

The Impact of Media on Children

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ABSTRACT

Disney Princess movies and Nickelodeon television shows serve as powerful cultural texts that shape children's understanding of gender. While they often reinforce traditional gender roles - depicting princesses as passive and desirous of love or male characters as assertive leaders - these media also subvert such norms through independent heroines like Moana or assertive female leads in Nickelodeon shows such as *Bella and the Bulldogs*. This research project examines the simultaneous reinforcement and disruption of gender expectations in these media, considering their influence on children's self-perception, career aspirations, and socialization. This study presents findings from surveys conducted among the students at Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy in order to explore gendered experiences and perceptions in children's media. The results highlight key themes regarding the media's role in perpetuating gender stereotypes. Moreover, the participants noted that the prevalence of such stereotypes in media negatively impacts child development, thereby illuminating the intricate dynamics of gender construction in contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

The gendered nature of media in children's lives permeates all aspects of children's lives, which raises important questions about how gender roles and stereotypes are portrayed and consequently internalized by children. This research aims to examine the representation of

gender in children's everyday media, focusing specifically on content targeted at children between the ages of 3 and 12 years old. By analyzing Disney Channel television programs and animated movies, this research will uncover how traditional gender stereotypes are constructed and transmitted through various mainstream media platforms. This research will explore how these representations might differently impact boys and girls during their fundamental years. The research questions are: How are gender roles and stereotypes portrayed in children's media, and what are their effects on young kids? How are these stereotypes being currently resisted or challenged? Children's television shows and films play a pivotal role in both constructing and disrupting gender norms by reinforcing traditional notions of masculinity and femininity through character roles, narratives, and appearance, while also providing spaces for resistance and redefinition, reflecting shifting cultural attitudes toward gender identity and expression.

This research is significant in understanding how media exposure shapes the minds of young children and their understanding of gender roles. Children have highly impressionable minds and a tendency to emulate their favorite characters, making them particularly vulnerable to gendered messages in the media. Young children often develop strong emotional connections to their favorite characters, viewing them as role models, and they start to internalize their behavior, values, traits, and characteristics. Discovering the effects of gender stereotypes in the media and how these stereotypes are being challenged will have important implications for parents. This research could help them make informed decisions about their child's media consumption while considering its potential impact on their child's self-image, gender identity, and future aspirations. Furthermore, understanding how networks like Nickelodeon can successfully challenge gender stereotypes could be an example for future children's media. Admittedly, the

impact of gender stereotypes in the media could lead to the creation of more inclusive, empowering content that supports the development of all children, regardless of gender.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the study, “Gender Stereotypes in a Children's Television Program: Effects on Girls' and Boys' Stereotype Endorsement, Math Performance, Motivational Dispositions, and Attitudes” by Eike Wille, Hanna Gaspard, Ulrich Trautwein, Kerstin Oschatz, Katharina Scheiter, Benjamin Nagengast, was to gather research on the threat of stereotypes on children. The researchers collected their data by presenting 335 fifth-grade students with a television program that included a segment filled with the gender stereotype that girls cannot do math and have to copy the answers from a male student. The researchers had the study participants watch the same amount of the film and then investigated its effects on both genders. They examined the children’s changes in stereotype endorsement, math performance, motivational dispositions, and attitudes toward math. Their results were that both boys and girls started to agree with more traditional gender roles (like the idea that boys are better at math). In addition, boys felt more connected to math but thought it was least useful after seeing the segment. Girls, on the other hand, did not show any noticeable changes in their math performance, motivations, or attitudes after watching the segment. According to the study's findings, children's views of gender roles might be influenced by even brief exposure to gender stereotypes in television shows, especially when it comes to the reinforcement of these stereotypes. This can even be a factor contributing to the differences between genders in STEM fields. This study supports the Expectancy Value Theory, a theory of motivation that describes

the relationship between a student's expectancy for success at a task or the achievement of a goal concerning the value of task completion or goal attainment. As the media portrays certain beliefs and stereotypes about gender roles in the STEM field, such as showing females as underperforming in math and science, this theory suggests that this could hurt women in STEM fields. This study gave me insights into how academic self-conception can impact women entering STEM fields.

