BEYOND PRINCESS CULTURE

Gender and Children's Marketing

EDITED BY KATHERINE A. FOSS

Beyond Princess Culture: Gender and Children's Marketing explores the impact of a post-princess space, examining potential agency and empowerment in the products' users while acknowledging that at least some alternatives continue to perpetuate components of the rigidly gender-coded princess culture. This book collectively critiques the commodification of the post-princess child consumer through analysis of historical and contemporary toys, video games, clothing, websites, and other popular culture phenomena. Guided by theories from feminist and gender studies, *Beyond Princess Culture* demonstrates how the marketing of children's products has and continues to perpetuate and challenge hegemonic notions of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and other positions of intersectionality, as situated in the social, economic, and historical contexts.

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Beyond Princess Culture

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In memory of Dr. Hazel Dicken-Garcia

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PREFACE

As with any project to do with children, this manuscript is intensely personal. Although this an academic book full of rigorous scholarship, you can't really (and fairly) talk about gender and children at a distance. In scholarship, we obviously draw from our own experiences in choosing our topics, samples, and analyses. Thus, our diverse upbringings shape what we write about and how we write. What we played with and wore as children, how we identified and performed our genders, and the slights and challenges we experienced impact ourselves as adults. For example, I recall being horrified as a ten year-old upon receiving a pink corduroy skirt for Christmas—appalled that anyone, especially my own mother, would think that I would like it.

Navigating gender and media as parents adds yet another dimension. Before I had children, I did not understand just how difficult it is, on so many levels. I significantly overestimated the extent to which I could control my kids' media consumption and the influences external to our household. At the same time, I did not foresee the complexity and quirkiness of children's ever-changing preferences and personalities (e.g., insisting on wearing safety goggles and a Spider-man watch to bed every night).

As a Feminist Media Studies scholar, I have struggled with what media products I allow and just how to help my two daughters express themselves. My nine year-old, Nora, is serious, spunky, precocious, and athletic. She prefers short hair and t-shirts and hates dresses and "anything Princess" (and always has). It is through Nora's eyes that I have witnessed the most heart-breaking gendered moments, like the *Frozen* birthday party in which she wore a robot shirt in a sea of Elsa-clad girls swooning for the princess impersonator. It was Nora who was rudely told that she could not join the ninja warrior class at a gymnastics place because it might "make the boys not want to do the class if a girl participated." She is strong and confident now, but I worry about the pressure to conform when she gets to middle school.

My youngest, Hazel, is silly. She will decorate anything and treats fashion like a daily mission, frequently mixing colonial bonnets with frilly skirts and her signature red cowboy boots. She is creative, dramatic, and nurturing. Parenting Hazel, with her love of all things Disney Princess, has been trying in a different way. Given a choice, she wants the Elsa water bottle and the Cinderella dress for her birthday. And yet, children do not follow predictable paths. In my attempt to appease her interests, I enrolled her in a short princess-themed dance camp, which she disliked immensely. Apparently, her princess interest only extends to Band-Aids and dolls, while she prefers karate and swimming for activities.

I begin with this brief description of my children because they are my starting point. Long before chapters were submitted, I knew all of the products studied in this book. *Caddie Woodlawn* is on our bookshelf. We own light sabers. I've eaten at the American Girl restaurant. I remember the Lands' End shirt controversy and excitedly bought clothing from the science-themed line. As I was writing the LEGO chapter, my kids were building sets they picked out. Furthermore, most of the contributors here have children and share the tension between scholar and parent. I know first-hand that LEGO Friends sets perpetuates gender stereotypes. That said, Hazel likes them so I buy them anyway, bringing me to my second point: children are active consumers. While we can help them become critical thinkers and can (somewhat) control their access, kids ultimately decide what products they enjoy and how to play with them. It is this truth that we must remember throughout this anthology.

This book is a cooperative project. I am grateful to all of the authors for sharing their work here.

I appreciate support from my colleagues at Middle Tennessee State University, especially Phil Loubere, Jennifer Woodard, Tricia Farwell, Andrew Oppmann, Greg Pitts (Director, School of Journalism and Strategic Media), Dean Ken Paulson and Associate Dean Zeny Panol. A big thanks to Tom Brinthaupt for the multiple faculty writing retreats.

Finally, I need to acknowledge my special support team that truly makes this book possible. I am forever grateful to the late Dr. Hazel Dicken-Garcia, who impressed upon me more than she will ever know. To Kathy Roberts Forde, for teaching me how to edit (among so many things). Thank you to Dr. Tanya Peres for the advice and writing support. I appreciate my two voices of reason: Kristi and Eric. Finally, I am grateful for my children, Nora and Hazel.

SECTION 1

CONSTRUCTING GENDER IN CHILDHOOD

· 1 ·

PINK OR BLUE?

The Gendering of Children's Marketing

Katherine A. Foss

In May 2011, a father posted a video of his four year-old daughter, Riley, criticizing the gender stereotypes of toy companies, stating that girls play superheroes and boys can enjoy princesses.[1] This *YouTube* video quickly went viral and was featured on *CNN* and other news sites. Since then, it has received more than five million views and 47,000 "Likes." This video and other consumer complaints have spurred retail outlets to, at least, superficially reexamine their gendering practices. In 2015, a Target press release announced that it would stop labeling its toy and bedding aisles after a mother tweeted about the problematic gender division.[2] Other retailers have expanded offerings for boys and girls that attempt to cross gender lines. This trend has generally received public support, with companies emerging that only offer gender-neutral products (i.e., Quirky Kids), yet has also prompted criticism from parents questioning the practice.

