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### Children's Film Media's Influence on Gender, Race, and Identity

Sara M. Kovis  
sk269@humboldt.edu

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## **Children's Film Media's Influence on Gender, Race, and Identity**

Sara Kovis

Department of Communication

California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

Dr. Armeda Reitzel

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## Abstract

Whether conscious of it or not, media images have been working our entire lives to construct our attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the world around us. What is the significance of the relationship between media consumption and how we interact in society? Applying communication theories and research into traditional and digital media is vital in understanding the realities around us. It explains where societal norms and values stimulate and how they trigger new behavioral changes. *Ideologies* are the mixed concepts and elements that create meaning in society. Today, people's ideological feelings produce pre-dated ideologies rather than their ideas. These are formed unconsciously by other social foundations, like their environment and the media, that surround and shape them. Not only does the media play a significant role in the views of others, but it is also a basis for forming our identities and place in a social context. *Enculturation*, first coined by anthropologist William Ogburn, is "the process by which people learn the dynamics of their surrounding culture and acquire values and norms appropriate or necessary to that culture and its worldviews" (Enculturation, Google Arts & Culture, 2022). Today, enculturation and information about cultures other than one's own are first introduced to children through the media.

*Keywords:* children's media, ideologies, enculturation

## **Children's Film Media's Influence on Gender, Race, and Identity**

Children are exposed to digital media as early as four months through the use of tablets, smartphones, and televisions. Recent reports from the 2020 Common Sense Census of media use by kids say that children from birth to 8 years old watch an average of 2 hours and 18 minutes a day (Rideout, V., & Robb, M. B., 2020). Children need to learn developmental milestones such as expanding social-emotional and behavioral skills like empathy and positive relationships at this age. The information we gain from television shows and the film industry carries into how we perceive the reality around us. *Cultivation Theory* is a communication framework focusing on television exposure's long-term effects. In the 1960s, professor of communication George Gerbner suggested that exposure to television for long periods directly influences your perception of social realities. His theory was developed over 60 years ago when the creation of the tv was fervid throughout society, and tuning in became a part of everyday living. To test the impact of media on perceptions, theorists used longitudinal studies and surveys to identify individuals' beliefs of reality, with the amount of media they consume being the primary variable.

Critical concepts of Gerbner's theory predict that media shapes attitudes and perceptions of the world and that media consumption lead audiences to accept established power structures and dominant ideologies. Today, cultivation theory examines the long-term exposure of media other than traditional sources like television, but with digital media such as social media platforms, video streaming, and online advertising. Throughout this paper, I will use key concepts of Cultivation Theory to

examine how the media, specifically youth and family targeted, integrates dominant and lasting images of race and gender, enormously impacting attitudes, behaviors, and life experiences.

### ***Racial Representation in Children's Media***

Ethnic-race representation in the media is how the patterns of cultural, ethnic, religious, and other social minority groups are portrayed through media. It is integral in creating and maintaining stereotypes in our culture but can have a dangerous effect when used irresponsibly. For example, the media incessantly focuses on stereotypes of a certain race or ethnicity, leading to discrimination practices and problematic attitudes. In children's media, it directs and influences how they perceive the world around them.

Western culture and ways of life dominate television and film and lack other cultures' values, physical appearances, or representations. The Children Television Project at Tuft University examined the representation of non-white characters in popular children's shows compared to the real-life demographic in the U.S. According to their research of over 1000 characters in children's media shows, "Characters of color (not counting the blue, green or other highly colored non-human characters) accounted for only 17% of the sample." and "Only 10 out of all of the characters we coded were Latino - less than 1% of all the characters we looked at" (Dobrow, 2017). In contrast, Americans who identify as Hispanic or Latino make up 19% of the U.S. population. This is vital in children whose racial, ethnic, or cultural groups are underrepresented because it can lead to feelings of less value or importance in society and undermine their sense of self.

Reflecting on how black women are harmfully perceived on television is another aspect of racism in entertainment media that should be highlighted. The few negative variations impact how society treats black people and how black adolescents and communities see themselves. Research published in the 2014 journal of Women, Gender, and Families of Color, used focus groups to examine the impacts of these popular images and to discuss their impact on the way black women are perceived. The study presented black male and female teens' images and discussed their media consumption habits to bring conversations about how often they see these portrayals and why they believe they are included in movies and television. Participants agreed that the stereotypes depicted in most of the popular culture artifacts included the "angry black women," "strong black women," "black women caretakers," and "over-sexualized black women." The focus group research findings "indicate that both male and female youth readily identified many images of black women as negative, inaccurate, and offensive" (V. Adams-Bass, K. Bentley-Edwards, H. Stevenson, 2014). The results show that the teens were aware and concerned that these images negatively impacted the black communities. These daily messages sent through television and film push racial discrimination and prejudice toward minority groups throughout society.

