

***In Pursuit of Quality TV Programs for Young Children:
What Are the Criteria in the View of Their Audience?***

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Abstract

There has been concern about the impact of media on young children, especially television. Parents have been looking for appropriate, high-quality media for their children, which is why the criteria of quality TV programs for young children are essential for parents to maximize the benefit of media in developing children's learning. The 'Media Quality Rating' research developed the indexes and systems for measuring the quality of TV programs for young children using the factor analysis technique and assessed the perception and opinion of the audience of two selected TV programs. There were three dimensions to the quality rating criteria for TV programs for young children: 1) the dimension of format and content, which consisted of six factors (standard and ethics of content presentation; promotion of thinking skills and inspiration; promotion of learning, capability, and life skills; participation of children, youth, and family members; compatibility between content and target audience; promotion of social values and cultures in compliance with the program's objectives); 2) the dimension of moderator, which consisted of three factors (professionalism; positive attitudes, carefulness, and good interpersonal skills; communication, expression, and personality); 3) the dimension of presentation techniques, which consisted of two factors (picture, sound, and activity techniques; production and presentation techniques). According to an opinion survey with 665 target audiences, which were parents and children aged 13 or above, about the quality of the two TV programs for young children, both programs met the quality rating criteria (average score of above 2.61). In addition, the quality rating system should be used as a tool to enhance media literacy among children and their parents.

Keywords: Media Quality Rating, Young Children, Television Program Quality

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Introduction

'Quality' media has been an important goal of the media reform movements across relevant sectors in Thailand. Due to its connection with people in society, media is expected to operate according to its normative standard and not only serve the private interest but also the public interest, especially the media for children and youth's development.

In Thailand, there have been attempts to reform media to promote quality, age-appropriate content for children and youth. This included the allocation of time slots on state-owned television and radio stations for children and family's programs and the founding of national and provincial bodies to support and create safe and creative media (Ramasoota et al., 2011).

In 2008, government agencies, scholars, and media professionals established additional criteria for determining the age-appropriateness of TV content. The added criteria were six dimensions of content that should be promoted (+6), aside from the existing three dimensions of harmful content that should be restricted (-3), with an intention to promote high-quality TV content for children's development; this approach has been used until the present. According to *the Announcement of Office of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) on guidelines for determining age-appropriate TV content 2013*, the six dimensions of content included the content that promoted 1) critical thinking, 2) academic and general knowledge, 3) moral and ethical values, 4) life skill development, 5) acceptance, understanding, and appreciation of diversity in society, and 6) family and interpersonal relationship development. The six dimensions of content were used to evaluate the age-appropriateness of TV content in Thailand and to ensure that the program was suitable for children's development.

However, in determining the age-appropriateness of TV content in Thailand, it is not common practice to consider the content that should be promoted and the content that should be restricted together. Moreover, there were suggestions that the six dimensions of content to be promoted should be separated from the age-appropriateness criteria and used as the criteria for quality rating and program promotion instead. It was also suggested that tools for quality rating should be developed. It is important to have a system in place to evaluate the appropriateness and quality of TV program content, to ensure that the media follows its normative standard and also serves the public interest, especially with regard to the development of children and youth (Oranop & Ramasoota, 2014).

Moreover, the rating system used currently in the Thai media industry is Nielsen's audience rating system, which measures the media exposure or the number of people who view or listen to a particular program or advertisement. The system, also known as the exposure-oriented analytical approach, reflects the interests and demands of the content providers and advertisers rather than those of the viewers and listeners (Ang, 1991, Meehan, 1984, cited in Napoli, 2008). Although qualitative research, such as focus groups or observations, has been conducted to gather in-depth information about specific characteristics of the target audience of the media, such as their lifestyle, values, and content preference, the goal of such research was to create content that suits the target audience, which served the marketing goal rather than reflected the actual needs or opinions of the target audience about quality content (Webster, Phalen, and Lichty, 2014).

Therefore, it can be argued that the quality rating system in Thailand still has limitations in terms of the indicators and tools for measuring media quality and also lacks a concrete

system or guidelines to measure the quality of media that are prevailing in today's society through various channels, including online platforms, which are easily accessible by young children.

The lack of a system for measuring the quality of media in Thailand, combined with the reliance on the audience rating system and the increasing competition in the Thai TV industry (Office of the NBTC, 2019), have contributed to the struggles of media targeting young children. While audience ratings are useful for measuring the popularity of media, they do not provide a complete picture of the media landscape and do not take into account the specific needs and preferences of different target audiences. As a result, media targeting children and young people may struggle to thrive and compete in the industry. One example was the decreasing number of children's TV programs since the full transition to digital television in 2015. The number of children's programs in 2020 dropped by 71.73% from 2015 after three children and family's TV channels had returned their digital TV licenses in 2016 and 2019 (Laorrojwong et.al., 2022) because of the intense competition and other business factors such as low ratings, low advertisement income, and high cost (Marketeer, 2019).

