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Stereotyping Gender Roles: Children's Commercial Advertisement

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Abstract

Heteronormativity gives the individual in our society a binary optional choice: the first choice being the socially accepted 'norm' that follows the heteronormative binary, and the second being the socially disfavored choice of being deemed 'abnormal' if one chooses to go against this heteronormative binary. In return, we as a socially constructed society then deem the binary option of the 'norm' as the culturally preferred 'good' choice, while at the same time deem the other binary option of the 'abnormal' as the socially constructed 'bad' choice. This occurs both intentionally and unintentionally. The purpose behind my area of focus is to identify that the binary stereotyping of heteronormative gender roles in children's commercial advertisement is resulting in young children having an essentialized heteronormative embedded ideology. With children's commercial advertisements exclusively representing the heteronormative non-intersectional gender role narratives, this identity exclusion is leading children to reject any form of intersectional identity that doesn't fit in the heteronormative binary bracket, as a subordinate socially ostracized form of gender and or sex identity for a child not to follow.

In our uniquely complex Western society, we as a culture have socially created a binary ideology that favors normativity and ostracizes any form of abnormality. Within our Western society, we tend to value the heteronormative narrative over all other narratives as the normal sought after standard for an individual to live by. What if one doesn't fit in to this stereotypical binary of this heteronormative narrative? This is the exact question that popped up in my head once I was thoroughly introduced to what and how heteronormativity is implemented throughout our society. For example, we socially implement a standardized specific color binary into a child's life based off their biological sex before they are even born: boys are assigned blue, girls are assigned pink. This simple but ever so relevant binary option causes our society to then create a stereotypical binary to follow: boys are supposed to like blue and girls are supposed to like pink. Seems like a minor somewhat non-offensive stereotype, right? Unfortunately, this considerably small micro-level of stereotyping has in my personal research been linked to profound long term essentialized effects on our society and children especially, on a much larger macro-level scale than presumed. With young children being at the forefront of developmental understanding of how the world is supposed to work, I wanted to unpack the direct effects of stereotyping gender roles in children's commercial advertising and what those effects may have on a child's socially constructed ideology.

Before we dive directly into this research, I should first begin with defining or unpacking some of those complex terms I previously mentioned that make up the very society we all live in. One of the first concepts I would like to introduce is known as hierarchy. A hierarchy is a system in which a specific group or people are ranked above one another based on a society's current given standard. In our society, the current hierarchical standard we collectively favor, is that of patriarchy. According to (Palczewski et al., 2019) patriarchy is a, "Hierarchical system that exercises hegemonic control wherein men are privileged over women and some men are privileged over men, and in which even some of those who are subordinate in the hierarchy accept it because such an ordering appears to make sense" (p. 46). The only reason this system

seems to 'make sense' according to the given definition, is due to our society's hegemonic ideology. Hegemony is defined by (Palczewski et al., 2019) as the, "Process of the interests of the ruling group come to dominate by establishing the common sense, that is, those values, beliefs, and knowledges that go without saying"(p. 45). That patriarchally influenced, hegemonic ideology, that our society is governed by is that of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity promotes that the heterosexual gender identity is the favored 'norm' to follow, while at the same time promotes that any individual that doesn't identify with the heterosexual identity, is socially ostracized as an abnormality.

Through our socially constructed heteronormative hegemonic ideologicistic society, we have created a stereotypical binary of how each biological sex should perform their assigned gender roles. This concept is better known as gender performativity, which was identified by (Palczewski et al., 2019) as, "A continuous process of identity negotiation through verbal and bodily communication"(p. 77). The way each biological sex is to perform, is based off what society attaches to the gender binary of the male and female sex identity. Men are stereotyped to perform masculine-considered traits such as aggression, strength, or even assertiveness; while women are presumed to perform feminine considered traits such as sensitivity, compassion, and passiveness. Our society directly and indirectly influences how both sexes are to perform their assigned gender roles. These societal influences can range anywhere from social media outlets like Twitter or Instagram, to other forms of popular media such as, magazines or television shows. In this research particularly, however, I will be analyzing the influential effect of stereotyping gender roles in children's commercial advertisement.

Within our heteronormative society we have made it a cultural norm for individuals to watch television on their freetime as a leisure activity. Homes everywhere contain televisions. Many people tend to watch television in hopes that it will provide the individual with some form of entertainment or visual satisfaction. As most of us may know and or be aware of, the individuals within our society who tend to have the most

leisure time on their hands, tend to be children. One thing children love to do in their freetime based on my own lived experience, is to watch television. Through watching television and other forms of media children are able to articulate how the world works. It's estimated that children between the ages of two and five watch roughly 32 hours of television a week(Uzoma, n.d.). Multiply that 32 hours a week by the 52 weeks in a given year; children on average watch around 1,664 hours per year of television alone. Of those 1,664 hours of watched television per year, children are exposed to approximately 40,000 plus commercial advertisements a year from solely watching television and no other forms of media(as cited in Shifrin et al., 2006). Besides the excessive amount of wasted leisure time that children could potentially be using to do something more constructive with their lives, the negative consequences of these stereotypical heteronormative commercial advertisements is far worse.