Despite current conversations about product gender neutrality, childhood products tend to be clearly defined along traditional gender lines. Even before babies are born, they already own abundant "gender-specific" items. Moms-to-be receive blankets, onesies, car seat covers, crib bedding, hooded towels and numerous other products declaring "BOY" or "GIRL" to the world. When expectant parents choose "not to find out," they are inundated with yellow and green "gender neutral" baby items (delaying, not heading off, the inevitable blue/pink dichotomy at birth). The defining moment—at the fetal ultrasound, a gender reveal party, or at delivery—not only prescribes a set of behavioral and aesthetic expectations, but also labels the new baby as a particular type of consumer. Before children have preferences or can display their personalities, their gender has predetermined the type of products they likely possess. As newborns, gender norms continue to be reproduced, as parents talk about their babies differently depending on whether they are boys or girls.[3]

Even if parents intentionally purchase products across gender-lines, it is difficult to truly avoid traditional toys and clothing. Gifts for kids tend to be based on gender stereotypes, as illustrated by the "color your own purse" kits given to tween girls or by the heaps of vehicles that little boys receive at birthday parties. Generous relatives reinforce gender disparities through Christmas gifts of plastic tiaras for little girls or ride-on toy tractors for boys. At McDonald's, gender determines the coveted Happy Meal prize, distinguished between the "boy" toy and the "girl" toy.

This division is not limited to toys. From infancy, clothing radically differs between the sexes. Boys' clothes convey action and adventure, with superheroes, vehicles, dinosaurs, space-themes, and spunky declarations like "Born to be wild!" or "Lil' Rock 'N' Roller." On the contrary, girls' clothing and shoes often resemble doll outfits—with adorned materials that inhibit active play. Everyday-wear for girls typically feature gentle animals (kittens, puppies, butterflies, and ladybugs) or dreamlike fantasy scenes (unicorns and rainbows), sometimes accompanied by cutesy or sassy messages ("Daddy's little princess!," "Melting hearts is my superpower!" or "Kiss me, I'm cute"). Character clothing is especially prevalent and gender-defined. Boys' clothes feature (male) superheroes, *Star Wars*, *Minecraft*, *Pokemon* and active depictions of other fictional narratives. Girls are offered "feminine" versions of the boy clothing (i.e., pink Batman shirts), *Hello Kitty!*, *My Little Pony*, Minnie Mouse, and other pastel choices. For little girls, Disney princess designs cover socks, underpants, leggings, skirts, tops, pajamas, swimsuits, and accessories.

The merchandising of popular children's characters has meant that even more items contain gendered messages.[4] Toothbrushes, first aid kits, beach towels, cereal, yogurt, crackers, applesauce, juice, kids' greeting cards, school supplies, and other products feature characters and color-schemes that indicate boy/girl divisions. For example, in the Band-Aid section, parents can choose between the Hulk, *Star Wars*, *Paw Patrol*, *Cars* (presumably for boys) *or* Disney Princess, *Frozen*, *Moana*, *Sofia the First*, "Poppy" from *Trolls*, and other characters (for girls). More "neutral" choices include *Peanuts*, *Mickey Mouse*, or the undesirable generic brown. This gendering extends to activities, as parents can drop off their children at "*Star Wars*" day at the local museum or hire an Elsa impersonator to belt out "Let it go" at their five year-old's birthday party.

The gender dichotomy in children's products and activities is far from innate. In addition to individual biases about girls and boys, media messages regularly reinforce "appropriate" dress and play, often based on gender. Even with some contemporary movements to encourage gender neutrality, advertisements, films, television, websites, music, and books continue to reinforce gender stereotyping. We are in an era of conflicting discourses with the gendering of children's marketing. The demand for gender-neutral products has been met with backlash about "preserving masculinity" and declarations of "boys will be boys" or "my little girl just wants to be a princess." We still see clearly defined toy aisles, even if the boy/girl signs are missing. At the same time, minor changes are apparent next to more traditional choices. NASA-themed shirts for girls are for sale next to pastel unicorns with text about dreaming. American Girl finally added a boy doll to its line ("Logan," a blonde drummer) and a few options in the "create your own" doll. News stories and blogs about gender expression and children who are transgendered have helped to initiate dialogue and acceptance about gender fluidity, but this discourse has yet to be fully reflected in the marketing of children's products.

Existing scholarship has critiqued this confusing space, particularly in regards to the explosion of princess culture.[5] Outside of the Disney enterprise, Lego, Mattel, Hasbro, Fisher Price, and other monolithic entities continue to produce products that shape how we perceive what it means to be perceived as male or female. Through clothing, imaginative play, gaming, literature, sports and other competition, gender is manifested and reproduced. In this book, we explore the impact of a post-princess space, exploring potential agency and empowerment in the products' users, while acknowledging that at least some alternatives continue to perpetuate components of the rigidly gender-coded princess culture. Through analysis of past and contemporary children's products and marketing campaigns, we aim to better understand how parents and their kids navigate and negotiate constructions of gender.

