

# Sweet Girls and Tough Boys: An Analysis of Gender Representations in Children's Cartoon Shows

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## Abstract

*This study explores gender representations in children's entertainment media and the ratio of male and female characters in terms of their active roles and personality traits. A comprehensive latent and manifest content analysis technique was used to analyze 34 hours of data taken from Disney, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon. Male representation was considerably high, with a ratio of 68% compared to female roles, which is 32%. Females were presented provocatively, showing off their beauty and physique, emotionally dependent on males, and constantly seeking their validation for survival. Female characters were primarily concerned about their looks and social status. On the other hand, male characters are deeply involved in their career, exhibiting their physical and emotional strength in a way that being a male is one of the great blessings they have.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Stereotypes, Western Children, Entertainment Media.

## Introduction

The most important question is, what is media doing to our children? Is it positively influencing them or simply damaging their ethics? The media has been frequently accused of presenting a faulty social picture to the little children. Children do not have any firsthand experience, so they rely on media learning. The media is also blamed for promoting violence, profanity, and evil activities. There needs to be more clarity between the research on children's programs and the actual scenario in which accidental learning occurs. McQuail (2005) argues about a vast area of media effects studies that have not been consensus on the results. As it has not yet been defined, there are no agreed-upon policies guiding media content harming children and making them more vulnerable. So, media effects might not give a clear picture of the damaging effects as some of them place the blame on circumstances and social situations in which children are operating, and some of them say it is neither good nor bad (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Calvert, 1999; Schramm et al., 1961).

Children and media research is primarily concerned about the environment and parental control of the content. Children media research also states that children with lower social status have different learning related to the media environment as it depends on the availability of more open space for physical activities, or children will be glued to the screens if no such opportunity is available (Jordan, 1991; Berry, 2007).

Children have unlimited access to several entertaining channels, but primarily, children under ten watch cartoons and animated movies. Many themes and ideas have been repeated in the cartoon shows, and children consuming such content without adult supervision would be in great danger of learning undesirable content (Rich, 2005).

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## Literature Review

Cartoon shows are considered the first mode of entertainment for young children. The first media window opening its narrative to children creates several valid concerns among parents, caretakers, psychologists, and policymakers (Pillar, 2011). Little children develop early gender perceptions based on their exposure to cartoons and animated films exposure. They also acquire gender role functionality while watching different media content. They can easily get influenced by different gender-targeted content, which leads them to their gender identification, relating to different roles presented in children's programs (Oliver & Green, 2001). Several gender-related research studies have endorsed the fact that there is a visible correlation between early media exposure and acquiring traditional gender role perception. Moreover, children would have nontraditional gender knowledge and norms if they were not exposed to regular media content (Durkin, 1983).

Gender-based studies have explored a limited mindset among young children who are exposed to stereotypical gender cartoons and are most likely to make it a regular expectation in terms of gender roles not only for themselves but for other genders as well (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). Children exposed to such stereotypical media consider it normal and acceptable as they do not have any other firsthand exposure to the real world. If a male character is personified as an aggressive female character, most likely, it will leave a lifelong impression on young viewers (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003). Cartoons and animated movies have been identified as the primary contributors to shaping children's gender-based role conceptions (Leaper, 2000).

An extensive gender stereotypes study based on four genres of children's animated movies and cartoons explored that it is mostly about which genre they are producing more, so if it is adventure or adventure-based, then definitely there are substantial gender stereotypes. However, in educational programs, it is pretty balanced (Leaper et al., 2002).