A metaphor that immediately pops into my head when referencing this topic is,"A child's brain is like that of a sponge, they soak up everything." This metaphor I grew up hearing ties into the concept known as the Social Learning Theory. Social Learning Theory as mentioned by (Palczewski et al., 2019) is the idea that, "Gender is a learned behavior, learned by observing, analyzing and modeling others"(p. 39). The direct or even subliminal messages encoded within each advertisement are theoretically being articulated and internalized by children on how they should perform their own gender identity. The initial problem with these direct or subliminal messages of gender performativity, is with their origin upon which they are based and reinforced on. As addressed by Browne (1998),"Stereotypes in advertising on children's television programs have been a special problem because of their potential impact on gender socialization and, subsequently, children's views of themselves and other people"(p. 83). This becomes a problem due to the fact that within our society, we stereotype gender roles in advertisements based off the heteronormative narrative. This stereotypical narrative then reinforces the binary that men are supposed to conform to masculine traits, while women are supposed to conform to feminine traits. This leads children to construct their own social reality of what constitutes as normal or abnormal,

grounded upon none other than, our socially constructed heteronormative hegemonic ideology.

Incorporating this heteronormative narrative within children's advertisement has the potential to invoke multiple negative consequences. Illustrated by Anuradha (2012) in her research, "Girls believed that the portrayal of boys in commercials as active, naughty, mischievous and aggressive was true. Boys, too, accepted the depiction of girls as caring, gentle, dependent, and so on, was correct" (p. 214). This stereotypical accepted depiction mentioned by Anuradha (2012), constitutes this social understanding as the normalized sought after traits for young boys and girls to follow. Research by Kolbe and Muehling (1995) noted that, "Behaviors observed and internalized from television advertising may have considerable influence in shaping gender-role concepts of young children"(p. 49). Children will then theoretically accept this essentialized belief because they will internalize these observed behavior traits as the normal socially expected behavior in which they may or may not choose to perform. A problem that arises with accepting this essentialized heteronormative belief that is being portrayed in children's advertisement, is that lack of intersectionality. Intersectionality is the idea that we as individuals carry multiple identities and those very identities are how the world views us as an individual. The failure of advertisements incorporating only heteronormative stereotypical gender identities and not including an intersectional identity narrative, leads children to internalize a bias perspective in favor of heteronormativity. This causes children to view any form of an intersectional identity as an 'abnormality', due to the fact the heteronormative narrative is the 'normal' gender identity that is being portrayed in commercial advertisements to children on a day-to-day basis. Stated by Kolbe and Macklin (1984), "Sex role stereotypes constitute one dimension with which individuals interpret their world" (p. 34). This ever so present, binary option of the heteronormative narrative stereotype depicted in a majority of commercial advertisements creates a one-sided ideology for children to base their own understanding of how their biologically assigned sex is to perform its socially constructed gender role within society.

One of the major negative societal consequences of the heteronormative stereotyping of gender roles and identities in children's advertisements is its direct influence on the erasure of different identity aspects. The sought after almost seemingly unattainable identity of the heteronormativity binary in our society reads as such: the ideal male is heterosexual, able bodied, white, upper-middle class, and full of masculine socially constructed traits; whereas the ideal female is heterosexual, able bodied, white, upper-middle class, and full of feminine socially constructed traits. These standardized gender identity expectations will influence children to police their own identity to try and conform to those expected traits. We as a society have normalized these types of gender expectations, by reinforcing these very stereotypical traits again and again in not only commercial advertisements but all forms of advertisements as well. This methodology of erasing identities causes children to forget about the unique individual identities that don't fit within the heteronormative standard that make up the very world in which we live. Those identities being erased through the exclusion of identities in advertisements, can include different gender identities like LGBTQ identified members, colored minorities, other sexes besides the two binary options male or female, differential economic classes, and even the privilege that comes with being associated as heteronormative female or male.