### ***In-Group vs. Out-Group Dialects***

Another critical aspect of children's media and its impact on racial and ethnic stereotypes is how villains often talk in foreign voices. Think Lion King's Scar, Jafar from Aladdin, and Ursula from The Little Mermaid. This is a dangerous message to young children learning about diversity and other groups of people through the media.

Historically, these linguistic characteristics of villains are thought to have stemmed from America's hostility towards other countries from the early 1900s to after the Cold War. Children begin to compartmentalize these characteristics, like non-American dialects, to define characters as "good" or "bad." This can lead to real-life discrimination and misinformation about others at a very young age.

When interviewed by The Guardian, Natalie Braber, a professor of linguistics at Nottingham Trent University, explains, "Accent is such a huge portion of who we are. To mock that or to use that accent as shorthand for someone who is stupid, or whatever trait it is, is offensive" (Welch, 2022). *Lord of the Rings* spinoff, *The Rings of Power*, has subtle and covert discrimination towards Irish people. The Elves, Dwarfs, and Humans speak versions of English or British dialect. These characters also possess admirable traits; intelligence, strength, mystery, and talent. However, the Harfoots are the only group of characters in the show to present an Irish accent. These characters are covered in dirt, their clothes are ragged, and they are less intelligent than their counterparts. Gregory B. Lee, a Professor of Chinese and Transcultural Studies at the University of Lyon, describes the background history of discrimination against Irish people in the U.S., "Native-born Americans criticized Irish immigrants for their poverty and manners, their supposed laziness and lack discipline, their public drinking style, their catholic religion..." (Lee, 2018). Although the show is based in a mythical fantasy world, the anti-Irish allegory is still evident in the underlying meanings of dialects assigned to the characters. It presents how covert racism is still prevalent in film and is recognizable to societal groups.

Nevertheless, writers and producers have continued to reproduce these stereotypes because they have continued to "work" regarding popularity, ratings, and viewership. Children are exposed to discrimination of in-group and out-group biases as early as infancy.

### ***Disney & Feminine/Masculine Stereotypes***

The Walt Disney Company is one of the world's most-known television and film media producers. According to PBS News, Disney is the world's third-largest global media conglomerate, sharing ownership with international broadcasting networks, such as ESPN, ABC News, The History Channel, National Geographic, and ten television divisions (Media Giants, n.d.). The pervasive stereotypes Disney has presented to emerging youth have confirmed and promoted the past's traditional gender norms and characteristics.

Examples of ideal Western gender roles include lead female characters' physical appearances and body forms as beautiful, white, thin, and youthful. Their domestic and feminine attributes include being soft-spoken, polite, romantic, or in-distress. The film media's cultural homogenization of gender roles provides audiences with little diversity among popular characters. The 2022 article, *Depictions of Gender*, explores how male and female genders are depicted in media, specifically within Disney films, and how they have influenced children for the past nine decades. According to author Jane Shawcroft's research, the study found an over-representation of attractive physical traits of female characters in Disney films. Shawcroft explains, "the over-representation of attractive female characters may contribute to the perpetuation of the idea that women



need to be physically attractive to be of value in society or create a higher standard for women's physical appearance than for men" (Shawcroft, 2022).

While the female protagonist characters are pictured as the "ideal beauty" and used to provide visual appeal to the audience, the female antagonist is portrayed as jealous, less attractive, older, and cruel. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarf's* Evil Queen was Disney's first female villain. In the film, the Evil Queen tries to kill Snow White because she envies the beautiful and youthful woman. Following the same recipe for success, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, and Sleeping Beauty have these similar notable storylines. "According to Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas, 55% of Disney film villains are either women or "feminized men," and among them, 25% are emaciated. Three out of the four of them are, in fact old, ugly, and unattractive" (Sarmin & Sattar, 2018, as cited in Johnston & Thomas, 1993). This influences how children learn about societal values and what makes someone worthy of being a princess. However, similar unrealistic physical stereotypes are often overlooked in male-targeted television shows, where their impact is just as heavily present in past gender depictions.

### ***Male Norms and Sexual Innuendos in Johnny Bravo***

To understand the male gender norms perpetuated throughout recent generations, how can we overlook the iconic show *Johnny Bravo*? 90s babies cannot forget the popular Cartoon Network personality, Johnny Bravo, the ultra-macho, blonde, and women-chasing central character. The television show aired from 1997 to 2004 and correlated to the impressionable influence it held on youth, precisely, the male-targeted audience. Similar to the physiques of females portrayed in children's films and

television, Bravo has a highly disproportionate and overly muscular body shape, one that steroids could not obtain. Although he is not the most brilliant cartoon on the network, Bravo leaves viewers with the impression that his shiny blonde hair, tight-fitting clothes, and muscles are supposed to be considered valuable in society.