Sexual stereotypes are another critical area of research that shows the ratio of male and female characters presented in children's programs. Character analysis established on the demographics and psychographics of the gender shows a vast difference between the presentation of roles, education, nature, and social status. Male characters show a ratio of 3:1 as compared to female characters in their roles (Luther et al., 2010). Not only main characters but also side characters presented by male characters also outstripped female roles by a ratio of 4:1. A considerable number of female roles were presented in an insignificant manner, showing a weak side of the gender. On the other hand, male characters were portrayed as assertive, strong, and visionary. In this study, occupation of gender was also a matter of concern as 42 male job-related characters were shown, and only nine females were engaged in a professional job system. Male psychographics were more appealing than females. Male characters were aggressive, goal-oriented, active, and brave; female characters were depicted as impulsive, shallow, romantic, self-centered, and overly sentimental (Foeher et al., 2005).

With passing time and more research on gender, television was considered as a gender socializing mediator. Past research studies explored and confirmed the typical gender portrayal in children's cartoons and entertainment shows. A visible difference between gender portrayal was noticed as males were more desirable, portrayed as problem solvers, leaders, and innovators, and females almost doing nothing practical, engaged in self-grooming, gossiping, emotionally physically dependent, and submissive (Oliver & Stephen, 2001).

Many studies were conducted to check gender perception in young children, and primarily, it was based on gender stereotypes they learned from cartoon shows and animated movies. The response revealed that in the future, young girls will also consider themselves playing the stereotypical role of a female presented in media. Their gender perception based on traditional female sex roles is about looking pretty, taking care of the household, and being more compromising and worried about their physical appearance (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997;

Mayes & Valentine, 1979). Few other research studies explored cartoons with female leading characters focusing on their male-like muscular side rather than showing their female traits. Young boys dislike watching cartoons and programs with female leads (Calvert et al., 2003). Young children like to identify themselves with superheroes of the same gender, and it is difficult for little girls to find such a connection as few female lead shows are available (Akerman et al., 2008). Some gender studies indicated that in the absence of female lead shows, girls like to watch male superheroes and unconsciously detest their gender (Vande et al., 2007; Bretle & Cantor, 1988; Siger, 2001).

Children unconsciously adopt subliminal messages containing negative connotations thrown at them very skillfully. Few cartoon storylines transform characters through magic into the opposite gender, resulting in either truly taking a stereotypical representation or being represented as homosexual or asexual (Gökçearslana, 2010). The most disturbing message conveyed through gender is giving mixed messages to little children about their early sexual orientation. With its universal appeal, *SpongeBob* is the most popular animated character, running in 170 countries. *SpongeBob's* sexual orientation has been presented as a gay character, showing intimate scenes with his close friend Patrick. "Grandma's Kisses" is an episode with disturbing gender-related strategies to seduce the other guy, and it is like copying it from a desperate woman who wants to get seduced (Pillar, 2011). As little children cannot tell fiction and reality apart, it would be considered more demeaning if a male character turns into a female persona (Nayak & Kahiley, 2008). Another very significant research was done on wearing dresses; if some males wear female dresses, it would be considered a source of anxiety, and characters portray their emotions as if they belong to low status and, at the same time, lose control and power. Characters presented as asexual can create more gender identity confusion, as little children will not be able to identify with any of the characters. *Teletubbies* are asexual, but it is considered a positive trait as it will keep children away from developing any gender discrimination and prejudices (Gökçearslana, 2010; Nayak & Kahiley, 2008).

Animated movies produced under the Disney banner are blamed for their confusing messages about gender. *Pocahontas*, a strong character, returns to her stereotypical duties as a female, and critics are not happy about her choice. They think she should have taken her role as a community leader (Dundes, 2001).

Towbin et al. (2004) explored gender-related characters in Disney movies. Male characters have two extremes: silent or displaying their personality through anger and physical force and showing their sexuality as an uncontrollable desire, born to rule the world. Obese people are depicted as villains. Females prioritize their outlook instead of working more on their profession or intellect. Girls are portrayed as needy, dependent, emotionally fragile, helpless, and ready to be taken care of. Their only aim in life is to get married and take care of the hero—obese girls portrayed as cranky, ugly, and unmarried.