With children's advertisements choosing not to incorporate more of an intersectional identity narrative, instead having actors playing the culturally desired and expected stereotypical heteronormative roles, this exclusion of different identities results in children even at such a young age to begin to involve themselves in body politics. Body politics is identified by (Palczewski et al., 2019) as, "The social norms that constrain bodily forms, expressions and one's very relation to their own body"(p. 76). Our society has normalized the body politics ideology that if an individual doesn't fit the presumed norm of heteronormativity, they are labeled as abnormal or the 'other'. Being labeled as the abnormality or 'other' in our society leads to the dehumanization of that individual and/or group who are socially categorized as the given 'other'. Yep (2016) states, "the process of othering creates individuals, groups, and communities that are

deemed to be less important, less worthwhile, less consequential, less authorized, and less human based on historically situated markers of social formation such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality”(p. 18). This process creates a binary that Yep (2016) coined as the “invisible center”, which states that the ‘invisible center’ in our society culturally accepts heteronormativity as the foundation from which to base our norms and abnormalities. This binary is so embedded within our very society, individuals use this seeming invisible standard as the basis of what society considers the socially acceptable norm without question. The reason we as a society don’t question this heteronormative center is because we have normalized this very identity as what individuals should strive to conform in their own self-identity.

Having children constantly being exposed to commercial advertisements that only follow the heteronormative gender role expectations, children begin to internalize the very idea of body politics in order to follow these expectations. According to Kolbe and Macklin (1984), “Roles that children observe in their social environment establish a set of acceptable and unacceptable role behaviors for them”(p. 35). With children only observing heteronormative gender roles in commercial advertisements as the normalized behavior expectation, they will internalize this behavior as the only accepted behavior to follow and/or perform within society. This leads the children who don’t feel comfortable conforming to these socially constructed gender roles for reasons such as how they were raised or even what is considered the normal gender roles in their specific household hierarchy, to self-objectify themselves in favor of society’s stereotyped perfect male and female persona. Self-objectification is the idea that we internalize how the world views us as an individual. If a child doesn’t conform to the heteronormative binary, they will be objectified and viewed by the rest of society as the ‘other’. This results in children constantly policing their bodies and how they want to be identified to others, in order to fit in amongst society’s stereotized expectation for their assigned gender role. Children don’t conform to commercial advertisements’ gender role expectations because they initially want to, they conform due to the fact that we

have normalized an ideology that puts so much emphasis on the idea not to be labeled as the dehumanized 'other'.

Fortunately, there are many ways that we can begin to combat the effects associated with the consumption of the heteronormative and other stereotypical narratives children have on children. One of the many ways for parents to combat some of these effects, is to simply limit or monitor the amount of television a given child watches. Parents can provide and encourage other ideas or ways for children to use their leisure time outside of indulging in television. For example, parents can encourage their children to go outside. Insist them to go and play tag with their friends or color on the sidewalk with chalk. Even simply to use their imagination and play a make believe game of any kind. If for some reason their encouragement doesn't work on getting their children outside, their authority as a parent will. Although a parent may assert their authority of their child and restrict their amount of television consumption. Children will still be exposed to the heteronormative narrative in minimal television and even no television consumption. The heteronormative narrative is everywhere.

With myself coming from a background whose parents worked constantly this may not be an option. Parents have an enormous influence on their children and how they view the world they live. Most beliefs and perceptions a child internalizes about the world usually begin within the home. Mentioned by Witt, S. D. (1997), "the strongest influence on gender role development seems to occur within the family setting, with parents passing on, both overtly and covertly, their own beliefs about gender". For those parents who don't have that ability to constantly monitor their child's television consumption can take a philosophical approach. When a child unintentionally absorbs the subliminal heteronormative messages conveyed through commercial television advertisements. It's up to the parents to break down those subliminal messages such as gender roles and stereotypes so the child can understand that these narratives are far from realistic. Parents can introduce their children to the idea of intersectionality in its simplest form and inform them on how television ads lack proper representation of intersectionality. Overtime, children on their own will be able to decipher this lack of

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intersectional representation. Resulting in children internalizing the understatement that what is being shown to them in commercial advertisement is not a proper representation of all the different intersectional identities within our society.

To conclude my research, as the saying goes, “children are the future of tomorrow”. Young children are in their fundamental stage of learning how the world and more specifically how the society they live in operates. A readily available media for children to gain insight on how the world and even society functions is through television. Children are steadily exposed to the stereotypical heteronormative narrative, not only in commercial advertisements but throughout day-to-day life experiences, which sets up their developmental understanding to normalize heteronormativity as the sought after identity to follow. The initial problem with accepting this socially constructed heteronormative ideology, is the fact that it creates its own binary for children to govern their lives. This binary creates one accepted normalized identity to follow and creates one socially unacceptable identity that should not be sought after by an individual. The heteronormative binary used in commercial advertisements lacks intersectionality, causing children to be unaware of different possible gender roles or identity options and unquestionably accept the stereotypical portrayal of those gender roles in advertisements as the normative one for children to follow. The only way we as a society can change this stereotypical heteronormative binary, is to systematically change the very definition of what our society constitutes as the socially accepted ‘norm’. Until this happens, children will be prone to accept the stereotypical heteronormative narrative depicted in media portrayals as the only socially accepted narrative for them to follow.

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