

Boys, girls, and their media experiences

THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITY

Dafna Lemish

This article explores the limits of gender representations in mainstream media for boys and girls.

Our gender identity is not something we are born with, but rather a set of understandings that organize how we relate to our bodies, one that is produced through behaviors and social relations in the practice of our everyday life. As such, gender is distinct from our biological and sexual differences that characterize us from birth. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir stated this in her famous saying: “One is not born a woman, but becomes one” (de Beauvoir, 1989/1949). This can of course be extended to men – one is not born a man, but becomes one. What is the role that popular culture in general,

and femininity; rather than, for example, an approach that would treat our gender identity as fluid, with a host of options in between?

MEDIA CONTENT IS DIVIDED ALONG STEREOTYPICAL GENDER LINES

There is ample evidence to suggest that the vast majority of media content consumed by children world-wide, as well as the related toys, games, clothes, and memorabilia, are clearly divided along stereotypical gender lines (Götz & Lemish, 2012; Lemish, 2010). Boys are more often defined by their actions while girls more by their appearance. Boyhood is about toughness

cles, sports, weapons, mechanic and construction toys, and are dominated by metallic and blue colors. Store-aisles of girls’ toys are characterized by dolls, fashion and beauty accessories, cute animals, arts and crafts, and household items, and are dominated by pink and purple colors.

Media content itself supports the segregation of boys and girls into two distinct worlds of action-adventure and sports for boys, and romance and relationships for girls – thus continuing to perpetuate a sense that this division is natural, normal, and unavoidable. As a result, boys and girls continue to cultivate distinct content tastes that propel a self-fulfilling prophecy: Given the assumption that girls prefer romance and boys action, for example, these contents are continuously produced to target them as an audience, reinforcing the notion of normalcy and social-gender appropriateness. Boys and girls develop tastes that adhere to these expectations, and vice versa. These processes have been studied and documented and are clearly evident not only in relationship to traditional screen-content (television and movies) but also in the use of online content. A recent study confirmed that boys and girls consume media differently. Boys prefer gaming online while girls prefer communication activities such as social media (Common Sense Census, 2015). Obviously, the above conclusions are over-generalizations and we can point to many examples that deviate from these trends, including “gender-blind” content, programs with counter-ste-



© Pixabay

III. 1: Media content supports a segregation into two worlds: action-adventure for boys, romance for girls

and media content for children more specifically, play in the construction of gender identity? What stories do they tell us about what it means to be a female and what it means to be a male? Or perhaps just as important – how do they constantly reaffirm the binary division between masculinity

and power. Girlhood is about beauty and emotions. Boys are presented as more logical and rational, motivated by accomplishments, while girls are portrayed as more emotional and romantic, motivated by relationships (III. 1). Store-aisles of boys’ toys are characterized by action figures, vehi-

reotypes, as well as boys and girls who deviate from the cultural norms and exhibit a wide range of dual gender interests and expertise. Nevertheless, the common trends remain quite clear and universal and require us to consider: how does the media fare contribute to the process of gender identity construction among the young?

CHILDREN NEGOTIATE THEIR IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION WITH MEDIA

There are 3 main lines of research that have pursued the processes by which media influence identity construction:

- Research grounded in the psychology disciplinary tradition,
- research grounded in media studies, and
- research grounded in feminist and cultural “reception” studies tradition.

In psychology, we find the dominance of “social learning theory” according to which children observe gendered behaviors in the media, internalize attitudes and beliefs about gender, and develop perceptions of what is gender-appropriate in their culture. The reinforcement of such clear gender lines (e.g. the pretty girl finds love – but the opinionated girl is considered a “bully”; the strong boy solves the problem – but the sensitive boy is outcast as a “sissy”) continue to entrench them as appropriate scripts of behavior and beliefs to be held by the individual child, as well as appropriate roles and professions they may wish to seek in the future. Studies have confirmed that children have very clear concepts of what roles and professions are appropriate for each gender. As a result, they will assume, that a nurse is a female and a pilot a male.

In a complementary manner, an important research tradition in media studies suggests that exposure to media representations “cultivates” our worldview. The more children

are exposed to gender stereotypes the more they take it for granted that those representations on the screen are reflecting the real world and what is accepted and rewarded in their society, and thus they internalize them to construct their own self-concept and their beliefs about themselves and about the world around them.

In media, girls' self-worth gets tied to their outer appearance

An example of a relevant line of research coming out of these schools of thought is the concern for the internalization of girls' self-objectification and sexualization. According to this argument, girls learn through exposure to so many conventional media narratives to see themselves as objects of desire who are valued by their appearance and sex-appeal and to evaluate their own self-worth in a similar manner. When girls look at themselves in the mirror, they see themselves from the point of view they internalized from the culture around them. Thus, notions of “I am fat”, “I am ugly”, “I am worthless”, are evidence of cultural values so regularly reinforced in much of the media fare. Self-objectification in girls was found to be related to low self-esteem, poor performance in school, eating disorders, shame, depression, and other mental health related issues (APA, 2007; Durham, 2008).

Boys, too, are affected by the sexualization and objectification of girls, as research on the consumption of pornography by teenagers has demonstrated. Heavier exposure to such content was found to be related to attitudes that make light of females' sexual abuse, shows less concern for female sexual well-being, and generally exhibit disrespect towards females as equal partners in a relationship. A recent study on teenage boys in Belgium, who read men's magazines, confirmed that such regular exposure contributes

to stereotypical attitudes objectifying women (Ward, Vandebosch & Eggermont, 2015).