Research Objectives and Framework

The objectives of this research were to 1) develop the indexes and systems for measuring the quality of TV programs for young children using the factor analysis technique and 2) assess the perception and opinion of the audience of two selected TV programs.

The conceptual framework of the study consisted of the normative theory of media, media functionalism, media quality rating, international guidelines for media performance, and the concept of children and family's programs. Additionally, research studies in Thailand about the quality of TV programs for young children and family (Jantalert, 2005; Puasopit & Kritsanapoot, 2008; Chanampon & Taiphapoon, 2015; Wipasinimit, 2017; Tinnam et.al, 2019) indicated both similarities and differences in the characteristics of quality programs and the desirable characteristics of children and family's TV programs, which could be classified broadly as the quality of format and content, the quality of program moderator, and the quality of presentation techniques. These characteristics also served as the working framework for measuring the program quality in this research.

In addition, the quality of young children and family's TV programs can be assessed from the perspectives of different stakeholders, such as quality from the point of view of professionals and experts, quality from the perspective of the audience, and quality as diversity (Shamir, 2007). Accordingly, this research would develop a system to evaluate the program quality from the perspective of the viewers of children and family's programs, which are parents and young children.

Key findings

Key findings according to the research objectives were as follows:

1. Indexes for measuring the quality of TV programs for young children using the factor analysis technique.

The study started with desk research and an open-ended questionnaire for children and parents, to gather information about the characteristics of quality programs for young children and family. Then, the indexes for evaluating the program quality, which included factors and items, were developed using an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) technique for data reduction. The indexes were subsequently used in an opinion survey with a sample group of 665, which consisted of parents and children aged 13 or above.

The findings showed that the indexes for measuring the quality of TV programs for young children consisted of three dimensions, and each dimension contained factors and items that were indicators of program quality. The details were as follows:

Dimension of format and content	
Factors	Items
1. Standard and ethics of content presentation	7
2. Promotion of thinking skills and inspiration	4
3. Promotion of learning, capability, and life skills	6
4. Participation of children, youth, and family members	3
5. Compatibility between content and target audience	3
6. Promotion of social values and cultures in compliance with the program's objectives	5
Dimension of moderator	
Factors	Items
1. Professionalism	6
2. Positive attitudes, carefulness, and good interpersonal skills	4
3. Communication, expression, and personality	5
Dimension of presentation techniques	
Factors	Items
1. Picture, sound, and activity techniques	4
2. Production and presentation techniques	9

Table 1: Indexes for measuring the quality of TV programs for young children

2. Results from testing of the quality rating system for young children and family's TV programs

Using the questionnaire that had been developed from the attributes and indexes for measuring the quality of TV programs for young children, a survey was conducted to assess the perceptions and opinions of the target audience toward two selected children's TV programs. The sample group consisted of 552 viewers of the two programs across the country, aged 13 or above. Data were collected by a cross-sectional study, using face-to-face interviews with general viewers, online surveys through the project's online platform, and online surveys with fans of the channels through the channels' online platforms.

The criteria used in the selection of the two children's TV programs for the testing were 1) being broadcasted both on digital terrestrial TV and online and 2) having a moderate to high audience rating prior to the testing period. The first program (Program A) was a family show that invited children to showcase their talent in exchange for the opportunity to win their desired gift. Program A was aired on a commercial TV channel. Another program (Program B) was a science show for preschool children that presented science experiments in a form of

animated demonstrations. Program B was aired on public broadcasting TV. The media organizations and producers of both programs also agreed to participate in the testing.

In the testing, the sample group would be asked to rank their opinions on whether each program possessed the factors of quality. The scores ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 being ‘strongly disagree’ and 5 being ‘strongly agree’.

The values of the scores collected from the indicators were calculated based on the average of each dimension's factors. The interpretation of the average score of viewer opinions was the following:

- 1.00 - 1.80 represents a program with very poor quality
- 1.81 - 2.60 represents a program with poor quality
- 2.61 - 3.40 represents a program with acceptable quality
- 3.41 - 4.20 represents a program with good quality
- 4.21 - 5.00 represents a program with very good quality

If the program had an average score of 2.61 or higher, it would be considered to meet the media quality rating criteria.