Exploring how this influences perceptions of body image in male genders is essential. However, a deep dive into his character traits should be considered the most concerning aspect of the television show. "Woah- Mama!" is Bravo's favorite catchphrase as he crosses paths with female characters, as well as his famous and small vocabulary of the words "chicks" and "baby." Feminist film critic, Laura Mulvey, first coined the term "male gaze" in her 1997 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. They explain the *male gaze* as "the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look. In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, 1997). Bravo breaks his neck to look at each woman he passes in the street and corners women trying to proceed with their day. Almost all of them are blatantly offended or fighting off his actions, yet the common theme of the abuse and male gaze continues in every episode.

Bravo and similar hyper-masculine shows have conditioned a generation to believe that the male gaze, cat-calling, and fixation on women's bodies are humorous and empowering to men. These childhood favorites influence young children's views on gender, normalizing sexual violence and trivialization in society.

### ***Sexualization of Teens***

Teenage adolescence is crucial in creating a sense of self, beliefs, and values. Although there is nothing erroneous in expressing the shared realities many teenagers experience on screen, over-sexualizing minors and high schoolers can have heavy repercussions in society. Teen media has created a social example that females only have two options: to dress provocatively and adhere to accepted beauty standards or be invisible socially. Unknown to many young viewers, the casting of youth-targeted television is unrealistic because the actors are much older than the teenagers they portray. Popular teen television drama, *Pretty Little Liars*, follows the lives of five high school girls and the drama that ensues after the murder of one of their friends. The show's name speaks for itself; the characters are undoubtedly beautiful, but the cast members are far from teenagers. In its first season, the leading actresses' ages ranged from 20-31 years old, a significant difference compared to their depictions as 16-year-old high schoolers (Mitrokostas, 2022). It is understandable how much pressure is put on teens to look like their favorite characters. However, it is unrealistic for teens to share the physical characteristics of adults 10-15 years their senior.

Two well-known and top-rated T.V. shows depicting the lives of high-schoolers are Emmy Award Winning series *Euphoria* and Netflix's *Riverdale*. Although both shows are progressive in their openness about sexuality and coming-of-age stories, the explicitness opens problematic doors. It glamorizes the sexual content to young fan bases. In one controversial episode of *Riverdale*, a 16-year-old protagonist strips down into lingerie in a speakeasy full of underage teens, her parents, and a group of adult bikers. Although the show's stars are of legal age, the characters they play represent

underage teens. The explicitness of the scene is alarming, primarily due to the on-screen sexualization of underage teenagers and its predatorial border. Psychiatrist and Clinical Researcher Louis Newman explains that “There is growing evidence that premature exposure to adult sexual images and values has a negative impact on the psychological development of children, particularly on self-esteem, body image and understanding of sexuality and relationships” (Newman, 2010). The normalization of "hypersexual teens" and females' devotion to approval from men is prevalent in film and television. A disturbing image of young females has emerged, with very sexual storylines in teen television. Although there is nothing wrong with media validating and empowering teenagers' real-world experiences, the issues lie in sexualizing them.

### ***Symbolic Annihilation of Sexual-Orientation***

*Symbolic Annihilation* was first proposed as a concept by George Gerbner in 1976 and used to describe the absence or underrepresentation of groups of people in media. Popular culture has annihilated women and others who do not conform to traditional gender roles and sexual orientation. According to research from the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, The Human Rights Campaign Foundation determined that “at least 20 million adults in the United States could be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender - nearly 8% of the total adult population” (Powell, 2021). How many characters can you recall watching on television that were not either male or female? Most likely, very few. Until recently, LGBTQ+ people were denied a place in television, film, and advertising. Seldomly, when featured, many stereotypes are promoted, and alternative representations and images are crowded out. A national

survey of 573 lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents revealed that exposure to gay- and lesbian-oriented media was positively related to the well-being of LGB teens (Bond, 2013). Knowing the media's powerful influence on teenagers should be an educational tool in identity development. Presenting an unreasonable expectation of socially accepted gender attributes at a malleable age harms mental well-being, sexual identity development, poor self-esteem, and depression. Sexual orientation is not as straightforward or recognizable as other identifying characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, or gender; therefore, media strongly influences societal perceptions about what it means to be LGBTQ+ in society. Providing educating and informational material rather than dramatizing shows for more viewership is essential for youth identity development.

### ***Conclusion***

There is great debate about whether traditional and digital media positively or negatively affects society. Still, neither of these stances can object to its power in forming our social realities. Decades later, George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory still rings true as our perceptions of reality reflect what the mass media presents to us. Film and media offer a baseline for helping children to understand the world around them, and many of their first introductions to this information are taught through a television screen. As Globalization progresses, Western media's ideas, beliefs, and values will continue to proliferate into other cultures. Creating positive images and diverse representations in children's media will challenge what past generations have grown up exposed to. Understanding the gatekeepers and institutions who control how society is

portrayed in the news and on television is essential when exploring how to alter negative stereotypes and unrealistic portrayals in media. Unlearning racism and gender roles through diverse representations and roles in television will contribute to the development of more vital senses of self and an overall safer and inclusive society for all people.

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