The “good girls”: Exploring features of female characters in children’s animated television

Since its inception, television has been a cause of both alarm and marvel. A nearly ubiquitous item in today’s average American home, the television seems to be a product that draws an equal amount of praise and concern from parents and caregivers. On the one hand, television can orient children to people and places that some may never have the opportunity to interact with in real time (Bryson, n.d.; Kenney, 2015). On the other hand, many of those with concern about television worry about the lack of fair representation of race and gender on children’s television programs (Signorielli, 2012; Van Evra, 2004). Either way, television has long been lauded as a socializing agent for children learning about themselves and others (Comstock & Scharrer, 2012; Witt, 2000). For this reason and others, television certainly “communicates with power.”

According to the Nielsen Company’s 2010-2011 annual report, children aged two to eleven spent nearly twenty-six hours of their week watching television. That time is nearly equivalent to the hours children spend in school per week (“Television audience report”, 2011)! Television remains the primary source of media for young children, but as they age, youth are more likely to look to different screen media (Comstock & Scharrer, 2012). Even as technology continues to change and we see more television viewing done on other platforms, it is still true that traditional television is king for young children (Pallotta, 2014; Rideout, 2013).

Furthermore, one of the most popular forms of children’s television has always been cartoons or animation. There is little evidence that children prefer animated programs to live action ones, but the media industry loves them because they are relatively cheap to produce compared to live action programs and are extremely profitable abroad, since they are not necessarily bound to any one culture or environment like live-action (von Feilitzen, 2012).
Animated television shows may not be on Saturday morning blocks as regularly anymore, but there are plenty still readily available on DVD, streaming websites, children’s cable, premium channels, and other platforms (Nussbaum, 2012). More programs and platforms are available than ever for children to choose from, and they still often choose to watch television animation.

While some might argue that television and cartoons are simply a part of youth culture, there is research that suggests that television unevenly represents sex/gender and race/ethnicity (Götz & Lemish, 2012; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Mok, 1998, Signorielli, 2012). To address the issue of images featured on children’s television programs, many content analyses have been conducted over the years to identify the representation of sex and different age groups, as well as the portrayals of race and ethnicity (Baker & Raney, 2004; Baker & Raney, 2007; Barner, 1999; Dohrmann, 1975; Hentges & Case, 2013; Klein & Shiffman, 2006; Long, Steinke, Applegate, Lapinski, Johnson, & Ghosh, 2010). With these trends in mind, we should be concerned about the content itself, especially given the amount of exposure to these images.

Using cultivation theory and social learning/cognitive theory, the following updated content analysis will set the stage for discussion of the implications of regularly viewing cartoon images (in the form of character drawings, descriptions, and language used) on how children understand the concept of sex and gender roles (i.e. the set of social and behavior norms around a specific sex) and later perform them.

**Cultivation Theory**

According to Gerbner and Gross’ (1976) research, the cultivation hypothesis claims that television slowly inoculates viewers with its viewpoints, making the heaviest consumers of television most susceptible to indoctrination of television portrayals. That is, high-frequency viewers are most likely to hold beliefs and attitudes consistent with television depictions. This
theory becomes especially troublesome when we imagine a television viewer for whom interaction with minorities occurs only on-screen (Van Evra, 2004). Cultivation theory has since diminished in prominence as a media effects theory due to its exclusion of developmental, environmental, and other factors that can surround television viewing (Kirsh, 2010). However, it is still important to consider this theory with respect to television exposure and the portrayals that may be associated with animated television.

**How children learn/understand sex and gender**

Gerbner’s cultivation theory may be useful to consider in light of children’s increasing exposure to television, but does little to explain how children come to learn about sex and gender roles apart from television. For the purposes of this study and its possible implications, sex and gender are defined in the following ways. According to the American Psychological Association (2012), sex is referred to as “a person’s biological status and is typically categorized as male, female, or intersex.” According to the APA, biological sex can be determined based on “external genitalia, sex chromosomes, and/or internal reproductive organs” (American Psychological Association, 2012). Throughout the body of this work, even though coders could not see these biological markers, they used other external, physical features (i.e. secondary sex characteristics like breasts, facial hair) to categorize characters as male and female. Discussion and results will include references to character sex.

In terms of gender, the American Psychological Association (2012) defines gender as “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex.” Due to the recent shifts in gender studies, the World Health Organization (n.d.) offers a definition of gender that is not necessarily linked to a particular person’s biological sex (which may or may not be the sex they identify with), but rather defines it as the “socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and
women.” This definition embraces individuals who identify with and externally appear to be a member of a sex that differs from their biological sex characteristics. Gender is categorized as masculine, feminine and androgynous (or having features of both sexes) (Beere, 1990). Even though the definitions of these terms might seem straightforward, it is difficult to assess how exactly children learn about concepts as complex as sex and gender. Two main theories that can be used to evaluate sex/gender socialization are social learning theory and social cognitive theory.

**Social learning theory.** According to Albert Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory, children acquire and maintain behaviors through the process of observation in their environment. When children act out and imitate the behaviors they see, they are either rewarded or punished, further reinforcing or diminishing those behaviors (Sammons, “Gender: Social learning theory”). Intons-Peterson (1988) argues that children accumulate knowledge about gender and sex by observing models’ behaviors and reinforcement patterns. Children begin to assign value to behaviors that have rewarded them and other models in the past and devalue behaviors that have been deemed inappropriate through punishment.

