

Phenomenology of Children's Reactions to G-Rated Animations and Its Educational Implications for Enhancing Moral Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aimed to phenomenologically explore children's reactions to G-rated animations and extract their educational implications for producing children's media content that promotes moral inquiry.

Methods and Materials: The research employed a qualitative phenomenological design with an interpretive and inductive approach. The study was developmental-applied in purpose and cross-sectional in timing. Participants included two groups: ten children aged six to nine years, selected through purposive sampling, and fifteen experts in education, psychology, and children's art. Data were collected using observation and semi-structured interviews with children, followed by a focus group discussion with experts. Data analysis was conducted through Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method and thematic analysis using MAXQDA software, enabling the identification of both children's experiential meanings and experts' educational inferences.

Findings: Children's reactions revealed complex moral, emotional, and cognitive engagement with the animated content. Participants displayed empathy toward animated characters, moral reasoning about fairness and justice, and critical thinking regarding narrative outcomes. Their affective responses showed awareness of ethical dualities—good versus bad and acceptance versus prejudice. The phenomenological analysis identified central themes such as identity discovery, empathy, courage, acceptance of differences, friendship, emotional regulation, and environmental concern. Expert panel discussions emphasized the educational potential of animations to cultivate moral reasoning, critical inquiry, and social awareness in children when guided by reflective dialogue and pedagogical framing.

Conclusion: G-rated animations serve as effective moral and educational tools that facilitate children's moral inquiry, empathy, and cognitive development through imaginative engagement. Integrating phenomenological insights into animation production and educational practice can strengthen children's ethical understanding, emotional literacy, and reflective thinking.

Keywords: Animation, Moral Inquiry, Phenomenology, Children's Reactions, Educational Implications, G-Rated Films, Empathy, Moral Development.

1. Introduction

Animated storytelling has long been a powerful tool in shaping children's cognitive, emotional, and moral development, functioning not only as a source of entertainment but also as a subtle form of education and socialization. Over the past few decades, scholars have increasingly recognized animation as a multimodal medium that communicates moral, cultural, and psychological values to young audiences through both explicit narratives and implicit symbolism (Beaino, 2021; Dalia et al., 2021; Fields, 2020). Animated films, particularly those produced for general audiences (G-rated), engage children in ethical reasoning, empathy formation, and exploration of identity, providing fertile ground for moral inquiry and educational reflection (Al-Lahi, 2022; Tudeh Ranjbar & Iraqi, 2022).

The growing visibility of children's animations in global media culture has prompted educational researchers to explore how moral and emotional learning can emerge through visual storytelling. Studies show that animation facilitates abstract thinking, enhances memory retention, and deepens conceptual understanding through emotional engagement and aesthetic appeal (Dehvari et al., 2023; Hosseini et al., 2023; Listiani et al., 2022). Children often identify with animated characters and absorb ethical cues from the ways those characters handle conflict, cooperation, and personal growth (Qasemi et al., 2023; Saberi, 2023). Within this framework, G-rated animations—those designed for all age groups—represent a distinctive educational space where moral inquiry occurs naturally through narrative immersion and imaginative identification.

Animations also serve as social mirrors that convey messages about morality, gender, culture, and justice (Fields, 2020). The works of major studios such as Pixar and Walt Disney have become global vehicles for the transmission of values, prompting both admiration and critique from educators and psychologists. For example, while animations like *Luca*, *Inside Out*, and *Zootopia* have been praised for promoting empathy and acceptance, they also invite discussions about stereotypes, idealization, and the commercialization of childhood (Al-Lahi, 2022; Nasirian & Pacini, 2022). The duality of moral exploration and cultural consumption positions animation as a pedagogical paradox—simultaneously educative and ideological. Consequently, the analysis of children's reactions to animations offers insights into how they process moral meanings, distinguish between fantasy and reality,

and internalize social expectations (Beaino, 2021; Tasviri & Atahri, 2021).

From a developmental perspective, the impact of animated narratives on children's cognitive and emotional systems has been well documented. According to constructivist and phenomenological approaches, children's learning occurs through active engagement with stories that allow them to interpret meaning, test moral hypotheses, and construct their own ethical frameworks (Ebrahimi-Tirtashi et al., 2023; Faghadi et al., 2024). The inquiry-based model of education proposed by Suchman (Suchman, 1966) emphasizes curiosity, questioning, and exploration as key mechanisms of learning—elements that are inherently present in animation-driven storytelling. Through animated narratives, children experience a symbolic representation of moral dilemmas where good and evil, courage and fear, and conformity and individuality are dramatized in accessible, emotionally resonant forms.

Educational researchers have explored how animation facilitates the acquisition of abstract concepts, particularly in moral and emotional reasoning. Dehvari (Dehvari et al., 2023) demonstrated that animations enhance students' understanding of abstract scientific and ethical concepts by translating them into concrete visual metaphors. Similarly, Hosseini (Hosseini et al., 2023) found that animated instruction improves children's abstract thinking, allowing them to process complex social ideas such as fairness, empathy, and responsibility. From a psychological perspective, Saba (Saba et al., 2023) showed that controlled exposure to animations can positively influence behavioral regulation and emotional control among primary school students, especially when paired with cognitive-behavioral interventions.