Even a short one-minute video with gender stereotypes about math was enough to make kids believe more strongly in the stereotypes. This is concerning because kids watch TV every day. Interestingly, while the stereotypes affected what kids believed, they didn't strongly impact how well girls did in math, how girls felt about math, and their motivation to do math. For boys, the stereotypes had mixed effects: they made them feel like they belonged more in math, but worried about being seen as "less cool" among their peers if they were good at math. While one short video didn't drastically change the kids' performance or findings, the researchers suggest that seeing these stereotypes repeatedly over time might have bigger effects. Even though the effects were small, it's significant that just one minute of stereotyped content could influence what kids believe about gender and math. This shows how powerful media messages are on young kids. This research suggests that while a single exposure to gender stereotypes might not dramatically change behavior, it can reinforce beliefs about what girls and boys "should" be good at. It is important because these beliefs, over time, influence children's choices and confidence in different subjects and, in turn, career paths. One of the most surprising findings was that even though boys were given a positive stereotype of being good at math, they were worried about being seen as uncool, which is a negative. This study raised the question: What happens when kids see these messages day after day?

“Are Disney Princess Movies “Bad” for Kids?,” by Cara Goodwin, discussed a study examining whether Disney princess media affects children's development, particularly focusing on gender attitudes, body image, and its effects on children's behavior. The research showed that 50% of young girls and 29% of boys engage with princess media monthly. Through studies, researchers found that four to five-year-olds who watch more Disney princess content display more stereotypically feminine behavior a year later. For example, they focused more on their appearance, nurturing behavior, and interests in domestic activities. However, they discovered that the same girls, when 10 to 11, actually believe more strongly that boys and girls should be treated the same way. “It seems that we should take these criticisms seriously, since Disney movies represent some of the first stories that our children hear.” While Disney movies are entertaining, the messages they portray to children have a lasting impact on them. This emphasizes the impact of media on body image, gender roles, and self-perception. The study also showed a positive outcome for children from lower-income families, who showed better body image and less acceptance of hypermasculinity.

This article contributes to my research on gender roles and stereotypes in children's media and their effects on Young kids. Coyne’s 2023 research revealed the persistent traditional gender patterns in Disney content, where princesses are often portrayed as “weak, attractive, nurturing, submissive, and fearful”, while male characters typically have hypermasculine traits. However, the study also highlights how the stereotypes are being actively challenged in modern Disney content through characters/films like Moana and Raya, who are independent and focused less on romance, and male characters like Kristof, who is more emotionally vulnerable than other male characters. The effects on children prove to be more complex than I initially assumed, as

young kids might mirror traditional gender roles. In the long term, their exposure to princess media surprisingly led to girls developing more egalitarian (viewing boys and girls as equal) gender views.

The television show *Bella and the Bulldogs*, created by Nickelodeon, while maintaining some gender stereotypes, defies multiple gender stereotypes for young girls. From the very first episode, Bella Dawson, the head cheerleader, earns a chance to try out for the quarterback of her middle school football team. Led by team quarterback Troy, the team does everything in their power to make Bella quit, as they believe a girl should not be on the team, let alone a quarterback. In the show's pilot, Troy chants, "Football is a man's game," in the locker room to which the entire team agrees. Bella perseveres through multiple challenges and sabotages they put in front of her, such as making practice incredibly hard and physical. When talking to her best friends about the challenges she's experiencing and the public reaction, she says, "I got a lot of people telling me I'm crazy." Bella overcomes personal and external doubts, leading the Bulldogs with determination and gaining gradual acceptance and respect.

Throughout the series, Bella's leadership as the quarterback of a traditionally male-dominated position challenged the stereotype that girls cannot excel in traditionally male sports and roles. Additionally, her intelligence, creativity, and problem-solving skills show viewers that girls can be strong academically and physically, countering the stereotype that women are lesser than men, intellectually and physically. Bella was able to secure the position of quarterback as she displayed a superior ability to throw and control the movement of the football, compared to her male counterparts. Bella is social and confident and challenges the stereotype that women are fragile and docile.

Across multiple episodes, Bella helps her male teammates learn to accept the concept and idea of freely enjoying typical feminine activities and not see it as an activity that minimizes their masculinity. In season 1, episode 5, “Tex Fest”, for example, Bella demonstrates her support for Troy and Newt joining the choir despite the backlash they face as it is not a “manly” activity. In season 1, episode 2, “Newbie QB,” the team is caught singing a girly pop song in the boy's locker room. As this is a secret activity, the leak of the team's love of the song causes embarrassment for the team, and Bella is suspected of leaking the information because she's new and a girl. Bella proves her innocence and gains the trust of her teammates. Her platonic friendships with her male teammates, in which she encourages them, lends helpful advice, and simply enjoys time with them, goes against the stereotype that women cannot be friends with men without romantic motives.