New gender theories analyze gender as a non-defined idea; it says everything is going through a vast flux, like religion, morality, and status, so they consider the *Adventure Time* cartoon show as anti-essentialist content. This show has been appreciated for its radical representation of gender, breaking stereotypes related to relationships and regular sexual identities, and, most of all, presenting homoeroticism crushes by focusing on metamorphism—*Adventure Time* presented non-specified characters or having multiple gender aptitudes. Gender equality in their nature was flexible as both genders were involved equally in good or harmful activities. Another liberating concept that fits in Western culture is showing same-sex involvement, the character involved in showing same-sex open intimacy without getting intimidated by society (Emma, 2015).

### Objectives of the Study

The study's main objective is to analyze the representation of gender and how it has been displayed. How gender of the character has been displayed as male or female? What is the focus point of gender portrayal? Which gender is positively portrayed?

- What is the ratio of male and female characters in children's cartoon shows?
- How has gender been portrayed in children's entertainment programs?
- Which gender is more actively related to positive and negative themes in cartoon shows?

Hypothesis 1. There are more active male roles as compared to female characters.

Hypothesis 2. Male characters are active in displaying negative themes in cartoon shows.

Hypothesis 3. The ratio of male characters presenting unethical themes is higher than that of females.

### Methodology

A time span between 2016 and 2021 was used to collect data from Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and Disney channels. Data was randomly selected from each channel, and it was of 34 hours duration. A total of 30 seasons and 150 episodes were analyzed. This study has used two all-inclusive research methodologies to answer the inquiries.

- Quantitative Manifest Content Analysis.
- Qualitative Latent Content Analysis

Content analysis is employed to identify the four areas of the content to gauge the frequency, direction, intensity, and place. Manifest content analysis helps measure the visible frequencies of the content, and on the other hand, qualitative latent content analysis is used to identify underlying themes of the content. A detailed coding sheet was designed to register manifest and latent content analysis. A comprehensive coding protocol was developed to record the content's actions, themes, frames, symbolic words, and storylines.

Gender. The participation of the specific gender in positive and negative activities and their ratio as male or female. Inanimate characters were recognized through their name, voice, role, and appearance. Qualitative thematic analysis is one exemplary method used to investigate ideological constructions of gender. A comparison was made to gauge the level of traditional vs innovative gender presentation. "Textual frame analysis is an interpretive approach mostly used to comprehend latent meanings in content" (Larsen, 2002).

### Data Analysis

**Table 1: Total Themes in 34 Hours**

Themes	N	Mean	Sum %	Sum	Per Hour
Positive	150	4.27	15.1%	640	18.82
Negative	150	23.92	84.9%	3588	105.5
Total	150	28.19	100.0%	4228	34 Hours

An independent sample t-test held by the aid of SPSS helps reaching the conclusion that there is a definite difference between ethical and unethical themes' representation in children cartoon shows. There was the representation of 4228 themes within a span of 34 hours with almost 28 occurrences, to be precise. Ethical themes take up a total of 15% (n=640/4228), giving us almost 19 incidents per hour (n=34 hours) and 5 incidents per episode (n=150), whereas, it was quite clear that the unethical themes take a lead covering almost an 85% (n=3588/4228) with an average of 105 incidents per hour (n=34 hours) and 24 incidents per episode (n=150).

**Table 2: Difference in Ethical and Unethical Themes in Cartoon Shows**

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig
Ethical	150	4.27	6.030	13.879	298	.000
Unethical	150	23.92	16.2662			

**Hypothesis 1.** There are more active male roles as compared to female characters.

To find the comparison between the total themes scoring for the ethical and unethical themes, an independent sample t-test was run to reach the conclusions that the representation of unethical themes (85%) is significantly higher than the ethical (15%) ones by rejecting the null hypothesis, stating that there exists no such difference between the ethical ( $M=4.27$ ,  $SD=16.26$ ) and unethical themes ( $M=23.92$ ,  $SD=16.26$ ), yet proven statistically wrong at the level of 0.5 alpha as the magnitude differences in mean (mean difference = 19.65, 95% *CI*: -16.8 to 16.80) is very large (eta squared = 0.39).