Animation also plays a critical role in cultural and identity formation. Fields (Fields, 2020) emphasized that animated representations of gender, race, and class have evolved since the 1990s, shifting from traditional stereotypes to more inclusive and diverse portrayals. Similarly, Qasemi (Qasemi et al., 2023) analyzed Iranian television animations and identified both congruent and conflicting themes with Iranian-Islamic cultural values, underscoring the pedagogical importance of culturally grounded animation. The representation of identity crises in Western animations, such as in *Zootopia*, further reveals how sociocultural anxieties are embedded within children's media and processed by young viewers as moral questions about difference, inclusion, and justice (Nasirian & Pacini, 2022).

The phenomenological dimension of children's engagement with animation is another emerging field of inquiry. Kiarasi (Kiarasi & Babaei, 2022) examined children's lived experiences of "hidden learning" through animations and video games, demonstrating that these media act as informal educational environments that foster curiosity, moral imagination, and emotional literacy. Similarly, Klinmalee (Klinmalee, 2022) emphasized that cartoons facilitate metacognitive growth and the ability to reflect on one's own learning processes, highlighting animation as a catalyst for inquiry-based and reflective thinking. These findings align with Leung's (Leung et al., 2025) recent work, which shows that animation-based art instruction promotes computational thinking, problem-solving, and creativity among young children, reinforcing the connection between artistic engagement and cognitive development.

Beyond individual cognition, animation carries broader social implications. Ghafari Qadir (Ghafari Qadir, 2023) analyzed expert perspectives on how animation conveys cultural and social messages to children, revealing that narrative design, character development, and visual symbolism can significantly shape children's understanding of moral and civic values. Tasviri (Tasviri & Atahri, 2021) also explored the educational implications of popular series such as *SpongeBob SquarePants*, finding that they both affirm and negate certain domains of moral and educational growth, depending on the interpretive framework used by the child audience. This reinforces the notion that moral learning through animation is not passive but dialogic—constructed through interpretation, reflection, and affective response.

From the perspective of child development and media psychology, the interaction between affect, cognition, and moral understanding is central. Dalia (Dalia et al., 2021) found that animated storytelling enhances children's language development and expressive abilities by providing emotionally charged contexts that support social communication. Beaino (Beaino, 2021) likewise observed that Lebanese children between ages three and ten display both affective and behavioral identification with animated characters, internalizing their emotional patterns and ethical codes. Such affective identification is crucial for moral inquiry because it enables children to simulate others' experiences, building empathy and moral imagination.

At the same time, scholars have cautioned against the uncritical consumption of animations that contain hidden ideological biases. Al-Lahi (Al-Lahi, 2022) warned that the

cognitive harms of some Walt Disney productions may include unrealistic portrayals of heroism, gender roles, and conflict resolution, which can distort children's perceptions of social reality. Similarly, Saberi (Saberi, 2023) argued that modern animated myths, such as those in *Spider-Man* or *The Last Story*, psychologically shape children's sense of identity and moral orientation through narrative archetypes that may reinforce binary thinking. These insights underscore the dual responsibility of animation producers and educators in curating morally constructive content.

In educational practice, inquiry-based and phenomenological approaches to animation study encourage children not merely to consume narratives but to interpret and question them (Ebrahimi-Tirtashi et al., 2023; Faghadi et al., 2024). By guiding children to reflect on their emotional responses and moral intuitions, teachers can transform viewing experiences into opportunities for ethical exploration and social dialogue. As Suchman's (Suchman, 1966) model of inquiry-based learning suggests, genuine understanding emerges from active questioning and personal discovery rather than passive reception. Animation, with its rich combination of visual, auditory, and symbolic cues, naturally stimulates such engagement.

Furthermore, the integration of digital learning media in contemporary education has expanded the role of animation in formal and informal settings. Listiani (Listiani et al., 2022) emphasized the pedagogical potential of computer-based animated tutorials during the COVID-19 pandemic, which supported continuity in education while enhancing engagement. Similarly, Tudeh Ranjbar (Tudeh Ranjbar & Iraqi, 2022) found that animations can effectively convey complex ideas and maintain children's attention more successfully than traditional didactic methods. These studies affirm that animation is not merely an artistic or recreational form but an educational instrument capable of mediating conceptual understanding and moral reflection.

Recent interdisciplinary perspectives bridge phenomenology, psychology, and pedagogy to examine how children experience animated worlds as moral laboratories. The combination of visual storytelling, character-driven ethics, and symbolic learning fosters what Faghadi (Faghadi et al., 2024) terms "dramaturgical education," where children enact and reflect upon moral dilemmas vicariously through animated narratives. This experiential engagement aligns with the inquiry-based pedagogical tradition and highlights the potential of animation to cultivate ethical reasoning and social empathy. This study aimed to phenomenologically explore children's reactions to G-rated

animations and extract their educational implications for producing children's media content that promotes moral inquiry.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