Unfortunately, social learning theory does little to explain how children develop concepts of “others” whom they are not observing directly. This notion becomes particularly important when children have limited models or the reinforcement pattern they are exposed to is dysfunctional in some way. In these cases, Perry and Bussey’s (1979) version of social learning theory helps to explain the child’s more active role interacting with his or her environment, but becomes less helpful when used to explain learning done in the absence of models (Intons-Peterson, 1988). Perry and Bussey (1979) found that children are more likely to imitate their same-sex adult counterparts; particularly when these adults are shown in larger groups and
especially when the opposite sex group is doing something different. Even though the tapes that children watched in the conditions were not television content per se, Bussey and Bandura (1999) make an excellent case that media representations of sex/gender roles can be as powerful of models as those seen in our everyday lives. Furthermore, if groups of same-sex models facilitate more imitation, then the current representation of sex on children’s television might dictate that males are more likely to imitate what they see since there are more groups of male characters overall; an interesting area of future research.

Social cognitive theory. A product of social learning theory and time, Albert Bandura (1986) developed social cognitive theory in the 1980’s to include the dynamic reciprocity of the person, his or her environment, and his or her behaviors. This theory assumes that there is triarchic reciprocity in interactions between individual factors (such as cognition, affect, and biological happenings), environment, and behavior (Pajares, 2002). This theory postulates that children learn to understand sex and gender through modeling, similar to social learning theory, but acknowledges that a person’s past experiences can be instrumental in what behavioral action may result at a later time (“The social cognitive,” n.d.). Therefore, the performance of gender is not purely an imitation of a rewarded model, but also incorporates an individual’s biology, past experience, beliefs, and values (Bussey & Bandura, 2002). Furthermore, almost any behavior performed elicits some type of social reaction. This social reaction, in turn, can change behaviors and actions in the future (Davidson & Davidson, 2003). It could be argued that this reciprocity Bandura describes helps to emphasize the importance of the individual’s experience in the social context. In his words, “people are producers of their environment, not just products of it” (Davidson & Davidson, 2003).
In Davidson and Davidson’s (2003) film, Bandura also explains that a given model’s “personal characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity and social status can also evoke differing reactions in others [even] when the behavior is the same.” Bandura (2002) describes four processes involved in observational learning. First, the viewer needs to pay attention to the model, picking up the significant aspects. After attending to the model, the viewer has to symbolically code the action, noting the different features and translating them into something they will remember. In the third step, individuals retrieve their conceptions and perform them in action. Of course, none of these processes would mean anything without having some motivation or incentive (the fourth process) to elicit (and continue to elicit) the action that was modeled and put into memory earlier (Bandura, 2001).

Interestingly, social cognitive theory is often used in communication research as a framework for understanding media effects (Bandura, 2001). It is not a difficult connection to make since social cognitive theory explains how someone may incorporate a model (even one seen on television) into their understanding of others and then chose to eventually reenact or play it out in their own lives (Jamieson, More, Lee, Busse, & Romer, 2008). According to Bandura (2001) as cited in Jamieson et al. (2008), media portrayals can provide models for learning purposes and/or can contribute to the motivation to enact already learned models. Even though media effects are not addressed by the present study, it is an important next direction.

It is clear that no one theory can accurately describe the intricate process of learning about differences between and among people. The theories mentioned here have been discussed in relation to gender identity and development, but are the cornerstone of identity development in general. The theories described either implicitly (social learning theory) or explicitly (cultivation theory, social cognitive theory) implicate television as models from which children can learn the performance of different identities and how they are received in society. These theories and
possible performance issues also play an important role in the next topic, stereotypes in children’s television.

**Portrayals on Television**

The theories listed earlier serve to provide background information about the possible ways that children develop understanding of gender and sex. It is now important to understand what content children might have been exposed to that would form the media basis for their learning about these constructs. Numerous articles have addressed the stereotypical ways that males and females are featured in children’s television (Baker & Raney, 2004; Barner, 1999; Dohrmann, 1975; Gerding & Signorielli, 2013; Hentges & Case, 2013; Lauzen & Dozier, 1999; Levinson, 1975; Long et al., 2010). With the growing importance of media among children, it is not surprising that minority portrayals on television could have lasting effect on how children continue to conceptualize sex and gender. Stereotypes are defined as “generalizations about a group of people in which the same characteristics are assigned to all members of a group” (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002). Often, stereotypes have a negative connotation. They can certainly be used negatively when the stereotype is not true of all individuals in a given group or when the generalization is demeaning or hurtful in some way, but whether we like it or not, stereotypes are commonly used to reserve mental energy when we are confronted with new information (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; McLeod, 2008). Stereotypes provide quick mental shortcuts so that we can respond quickly in novel situations.

Because stereotypes about a given sex are related to the actions and behavior of that sex and do not have a biological basis for these differences, they should be considered gender role stereotypes instead. Brewer (n.d.) lists several common stereotypes of feminine and masculine gender roles. Females are more loving, caring, nurturing, and are often tending to the home and the children. On the other hand, males are competitive, assertive, forceful, and aggressive. Males
are to be the breadwinners of the home, providing financially for the family, but less by way of caretaking (Brewer, n.d.).

**Sex and gender portrayals on children’s television.** Quite a bit of research has identified stereotypical images of gender and race/ethnicity in children’s live action shows and advertisements aimed at children (Bartsch, Burnett, Dinner, & Rankin-Williams, 2000; Peirce, 1989; Powell & Abels, 2002; Signorielli, 2004; Signorielli, 2008; Smith & Cook, 2008).

Signorielli has been particularly interested in discussing the portrayal of gender roles in television since the 1980’s (Signorielli, 1989). In this study, the researcher found that while more females were featured in prime time television than in previous content analyses, they were still underrepresented in terms of the actual population statistics (Signorielli, 1989). In Signorielli and Bacue’s (1999) content analysis, the researchers found that this divide was decreasing, but women were still underrepresented. However, they noted that women in prime time television demonstrated a greater variety of occupations which they believed was certainly a step in the right direction. This study analyzed only main and supporting characters that were essential to the plot line (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). By eliminating characters that did not advance the plot, this data does not account for all of the possible characters on television shows.