**Hypothesis 2.** Male characters are more active at displaying negative themes in cartoon shows.

**Table 3: Male and Female Representation in Total Themes**

Gender	N	Mean	Sum	Sum	Per Hour
Male	150	19.0	67.4%	2850	83.82
Female	150	9.18	32.6%	1378	40.52
Total	300	28.19	100.0%	4228	124.35 Hours

On the SPSS, an independent sample t-test was run in order to identify the difference between male ( $M=19.00$ ,  $SD=14.75$ ) and female ( $M=9.18$ ,  $SD=14.75$ ;  $t(298) = 6.88$ ,  $p=.000$ ) representation in Children Cartoons Show (Table 3). The test was a clear success by showing significant statistically calculated results after a definite testing procedure and not by any chance or any sampling error (Table 3).

About 30 shows were taken randomly as a sample providing 150 episodes from the three channels known as Disney, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon mounting up to the watch time to be an exact 2020 minutes. It was observed precisely that within 34 hours there were 4228 represented themes with an exact number of 124 occurrences per hour ( $n=34$  hours) and 28 incidents per episode ( $n=150$ ). Furthermore, explaining the review about the visual representations of female ( $n=1378/4228$ ) is about 32% (40 incidents per hour and 9 incidents per episode) and that of males ( $n=2850/4228$ ) is about 67% (84 incidents per hour and 19 incidents per episode). It sums up the test to generate a result that states that males exceed the representation being 67% than females who are just given 32% of it. The magnitude difference in mean (mean differences=9.81, 95% *CI*:12.61675 to 12.61888) is very large (eta squared=0.39) clearly showing that the null hypothesis of being no difference in between the representation of both males and females is rejected at an alpha 0.5 level because of the very large differences.

**Table 4: Difference in Male and Female Representation in Cartoon Shows**

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig
Male	150	19.00	14.756	6.88	298	.000
Female	150	9.18	9.308			

Within 4228 themes and a total of 2020 minutes of view time, unethical themes take up to 85% ( $n=3588/4228$ ) of the screen time, males being 69% ( $n=3588/2486$ ) involved in representations and leaving females with only a 31% ( $n=3588/1102$ ) of it. This sums up to a total of 3588 themes comprising of 150 episodes run on 30 randomly selected cartoon shows. Whereas the



ethical themes take up only the 15% (n=640/4228) where males exceed by having an active involvement of almost 57% (n=640/364) and females 43% (n=640/276). Table 4 is the tabular description of depiction of ethical and unethical themes performed by male and female in children cartoon shows. This account is in support of the previous findings that claim that there is a clear and definite difference in male and female representations in children cartoon shows.

**Table 5: Total Themes and Gender Representations**

Gender		Unethical Themes	Ethical Themes
Male	N	150	150
	Mean	16.57	2.43
	% of Total	69.3%	56.9%
	Sum	2486	364
Female	N	150	150
	Mean	7.35	1.84
	% of Total	30.7%	43.1%
	Sum	1102	276
Total	Mean	23.99	4.1
	Sum%	3588/85%	640/15%

**Hypothesis 3.** The ratio of male characters presenting unethical themes is higher than females. The unethical themes take major part as they are 85% (n=3588/4228) having a definite number 3588 in total where male share 69% (n=2468/3588) and female only a 31% (n=1102/3558). These stats clarify that there exists a huge difference in representation of both the genders. Explaining it further, out of those 3588 themes the division on the respective channels branches as it takes 41% (n=1484/3588) by Cartoon Network, 32% (n=1147/3588) by the Disney and Nickelodeon takes only about 26% (n=906/3588). This leads to the point where it could clearly be seen that on Cartoon Network male perform almost 46% (n=1135/3588) of the unethical themes and female on Disney perform only about 45% (n=501/3588) marking both the reading as the highest recorded frequencies, whereas, taking it to the Nickelodeon than there is a shared stat by females representing only about 23% (n=252/3588) of the total unethical themes which makes it the lowest frequency where for males it is 28% (n=705/3588) which makes it the second highest amongst all. (Table 5).