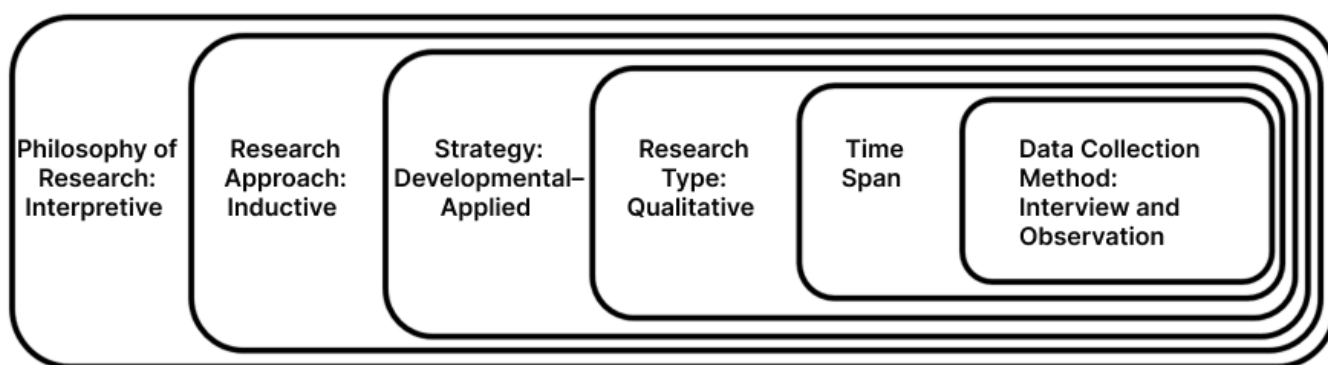
The present study, in terms of its purpose, is classified as a developmental–applied study. The nature of the research is interpretive, with an inductive general approach; therefore, research questions were employed to achieve the study's objectives. In terms of data nature, research can be categorized in various ways, and in this study, the data

collected and analyzed are qualitative in nature. Data in this research were gathered through interviews with children and observations of their behavior during and after viewing animations at one level, and at a second level, through interviews with experts in the field of childhood studies, including psychology, animation content production, and education. The data were textual and qualitative. Temporally, this study is cross-sectional, and in terms of data collection method, data were obtained through observation and interviews.

The following figure presents the various layers of the current study based on the “research onion” model by Saunders et al. (2009):

Figure 1

Methodological layers of the present research



The research procedure was as follows: in the first stage, to identify children's reactions to cartoons, after consulting with experts, a G-rated animation was purposively and judgmentally selected that included concepts and themes related to moral inquiry. The letter “G” is the initial of the phrase *General Audience*, meaning that all age groups are allowed to view it. After selecting the animation, 15 children aged 6 to 9 who met the inclusion criteria were chosen to watch the film. The children's reactions were carefully observed, recorded, and documented by the researcher for later analysis. The results of this stage were then analyzed and presented to experts. The analysis of this stage was carried out using the phenomenological method. Since phenomenology includes various approaches, as explained later, this study specifically employed Colaizzi's seven-step technique to analyze data obtained from (1) recorded observations of children's reactions to the themes of the selected animations and (2) interviews with children about the themes of the selected animations. Finally, during the interviews with experts, they were asked—based on the

results of the first part of the study—to propose strategies for producing children's works that promote moral inquiry.

Population and Sample (Size and Sampling Method)

This research involved two populations. In the first part, the study population consisted of children aged 6 to 9 years. The sampling method was purposive, and the sample size was 10 children. The choice of this age range was based on psychological and developmental considerations. According to Piaget's theory, children in this age group are in the *concrete operational stage*, meaning they have developed the ability to understand and process simple rules, empathize with characters, and reason about cause-and-effect relationships, while still being strongly influenced by media messages.

The inclusion criteria for children were as follows:

- Willingness to participate in the study.
- Attendance in animation-viewing sessions.
- Participation in interview sessions.

In the second part, to identify the inferences derived from children's reactions to G-rated animations for producing

animated works, the research population consisted of experts in education, psychology, and children's art. After presenting the results of the first phase, they participated in a focus group to propose strategies for producing such works. The sample included 15 experts in relevant fields, selected through purposive sampling based on defined inclusion criteria. The data collection tool was a semi-structured focus group session in which the main discussion themes (children's reactions and educational implications) were predetermined, while sufficient flexibility was provided for open discussion and interaction among experts.

The inclusion criteria for experts were as follows:

- Possession of at least a master's degree in one of the following fields: child psychology, educational sciences, performing arts (animation or cinema), or media and communications with a child-related focus.
- A minimum of five years of documented professional experience in their area of expertise (teaching, research, content production, or directing in the field of children).
- Recognition as a specialist by at least one of the following indicators:
 - Authorship of publications (books or peer-reviewed articles) in the field of children and media.
 - Experience producing a recognized work (animation, television program, or illustrated book) for children.
 - University-level teaching experience in courses related to child psychology, education, or arts.
 - Membership in professional institutions related to child development.

Sampling in this section was also judgmental and purposive, and the expert panel consisted of 15 members.

2.2. Measures

In phenomenological studies, data collection tools are typically semi-structured interviews. Based on data obtained from the research questions, which are presented in interview form, significant statements and expressions illustrating the formation of the participants' experiences of the phenomenon under study are identified. Then, statements of equal value are specified, and main themes are extracted. In the present study, two main research questions were pursued: (1) What experiences do children have regarding

the phenomenon under investigation? and (2) What contexts or categories influence their experience of the phenomenon? Accordingly, both direct observations of children's reactions and their verbal responses in interviews about cartoons were used as data. The research tools thus included observation and interviews regarding children's reactions to animations. In the second phase, data were collected through interviews and a focus group. The data collection tool for this section consisted of guiding questions used in the focus group discussion.