More recently, Gerding and Signorielli (2013) conducted a similar content analysis for popular ‘tween’ television shows. When focusing on main characters only, the researchers found that males outnumbered females in their sample, particularly in the action-adventure genre. They also found that significantly more females were coded as being attractive; suggesting that males can be unattractive and still advance the plot, but females should be attractive in order to do the same. The research mentioned here is only a small subset of the research on sex and gender in television, but should begin to highlight the major trends.
Sex and gender portrayals in children’s animated television. Particularly with respect to children’s animated television, Kirsh (2010) and Signorielli (2012) identified several studies that originally indicated males’ overrepresentation in children’s animated cartoons. Signorielli’s (2008) research addressed the landscape of children’s programming, particularly cartoons, and noted that male characters consistently outnumber female characters by four or five to one. Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) reported this finding several years earlier, but also suggested that there had been some change in male and female character depictions over time. The researchers found that female characters in the latter part of their sample were rated as more assertive, intelligent, and independent than earlier cartoon females. However, they were still likely to be portrayed in traditional feminine stereotypes (e.g. emotional, domestic, and romantic). Moreover, unlike male characters, female characters did not have recognizable occupations, another stereotype of the female as the caregiver or domesticated woman (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). In a more recent set of studies, males were more likely to be represented as the heroic leaders in the cartoons as opposed to the females who were more likely to be minor characters, reflecting the more emotional and less physically aggressive stereotypes of women (Baker & Raney, 2004; Baker & Raney, 2007). These findings seem to hold true for the traditional action-adventure cartoons, but not as well for the nontraditional animated genres (Kirsh, 2010). When controlling for genre type, however, male to female representation was virtually equal in the “nontraditional adventure” and “educational/family” television series according to Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman (2002). While the authors note that this change seems promising, overall, male characters were still more likely to demonstrate physical aggression. Women, by contrast, were still depicted as more fearful compared to male characters and as more nurturing, polite, and romantic than males.
Baker and Raney’s (2007) research on superhero roles in children’s animated television also indicated that while male and female superheroes were similar on more than 85% of character traits, males were still depicted as tough, muscular, and aggressive characters. Female superheroes were shown as excitable, emotional, and more concerned with appearance. Superheroes were defined as those who drove the plot line, embodied the force of good, fought against evil or villains, and had some sort of extraordinary characteristics. Using this definition for superheroes likely eliminated a great deal of animated children’s shows that could have been analyzed as well.

According to Rudy, Popova, and Linz (2010), content analysis as a methodology is particularly important in gender role research because it lends itself to theorizing about the effects of viewing such content, as well as, considering the motivations behind those who create it. While the patterns of gender role stereotyping in the media may not change much over time as the research cited earlier suggests, the content available almost always differs. For this reason, continuing to analyze contemporary samples is useful. Not only is a new sample needed, but a sample composed of cartoons is even more necessary. Cartoons are an important genre to study because they are full of intentionality. Every detail of animated television must be planned out and considered, leaving little room for any “coincidence.” Do the gender stereotyped themes remain especially in cartoons, where the character choices are made most apparent? This research hopes to address that question with the current sample.

**Television Viewing and Stereotyped Beliefs**

Content analysis is an excellent tool for identifying patterns throughout media surveyed, but does nothing to attempt to understand how these images might affect the children watching them. It is difficult to determine the effects on children viewing these stereotypes on television because it is difficult to entangle what precisely a child attends to, remembers, and how it affects
his or her existing knowledge. Because of these limitations of content analyses, empirical research on media effects is needed to ascertain how children react to the television they watch. Research on the association between television viewing and advocating more traditional (or stereotypical) beliefs about sex/gender roles is inconsistent. Several studies suggest that the amount of television viewing is not or at least only modestly correlated with belief in more traditional gender roles (Kalof, 1999; McCauley, Thangavelu, & Rozin, 1998; Meyer, 1980; Morgan, 1982; Morgan, 1987; Morgan & Shanahan, 1997; Rosenwasser, Lingenfelter, & Harrington, 1989; Zuckerman, Singer, & Singer, 1980). Meta-analyses of studies in this area, however, actually support a connection between television viewing and holding more stereotypical beliefs about gender roles. Herrett-Skejillum and Allen (1996) calculated a positive relation between television viewing and endorsement of gender stereotyped occupations when they performed the appropriate statistical analyses on the breadth of studies in this field. This evidence was strongest among those studies using non-experimental design. This meta-analysis excluded two studies that found very high correlations \((r>0.81)\) and two studies with no correlation \((r\approx0.00)\). This exclusion category removed the major outliers, helping to determine the most likely correlation, but not necessarily the ‘true’ correlation. One particular study used in this meta-analysis was Davidson, Yasuna & Tower’s (1979) research on cartoons and young girls’ sex-role stereotyping. The experimental design in this study randomly assigned five and six year old girls to view either a highly stereotyped, neutral, or counter-stereotyped cartoon program. After viewing the program, the children were assessed using the Bem Sex Role Inventory. The researchers found that the girls who watched the non-traditional, counterstereotyped program had lower scores (referring to less sex role stereotypes) than the girls in the other two conditions. The girls’ scores from the other two conditions did not significantly differ. Though this study is certainly older and an experimental style, it is important to consider
that this area of research has been interesting to scholars since the late 1970’s. It also supports the idea that there may be a link between television exposure and gender role stereotypes, though this particular study identified that counter-stereotyped or non-traditional programs may help disentangle this link.