**Table 6: Gender and Unethical Themes in Cartoon Channels**

Channels	Male			Female			Sum	Total
	N	Mean	% Total	N	Mean	% Total		
CNW	50	22.70	45.7%	50	6.98	31.7%	349	1484 41.4%
Disney	50	12.92	26.0%	50	10.02	45.5%	501	1147 32.0%
Nick	50	14.10	28.4%	50	5.04	22.9%	252	957 26.7%
Total	150	16.57	100.0%	150	7.35	100.0%	1102	3588
							30.7	11.96
							%	

An independent sample t-test run to testify the difference between the representation of male and female scores of unethical themes.

**Table 7: Difference Between Gender and Unethical Themes in Cartoon Shows**

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Dev	t	df	Sig
Female	150	7.35	7.75	6.947	298	.000
Male	150	16.57	14.296			

To visit through the null hypothesis claiming that males' (M=16.57, SD=14.296) participation is not higher in presenting unethical themes than the females (M=7.35, SD=7.75;  $t(298)=6.947$ ,  $p=.000$ ) an independent sample t-test was run resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis at an alpha 0.5 level signifying a clear statistical difference between both the representations. The magnitude of mean differences (mean difference= 9.227, 95% CI: -11.840 to 11.843) was very large as out of 3588 themes an involvement of 69% (n=2486/3588) males and 31% (n=1102/3588) females is clearly calculated.

## Discussion

Previous ventures through the representation of the male end of society in cartoons show males as more into education and social, hence being a more positive image for society. In contrast, the females are seen to be more empathetic, social, and helpful. This journey creates a disparity as the current findings give males the edge of an equally good or a bad character. In contrast, the depiction of females is merely concentrated on mannerisms. It is a gateway to create gender stereotypes, especially for young viewers, as they, specifically in a country like Pakistan, have a child with an average of more than 2 hours of watch time on these cartoon shows. They are, no doubt, the pathways that lead them to real-world scenarios as they create these representations in cartoon shows as a norm followed and set up for the real world. Hence, it imposes a great deal of responsibility on the creators to notice this gender role distribution as they are entirely in need of renovations to be more flexible, liberal, and have neutral impressions in order to change the narratives.

Diving further into the study, turning towards the gender-related problems set into discussions through specific cartoon show platforms such as 'The Worst Date 'in episode brace face, we can see Adam struggling to find a deodorant because of the armpit smell caused due to entering into puberty, similarly, in another episode we can see Nina getting jealous of Sharon as she gets her period first on which Nina expresses her mean attitude by passing the remark 'so you finally got a visit from aunt flow' and her jealousy results as a relaxation for Sharon during her misery.

Flipping into the physical appearances of girls in different cartoon shows, they are given a provocative appearance as their midriff is kept visible. Female characters are awarded an impression of happily slipped into clothing, revealing them as mostly seen wearing shorts. Their life stories are created in a manner that revolves around non-problems like finding a suitable, famous boyfriend, being the beauty icons, and having a slim, attractive figure. Dismembering the capabilities of an actual female, in the cartoon world, they are seen in a shallow light as they are never shown stressing about any career, gossiping about crushes and dates, and guarded by money, pricey dresses, and appearances. Their actions, like jealousy and meanness, are their way of getting boys' attention. Girls, presumably, control relations and consider others around them as being inferior entities.

On the other side of the picture, a flat figure becomes the reason behind the rejection of a female cat; Oscar feels flawed and unsettled just because his mother has jelly-like breasts. Even in the tale of three sisters having the title of 'gross sisters' along with everyone, the teachers also similarly identify them. Such lessons are very disruptive for young minds.