2.3. Data Analysis

In the present research, data analysis—both in the interview and observation phases—was conducted according to the principles and procedures of the phenomenological method. The aim of qualitative phenomenological research design is to discover the meaning of a specific experience for a group of individuals and the way it is lived. The textual data obtained from interviews, the researcher's observational notes on children's behaviors and perceptions, and the textual data derived from the expert focus group panel were analyzed and reported using two techniques: (1) phenomenological analysis and (2) thematic analysis.

In the phenomenological analysis section, Colaizzi's seven-step method was applied. After entering the data into MAXQDA software, phenomenological analysis was carried out. First, all participants' descriptions were thoroughly reviewed to gain empathy and familiarity with their experiences. In the second step, key statements were extracted from each transcript. In the third step, the meanings and concepts of each key statement—referred to as formulated meanings—were constructed by the researchers. Fourth, these formulated meanings were organized into thematic clusters. In the fifth step, the findings were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study, which was presented as a clear and coherent statement. In the final step, the results were returned to participants for validation and feedback regarding the findings.

3. Findings and Results

Data analysis was conducted at three levels. At the first level, the selected sample was analyzed from a phenomenological perspective and examined in terms of *moral inquiry*, with the results reported accordingly. At the second level of analysis, children's reactions to the selected

sample were analyzed, focusing on how they responded to viewing the chosen animation from the standpoint of moral inquiry. Finally, in the third section, the educational inferences drawn from the findings of the first two sections were presented for developing children's programming aimed at promoting moral inquiry, taking into account the opinions of experts in the field under study.

A) Phenomenological Analysis of the Selected Sample from the Perspective of Moral Inquiry

In this section, the selected animation was analyzed from the perspective of moral inquiry for children using a phenomenological approach. The identified concepts are described separately for the examined sample as follows:

Phenomenological Analysis of the Animation *Luca*

Film Introduction: *Luca* is a 2021 computer-animated adventure and comedy-drama film produced by Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures. The film was directed by Enrico Casarosa, and its story takes place in a fictional seaside town in Italy called Portorosso. Luca, a young sea monster who can take human form, becomes involved in an adventurous summer with his new friend, Alberto.

Luca is a young boy who lives in the depths of the sea. Ignoring his parents' warnings to stay away from humans, he is curious to explore the world beyond the ocean. One day, Luca meets Alberto, another sea monster of his age, who shows him that sea monsters can transform into humans

on land. The two friends decide to travel to the town of Portorosso, where they meet a girl named Giulia. Together, they enter competitions and try to earn enough money to buy a Vespa so they can travel the world.

The main characters are as follows:

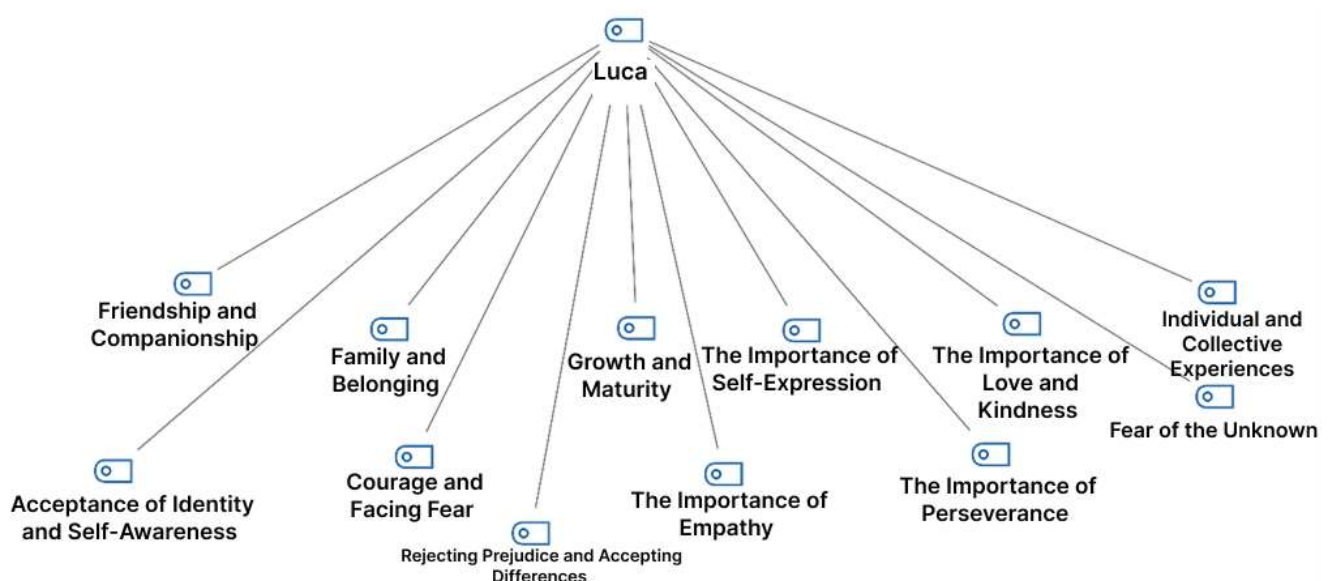
- **Luca Paguro:** A young sea monster who can transform into a human.
- **Alberto Scorfano:** Luca's best friend, another sea monster who helps him get acquainted with the human world.
- **Giulia Marcovaldo:** A bright and intelligent young girl who befriends Luca and Alberto.

Luca (2021) is a highly engaging film that deeply addresses moral and psychological themes for children. It teaches children how to embrace their identity, maintain friendship, face fears and failures, avoid prejudice, help and care for others, and bring love and kindness into their lives. It is especially valuable for children who are in the process of discovering themselves and the world around them.