Finally, in season 1, episode 20, “No Girls Allowed,” the opposing team's head coach prevents Bella from playing football right before the Bulldogs' first playoff game. Bella, with the support of her team and community, fought to let her play. The episode not only showed how society tries to limit the potential of women, but also inspired girls to fight for equal opportunities.

Nickelodeon's choice to air a television program that not only stars a female lead but also challenges gender stereotypes for two seasons is a contrast to Disney's choice to air programs that reinforce toxic gender stereotypes. The reason behind its cancellation by Nickelodeon after only two seasons, despite being a very popular show, remain unclear, but during its tenure, gender norms were disrupted and challenged. The program *Bella and the Bulldogs*, then, directly contributes to my research on what types of programs are influencing/have influenced adolescents. It illustrates how children's media can promote gender equality, challenge toxic

stereotypes, and display empowering and inspirational role models for young viewers, especially girls. It also serves as an example for future television programs.

The article, “Disney Princesses Can Be Good for a Child’s Self-Image, UC Davis Researchers Suggest A Favorite Princess Can Improve a Child’s Confidence” by Alex Russell, presents a study by the University of California, Davis. Researchers wanted to understand how Disney princesses affect young children's confidence and play behaviors. They specifically studied how the body type of child’s favorite princess influenced the toys they played with and how children felt about their bodies. To conduct their research, they surveyed 340 children and their caregivers in Denver from 2020 to 2021. They studied the children, mostly girls, at age 3 and again at age 4. Their research included asking their caregivers about their child’s body confidence, observing the children’s choice of toys, and creating three categories for the body types of Disney princesses: “thin, average, and above average/heavy.” The key findings of their study were that children whose favorite princess was of an average body type (like Moana) developed more body confidence over time and were more willing to play with toys of both genders. Their body confidence increased the more they played with these types of princesses. The researchers concluded that princesses, thin or not, did not cause harm to young children, as they surmised, “Princesses with average body size created a protective effect, strengthening how confident children feel about their bodies and freeing them to play in different ways,” (Shawcroft). Moreover, the article discusses how Disney princesses represent more than what girls look like as they run, climb mountains, and fight. Shawcroft observed, “For these princesses, their stories are more about what they can do with their bodies than how they look” (Shawcroft). One limitation of this study is that the participants were not diverse, as 84% were white. Additionally, it only followed one age group of children for two years.

This article contributes to my research, as it provides findings and opinions contrary to many critics' concerns over the influence of how Disney portrays Disney princesses. This research showed the potential positive effects of Disney princesses on young boys and girls. It illustrates how modern princesses, like Moana, are breaking traditional gender stereotypes through their physical strength and engagement in physical activities. The study's findings further highlight how Disney animators created princesses such as Moana with interior depth rather than focusing narrowly on their appearance. This study found that children "playing princess" as a game paved the way for them to engage with toys marketed to a range of children, regardless of gender.

In "Gender stereotypes about intellectual ability emerge early and influence children's interests," Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian present a study that examined how gender stereotypes about intellectual ability influence children's interests and beliefs in their early childhood. The research question was: At what age do children begin to associate brilliance with a specific gender, and how does this affect their choices? The researchers conducted studies with 400 children of all ages 5 to 7. They showed images and asked the children who they believed was "really smart." Then, they showed games labeled "smart children" or "hardworking children." Then, they recorded their responses to gather information on their beliefs and interests. Their research showed that at age 6, girls were much less likely than boys to associate their gender with being intelligent.

Additionally, age 6 and 7-year-old girls started to be less interested in activities that were for "really, really smart" children. The researchers concluded that these stereotypes are learned very early on in life and can shape the future interests and career choices of girls significantly, which can lead to gender gaps in STEM fields. This study suggests that cultural messages, which

most likely, include how characters are portrayed in children's media, contribute to the early development of gender stereotypes about intelligence. In the researchers' view, "The present results suggest a sobering conclusion: Many children assimilate the idea that brilliance is a male quality at a young age. This stereotype begins to shape children's interests as soon as it is acquired and is thus likely to narrow the range of careers they will one day contemplate" (Bian et al.). The researchers identified a possible limitation to the study, which is that it was conducted with primarily white middle-class children in the U.S. As they surmise, "It will be important to test whether these findings extend beyond a middle-class, majority-white U.S. cultural context and to comprehensively investigate the sources of the 'brilliance = males' stereotype in children's environments" (Bian, et al.)