More recently, Oppliger (2007) examined predominately non-experimental studies and found a similar positive relation between exposure to stereotyped gender roles on television and sex/gender stereotyped behaviors and/or attitudes among both adults and youth. One particular study in this meta-analysis suggests that children do notice the different sex role stereotypes in the cartoons they watch (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997). Using a sample of 89 children aged four to nine from a university-affiliated day care center and two parochial schools nearby, these researchers administered structured interviews designed to gain demographic information about the children, their interpretations of what boy and girl characters on cartoons are like, what career the child would like to pursue, and their opinions about what boys and girls typically pursue as careers. The researchers concluded that noticing the stereotypical gender role differences in cartoons does appear to relate to indicating increased gender stereotypical job expectations for the child and others (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997). This study and its findings are important because they help provide support for the hypothesis that there is, in fact, a relation between television viewing and perceived sex/gender role stereotypes.

Additionally, research cited in Van Evra (2004) and Signorielli (2012) suggests that television viewing is generally correlated with espousing more stereotypic views on sex and gender, but this link may also work in the reverse manner, meaning that those who hold more stereotypic views could watch more television in order to confirm their beliefs. Conversely, this link could be due to a third, extraneous variable. It is also possible that the audience’s perception
of sex/gender role stereotypes is more important than the depictions viewed in determining the possible behavioral effects of viewing the content (Van Evra, 2004; Signorielli, 2012).

The literature described here demonstrates that television is an important part of a child’s media landscape, exposing them to models of sex and gender. It is unclear to what extent these models are internalized, but it seems fair to imagine that they are certainly one of many factors at play when a child ‘does’ gender and/or makes references to sex/gender roles. While it cannot make claims about the extent to which children play out these gender stereotypes, this content analysis can demonstrate that these stereotypes continue to exist. It is hypothesized that the content analysis of the present study will yield similar results to previous research on demographics in children’s animated television; firstly that

**H1:** The sample will feature more male characters overall.

The researcher also predicts that

**H2:** Male and female characters will differ in ratings on four physical traits. Females will be more likely shown as skinny, beautiful, light skin, and well-dressed characters while males will be more likely shown as fat, ugly, dark skin, and sloppily dressed.

**H3:** Male and female characters will differ in ratings on four personality traits. Females will be more likely shown as good, honest, kind, and peaceful characters while males will be more likely to be shown as bad, dishonest, cruel, and violent.

According to the cultivation theory, such misrepresentation of national demographics in children’s animated television could inoculate the heavy television viewer over time, leading them to believe the depictions they see on television are their “reality.” Likewise, social learning/cognitive theory postulates that children might learn from any model they see on television even if they are not regular television viewers. If there is little representation of a given
group or stereotypical ones are seen at best, then according to these theories, children will cognitively incorporate this information and potentially play it out in their performance of gender (and other identities) in the “real world.”

Method

Sample

A sample of ten animated television shows was selected from cross referencing several “top ten” lists for children’s animated television shows in 2013-2104. These lists were readily available on the Internet without fee. Inclusion in this sample required that a show be featured on at least two lists and be geared for children ages six to twelve years old. Three episodes of each television show were chosen from the latest DVD for purchase and then made available for check out from a university library in the northeastern part of the United States. This selection yielded a total sample of 30 episodes of the ten shows on six networks: Disney, Cartoon Network, Fox, Nickelodeon, PBS, and The Hub. See Appendix B, Sample Information, for a complete list. One episode consisted of two 11 minute shorts or one longer 22 minute episode.

Procedure

The coding manual was edited collaboratively from the original 1998 coding scheme by the principal investigators and project manager (this author) for clarity and content. Few adjustments to the coding instrument were made to reflect interest in a new set of research questions including adding three questions (species, adult-like/child-like, and competent/incompetent) and removing one (selfish/unselfish) as appropriate. See Appendix A for complete manual. Thirty undergraduate and graduate students were trained in the 2013 coding scheme and given access to the CTV 2013 Character Coding form, made available to the students through google documents. The coding scheme includes forced choice answers, questions about physical and personality characteristics using a 0-5 scale, as well as a comment
box at the end to explain or justify any choices made. All speaking characters in each episode were coded. Since this project is also interested in sociolinguistic analysis, any characters that did not speak (including animal noises) were excluded from the sample. Coding was completed in three rounds over the course of a semester. For each round of coding, pairs were randomly assigned to code one episode of the television programs at a time. Reliability of coders was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa for a random coding pair based on their raw data. Cohen’s Kappa on all demographics for one episode coded by two unique coders was $\kappa = 0.46$, indicating a moderate agreement among coders. In order to clean the first round of coding, discrepancies in forced choice answers were resolved between the coding pair by re-watching the episode together and referring to any of the comments made in the comments box. In this way, coding pairs made the executive decisions for the final cleaned data. To clean the data gathered on physical and personality characteristics, scores were averaged to create one composite score for each domain. For the second and third round of data, four undergraduates and one graduate student met in randomly assigned pairs to watch the remaining episodes and resolve discrepancies in coding.

The personality traits of interest were chosen based on gender roles of masculinity and femininity from measures like the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). This measure is one of the most widely used measures in gender research and has demonstrated strong reliability and validity (Beere, 1990). The Bem Sex Role Inventory (1974) lists several feminine traits that relate to the hypotheses in this study. Females are compassionate and sympathetic (these traits are related to kind). They are eager to soothe hurt feelings and are understanding (peaceful). Females are also sensitive to the needs of others and are gentle (good). On the other hand, males are forceful and aggressive (violent) and can be dominant and competitive (bad). Truthfulness (honest) is gender neutral according to BSRI, but this researcher was interested to see if this
finding held in the particular sample. All physical traits were examined in subsequent analyses.