Phenomenological Analysis: The animation *Luca*, by addressing themes such as identity, fear of the unknown, friendship, and acceptance of differences, helps children gain a deeper understanding of human relationships and social values. It is not only entertaining but also conveys profound messages about self-awareness, cooperation, and acceptance of diversity. The identified concepts are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Identified Concepts in the Phenomenological Analysis of the Animation *Luca*



Acceptance of Identity and Self-Awareness: *Luca* is a film about finding and accepting one's identity. Luca, the main character, is in search of who he truly is. As a sea creature eager to explore the human world, his quest for identity mirrors humanity's universal pursuit of self-understanding and one's place in the larger world. Through new experiences and exposure to life outside the sea, Luca gradually gains a deeper awareness of himself. The protagonist lives in a world that does not belong to him, yet he must hide his true nature from humans—a metaphorical representation of the adult world, which operates by rules beyond the child's realm. For children discovering themselves and their place in the world, the film teaches them to accept who they are without fear, even if they are different, and to enter new worlds with courage.

Friendship and Companionship: Friendship is one of the central themes of the film. Luca and Alberto, despite their differences, remain loyal to each other. This teaches children the value of honesty, loyalty, and care in relationships. Their friendship lies at the heart of the narrative: through cooperation and shared experiences, they demonstrate how friendship shapes individual and social identity. Their relationship helps them overcome fears and build mutual trust.

Courage and Facing Fear: Throughout the film, Luca must confront his fears and doubts. He learns to move forward despite them. This theme is particularly relevant for children who may be struggling with their own fears and anxieties. The film teaches that courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to face it.

Rejecting Prejudice and Accepting Differences: The film also deals with the issue of prejudice and the acceptance of diversity. The inhabitants of Portorosso view sea monsters like Luca and Alberto with suspicion because they see them as different. This conveys to children the importance of avoiding prejudice and treating others with respect and understanding. *Luca* reminds viewers that embracing differences and respecting others are keys to building positive relationships. Initially, humans fear the sea creatures, but as they learn more, this fear transforms into friendship and empathy—illustrating the importance of cultural and individual acceptance in society.

Family and Belonging: The film also explores the concept of family and belonging. Luca must navigate between his biological family and his sense of true belonging discovered through friendships. The story teaches that family can exist in various forms and that belonging to a group or family involves acceptance and love.

Growth and Maturity: Luca undergoes personal growth throughout the film, evolving from a curious boy into a more mature individual. He learns to make decisions and take responsibility for them. This theme helps children understand how to handle responsibility and make independent choices as they grow.

The Importance of Empathy: The film emphasizes empathy and understanding others. Luca and Alberto must support and care for each other, teaching children to help and protect others—even those who are different from themselves.

The Importance of Self-Expression: *Luca* also highlights the significance of expressing oneself. Luca must reveal who he truly is and communicate his identity to others. This teaches children the importance of self-expression and authenticity, even in the face of difference.

The Importance of Perseverance: Throughout the film, Luca encounters bullying and must remain resilient. This helps children learn how to stand firm, persist, and move forward despite external challenges.

The Importance of Love and Kindness: The film underscores the essential role of love and kindness. Luca and Alberto share a deep affection and mutual care, showing children how to cultivate love and compassion in their lives.

Fear of the Unknown: One of the film's key themes is fear of the unknown and of differences. Initially, Luca and his friends are afraid of the human world. This fear stems not only from ignorance but also from past negative experiences. However, they come to realize that through discovery and interaction with new worlds, such fears can be overcome.

Individual and Collective Experiences: Each character in *Luca* has unique personal experiences that shape the group's collective identity. As Luca learns new skills and faces challenges, he becomes more independent. These experiences influence not only his self-concept but also his relationships with others.

B) Phenomenological Analysis of Children's Reactions to Viewing the Film from the Perspective of Moral Inquiry

In this part of the study, the findings obtained from observing the behaviors and questions of the child participants during the viewing of the selected sample, as well as from interviews with them, are presented. The children's reactions to the animation were observed by the researcher, and the children were interviewed after viewing the animation. In Table 1, a portion of the children's reactions and remarks is presented.

Table 1
Description of Children's Reactions to Viewing the Selected Works

Row	Children's Reactions
1	"Wow, the <i>Luca</i> cartoon was so good. I fell in love with Luca and his friend Alberto! When they were swimming in the water and playing together, I felt very happy. But when people were afraid of them and chased them, my heart trembled. I wanted them to go and for everything to turn out right. At the end, when Luca was able to continue his friendship with that girl, I was very happy! It was like when I play with my friends. The animation was very colorful and beautiful, and I wanted to watch it again."
2	"I laughed at their humorous and funny movements. I became angry and upset at the violent behaviors, and I smiled at their interesting actions. Exciting, strange, and new behaviors triggered my reactions. Events that were exaggerated in the animation seemed excessively bizarre to me. In my opinion, the film was very interesting, with exciting and appealing exaggerations. Which character did you like? Why? Alberto had an interesting face and cute curly hair, and Luca—because he was obedient. Humans on land—because they hunt sea monsters. What do you think would have been better to happen in the film? It would have been better if the sea-monster characters had remained on land from beginning to end, and humans had not seemed so scary. Humans should stop hunting sea monsters."