How we define and perform gender as children (and for children) significantly influences the nurturing of identity, behavior, aspirations, skill sets, opportunities, and other critical aspects of life. The false mantras of "boys will be boys" or "every girl wants to be a princess" enforce rigidity and disparities that have long-lasting implications. Teachers' gendered misperceptions can discriminate against male students, reducing motivation for boys to improve reading and become better students.[6] Negative gender stereotypes have been shown to hinder girls' and women's interest, confidence, and achievement in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields.[7] These gender disparities impact inequalities in employment, compensation, health care, politics, law enforcement, domestic divisions of labor, and other areas, as mitigated by overall positions of intersectionality (race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, geographic region, and other factors). In other words, the messages in children's products not only dichotomize gender from a young age, but also set in motion lifelong differences that reinforce patriarchal hegemonic structures.

Children, Media, and Marketing

Children are frequent media consumers. Even toddlers consistently consume media, as kids under two spend an average of 40 minutes per day watching TV or using other screen devices.[8] Screen time increases with age: Five to eight year-olds have almost three hours, eight to 12 year-olds spend approximately six hours, and teenagers average nine hours per day.[9] Kids also have access to a variety of media platforms, as 98% of U.S. households with children ages 0–8 have at least one mobile device, up from 52% in 2011.[10] Approximately 45% of younger kids have their own tablets, while 89% of teenagers have smartphones.[11] On average, younger children watch *YouTube* and other online videos for 17 minutes per day and spend approximately 48 minutes on mobile devices, whereas tweens and teens are more diversified in their media activities.[12] Moreover, the amount of media consumption for tweens and teens varies by age, gender, race, parents' level of education, and socio-economic class.[13]

Across platforms, advertisers then have numerous channels to reach child consumers through TV commercials, embedded ads, online videos, branded websites, social marketing, in apps, and other sites.[14] Advertising is prevalent in children's web content, as Cai and Zhao found that 87% of popular kids' websites contain ads.[15] Additionally, cross-promotion with branded characters, interactive ads in mobile gaming, and advergames engage kids in ways that traditional marketing cannot.[16] In these outlets, children may have difficulty distinguishing between content and advertisements more than with older forms of marketing.[17] These forms, particularly advergames, have been shown to be more effective in persuading kids to ask others to purchase the products for them, compared to television commercials.[18] Not surprisingly, 69% of parents reported having concerns about the effects of advertising on their children.[19]

Children's products can be a lucrative business. In the United States, toy industries generated over $20 billion in retail sales, just in 2016, a 5% increase from the previous year.[20] Companies spend more than $543 million annually to market games, toys, and children's vehicles.[21] Children are an attractive audience to the advertising industry because, as Ellen Seiter outlines, they are influential in adults' purchases, they "will soon spend a lot of money themselves, and they provide an opportunity to inculcate brand loyalty at an early age, thus ensuring future markets."[22] In the billion-dollar marketing industry, the use of gender stereotypes has been perceived as a "safe" choice that resonates well with audiences, allowing for quick identification of roles.[23] As the following sections on historical background and literature demonstrate, gender positions and preferences are neither inherent, nor fixed, as "normalized" gender expression has shifted over time.

Background: The History of the Child Consumer

Children have not always been at the center of society. In fact, to have life revolve around kids is a contemporary phenomenon. While the number of stay-at-home parents has significantly decreased in the last 50 years, parents today devote much more time to their children and are more involved in their lives.[24] Parents are spending more money on children's products and activities, and kids have more power and influence in purchasing decisions.[25] Additionally, children nowadays are more active consumers, with far more disposable income than in the past.[26] This child-centered trend has been reflected in the marketing of products to children.

Children as Passive, Not Consumers

Children's toys and clothes have become more explicitly gendered over the last century. Julia Grant explains how in the early 19th century, "gender was viewed primarily as a social category that was acquired in successive stages as children matured."[27] Babies wore simple white dresses, and male and female toddlers had similar outfits, wearing skirts and dresses.[28] As boys aged, their clothing became more gender-distinct as they began donning trousers and getting haircuts. Girls' maturity and age was then defined by hairstyle and skirt-length.[29] Moreover, qualities that would later be perceived as feminine (i.e., "tenderness, self-control," and "self-sacrifice") were idealized for both boys and girls during the Victorian era.[30] Gendered color-coding was also reversed, as pink was associated with masculinity, while blue was perceived as more feminine.[31] Children were not perceived as autonomous or influential, and for the first few decades of the 20th century, mothers were considered the target market for children's clothing and other products.[32]

From the post-Civil War era to the early 1900s, toys were designed to allow kids to mimic their parents' duties, teaching them how to become adults.[33] Miriam Forman-Brunell highlights how dolls were used to teach young girls to become "useful" members of society, capturing the strength and vitality of the Progressive era.[34] At the same time, in the late 19th century, male inventors created mechanical dolls, fitting with the era's focus on science and technology. With industrialization, the mass production of children's products became the norm, as fewer items were made in the home. Long-standing toy brands emerged in the early 1900s, with Lionel Trains (1900), Crayola (1903), Erector sets (1913), Tinkertoy (1914), and Lincoln Logs (1916).[35] These toy categories have been relatively unchanged since the 1920s, with cleaning toys, ovens and kitchen sets, strollers, doll houses, shopping carts, and other products representing domestic work marketed toward girls, while boys have been offered active toys that encourage play.[36]