Results

Frequencies

In order to address the question on demographics of sex, race, age, nationality, and species of characters in this sample of children’s animated television, frequencies are reported below. Of the 554 characters in the sample, 179 (32%) were female, 369 (67%) were male, and 6 (1%) were ‘uncertain.’ Most the characters appeared to be middle aged (N = 190, 34%), teenagers aged 13-18 (22%), or children under 12 (18%). The rest were young adults (12%), elderly (6%), or uncertain (8%). The majority of characters were White, Non-Hispanic (N = 249, 45%) or uncertain (N = 243, 44%). 8% of characters (N = 45) were Asian, 2% of characters were Black (N = 12), and 1% of characters were Latino(a) / Hispanic (N = 4) or Arab /Middle Eastern (N = 1). Nearly half of the characters were of U.S. nationality (N = 264, 48%). The rest were Foreign/Non-U.S. (N = 160, 29%) or uncertain (N = 130, 24%). The majority of characters were human or humanoid (N = 350, 63%), followed closely by animal or animal like (N = 177, 32%). The rest were other or machine/robotic (N = 22, 4%) and 5 were uncertain (1%). The uncertain categories were subsequently removed from further analyses.

Demographic information. In order to understand the associations in the above demographics by character sex, cross tabulations with chi-square analyses were conducted. Table 1 describes the findings of these analyses. There was an association between a character’s sex and their age  $\chi^2 (4, N = 508) = 37.98, p < .001$, such that males were more likely than female characters to be middle aged while females were more likely than male characters to be teenagers than would be expected by chance. Cramer’s $V = .27$, a moderate effect size. There was no significant relation between character sex and race or character sex and nationality.
Fisher’s exact test was used to test the association between character sex and species since multiple cells had expected counts less than five, an assumption for performing Pearson chi-square tests. There was a significant relation between the two variables (FE = 8.4, \( p = .03 \)). Cramer’s \( V = .07 \), a very small effect size.

**Physical attributes.** To answer the research question about physical traits that are attributed to males and females, t-tests were conducted. For each physical attribute, coders rated the characters on a scale of 1-5 (1 was denoted as one extreme end of the trait, 3 was average or neutral, and 5 was the other extreme of the trait). 0 was used when the coder could not see the character and/or was uncertain about some aspect of the physical trait for the character. 0’s were eliminated from the analyses. See Table 2 for t-test results. On average, females were rated as skinnier than male characters. This difference was significant \( t(367) = 5.88, \ p \leq .001 \). Cohen’s \( d = .53 \), a medium effect size. On average, females were also rated as more beautiful than were male characters. This difference was significant \( t(283) = 7.20, \ p \leq .001 \). Cohen’s \( d = .57 \), a medium effect size. There were no significant differences in character sex and their dress rating (well-dressed to sloppily-dressed) or character sex and their skin color rating.

**Personality traits.** To address the research question about personality traits that are attributed to males and females, t-tests were conducted. Coders rated each character on a variety of personality traits using a scale from 1-5 (1 being one extreme end of the trait, 3 being average or neutral, and 5 being the other extreme of the trait). 0 was used when coders were uncertain and/or did not “see” the personality trait. For the purposes of this project, 0’s were excluded from the following analyses. See Table 3 for results on these t-tests. On average, females were more likely to be rated as good than were male characters. This difference was significant \( t(268) = 2.91, \ p = .004 \). Cohen’s \( d = .37 \), a small effect size. On average, females were rated as more peaceful than were male characters. This difference was significant \( t(315) = 4.57, \ p < .001 \).
Cohen’s $d = .55$, a medium effect size. On average, females were rated as kinder than male characters. This difference was significant $t(315) = 3.36$, $p = .001$. Cohen’s $d = .44$, a small to medium effect size. On average, females were rated as more honest than male characters. This difference $t(315) = 2.55$, $p = .011$. Cohen’s $d = .31$, a small effect size.

**Discussion**

In this sample, male characters continued to outnumber females around two to one. This finding was not surprising given all of the previous content analysis research showing large discrepancies between male and female characters. In terms of character demographics, it is interesting that character sex was related to age and species, but not race or nationality. Females were more likely to be teenagers, but less likely to be middle aged. This finding is somewhat consistent with prior research on television’s obsession with youthfulness for female characters (Signorielli, 2012). It is well documented that primetime television programs value, feature, and over represent young adults and the middle-aged; especially females of these age groups (e.g. Lauzen & Dozier, 1999, Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Children’s television, on the other hand, often includes characters of a similar age range as the target group (Harwood, 1997; Harwood, 1999). Children also prefer to watch same age characters, but they tend to idealize characters that are older than them (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). Particularly in ‘tween’ live action shows, actors are often much older than the characters they play; creating unrealistic images of age (Russnow, 2011). Given the nature of this sample, it was not surprising that female characters were more likely to be teenagers and less likely to be middle-aged. Teenage female characters are certainly young and youthful, but are slightly older than the target age group to account for children watching “up.” Another possibility is that this difference in age is due to the sample of shows chosen and their respective plotlines. More research on images of age on television would be needed to explain this finding further.

This researcher expected that there would be a relation between sex and race, but the data did not support this assumption. There were of course, a greater proportion of White characters
than any other racial or ethnic groups and this number is disproportionate in terms of U.S. Census information (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), but character race was still not related to character sex. The likely reason that these two variables were not related is, in fact, because of the predominance of White, non-Hispanic characters. The few characters of color that did exist would not be enough to establish a relation.