Reception studies, grounded in the scholarly tradition of feminist and cultural studies, explore these processes from the point of view of the children who are “receiving” the media texts, making meaning out of them, and absorbing them within their existing repertoires of worldviews and personal experiences. According to this approach, media texts serve as “Sites of Struggle” among conflicting value systems, including traditional patriarchal forces versus female resistance. Such was a series of studies on how tween girls negotiated the concept of “Girl Power” that became popular in the 90s. As they tried to consolidate expectations placed on them by the conflicting ideologies of traditional femininity on one hand, and the growing visibility of feminism on the other hand, they seemed to embrace a culture of empowerment and independence – as long as it was confined to the realms of consumerism and external appearance (Zaslow, 2011).

In this manner, so the argument goes, old restrictive female stereotypes and conventions (e.g. housewives) were replaced with new ones (e.g. sexy consumer). Similarly, studies of girls' online activities also reveal that media texts and platforms offer girls opportunities to develop different aspects of their identity as maturing young women and to confront society's conflicting expectations that they be very sexy and pretty, but not yet act upon their own sexual desires; to be independent and successful, and yet to be submissive and well-behaved; to do well in school, and yet prepare themselves for the grand moment of becoming a wife and mother.

Conflicting messages for boys

Similarly, boys are also bombarded by conflicting messages at the time

RESEARCH

that they are developing their gendered identity. On one hand, they feel unsafe and vulnerable trying to live up to expectations of traditional, stereotypical masculine behavior of toughness, emotional disconnection, and aggression so prevalent in male role models in the media. At the same time, they find very little room for positive alternatives in the media, as other common forms of masculinity present immature fathers controlled by their wives, or “feminized” males ridiculed by society around them. In order to protect their masculine self, they disassociate themselves from programs dealing with interpersonal relationships, intimacy, and romance by relegating them to the “female” world. Superheroes – such as Superman, Batman, and Spiderman – have a particular role in boys’ development of male identity. In many ways, they are the embodiment of the “perfect” traditional man: they are physically strong, brave, always on the lookout to defend the weak, they are undefeatable, active outdoors, full of adventure, and adored by women. At the same time, these heroes also provide boys with opportunities to explore their own private lives, emotional worlds, and aspirations for the future and thus illustrate the concept of “Site of Struggle”. However, we cannot dismiss the concern that storylines involving dominance and aggression, situated in the context of conflict and threats, restrict boys’ developing identities and limit their ability to experiment emotionally and experience other possible social scripts. So it seems that most stereotypical popular media fare constrain the inner worlds of both girls and boys and thus reproduce a limited range of cultural expectations (Lemish, 2010).

Gay and transgender identities mostly unacceptable

A special consideration needs to be given to the role media play in the

construction of gay and transgender identities. Studies suggest that such representations are mostly unacceptable and thus absent in media directed at children around the world, and that negative images are prevalent when they are present in content aimed at adults. The popular images of the hyper-feminized gay man and the “butch” gay woman are a direct replication of gender stereotypes, as the gay identity is presented as female and the lesbian one as masculine. This reversal denies gay people the option of constructing an identity not bound by this binary division. The absence of diverse alternative models and perspectives in mainstream media reinforces the misperception of the dominant view. It is the internet that has been recently providing opportunities for gay youth to explore, connect, and build a community in a safe space (Lemish, 2010).

BROADENING THE RANGE OF IDENTITY POSSIBILITIES

It is important to acknowledge that there are many initiatives and media products created worldwide that set out purposefully to broaden the range of identity possibilities of boys and girls. Many such examples have been presented and celebrated during the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL festival of quality media for children (Lemish, 2010). These efforts are extremely valuable as research suggests that children are capable of learning and internalizing new ways of constructing their gender identity when presented with attractive alternatives that are positively reinforced by society. It is also highly important to present data that documents that such innovative programming can be highly profitable – counter to the beliefs of producers – that sticking to traditional gender stereotypes is the only smart economical choice. When concerned about the cultural material children use to construct their sense of what it

means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl – opening up the entire range of characteristics, personality traits, skills, and aspirations to both genders – is not only economically viable, but is the smart and right thing to do for the well-being of individual children, as well as for our societies as a whole. ■

This commentary is based on earlier work by the author, including Lemish 2010 and 2015 cited below.

REFERENCES

- APA Report on the sexualization of girls (2007). *American Psychological Association*. Available at: www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html [12.01.2016].
- Common Sense Media (2015). The common sense census: Media use by tweens and teens. Available at: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens> [12.01.2016].
- de Beauvoir, Simone (1989/1949). *The second sex*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Durham, Gigi (2008). *The Lolita effect: The media sexualization of young girls and what we can do about it*. Woodstock & New York: The Overlook Press.
- Götz, Maya & Lemish, Dafna (eds) (2012). *Sexy girls, heroes and funny losers: Gender representations in children’s TV around the world*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Lemish, Dafna (2015). *Children and media: A global perspective*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lemish, Dafna (2010). *Screening gender in children’s TV: The views of producers around the world*. New York & Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ward, L. Monique, Vandenbosch, Laura & Eggermont, Steven (2015). *The impact of men’s magazines on adolescent boys’ objectification and courtship beliefs*. In *Journal of Adolescence*, 39, 49-58.
- Zaslow, Emilie (2011). *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

THE AUTHOR

Dafna Lemish, PhD, is Professor and Dean of the College of Mass Communication and Media Arts at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA, and founding editor of the *Journal of Children and Media*.