This study contributes to my research by providing evidence that stereotypes about intelligence shape the beliefs and interests of children at a very early age. It demonstrates how children internalize gender roles and stereotypes through messages, which can become more apparent when in the media they consume. The findings support the idea that the media's portrayal of intelligence may reinforce the harmful stereotype that being smart is a male trait, potentially negatively influencing how young girls perceive themselves, their potential, and their career aspirations. Additionally, this study highlights how stereotypes can affect a child's choices, showing that girls as young as six may be discouraged from participating in STEM activities. This study also emphasizes the importance of addressing these harmful stereotypes early on to prevent long-term impacts that they may have on children's future career paths. Although this study doesn't specifically research the effect of gender stereotypes in the media, it reveals the impact of gender stereotypes in general on children. So, when these gender

stereotypes are being presented to young children through the media they watch every day, it only worsens the children's exposure to them and thus worsens their effects on them.

In the study “Watching Gender: How Stereotypes in Movies and on TV Impact Kids’ Development” by The Common Sense Media and written by L. Monique Ward and Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, media that focused on previous scholarly research on children's television and movies were analyzed. In addition, they constructed a national survey of about 1,000 parents to investigate their attitudes toward how gender is portrayed in such media. They analyzed over 150 sources and found that gender stereotypes in TV and movies are very influential on children's lives. They found that children seeing gender roles portrayed in media has consequences on children’s relationships, self-esteem, and career aspirations. The study summarizes their research into 10 key findings: 1) “Media reinforces the idea that masculine traits and behaviors are more valued than feminine traits and behaviors, and boys who consume these media messages are more likely to exhibit masculine behaviors and beliefs.” The media commonly portrays masculine traits like dominance, aggression, and withholding emotion. These influence boys to adopt such behaviors. Young boys tend to admire masculine role models while not wanting to engage in media with female characters.

2) “Media promotes the notion that girls should be concerned about their appearance and should treat their bodies as sexual objects for others’ consumption.” Messages in the media encourage girls to prioritize their looks and associate being good-looking with success. This can cause girls to have body issues and reduced confidence, and impact their mental health and academic performance.

3) “In adolescence, media use is associated with more tolerant views of sexual harassment and more support for the belief that women are at least partially responsible for their

sexual assaults” (Common Sense Media, Ward and Aubrey). Some of the research they explored suggested that media exposure in adolescence can promote sexist beliefs, harmful views about a woman's responsibility in cases of sexual assault, and the tolerance of sexual harassment.

4) “Heavier viewing of gender-traditional television content is associated with children’s gender-typed career aspirations.” Traditional media content influences how children perceive suitable careers for them based on their gender, often discouraging girls from pursuing STEM careers due to portrayed gender stereotypes.

5) “The television programs and films that children and adolescents watch reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.” TV and film often reinforce gender roles by depicting male characters as dominant and aggressive, while female characters are passive and focus on their appearance.

6) “Youth of color may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of media use on gender-role development.” African American and Latino youth are particularly susceptible to the media's stereotypes about gender.

7) “Heavier viewing of gender-traditional TV and film content is linked to the expression of more rigid beliefs about what men and women do and are and how they behave.” Consuming media filled with traditional gender stereotypes can cause more rigid beliefs about gender roles in household chores, jobs, and adult behavior.

8) “Accepting rigid stereotypes about the roles and attributes of women and men has consequences for development in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.” Harsh gender stereotypes can limit the intellectual and professional potential of children, which can lead to mental health issues such as depression, body image issues, and gender-based violence.

9) “As children enter adolescence, the media provide lessons on how they are expected to behave in romantic and sexual situations, and these lessons are strongly gendered.” Youths internalize media messages about romantic and sexual behavior, with boys encouraged to pursue sexual relationships and avoid commitment, while girls are expected to be more passive, prioritize relationships, and use their looks to get men.