The following image explored by the keen eye of observations reveals that it is by far an unflattering approach for the male character to turn a female by magic or any other fictional practice, adding humiliation to the name. It is seen in the show 'Penguin of Madagascar 'when

suddenly students are informed that there stands only a DNA test in between the classification of male and female, and the character Skipper, on finding being a female penguin, takes the revelation a reproachful act and goes into denial and demands further tests to clarify the situation. He is leading it to cry and curse his life. This approach is a direct portrayal that being a female is shameful in the boys' world. This example explains that humiliation follows as it is more demeaning if a person turns a female into a pig or panda (Nayak & Kahiley, 2008). Hence, gender intersexual transformation is mainly the justified reason behind triggering anxiety.

These cartoon shows for young viewers are the first windows that open ideas and impressions about gender stereotypes and roles. Angling these gender representations takes the initiative to build relatability between the character and the natural world (audience). However, the structure on which the content building stands follows the ratio of 19 to 9, male to female. The male perspective holds firm ground as presented as charismatic powerhouses and females as socially nuanced and receptive. The aftermath of such content shaping is so lasting that in young minds, the fiction holds more substantiality. As a reaction, a derogatory attitude towards certain groups develops as the expectations are completely unrealistic.

Submitting the weirdest themes as a mother-son bond, threesome sex, and preferring cats, dolls, and parrots as romantic partners challenged the existent stereotypes by offering wide and wild verities to the audience. In the world of homosexuals, where purple color predicted choice and the community, the wilderness of straight women was seen as they went looking for 'Rolling pins.' Such stories degrade the idea of same-sex attraction.

Gender-typing is a phenomenon that explains the idea that since young and fresh minds thereby show a heavy reliance on mediated environments to form the concepts circulating themes as such social roles and motives hence, stating the use of modeling theory by Albert Bandura to experiment with violence exposure and instant learning as children are equipped with media at an early age as 3. The infant minds can develop and absorb gender preferences and all the related information from 15-36 months. This acquaintance is adopted from families, but in the modern developed world, they adopt it from the mediated world they are surrounded in (Herington, 2003).

Heavy exposure, reliance, and relatability are observed in children of the modern mediated world. Thereby accepting values as legit facts and modeling the media-acquired information as this world lacks the charms of parental supervision and family environments, resulting in full authority to the exposed mediated content, and such platforms are successfully brainstorming and bombarding fresh and pure minds with their gender stereotypes and roles that are idealistic or unreal, being potentially harmful and unhealthy. (Greenburg, 1994; Ward, 2003).

There is a list of very few shows that portray non-traditional gender roles, but still, when it comes to showing relationships and intimacy, a very typical action is observed: Starfire, a self-conscious teenager. Rowen is seen insulting Robin for falling for such a personality, making her a sensible character, though both the girls show equal capability for the role. Furthermore, in Teen Titans, whenever there is a need to show sexual appeal, a kiss is added, and the man is always seen as building the initiative.

## **Conclusion**

Children's unconventional learning, most of the time, comes from media. Innocent childish cartoons deliver profound messages that young, impressionable viewers take very seriously. Stereotypical role assignments present a picture of popular culture with nothing new to offer, and children perceive it as an acceptable way to socialize with other genders. The duties, roles, and physiological and psychological limitations of a specific gender can be perceived in a way that can create a blockage to understanding the potential of gender.



Gender representations and role assignments are a responsibility imposed on content creators as they set up the narratives for the upcoming world. Female and male role distributions now need to go through the revival processes. The approaches explained in the study are disruptive for the new minds as they are dismembering the idea of a female in society. The main idea is to provoke the content creators to work and change their existing strategies, as in the new world, a child is exposed to media shortly after birth. Their processing capabilities develop a system that accepts the mediated society, yet the real-world settlements become alien, and they fall prey to disturbed life patterns.

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