In this time period, magazines and catalogs highlighted toys and other products available for children, as evident in the Sears' catalogs in the early 1900s.[37] Beginning in the 1920s, boys' and girls' outfits became much more distinct from each other in advertisements, with the blue/pink colors indicating gender.[38] Clothes for boys became much more masculine at a younger age, deviating from what girls would wear.[39] This was a gradual process, as the newborn "going home" outfit would not become gendered until decades later. While clothing and domestic products appeared in this era, toys were not heavily advertised. Fewer than 20% of ads in *Parents* magazine featured toys, demonstrating that children were not perceived as a target audience.[40]

Recognizing Children as Consumers and the Gendering of Childhood

It was in the 1930s and 1940s that advertisers first considered children as a target audience—as "legitimate, individualized consumers."[41] Manufacturers capitalized on this new group, offering children's clubs and contests for purchasing their products, particularly through popular radio programs. With this recognition, advertisers sought to understand how to create messages that would appeal to children at various developmental stages.[42] In the late 1940s, television enabled the "demonstration" of toys through commercials and further cemented perceptions of children as consumers.[43] It was in this period that advertisers became more focused on using children's past activities to predict future successes, with the child perceived as a "novelty seeker."[44]

Print advertising for toys and other children's products also significantly increased at this time, following the post-war "baby boom."[45] Marketing expanded to incorporate children as research participants in the 1960s, with the use of children's "likes/dislikes" driving the market.[46] Researchers observed children playing with toys and used this information to shape future products. In this era, children's ads were highly gendered. Even with "gender-neutral" products, ads often featured a single boy or a girl watching the boy play.[47] It should be noted that advertisements were nearly homogenous, with only a few token children of color included.[48]

While parents questioned the value of comic books and other products, before the late 1960s, no organized effort to control advertising toward children existed. With the Vietnam War, protests against children's weapon toys emerged.[49] At the same time, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) began monitoring the safety of toys in general, prompted by Edward Swartz' published list of "dangerous" toys. Action for Children's Television (ACT) and other groups also drew attention to the potential influence of television commercials on children, leading to voluntary guidelines and recommendations by professional advertising and broadcasting associations, as well as FTC investigations.[50]

In the 1970s and 1980s, advertisers focused on creating more active-learning and cognition-type toys.[51] Toys marketed as educational became big, paired with *Sesame Street* and other TV programs designed to teach children concepts. Parents' roles were reduced to simply "the purchaser, the go-between in an exchange between toymaker and child."[52] Home video gaming systems also emerged in this era, bringing in new forms of interactive technology into childhood with Atari and other electronic games.[53]

Starting in the 1990s and continuing today, children have been perceived as autonomous consumers with ability to influence household purchases.[54] As such, fantasy play, cross-promotion, and merchandising have heightened the marketing to children.[55] Additionally, the increase of dual-working and divorced parents has translated to more spending on children's products and children have more money to spend. Marketing platforms have dramatically expanded to include the internet, mobile devices, and new gaming systems, bringing more ways for advertisers to reach children and in more subtle ways.[56] Still, children's products continue to be marketed as gendered, reinforcing stereotypes of the past.

Gender and Marketing

Research has shown that girls and women are significantly underrepresented in advertising across product categories and age groups.[57] Advertisements have historically reinforced gender stereotypes, portraying men as independent and dominant, and women as passive and dependent. Women appear without speaking in ads four times as often as men and are less likely to narrate or provide voice-overs for commercials.[58] Moreover, while women are more likely to be featured as product users, they are also typically portrayed as relying on others and are confined to the home or domestic settings.[59] Moreover, by age group, gender disparities are more prominent in ads targeting elementary school children than for adults or other age groups, with male characters significantly outnumbering female characters and more rigid gender roles overall.[60] Gender norms are perpetuated across media-platforms, reinforcing traditional "male" and "female" characteristics.

Gender Norms in Marketing and Media Content

Toy marketing is heavily gendered, defining normative preferences for girls and boys. A content analysis of Nickelodeon commercials suggested that while many ads featured both boys and girls, boy-only content was more likely to focus on competition and action, and included indoor and outdoor scenes.[61] Girl-only commercials tended to take place inside, with "girls confined to toys that centered on the family, friendship, and romance."[62] Appearance is also presented as more important for girls, as television ads focus on the appearance and sexuality of thin female characters more than female characters who are average-size or larger.[63]

Commercials are also racially misrepresentative. Bramlett-Solomon and Roeder's analysis of Nickelodeon commercials found that 70% of characters were Caucasian, 20% were African American, and 10% were Asian Americans.[64] The characters of color primarily held secondary or minor roles to the Caucasian characters. Moreover, stereotypes strengths of different ethnic groups were perpetuated in the ads.[65] Similarly, in Debra Merskin's study of race and gender in the Turner Cartoon Network ads, Caucasian boys dominated, playing active roles, whereas girls were depicted as passive and in indoor settings.[66] While ads contained all-Caucasian and mixed race characters, fewer than 5% of all commercials featured only characters of color.[67]