10) “There are several ways to combat gender stereotypes and promote positive gender representations, including presenting counter-stereotypes, talking to children about media content, and providing media-literacy education” A way to counter the stereotypes in media is by presenting content such as presenting strong and capable female leads who are not consumed with their appearance and attracting boys, lead others, and enjoy outdoor activities, sports, science and more. Additionally, feature media could present male characters who work with girls, respect them, treat them equally, show empathy and emotion, and resolve conflicts without aggression. Moreover, parents discussing media content with their children and promoting media literacy education can reduce the potential of internalized gender norms and encourage them to think critically about the media messages they're consuming.

This study contributes to this research project by giving examples of how gender stereotypes are portrayed in children's media and their effects on young kids. It supports my research by showing that TV shows and movies often portray boys as dominant, aggressive, and unemotional. In contrast, girls are shown to be focused on appearance and being passive. This reinforces traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. The stereotypes found in the study affect how children see themselves and others and can shape their beliefs about the roles of men and women. Additionally, it provided concrete data that measured how children are impacted by these stereotypes, by harming their confidence, mental health, and ambitions. It also highlights

new information in my research, which is that youths can adopt harmful ideas about relationships. Finally, this study points to solutions that challenge the harmful stereotypes currently in media, such as creating TV and shows with strong female leads who are breaking traditional gender roles and showing boys who not only treat others equally but also express their own emotions. It also stresses the importance of media literacy, having parents and educators teach children to think critically about the media they watch and question the stereotypes they may see.

The kids' television show “Game Shakers,” created by Nickelodeon and Daniel Schneider, challenges gender stereotypes from the beginning. The show, created in 2015, stars two female leads, Babe and Kenzie, who co-found a successful tech company specializing in video game development. This challenges the stereotype that girls should not be in STEM fields. Though both characters are very different from each other, they defy standard gender stereotypes in their ways. Babe is confident, ambitious, assertive, strong, and a natural leader. She breaks the stereotype that girls should be quiet, passive, and less ambitious. Kenzie is incredibly intelligent, tech-savvy, and very responsible. By portraying Babe as more outspoken and bold, whereas Kenzie is quiet and organized, viewers are exposed to the fact that girls can be beyond the “girly girl” stereotype. The wardrobe of both female leads does not emulate the typical feminine style, as they dress casually and comfortably to fit their roles in the company. Finally, the female friendship between Babe and Kenzie does not include the typical storyline of fighting over boys, their appearance, or popularity. Instead, it is based on a shared dream, goals, and respect towards each other.

“Game Shakers” also challenges male stereotypes with the characters Hudson and Double G. Hudson is laid back and funny and respects Kenzie and Babe as his bosses. He defies

stereotypes, as he is not portrayed as traditionally “tough” or “dominant” and isn't threatened by strong female leadership and success. In addition, the main adult in the show, Double G, is a flamboyant businessman and rapper who is fun and unlike the traditional “serious businessman”. After an initial confrontation with Kenzie and Babe over the illegal use of his song, he ends up funding their new company, “Game Shakers”. Unlike media that typically portrays boys dismissing girls’ intelligence and abilities in technology and business, Babe and Kenzie earn the respect of their peers, including the men. The boys show respect towards the girl's leadership and, in general, promote equality and mutual respect towards viewers.

“Game Shakers” contributes to this research project by showing how the media can challenge traditional gender stereotypes. By featuring girls in leadership roles within the tech world and breaking down traditional male and female behavior expectations, “Game Shakers” can be an example for future television shows aimed at children. Through its characterization and character interactions, “Game Shakers” sets a positive example for not only girls but also boys on the vast potential of girls and the equal relationship between genders.

The research article “Dismantling gender stereotypes in media and advertising” by UNICEF identifies common problems in children’s media surrounding gender and notes how they are trying to stop them. Some common harmful stereotypes they identified were women as the “caretaker” and men as the “breadwinner” and unrealistic beauty norms. These norms can impact children’s self-perception and lead to mental health problems and unhealthy eating habits. Lastly, negative stereotypes about girls' involvement in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) from an early age have lasting effects on their career decisions, contribute to the gender divide, and can significantly impact the economy. By promoting positive gender socialization, UNICEF wants to address discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes by

promoting positive gender socialization for children. They hope to achieve fair outcomes for all children. They believe that “gender norms can change, and change is most likely to be achieved by exposing children and adolescents to positive gender norms as early as possible” (UNICEF).