Male and female differences in physical attributes somewhat supported the researcher’s hypotheses. On average, females were more likely to be rated by coders as skinnier and more beautiful than male characters. There were no significant differences in character sex and skin color or dress. The significant results support the finding that at least some of the physical attributes of male and female characters were different. Even though this author believed that male and female characters would differ on all of the physical attributes, seeing that there was no significant difference in the light v. dark skin or well v. sloppily dressed ratings is somewhat promising. The findings on the skinny v. fat and beautiful/handsome v. ugly do, however, mirror past findings in published research of more attractive females in children’s television (Baker & Raney, 2004; Fouts & Burggraf, 1999; Gerding & Signorielli, 2013). In terms of personality traits, female characters were more likely to be rated as “good,” “peaceful,” “kind,” and “honest”, but this honesty rating was only slightly different for male and female characters. These findings support the author’s hypothesis that the personality traits attributed to males and females are different and unequal. These findings also follow the research literature around gender stereotypes in children’s television, animation and otherwise (Hentges & Case, 2013; Signorielli, 2012; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995).

One rationale for the phenomenon that females are pro-social comes from character development research in film and media studies. It is well documented that women and those of color are less developed as characters (Eschholz, Bufkin, & Long, 2002; Horton, Price & Brown,
A fully developed character has easily identifiable personality traits and very obvious character flaws. These flaws are meant to make them appear more “human” and show hubris. Less developed characters do not demonstrate such hubris and are often quite superficial (“Develop character personality,” n.d.). This lack of development or superficiality may lead scriptwriters, directors, and producers to show the underdeveloped female characters as “pro-social” or make them “good” so that it’s not seen as sexist. If they are not planning to develop the character and expose her flaws, it is much easier to make her superficially “good” so that viewers will not associate a female in a minor role as a character that is “less than” for any reason. Ironically, in doing so, they are perpetuating certain stereotypes about females being more pro-social than males; a fairly sexist trope.

A similar justification on the underdevelopment of females stems from information about the medium. Television, in particular, is a relatively short medium. A 22 minute — and especially an 11 minute — episode is not nearly enough time to fully develop every character that will be shown. Script writers and producers seem to know this fact. Are they choosing to make girls “good” so they can save face or is that they are choosing to employ the pro-social stereotypes that already exist about females because they want the audience to take their own mental shortcuts and immediately understand a character who will not be developed due to time constraints? If employing these stereotypes allows the media makers the time and energy to fully develop other characters in the television shows, should they be blamed for its use? Of course, it is unfair to make such sweeping generalizations about all media producers, but these ideas might play a role in why this content analysis found differences in male and female characters’ personality traits.
Another explanation is that these findings merely endorse the interpretation of females in a male-driven television industry. Most of the directors and creators of these series are male, the only notable exception being *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. It is possible that these directors and creators bring their implicit and explicit experience of the world into their art. In prime time television, several studies have found that who is working behind the scenes does indeed affect the portrayals of males and females on screen (Lauzen & Dozier, 1999; Lauzen, Dozier, & Cleveland, 2006; Lauzen, Dozier, & Hicks, 2001; Signorielli, 2012).

Cultivation theory might also explain why these stereotypical tropes continue to exist. The more television that we watch, the more we are inclined to believe that what we see is normative. We see the same images and tropes over and over again that we start to hold them as truth. Perhaps writers, animators, and producers continue to utilize the images we have come to incorporate into our reality not only because it’s a part of their own, but also because it is a convenient shortcut for the audience. Of course, these statements are only speculations, more information and research would be needed to determine if any of the rationales discussed are responsible for this phenomenon.

**Limitations**

The character coding manual was edited based on the original manual used by Dobrow and Gidney (1998), but operational definitions of certain aspects could differ from other content analyses and, as such, could result in different research findings. This researcher believes that the coding manual has strong face validity, but it is possible that the coding manual could reflect differences anyway. For practical purposes, only a subset of personality traits and character demographics were considered as part of this analysis. By limiting the variables, this research is unable to account for all differences in male and female characters in this sample according to the coding scheme.
The present sample is also not without its own limitations. The sample was derived from cross-referencing several “top ten” lists of children’s animated television. Viewership of each program was not accounted for and while television shows in the sample had to appear on multiple lists, it is possible that they are not necessarily the most widely viewed animated television programs for children aged six to twelve. Additionally, the shows had to be available on DVD to be included in the sample. Because of DVD release dates, many of the episodes that students coded aired in 2011-2013, already outdated in terms of air time. While the coded episodes might currently be in reruns, they are certainly not new to television. For these reasons and more, it is entirely possible that this sample is not representative of cartoon animation that children regularly view and as such, results should be considered only within this particular sample.

Content analyses are also limiting in that they may describe what exists in the television world, but do not measure how much someone “gets” from it. This measurement would require research in the area of media effects. Media effects research is an area of study that can help discuss the impact of children’s exposure to images featured on television, particularly how those effects might translate to new media platforms that have not been as extensively studied.

Implications and Future Research

The first step toward any major change is awareness. Several groups, such as Media Girls and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, are already heavily invested in this work; creating research and workshops to demonstrate inappropriate and unequal representation of females in children’s media while also empowering young girls to create less biased media themselves (“Media Girls,” n.d.; “Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media,” n.d.). Given the results of this study, it is no wonder groups like Media Girls and the Geena Davis Institute exist.
Where are all of the females in children’s animated television? Males continue to outnumber female characters. Not to mention that when they are shown, female characters are more likely to be younger (i.e. teenagers) and be more physically attractive (i.e. skinnier and more beautiful) than male characters.