Marketing in other platforms also continues to reinforce gender roles. A study of the Disney store websites suggests that the marketing of toys differed greatly depending on which gender was targeted. "Boys'" toys use bold colors and consisted of building sets, action figures, vehicles, and weapons, whereas "girls'" toys tend to be pink or purple dolls, beauty products, or domestic in nature.[68] Likewise, advertising for children's Halloween costumes also perpetuates traditional gender roles, as female costumes tend to be more decorative and revealing, with models in submissive positions, while male costumes are more-functional, exemplifying strength and a "body-in-motion."[69]

While advertising continues to perpetuate stereotypes, media content has become more diverse in its presentation of gender expression. Television shows for children underrepresent women and girls, yet vary in the extent to which they perpetuate gender stereotypes.[70] Luther and Legg found gender differences among the characters in children's cartoons, noting that physical aggression occurring more often with boys, whereas girls demonstrate more social aggression through name-calling, rumor-spreading and other verbal attacks.[71] On the contrary, Rebecca Martin found that TV programs aimed at preschoolers do not reinforce stereotypes about emotional behavior, as male and female characters express a range of emotions.[72] Hentges and Case also note no significant gender distinctions on the Disney Channel, but identified differences in stereotyping behavior on the Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon, suggesting that the channel's target audience may impact content.[73]

Much of the literature on children and gender is focused on Disney princess films, identifying gender stereotypes, changes over time, and narrative-centered research. Consistently, princess films promote romantic heterosexual idealism and reinforce some gender stereotypes.[74] Garlen and Sandlin explain how the princesses' quest for heterosexual romantic love in these films delineates a "'cruel optimism' because it creates a loving attachment between us and the very patriarchal social structures that limit our agency and narrowly define our categories of being in the world."[75] However, princess characters have shifted from docile and content in their gendered roles to more active and empowered.[76] In contemporary Disney films, male and female characters exhibit both masculine and feminine characteristics.[77] These films still represent patriarchies, but offer more complex gender roles through messages about challenging dominant structures.[78] For example, Streiff and Dundes highlight the complexity of the characters Anna and Elsa in Disney's *Frozen*, who exemplify "a postfeminist, contradictory combination of attributes that both reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes."[79] Elsa can be perceived as both the protagonist and the villain, as well as empowering, yet reinforcing the stereotype of the female sacrifice.[80] Similarly, contemporary Disney films have begun diversifying the princess character.[81] While *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, and *The Princess and the Frog* are heavily criticized for historical inaccuracies, cultural stereotypes, and tokenism, the 2016 film *Moana* has been praised for its authenticity, diversity, and challenge of gender stereotypes.[82] The noted contradictions in *Frozen* and expansion of princess characters overall demonstrate the give-and-take trend in popular culture, which confirm and challenge traditional gender roles. And yet, gender stereotyping is still common in popular video games, children's literature, coloring books, and elementary school textbooks, among other media forms.[83]

The Effects of Gender Stereotyping

By toddlerhood, most children understand boy/girl and the products associated with these labels. Preschool children are able to identify and categorize toys that they believe fit a particular gender, which influences their toy preferences.[84] Gender socialization can also influence children's attitudes toward gendered products and brands.[85] A study of children, ages 3–6, shows that children can easily identify ads/products by gender and prefer those that correspond with their gender.[86] Moreover, preschoolers also believe that their parents would more likely approve of toys that fit their gender.[87] Such gendered division is problematic given that toys labeled for "boys" tend to involve action, competition, and technology, while toys for "girls" value passivity, appearance, and domestic skills.[88] Even within a brand, gender differences can be apparent. For example, LEGO construction sets aimed at boys feature professions, encouraging heroism and skill, whereas sets for girls focus on beauty, nurturing behavior, making friends, and developing hobbies.[89]

Media messages influence how kids play and interact with each other. Preschoolers who engage in princess play are more likely to carry out female gender-stereotypical behavior.[90] Playing with dolls, which often convey gender stereotypes, can also impact children's perceptions. Sherman and Zurbiggen used experimental design to measure the short-term impact of playing with Barbie on career cognitions.[91] Overall, girls believe that boys have more career choices than girls. Additionally, those that played with Barbie (in the experiment) perceived girls as having fewer occupation options than those who played with Mr. Potato Head.[92] The unrealistic proportions of most dolls can negatively influence girls' self-esteem. Jellinek, Myers, and Keller found that girls who played with "thin" dolls indicated higher rates of body dissatisfaction than girls in the full-figured doll experimental group.[93] Likewise, Dittmar and Halliwell conclude that exposure to images of Barbie resulted in girls reporting more desire for thinner bodies and lower body self-esteemed, particularly with younger participants.[94] In another study, the majority of the six to nine year-old female participants selected a sexualized computer-generated doll wearing revealing clothing to represent their "ideal self" over a non-sexualized doll.[95] And Anschutz and Engels note that girls who played with an "average-size" doll and then were offered food actually ate significantly more compared to those who played with thin dolls.[96] While scholars have demonstrated the extent to which male action figures have unrealistic bodies, literature has not identified negative effects associated with playing with these dolls.[97]