The argument launched suggests that there should be a greater promotion of positive gender socialization through advertising, which will help to ensure that children will consume media that is positive and inclusive as a variety of social norms, rather than pushing harmful stereotypes that have a lasting impact on children. UNICEF wants to encourage advertising, marketing, and media industries to promote positive portrayals of gender and diversity to empower all children

This article contributes to this research project as it not only identifies common stereotypes and why they harm children but also proposes solutions to stop the perpetuation of negative stereotypes on impressionable children. Additionally, it shows how their organization, UNICEF, is specifically working towards promoting positive representation, not only in the media but also in marketing.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This research interrogates the ways in which Disney’s television programs and films portray traditional gender roles through character analysis, dialogue, and narratives that might reinforce gender stereotypes. For decades, Disney has portrayed harmful gender narratives: princesses who need rescuing, an emphasis on female characters’ appearance and finding a husband, and male characters who display strength, heroism, and dominance. Though rigid gender norms have been prevalent in children's media since its creation, there has been a recent

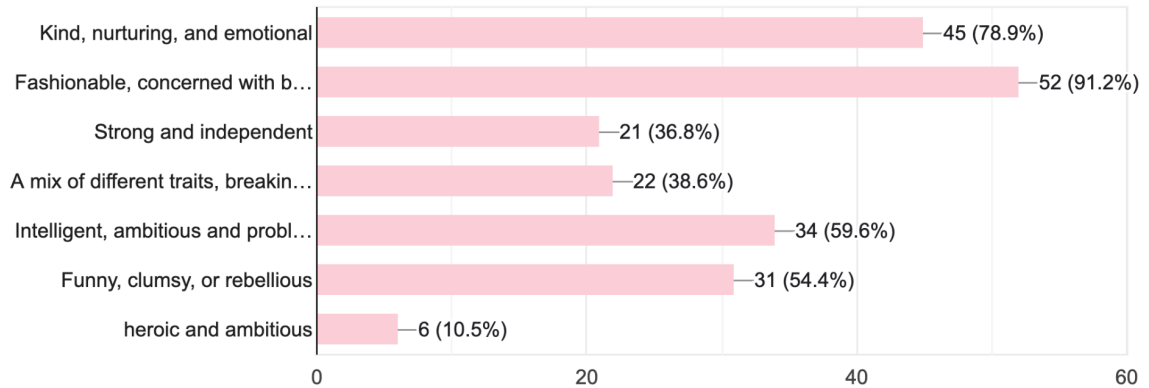
shift in some media platforms, such as Nickelodeon. Nickelodeon has produced shows like “Bella and the Bulldogs” and “Game Shakers” that actively challenge traditional gender norms. These shows present female characters in roles traditionally reserved for male characters. This promotes the powerful message that girls can enter and succeed in spheres once exclusively promoted for boys, helping to break down long-standing gender barriers.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

This research project employed a mixed-methods approach to collecting data. First, a primary source analysis was conducted by viewing several television programs and films produced by Nickelodeon and Disney. Second, this researcher performed a content analysis of peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles. Finally, a quantitative survey on childhood experiences, gender representation, and mainstream media consumption was distributed to the FSHA student body. The students were presented with two question types, namely, multiple-choice and check-all-that-apply. The multiple choice questions presented students with a range of options with the expectation that they select one answer, whereas the check-all-that-apply questions allowed participants to select as many options as they agreed with.

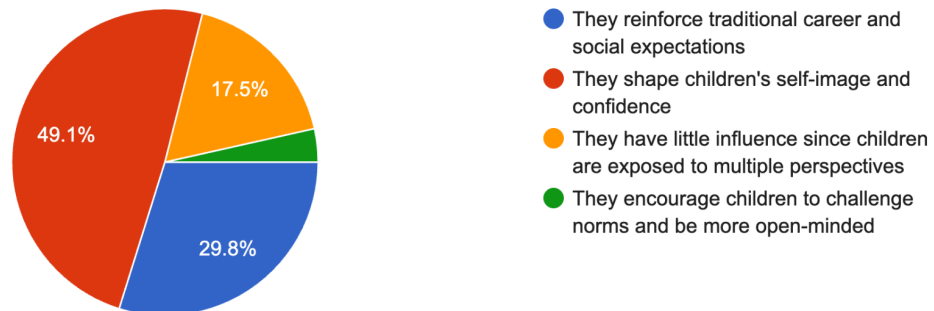
5.) How were girl characters typically portrayed in these networks' shows/movies? (Check all that apply)