Reaction Analysis

Perception of Reality versus Fantasy: The participant's reaction to exaggerated events as a strong stimulus indicates that their perception of reality and fantasy is developing. The exaggeration challenges their sense of reality and blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy—a key aspect of how the unconscious processes and categorizes experiences.

Moral Understanding and Empathy: The participant's view of the story—defending sea creatures and rejecting humans as hunters—shows engagement with moral themes. This points to a deeper level of processing, in which the participant not only enjoys the cartoon but also reflects on its moral dimension, indicating empathy and a sense of justice.

Resolution of Negative Emotions: The participant states that they felt upset during part of the film, but that in the end everything turns out well. This suggests they experienced negative emotions, but ultimately felt better due to the resolution of problems. This may indicate an understanding of problem resolution and the importance of hope.

Learning Appropriate versus Inappropriate/Good versus Bad: The participant becomes angry in response to violent behaviors. This reaction shows displeasure toward such behaviors and the experience of negative emotions such as anger. It may indicate that the participant is learning to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. The participant also reacts negatively to frightening or antagonistic characters, which is part of their viewing experience and can help them develop an understanding of good and bad.

Exploration of the World: Strange and novel behaviors in the animation are exciting for the participant. This

reaction shows enjoyment of encountering new and unexpected things, suggesting that the participant is exploring the world through the animation.

Understanding Exaggeration in Animation: The participant feels that the exaggerated events in the animation seem excessively strange. This shows an emerging ability to differentiate between reality and fantasy and may indicate that the participant is developing their understanding of the world.

Understanding of the Story: The participant recognizes a longstanding enmity in the film—humans hunt sea monsters and sea monsters fear humans—and that this forms the backdrop of the narrative. This reaction shows that the participant understands the story and plot of the animation.

Development of Critical Ability: The participant thinks it would have been better if the sea-monster characters had remained on land from start to finish and humans had not seemed so frightening. This shows that the participant critiques the story and its characters and offers specific suggestions for improving the animation. This may indicate that the participant is developing critical and analytical abilities.

Role Modeling: The participant is drawn to specific characters such as "Alberto" and "Luca." This shows enjoyment of particular traits—like an "interesting face" and "curly hair"—and an appreciation for Luca because he is "obedient." This may indicate that the participant values certain moral and behavioral characteristics in characters.

C) Educational Inferences

Emphasis on Friendship and Solidarity: Friendship among characters serves as the narrative foundation in the animations studied. These works show how friendship can

foster peace and help solve problems. An educational implication is to emphasize friendship, cooperation, and solidarity in creating similar works so that children learn how to build relationships and solve problems together.

Exploration of Identity and Acceptance of Differences: These films teach children to accept differences and believe in themselves. The educational implication—supported by children’s reactions—is to develop children’s works featuring characters who seek their identities, thereby helping children understand differences and develop self-confidence.

Courage in Facing Fears: The main characters confront fears and obstacles throughout the story, yet they show courage and move forward. In producing animations, demonstrate to children that fear is natural, but can be overcome through courage and perseverance.

Role Modeling: Animated characters can serve as positive role models. Each character possesses a set of moral qualities that can teach children how to behave and how to present themselves in society.

Teaching through Story: Using narrative and animation to teach moral concepts helps children comprehend these concepts more easily and apply them in their lives.

Emphasis on Imagination and Fantasy: The worlds of these animations are rich in imagination and fantasy. They show children how to use imagination to solve problems and manage their surroundings. Animations should employ fantastical elements to encourage children to use their imagination and to help them view issues from multiple perspectives.

Moral Education and Human Values: The animations examined address moral themes such as understanding, forgiveness, and responsibility. The characters teach children how to treat and care for others. An educational inference for children’s productions is to emphasize moral and human values so that children can grasp these values through stories and apply them in their lives.

Emphasis on the Environment and Nature: *Luca* takes place in a coastal town and addresses the importance of protecting the environment and nature. The characters care for the sea and their habitat. A key implication is to emphasize environmental protection in children’s productions and teach children ways to help preserve the environment.

Teaching Life Skills: These works teach children how to solve problems and overcome obstacles. They also highlight the importance of family and mutual support. Animations

should impart life skills such as problem-solving, coping with failure, and the importance of supporting one another.

Emphasis on Cultural Differences: These films show children that cultural differences can be interesting and beneficial. An educational implication is to highlight cultural differences in children’s productions and teach children how to respect and learn from diverse cultures.

Teaching Patience and Perseverance: In these works, characters must be patient and demonstrate perseverance to achieve their goals. They teach children that patience and endurance contribute to success. Children’s productions should instruct how patience and perseverance help them reach their objectives.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that children’s reactions to G-rated animations such as *Luca* are multifaceted, reflecting emotional, moral, and cognitive engagement. Observation and interviews indicated that participants responded with empathy toward characters, experienced emotional fluctuations throughout the storyline, and demonstrated moral reflection regarding justice, friendship, and acceptance of differences. These findings align with the core theoretical premise that animation serves as both an educational and affective medium that stimulates moral inquiry in children (Ebrahimi-Tirtashi et al., 2023; Suchman, 1966). The phenomenological analysis of children’s experiences showed that their emotional and cognitive reactions were not merely passive reflections of the story but active processes of meaning construction, moral evaluation, and identity formation.