According to social learning/cognitive theory, these representations of character sex on television have the potential to not only teach females about “being” and “doing” female, but, according to cultivation theory, those who watch more television could develop a worldview on gender that is in line with these depictions. To this end, females who see that female characters are more beautiful, skinnier, concerned with being good, kind, and peaceful might begin to believe that they must also value these traits. Not only might females learn to value the traits of females on television, but they could also use them as models for performing what we consider to be feminine gender.

Of course, these are just some of the first issues to come to mind, but what about the effects of cartoon viewing on males? Do boys notice that it’s a man’s world on children’s animated television? And how might acknowledging males’ overrepresentation on children’s animation translate to young boys’ learning about gender from animated television?

If youth notice these differences in age, physical features, and personality traits in animated television, are they more inclined to perform in ways that mirror these differences in reality? If so, are females merely reinforcing negative stereotypes about feminine gender because the few females they see on television that they are copying are more pro-social and physically attractive? Social cognitive theory would argue that, of course, these models are providing the information needed for feminine gender performance, but they are only one part of the triarcic reciprocity involved in behavioral action around gender. But it still begs a serious question. If the performance of feminine gender reflects some stereotypes gleaned from television, is it fair to
assume that children who watch a great deal of television will continue to hold gender stereotypes? Research already points to the presence of a relation between gender stereotyped beliefs and television consumption (Signorielli, 2012). While the current project cannot make such bold claims, by noting sex/gender portrayals at the content level, this research can provide the information needed to design further research that would be able to do so.

One of the primary limitations of this study is that it is not a media effects study. Future research would not only analyze whether females have “cultivated” these messages from media they consume, but also how ethnic minority individuals are affected by media, particularly females of color. Though slightly removed from the sex and race discussion, more research is definitely needed to determine how multiple platform use, multi-tasking, and time shifting is impacting how children watch television and the resulting effects on their beliefs on sex roles. Information gleaned from those studies would help media effects researchers understand the whole picture of children’s’ television/media consumption.

Conclusion

Overall, this research has added currency to the literature on television’s sex/gender stereotypes and postulates how children might be affected by them. This content analysis found that there is somewhat more diversity on children’s animated television than was found in content analyses of 1990’s programming (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995; Dobrow & Gidney, 1998), but echoed similar findings of more recent content analyses (Baker & Raney, 2004; Gerding & Signorielli, 2013; Klein & Shiffman, 2006). Males and Caucasians continue to be consistently overrepresented in children’s animated television than their percentage in national statistics. Though unlikely in the current political moment, results of this study should urge policy makers to push for more appropriate, egalitarian, and less stereotyped representations in children’s television especially because the representation is so skewed. However, the more
likely pattern is that by making academics, parents, and educators aware of these inequities, these individuals will begin to take notice and better monitor children’s television patterns. The results of this study also greater support for the work of media literacy groups and hopefully encourage them to incorporate these more recent findings from the cartoon genre into their media literacy programs for young females. If awareness of old age stereotypes on television can lead participants to watch less television, then perhaps the same can be said of other inaccurate portrayals (Donlon, Ashman, & Levy, 2005). If that is the case, children might too decide to watch less television. Considering youth culture is not abandoning their screens anytime soon, maybe this research cannot effect change from the media, but it could certainly prompt and support interventions in media literacy that will impact the way girls view themselves and the media. More research and evaluation is necessary, but this work supports the rationale for continuing this line of academic pursuit.
References


http://www.simplypsychology.org/katzbraly.html


CA: The Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media.


Table 1

*Chi-square tests and descriptive statistics for character sex*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Character Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Under 12</td>
<td>59 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenager (13-18)</td>
<td><strong>57</strong> (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Adult</td>
<td>44 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Aged</td>
<td><strong>151</strong> (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly</td>
<td>23 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American / Black</td>
<td>9 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, NonHispanic</td>
<td>177 (81%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>30 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino(a), Middle Eastern, &amp; Other</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nat’l</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>178 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign/ Non-US</td>
<td>119 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Species</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human / Humanoid</td>
<td>247 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal / Animal-like</td>
<td>103 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Machine / Robotic</td>
<td>5 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Numbers in parentheses indicate column percentages. **Bold and Underlined numbers** = Standardized Residual ≥ |1.97*
Table 2

*Ratings on physical traits by character sex*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Male (SD)</th>
<th>Female (SD)</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skinny/Fat</td>
<td>2.90 (.95)</td>
<td>2.40 (.88)</td>
<td>.50*** [0.33, 0.66]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty/Ugly</td>
<td>3.13 (.79)</td>
<td>2.52 (.91)</td>
<td>.61*** [0.44, 0.78]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light/Dark</td>
<td>2.05 (.88)</td>
<td>2.10 (1.0)</td>
<td>-.05 [-0.24, 0.12]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well/Sloppy</td>
<td>2.53 (.90)</td>
<td>2.43 (.79)</td>
<td>.10 [-0.07, 0.27]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Notes. Light/Dark = skin color. Well/Sloppy = dress. BCa 95% CI for Mean Difference in brackets.
Table 3

*Ratings on personality traits by character sex*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Male (SD)</th>
<th>Female (SD)</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good/Bad</td>
<td>2.57 (1.16)</td>
<td>2.22 (.94)</td>
<td>.35** [0.12, 0.57]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace/Viol</td>
<td>2.94 (.98)</td>
<td>2.42 (.94)</td>
<td>.52*** [0.32, 0.74]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind/Cruel</td>
<td>2.72 (1.06)</td>
<td>2.32 (.91)</td>
<td>.40*** [0.19, 0.62]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest/Dis</td>
<td>2.61(.94)</td>
<td>2.32 (.93)</td>
<td>.29* [0.07, 0.52]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p ≤ .001