Expanding Gender Norms

The construction of gender and its effects is complicated. The notion of children crossing gender lines and defying gender norms is not a new concept. In 1905, Charlotte Perkins Gillman stated,

> The most normal girl is the "tom-boy,"—whose numbers increase among us in these wiser days,—a healthy young creature, who is human through and through, not feminine till it is time to be. The most normal boy has calmness and gentleness as well as vigor and courage. He is a human create as well as a male creature, and is not aggressively masculine till it is time to be. Childhood is not the period for these marked manifestations of sex.[98]

Since the emergence of the "tomboy" character in 19th century literature, media messages have existed that challenge traditional gender roles.[99] Over the 20th century, the prevalence of "tomboy" traits became more common in culture as roles for women expanded, with "tomboys" reflected in film, television, comic books, and in their own "special" products. This trend became more popular with feminist and LGBTQ movements, as the image and definition evolved to include queer identity and more people of color.[100]

Girls exhibiting "male" characteristics and playing with "boy products" have always been notably more pervasive and accepted than for boys who cross gender lines.[101] Grant traces the history of boys challenging gender norms, labeled as "sissies," demonstrating how effeminate boys have been stigmatized and condemned throughout the 20th century.[102] Starting in the 1920s, femininity in boys began to be equated with homosexuality and was therefore perceived as a threat to masculinity, as conveyed in media products.[103] This persistent stigma is reflected in the absence of boys crossing gender lines of advertising content. One justification is that girls are more willing to cross gender lines than boys are—an explanation also used for the overrepresentation of boy characters in ads targeted at elementary school children.[104] Moreover, the stigma associated with crossing gender lines is reflected in parents' and children's perceptions. Emily Kane interviewed parents of preschool children, finding that they were much more accepting of girls participating in non-gender-conforming play compared to boys.[105] Adults are also less comfortable ascribing feminine characteristics to describe boys than using masculine characteristics to describe girls.[106] Laura Zimmerman's study of preschool-aged children suggests that girls were more likely to cross gender-lines, with only 6.9% of boys preferring the "cross-gender ad."[107]

Outside of marketing, the expansion of gender norms has become more prevalent in news and entertainment media. Due to the feminist and LGBTQI+ movements, anti-discrimination legislation, and overall cultural changes, most media products offer an array of gendered messages that showcase possibilities for girls and boys. For example, the popular kids television shows *Doc McStuffins* and *Dora the Explorer* feature female characters of color, who are "heroic, inquisitive, clever, and adventurous," thus challenging gender stereotypes.[108] Similarly, Emma Jane showed how the cartoon *Adventure Time* challenges gender roles, offering subversive and progressive messages.[109] Just as importantly, more transgender characters and people are visible on television, while websites and blogs like *Transparenthood* offer communities for parents of non-gender conforming children.[110] Emilie Zaslow's analysis of 30 news segments identifies conflicting themes in the discourse.[111] Overall stories supported gender fluidity, while the newscasters undermined the positive message, blaming mothers and declaring their own hegemonic masculinity. In this way, Zaslow concludes that news media "simultaneously incorporates trans-acceptance and rearticulates transphobia or trans-misogyny."[112]

Even with gender-typed products, children do not always play out the stereotypes. Eva Änggård studied preschoolers as they created their own stories.[113]

While many of the kids used gender-stereotyped content, they changed the characters and plots in ways that challenged gender norms (i.e. girls make female characters active protagonists and boys created empathetic heroes).[114] Karen Wohlwend's ethnographic study demonstrates that kindergarten girls create their own fantasies and counternarratives when they play with princess dolls, far beyond the dolls' limited stories.[115] Male kindergartners also enjoy playing with princess dolls, combining princess narratives with other familiar characters to come with their own scenarios.[116] These contradictions are also evident in how children talk about gender and media. Spring Serenity Duvall conducted focus groups with elementary-age girls about popular cartoons, noting a complexity in their responses: they internalized gender norms and perceived distinct gender differences, but at the same time, spoke and embraced gender equality and empowerment for girls.[117] The conflicting discourses identified in the existing scholarship set the stage for this anthology, which further explores contemporary constructions of gender in children's products.

Theoretical Framework

Throughout this book, authors draw from multiple theoretical bodies to underscore their analysis. As a whole, this anthology is situated in Feminist Studies and Media Studies. Several assumptions underscore this work. While we acknowledge that physical and functional differences exist between the labels of boys/girls, men/women, the establishment of gender as binary is both false and problematic. As Jean Lipman-Blumen articulates, "Gender roles are social constructions; they contain self-concepts, psychological traits, as well as family, occupational, and political roles assigned dichotomously to members of each sex."[118] Thus, defining gender as boy OR girl establishes and reinforces attributes assumed to be associated with either one or another. These false binaries translate to gender performance, as boys and girls are socialized to behave in particularly ways. Boys are taught self-reliance, aggression, independence, domination, with success "measured in productivity, resources, and control."[119] They are encouraged to explore new environments, participate and win at team supports, and to suppress their emotions. On the contrary, girls learn to be passive, gentle, emotional, and nurturing and are taught to believe that they should are more fragile, therefore need to be dependent on others. Girls are more likely to be required to do household chores and help teachers, with less emphasis on winning and team play.[120] Parents, other family members, peers, school and community, and media messages partake in gender socialization to the extent to which gender disparities have become "commonsense" or naturalized.