The first major finding pertains to children’s moral understanding and empathy while watching the animation. Participants expressed clear sympathy for the sea-monster protagonists, recognizing the unfair treatment they received from humans and identifying moral injustice as a core issue. This response demonstrates children’s ability to evaluate right and wrong based on emotional intuition and contextual reasoning, supporting the view that moral reasoning in children is grounded in emotional experience and social awareness (Hosseini et al., 2023; Saba et al., 2023). The finding corroborates Dalia’s (Dalia et al., 2021) observation that animation enhances emotional and linguistic expression, enabling children to verbalize moral positions more confidently. Furthermore, Beaino (Beaino, 2021) found that children’s identification with animated characters leads to emotional contagion—an empathetic process that helps

internalize moral values. The results of this study extend these conclusions by demonstrating that moral empathy can emerge even in fictional contexts when the narrative structure and character design resonate with the child's sense of fairness and belonging.

Another significant theme emerging from the data was the development of critical and reflective thinking. Some children proposed alternative storylines or suggested changes to reduce the hostility between humans and sea monsters, revealing an early form of moral creativity. This indicates that animated narratives can inspire inquiry-based reflection rather than mere imitation (Ebrahimi-Tirtashi et al., 2023; Faghadi et al., 2024). The observed capacity of participants to critique character behavior and imagine more just resolutions supports Suchman's (Suchman, 1966) model of inquiry learning, in which cognitive and emotional curiosity serve as the foundation for moral reasoning. This finding also parallels Klinmalee's (Klinmalee, 2022) results, where animated teaching contexts enhanced students' reflective engagement and problem-solving ability. Similarly, Leung (Leung et al., 2025) demonstrated that animation-based learning fosters computational and analytical thinking, implying that artistic media can cultivate reasoning processes applicable beyond the artistic domain.

The results also highlight the role of imagination and fantasy in shaping children's perception of moral and social concepts. Participants often blurred the boundaries between reality and fantasy, simultaneously enjoying exaggerated scenes while reflecting critically on their meaning. This supports the argument that fantasy functions as a cognitive rehearsal space where children can safely explore moral dilemmas (Dehvari et al., 2023; Kiarasi & Babaei, 2022). According to Dehvari (Dehvari et al., 2023), abstract concepts such as justice, fear, and belonging can be more effectively understood through animated symbolism, as it externalizes invisible emotions into visual metaphors. The findings also resonate with Al-Lahi's (Al-Lahi, 2022) study, which emphasized the cognitive duality of animation—its capacity to both engage and challenge children's reasoning through emotionally charged representations.

Children's reactions also underscored the importance of identity and difference as moral constructs. Several participants interpreted the sea-monster identity as symbolic of "being different" and empathized with the characters' struggles for social acceptance. This demonstrates that even at an early developmental stage, children possess the capacity to reflect on issues of inclusion, prejudice, and belonging. Similar findings were reported by Nasirian

(Nasirian & Paeni, 2022), who analyzed *Zootopia* as an allegory for identity crises and discrimination in modern society. In the present study, participants' emotional engagement mirrored these patterns, suggesting that children internalize social lessons about tolerance and equality when presented through relatable animated characters. This supports Qasemi's (Qasemi et al., 2023) conclusion that animations reflecting diverse cultural and moral frameworks can influence children's ethical development in line with or against societal norms.

Another finding concerned emotional regulation and the resolution of negative emotions. Participants frequently reported fear, anger, or sadness during moments of conflict in the film but experienced relief and joy at its resolution. This emotional trajectory reflects a cognitive process of learning through affective simulation, consistent with Saba's (Saba et al., 2023) findings that exposure to emotionally structured animations can enhance children's capacity for self-regulation and anger control when guided by cognitive frameworks. The current results suggest that children do not merely imitate emotional expressions but learn from the narrative resolution that moral harmony and reconciliation yield emotional stability. This aligns with Beaino's (Beaino, 2021) observation that exposure to emotionally complex animated content supports emotional maturity, and with Dalia's (Dalia et al., 2021) claim that narrative emotionality fosters prosocial language use.

A further dimension of the results was the emergence of moral dualism and value distinction—children showed aversion toward violence and dishonesty, while admiring characters who demonstrated courage and cooperation. This moral categorization process reveals early ethical discernment, which is reinforced by audiovisual cues in animation (Tasviri & Atahri, 2021). According to Ghafari Qadir (Ghafari Qadir, 2023), the visual and narrative symbolism of animation plays a decisive role in conveying moral and social values, allowing children to internalize these messages through identification and repetition. The findings of this study thus suggest that children's cognitive-emotional processing of animation contributes to the gradual formation of value hierarchies, confirming prior arguments by Ghoshi Rizi (Ghoshi Rizi et al., 2023) that animated media are powerful vehicles for shaping children's conceptual frameworks of good and evil.

Additionally, the participants' reflections on the relationship between humans and the natural world in *Luca* indicate an emerging ecological consciousness. The sea-monster motif encouraged empathy not only toward fictional

beings but also toward environmental preservation, as children expressed concern about “humans hunting sea creatures.” This aligns with Tasviri’s (Tasviri & Atahri, 2021) findings that educational animations can embed environmental ethics within narrative learning. It also supports Dehvari’s (Dehvari et al., 2023) argument that animations can be instrumental in connecting cognitive understanding with moral action through embodied imagery.