57 responses



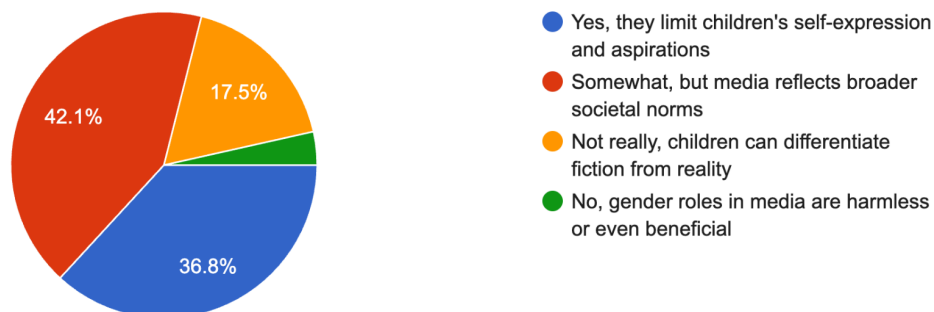
10.) What impact do you think gendered media representations have on children's real-life behaviors and aspirations?

57 responses



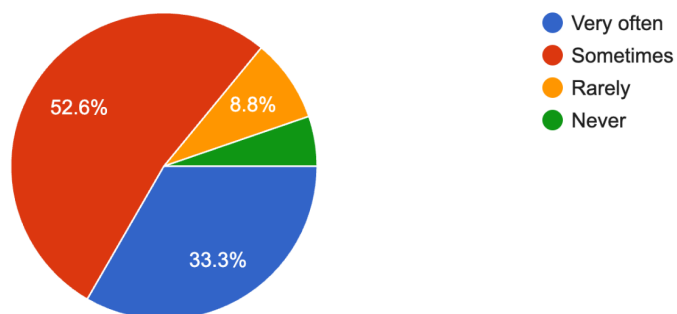
9.) Do you think gender stereotypes in children's media are harmful to a child's development?

57 responses



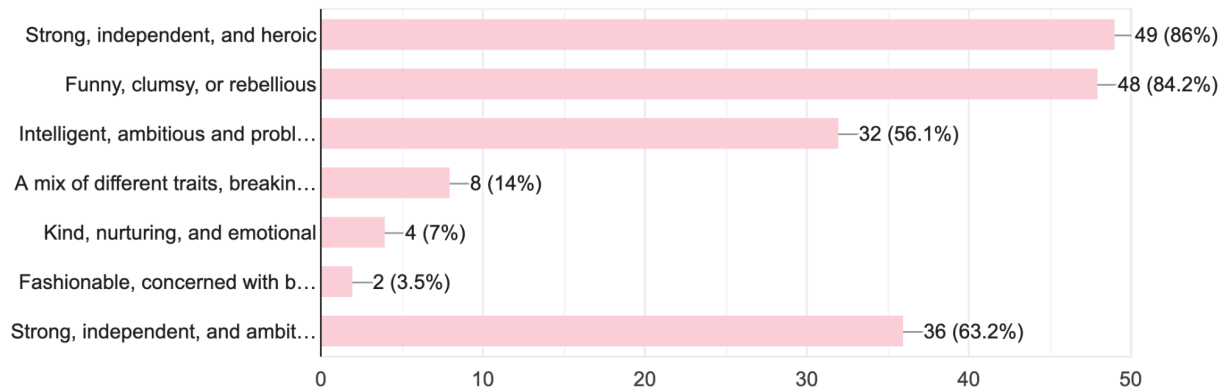
3.) How often did you see traditional gender roles challenged in Nickelodeon shows/movies such as Game Shakers, Bella and the Bulldogs, and more?