Appendix A

CTV_13 Character Coding Sheet

* Required

Coder Name *
Coder Name

Show Title *
Write the show's title

Episode title *
Write the episode's title

Character Name *
Write the character's name

Age group * (choose one):
Baby or infant, Child (4-12), Teenager (13-18), Young Adult, Middle Aged, Elderly, Uncertain

What is the character's sex? * (choose one):
Female, Male, Uncertain

Race / Ethnicity / Ethnic Origin *
What is the character's ethnicity? (Choose one):
African-American/Black, American Indian, Anglo-Saxon/Nordic, Arab/Middle Eastern, East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, Korean), South Asian (Indian, Pakistani), Jewish / Jewish American, Latino(a) / Hispanic, French / Franco-American, Slavic, Other, Uncertain

If race/ethnicity is OTHER, please specify...
What is the character's social class? * (choose one):
Underclass / Criminal, Poor / Working class, Middle Class, Upper Class /
Wealthy, Elite (kings, queens, princes, princess), Uncertain

Citizenship / Nationality *
What is the character's citizenship/nationality? (Choose one):
U.S., Foreign / Non-US, Uncertain

Dramatic Role *
What is the character's dramatic role? (Choose one):
Major hero / Major heroine, Major villain, Heroic sidekick, Villainous sidekick,
Minor character, Walk-on character

Species *
What species is the character? (Choose one):
Human / Humanoid, Animal / Animal-like, Machine / Robotic, Other, Uncertain

If species is other, please specify

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Skinny (1) ... Fat (5) *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't Tell Fat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Beautiful/Handsome (1) ... Ugly (5) *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't Tell Ugly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Skin tone: Light Skin (1) ... Dark Skin (5) *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't Tell Dark Skin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHILDREN'S ANIMATED TELEVISION
43

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: Dress: Well-dressed (1) ... Sloppily Dressed (5) *
   0 1 2 3 4 5
Can't tell  ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Sloppily dressed

PERSONALITY TRAITS: Serious (1) ... Comic (5) *
   0 1 2 3 4 5
Can't Tell  ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Comic

PERSONALITY: Strong (1) ... Weak (5) *
   0 1 2 3 4 5
Can't Tell  ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Weak

PERSONALITY: Good (1) ... Bad (5) *
   0 1 2 3 4 5
Can't Tell.  ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Bad

PERSONALITY: Peaceful (1) ... Violent (5) *
   0 1 2 3 4 5
Can't tell Violent  ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

PERSONALITY: Kind (1) ... Cruel (5) *
   0 1 2 3 4 5
Can't tell.  ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Cruel

PERSONALITY: Smart (1) ... Stupid (5) *
   0 1 2 3 4 5
CHILDREN’S ANIMATED TELEVISION
44

Can't tell
                      ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
Stupid

PERSONALITY: Independent (1) ... Dependent (5) *
              0  1  2  3  4  5
Can't tell
                      ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
Dependent

PERSONALITY: Warm (1) ... Cold/Stand-offish (5) *
              0  1  2  3  4  5
Can't Tell
                      ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
Cold / Stand-offish

PERSONALITY: Honest (1) ... Dishonest (5) *
              0  1  2  3  4  5
Can't tell
                      ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
Dishonest

PERSONALITY: Active (1) ... Passive (5) *
Active = takes initiative, takes the lead ** Passive = lets things happen, takes no initiative
              0  1  2  3  4  5
Can't tell
                      ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
Passive

PERSONALITY: Agile (1) ... Clumsy (5) *
              0  1  2  3  4  5
Can't tell
                      ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
Clumsy

PERSONALITY: Childlike (1) ... Adult-like (5) *
              0  1  2  3  4  5
CHILDREN'S ANIMATED TELEVISION
45

Can't tell

Adult-like

PERSONALITY: Competent (1) ... Incompetent (5) *

0   1   2   3   4   5

Can't tell

Incompetent

Other comments?
Please use this textbox to note anything else you found important that was not previously listed or to defend a particular rating.

__________________________________________
Appendix B

Sample Information

**Adventure Time*** - Cartoon Network
- Loyalty to the King
- Blood Under the Skin
- It Came from the Nightosphere
- The Eyes
- Storytelling
- Slow Love

**American Dad*** – Fox Hot
- Water Hurricane!
- A Ward Show

**Arthur** – PBS Swept
- Away
- Germophobia
- Arthur Sells Out/
- Mind Your Manners
- D.W. on Ice
- Spoiled Rotten

**Bob’s Burgers*** – Fox Bob
- Day Afternoon
- Synchronized Swimming
- Burger Boss

**Digimon*** – Nickelodeon Enter
- Flamedramon
- The Digiteam Complete
- A New Digitude
**Dragons: Riders of Berk*** – Cartoon Network
  - Thawfest
  - When Lightening Strikes
  - What Flies Beneath

**Legend of Korra*** – Nickelodeon
  - Welcome to Republic City
  - A Leaf in the Wind
  - The Revelation

**My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*** – The Hub
  - Friendship is Magic Part 1
  - Friendship is Magic Part 2
  - The Ticketmaster

**Phineas and Ferb*** – Disney
  - Jerk De Soliel
  - Toy to the World
  - A Hard Day’s Knight
  - I Brobot
  - It’s a Mud, Mud, Mud, Mud World
  - The Ballad of Bad Beard

**SpongeBob SquarePants*** – Nickelodeon
  - Accidents will Happen
  - The Other Patty
  - Drive Thru
  - Hot Shot
  - Friendly Game
  - Sentimental Sponge

Broadcast Network*
Public Broadcasting**
Children’s Cable***