The study also contributes to understanding the pedagogical and cultural implications of animation as moral education. Consistent with Faghadi’s (Faghadi et al., 2024) concept of dramaturgy in education, animations employ dramatic tension and character conflict to simulate real moral dilemmas. The experiential nature of animation allows children to explore ethical concepts vicariously, thereby transforming passive observation into active reflection. The participants’ ability to evaluate, critique, and propose alternative moral outcomes confirms that animation operates as an informal yet potent form of moral inquiry, echoing the inquiry-based education model proposed by Ebrahimi-Tirtashi (Ebrahimi-Tirtashi et al., 2023).

The findings also align with cross-cultural studies emphasizing the universal moral structures embedded in children’s media. For example, Fields (Fields, 2020) observed that modern animations increasingly represent themes of diversity and equality, moving away from monolithic cultural archetypes. The participants’ positive reactions to inclusivity and cooperation in *Luca* confirm that such global shifts are cognitively accessible to children and reinforce social values of mutual respect. Similarly, Beaino (Beaino, 2021) and Dalia (Dalia et al., 2021) highlighted that animation, when ethically designed, can support emotional literacy, promote empathy, and enhance communication skills—outcomes consistent with the moral and cognitive dimensions found in this research.

Moreover, the phenomenological approach employed here extends the work of Kiarasi (Kiarasi & Babaei, 2022), who examined “hidden learning” in digital media, by showing that moral learning can also occur through unstructured, spontaneous viewing experiences. The children’s reflective comments suggest that moral lessons do not depend solely on didactic instruction but arise naturally from interpretive interaction with media content. This supports the notion of “implicit pedagogy” proposed by Tudeh Ranjbar (Tudeh Ranjbar & Iraqi, 2022), according to which animation functions as a social teacher embedded in entertainment.

The convergence of emotional, moral, and cognitive learning observed in this study mirrors the integrated frameworks discussed in prior research. According to Leung (Leung et al., 2025), animation-based education enhances complex problem-solving by engaging creativity, imagination, and critical thinking. Similarly, Listiani (Listiani et al., 2022) demonstrated that digital and computer-based learning media using animation during the pandemic improved engagement and comprehension. These findings support the current results that animation-based experiences—when properly structured—offer powerful educational potential, integrating emotion, imagination, and cognition.

From a sociocultural standpoint, the findings resonate with Saberi’s (Saberi, 2023) psychological assessment of animated myths, suggesting that recurring archetypes in animation—such as the hero, the outsider, and the mentor—act as developmental models through which children interpret moral and existential questions. In this study, children’s attachment to characters like Luca and Alberto exemplifies this archetypal learning, where friendship, courage, and authenticity are valorized as moral virtues. Likewise, Al-Lahi (Al-Lahi, 2022) noted that even though some animations can produce cognitive distortions if consumed uncritically, they also offer rich contexts for guided moral reasoning when mediated through dialogue and education. Thus, this study’s findings support the pedagogical value of using animations within structured ethical reflection.

Finally, the results reinforce the dual role of animation as both aesthetic experience and educational instrument. The phenomenological responses of the children show that moral inquiry emerges through emotional immersion and imaginative identification rather than explicit instruction. This supports the interpretive frameworks advanced by Faghadi (Faghadi et al., 2024) and Ebrahimi-Tirtashi (Ebrahimi-Tirtashi et al., 2023), which argue that aesthetic experience itself can serve as a form of philosophical and moral education. By allowing children to explore ethical conflicts symbolically, animations contribute to the cultivation of emotional intelligence, empathy, and reflective judgment—key competencies for moral development in early childhood.

Despite its valuable insights, this study faced several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and restricted to children aged six to nine, which limits the generalizability of findings to broader age groups or different cultural contexts. The use of a single animation

(Luca) as the primary stimulus may also have constrained the diversity of responses, as other animations with distinct moral or cultural frameworks might have elicited different patterns of reaction. Furthermore, the qualitative design relied heavily on the researcher's interpretation, which, while phenomenologically appropriate, introduces the possibility of subjective bias. Temporal constraints prevented longitudinal follow-up, and thus the study could not assess the persistence or transformation of moral understanding over time. Additionally, the study was conducted in controlled viewing settings, which may differ from children's everyday media consumption environments, potentially influencing the authenticity of responses.

Future research should broaden the demographic scope to include diverse age ranges, cultural backgrounds, and socio-economic contexts to examine how children's moral interpretations vary across environments. Comparative studies analyzing reactions to multiple animations from different cultural industries could illuminate how global and local moral messages interact in shaping children's ethical cognition. Longitudinal studies are recommended to track changes in moral reasoning and empathy over extended periods following repeated exposure to morally charged animations. Moreover, integrating physiological or neurocognitive measures such as eye tracking or emotional recognition software could provide deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying moral and emotional engagement. Future work might also explore parental or teacher mediation strategies to understand how adult guidance influences children's moral interpretations of animated narratives.

In practical terms, educators and animation producers should collaborate to design animations that integrate moral inquiry within engaging storytelling frameworks. Teachers can use animations as reflective teaching tools by encouraging children to discuss ethical dilemmas and express emotional reactions after viewing. Curriculum designers might incorporate animation-based learning modules to promote empathy, cooperation, and critical thinking in early education. Parents should also engage in post-viewing conversations that guide children toward moral reflection, helping them differentiate between fantasy and real-world ethics. Finally, media producers should ensure that animations for children include balanced representations of diversity, emotional resilience, and ecological consciousness, turning visual entertainment into a vehicle for ethical growth and humanistic education.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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