Feminist theorist and philosopher Judith Butler explicates differences between sex and gender, stating:

> When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.[121]

In other words, our perceptions of gender are products of culture, not tied to physicality of sex. Moreover, as Butler theorizes, gender is not simply a noun, but is something that we do—that we perform and is expressed in different ways depending on our present company and the situation.[122] Thus, how we conceptualize and present our own gender attributes constantly changes.

Gender manifests differently, based on particular social situations, as Michael Messner explains, "The key issues is under what conditions gender is activated as a salient organizing principle in social life and under what conditions it may be less salient."[123] Likewise, Erving Goffman emphasizes that these performances are underscored by preconceived expectations, stating, "Gender expressions are by way of being a mere show; but a considerable amount of the substance in society is enrolled in the staging of it."[124] Like adults, children's gendered attributes also change and evolve depending on context. Thorne explained how kids' peer groups can influence the extent to which they act out gender-conforming or crossing behavior in the moment.[125] How one performs gender is constantly shifting. Therefore, gender is a complex array of constructions, which underscore the fusion of seemingly opposite attributes when kids are allowed to express themselves, as demonstrated by little girls in princess dresses acting like ninja warriors or preschool boys choose skirts and bows "to be fancy" and then take Superman leaps off the couch.

As social constructions, then, gender roles are constantly being shaped and reproduced. We are taught our gender roles through socialization in interpersonal communication and media and other societal institutions. Media messages are obviously not simply a reflection, but a painting of reality that, as Roland Marchand writes, "distorts the shapes of the objects it reflects, but it nevertheless provides some image of everything within its field of vision."[126] Marketing's distortion is that its messages attempt to present products in the best light possible, for the advertising creator aims to, as Goffman articulates, "favorably dispose viewers to his [sic.] product … to show a sparkling version of that product in the context of glamorous events."[127] Chiara Giaccardi outlines the connection between reality and advertisers' representation of it:

> Rather than mirroring social reality, advertisements put it on stage, construct a discourse out of particular aspects, draw on topic issues and discursive conventions; they select from among a range of possibilities, related to both form and content, and elaborate a version of social reality which is neither "true" nor "false," and which often lacks verisimilitude, but is always meaningful, inasmuch as it is "anchored" to what is represented.[128]

Advertising messages are shaped by institutional constraints, cultural conventions, intertextuality, and the creators' personal biases.[129] In fact, many practitioners recognize that advertising often contains gender stereotypes and use the justification that they allow for quick identification and appeal to audiences.[130] Furthermore, not all marketing professionals believe gendered messages are problematic.[131] Goffman's pivotal work demonstrates how advertisements perpetuate stereotypes by portraying men differently than women in terms of size, position, activity, roles in the family, and other components, which support a "hierarchy of functions" in which men "outrank" women in advertisements, exerting their dominance.[132]

As evidenced in the literature review, gender stereotyping is prevalent in advertising and can change over time and by platform. Advertising commodifies gender and as such, becomes "conceived as something fixed and frozen: a number of sexually defined attributes that denote either masculinity or femininity on the super-market shelf of gender possibilities"[133] This commodification is why we experience a disconnect between the expansion of acceptable gender expression in society and the heavily binary gendered nature of children's marketing. As Susan Willis states, "to free gender from the commodity form requires seeing it as an ongoing expression of how we live our sexuality, something that emerges out of social relationships and in relation to larger social forces."[134] The construction (rather than inherent nature) of gender is also evident in the variance of gender depictions across cultures, for example, Italian and British advertisements differ in their definition and presentation of gender roles.[135]

Gender disparities are problematic, not only because they impact children in their everyday lives, but in that they reflect larger power imbalances in society. The representation of one gender (male) as dominant, independent, aggressive, and active, while the other (female) as submissive, subservient, dependent, weak, and passive, assigns and reinforces power and dominance of the masculine over the feminine, of men over women. Goffman's analysis highlights how gender stereotypes in advertisements encourage male domination and control of women through "the ritualization of subordination."[136] The repetition of these ideologies have become commonsense, or, as deemed by Antonio Gramsci, hegemony, in which the control of one group over another is naturalized to the extent in which is seems normal.[137] As Richard Dyer reminds us, hegemony is not fixed, rather, "it is something that must be ceaselessly built and rebuilt in the face of both implicit and explicit challenges to it."[138]

The existence of this patriarchal hegemony dramatically shapes children and adults' perceptions of gender norms and expression. Lipman-Blumen discusses how the socialization of girls as dependent is "transferred into adult life, where women are expected to depend on men in the home, the community, and at the nation's helm to see to their best interests."[139] Likewise, women's subordinate position to men has been used as justification for inequality in the workplace and other public spaces, as well as for childrearing and domestic labor.[140] We can also think about negative implications for confining gender expression to narrowly defined attributes. By encouraging people to view gender as binary is to discourage overall acceptance gender fluidity and people who are LGBTQ+. Such stigma consistently manifests in the real-world, from not supporting equal marriage rights or all-gender bathrooms to hate crimes against people not fitting the narrow traditionalist definition about what gender is or how it should be performed. For children, putting limitations on how gender should be performed is not only frustrating, but also holds dire consequences for children's self-confidence, social acceptance, academic and athletic performance, future relationships, and aspirations. It is for these reasons that we explore the post-princess space of children's gendered marketing in this book.