57 responses



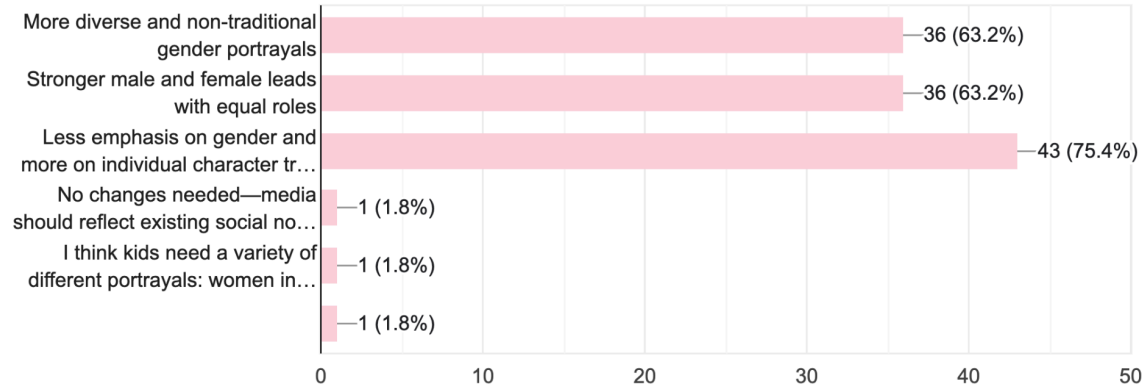
4.) How were boy characters typically portrayed in these networks' shows/movies? (Check all that apply)

57 responses



11.) What changes, if any, should be made in children's media to improve gender representation? (Select all that apply)

57 responses



RESULTS

The survey of 57 Flintridge Sacred Heart Academy students revealed that there are stark differences between how male and female characters are portrayed. Male characters were

portrayed as “strong, independent, and heroic” (86%) and “funny, clumsy, or rebellious” (84.2%). In contrast, female characters were described as “fashionable, concerned with beauty” (91.2%) and “kind, nurturing, and emotional” (78.9%). This difference shows the persistence of gender stereotypes in children's media. However, FSHA 37% of FSHA students observed female characters as “strong and independent” and 54.4% as “funny and rebellious”, which supports the research on how the portrayal of female characters in children's media is evolving and becoming more equal to that of men. When given questions concerning the effects of these portrayals on children, 78.9% of respondents believed that gender stereotypes in children's media are either definitely (36.8%) or somewhat (42.1%) harmful to child development. When asked about the possible impacts, 49.1% believed that gendered media representations “shape children's self-image and confidence.”

In comparison, 29.8% believed that they “reinforce traditional career and social expectations.” Only 3.5% viewed gender stereotypes in media as “harmless or beneficial”. This survey also revealed how gender stereotypes are being challenged, and the beliefs about that. When asked about modern Disney films featuring characters like Moana, Raya, and Elsa, 40.4% of students reported seeing traditional gender roles challenged “very often,” with 43.9% seeing it occur “sometimes.” Similar results were shown regarding Nickelodeon programs, with 33.3% of people observing gender roles being challenged “very often” and 52.6% “sometimes.” This suggests a positive change in children's media, as 54.4% of students believing that “gender stereotypes are still present but have improved” and 42.1% feel that “media now offers a more balance and inclusive gender portrayal” when questions about possible or necessary improvements, 75.4% of students want “less emphasis on gender and more on individual character traits.” At the same time, equal percentages, 63.2% each, called for “more diverse and

non-traditional gender portrayals” and “stronger male and female leads with equal roles.” Only 1.8% believed no changes were needed. These results show the overwhelming support for continued improvement towards more balanced gender representation in children's media. The findings of this survey show both the continuance of traditional gender stereotypes and positive developments in challenging these norms in the media that children consume daily.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, gender representation in children’s media is influential, as it can either reinforce outdated stereotypes or create more inclusive and empowering content. As the content analysis has demonstrated, while traditional gender portrayals still persist, depicting boys as dominant and girls as weak, there is a growing trend of media content that is empowering to all genders and promotes equality. This growing trend in media shows more well-rounded characterizations, especially in modern Disney films and Nickelodeon shows like *Bella and the Bulldogs* and *Game Shakers*. How characters are portrayed is not just for entertainment; they can shape how children see themselves, their peers, and their potential. Children tend to idolize these characters and internalize the messages they send. The results of the FSHA student survey further affirmed the fact that today’s youth see both the harm in gender stereotypes and a need for change. As the entertainment children consume continues to evolve, so does the importance of challenging harmful gender norms. By supporting media and companies that defy gender stereotypes and inspire confidence and promote positive representations, we as a society can help raise the next generations to believe in themselves, and the limitless potential of themselves and others, regardless of their gender.

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