The findings showed that both TV programs met the media quality rating criteria, with an average score of at least 2.61 in all factors. The average quality score of both programs was also at a very high level for all dimensions (with scores between 4.21 and 5.00 in all factors), as shown in Table 2.

TV programs for young children and families	Dimension			Average score	Quality rating result
	Format & content	Moderator	Presentation techniques		
Program A	4.49	4.64	4.44	4.52	Met the media quality rating criteria
Program B	4.21	4.31	4.21	4.23	Met the media quality rating criteria

Table 2: Quality rating result for the young children and family's TV programs

The results of the media quality rating from the viewer survey on each factor of the two programs were as follows:

1) For Program A, overall, the viewers rated the program quality as very good. The dimension that received the highest score was the program moderator (4.64). The top factor that the viewers rated as having very good quality was “positive attitude, carefulness, and good interpersonal skills”. The viewers saw that the program moderator had good interpersonal relationships, encouraged and praised others, and had a cheerful, fun, and lively personality. In addition, the second factor that the viewers rated as having very good quality was “communication, expression, and personality”. The viewers saw that the program moderator had a pleasant voice and good expression.

The dimension of format and content was also rated as very good (4.49), with the top two factors (both receiving equal scores) being "promotion of thinking skills and inspiration" and "compatibility between content and target audience", as the program content was seen as motivating and inspiring for children and young people and also enjoyable for families. The third highest-rated factor in this dimension was "promotion of learning, capability, and life skills", as the program content was seen as encouraging children and young people to express themselves.

Similarly, in the presentation techniques dimension, the overall quality of the program was rated as very good (4.44). The highest-rated factor was "picture, sound, and activity techniques", which the viewers saw as entertaining and engaging. Another factor that received a high score was "production and presentation techniques". The viewers saw that the program had a good atmosphere and could attract the audience's attention. The program was also seen as using an interesting storytelling method and a logical sequence of events, which made it easy for children to understand.

2) For Program B, overall, the viewers also rated the quality of the program as very good. The dimension that received the highest score was the program moderator (4.31). The factor with the highest average score was "communication, expression, and personality" (4.35). The viewers saw that the program moderator used easy-to-understand and accurate language, spoke clearly and politely, had manners, and knew how to make jokes.

In terms of format and content, the program was rated as very good (4.21) as well. The top two factors that received the highest score, both equally, were "promotion of thinking skills and inspiration" and "compatibility between content and target audience". The viewers saw that the program content could inspire and motivate young children while also creating joy for them as the target audience of the program.

Likewise, the presentation techniques of the program were rated as very good overall (4.21). The factor that received the highest score was "picture, sound, and activity techniques", which included engaging and entertaining visuals and sound. The viewers saw that the program had a lively atmosphere. The "production and presentation techniques" dimension also received a high score. The program was able to engage the audience with interesting storytelling and a well-structured plot that was easy for children to understand. The program also had attractive graphics that was suitable for the content.

Conclusion & Recommendations

After the testing of the media quality rating system, there was feedback from various stakeholders in the television industry, including media professionals, media organizations, media producers, scholars, regulatory organizations, and media professional organizations, on the development of a quality rating system for children and youth's programs. Based on such feedback, here are the proposed recommendations for improving the quality rating system for young children's media:

1. The weight of the indicators in each dimension should be balanced, with the highest weight given to the format and content dimension, followed by the moderator dimension and the presentation techniques dimension, respectively.

2. The indicators should be divided into two groups: 1) core indexes, which are the quality characteristics of the media type in question, and 2) additional indexes, which are based on specific features of each sub-program.
3. The indicators should be used to assess programs from the viewer's perspective as well as in the production process.
4. In evaluating the program quality through viewer surveys, there must be adequate representation of a demographic group of program viewers. Also, data should be collected from the groups that are familiar with the program but have not watched it or have stopped watching it in the present.
5. Updating the data collection methods to reflect the opinions of the target audience, specifically children and young people, is necessary.

The quality rating system should be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure its effectiveness and relevance. This will establish a standard and accepted system among media professionals, audiences, regulatory organizations, and media organizations for the benefit of Thailand's media ecosystem in many ways. For example, this quality rating system can be used as a tool to guide the public in choosing quality media by themselves and to enhance their media literacy skills. It will also provide information about media quality to government agencies, which can then implement positive measures to promote quality media such as funding, tax breaks, awards, or other incentives to motivate media producers to improve the quality of their work. Furthermore, it can serve as feedback for media producers on their performance in terms of quality and help them make necessary improvements. This will lead to the development and promotion of safe and creative media in Thailand in the future.

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