Structure of the Book

This anthology approaches the gendered marketing of children's products in three sections. In the first section, "Constructing Gender in Childhood," authors discuss nostalgic historical and contemporary products that have shaped (and continue to shape) perceptions of gender. Kate Edenborg uses a historical study of the book *Caddie Woodlawn* and advertisements of the 1930s to explore how girlhood was constructed during this time period. Next, Mimi Wiggins Perreault, Gregory Perreault, and Michael McCarty offer a cross-cultural analysis of Nintendo commercials for the character Princess Zelda, providing the evolution of the character and significance in contemporary culture. Chapter 4 outlines the history and place of the American Girl doll franchise, as Natalia Rybas and Sergey Rybas highlight prized characteristics of the contemporary customized doll line.

The second section, "Updating Classic Toys," focuses on long-standing toys and narratives, looking at how the brands and products have evolved over time. First, in Chapter 5, Christine Eschenfelder traces the history of Hasbro toys to its current digital marketing, showcasing the company's superficial efforts to make their products gender neutral. Jennifer Fogel studies the marketing of recent *Star Wars* movies in Chapter 6, showing how female protagonists were initially ignored in the merchandising of the films. Then in Chapter 7, Katherine Foss examines a mainstay in children's toys—the Lego brand, and its evolution from building block sets to its own universe, and with that, constructions of gender in the film and television narratives. Next, Erika Thomas expands upon existing analysis of the princess craze to explore postmodern Feminism in Disney's "Dream Big, Princess" Campaign. Madeleine Esch completes this section in Chapter 8, studying representations of girls' leadership in the development of the "President Barbie" line of dolls.

Section three of the book, "Redefining Gendered Spaces," centers on the expansion of activities, clothing, play, and culture. In Chapter 10, Nathan Gilkerson uses public relations and marketing theories to address how the retail brand Land's End modified its gendered clothing lines in response to social media complaints. Chapter 11 focuses on food and the kitchen as a redefined gendered space with reality television, as Rebecca Swenson analyzes children's competitive cooking shows, demonstrating the historical and contemporary significance of media in cooking narratives. Then in Chapter 12, Torie Fowler explores the music covers of Kidz Bop music, highlighting the continued gendered messages, despite the "updated" and "kid-friendly" marketing of the products. Finally, Chapter 13 showcases consumer agency in response to the limited products for girls, as Spring Serenity Duvall discusses the do-it-yourself culture, in which parents challenge gender norms by crafting their own superheroine costumes for their daughters, bypassing the gendered availability of commercial retail. Finally, the Conclusion brings together the themes of the book, identifying conflicting discourses in the marketing of children's products, and discussing implications and potential for improvement for consumers, corporations, and the marketing industry.

Notes

1. Dbarry1917. "Riley on Marketing."
2. Contrera, "Target Will Stop Separating Toys and Bedding."
3. Karraker, Vogel, and Lake, "Parents' Gender-Stereotyped Perceptions."
4. Calvert, "Children as Consumers."
5. Hains and Forman-Brunell, *Princess Cultures*; Hains, *The Princess Problem*; Stover, "Damsels and Heroines"; Wohlwend, "Damsels in Discourse."
6. Lavy, "Do Gender Stereotypes Reduce Girls' or Boys' Human Capital Outcomes?"; Wolter, Braun, and Hannover. "Reading is for Girls!?"
7. Gunderson et al., "The Role of Parents and Teachers"; Shapiro and Williams, "The Role of Stereotype Threats."
8. "A Special Population: Children Under Two," *The Common Sense Census*.
9. "Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight," *The Common Sense Census*; "Media Use By Tweens & Teens," *The Common Sense Census*.
10. Ibid.
11. "Media Use By Tweens & Teens."
12. "Media Use By Kids Age Zero to Eight"; "Media Use By Tweens & Teens."
13. "Media Use By Tweens & Teens."
14. "Advertising to Children & Teens," *A Common Sense Research Brief*.
15. Cai and Zhou, "Click Here, Kids!"
16. "Advertising to Children & Teens."
17. Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave, and Ponnet, "Children and Advergames."
18. Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic, "How Advertising Literacy Training Affect Children's Responses."
19. "Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight."
20. "Annual U.S. Sales Data," *The Toy Association*.
21. Schonfeld & Associates, *Advertising Spending*.
22. Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 103.
23. Windels, "Stereotypical or Just Typical?"
24. Dotti, Giulia, and Judith Treas. "Educational Gradients in Parents' Child-Care Time."
25. Calvert, "Children as Consumers."
26. Ibid.
27. Grant, "A 'Real Boy' and Not a Sissy," 831.
28. Paoletti, *Pink and Blue*.
29. Ibid.
30. Grant, "A 'Real Boy,'" 832.
31. Del Giudice, "The Twentieth Century Reversal of Pink-Blue Gender Coding"; Frassanito and Pettorini, "Pink and blue: The color of gender."
32. Cook, "The Mother as Consumer"; Seiter, *Sold Separately*.