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Gender Representation in Children's Media and Preschool-Aged Girls' Internalized Beliefs About Gender

Jessica Lindsey Kanne Atkins
Missouri State University, Jessica604@live.missouristate.edu

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN CHILDREN'S MEDIA AND PRESCHOOL-AGED GIRLS' INTERNALIZED BELIEFS ABOUT GENDER

A Master's Thesis

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Master of Science, Early Childhood and Family Development

By

Jessica Atkins

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ABSTRACT

The current study examines patterns of gender representation through three categories (distribution, presentation, and stereotyped behaviors) in children's media and how these patterns relate to preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender. Both historical and presently available children's media tends to display high levels of stereotypical gender representation. By preschool age, children have already developed distinctions between boys and girls, and hold internalized beliefs regarding gender. The objective of the current study is to examine the relationship between these two factors. To accomplish this, preschool-aged girls were interviewed to assess their internalized beliefs about gender. Their caregivers completed questionnaires related to their household's demographics, media usage, and gender representation in the children's media being viewed. Analyses demonstrated patterns suggesting a relationship between stereotypical gender representation in children's media and stereotypical internalized beliefs about gender in preschool-aged girls. The current study suggests a need for further research on the topic, as well as a greater number of counter-stereotypical representations of media in available children's media.

KEYWORDS: gender, children's media, internalized beliefs, preschool, girls, gender presentation, gender distribution, gender-stereotyped behaviors

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Approved:

Elizabeth King, Ph.D., Thesis Committee Chair

Hailey Hyunjin Choi, Ph.D., Committee Member

Sarah Baker, Ph.D., Committee Member

Julie Masterson, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

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INTRODUCTION

Research defines gender identity as a person's understanding of self in relation to their attitudes about and awareness of where they fall on the gender spectrum, expressed through both character traits and physical appearance (Bonfatto & Crasnow, 2018; Halim et al., 2018). Gender identity and awareness begin to develop within the first year of life and continue to be shaped by a child's experiences and environments as they grow up (Fast & Olson, 2018). As children form their gender identity, they adopt gender stereotypes, a process that begins around the age of three (Skočajić et al., 2020). Gender stereotypes are preconceived notions which are used to describe certain groups of people, establish behavioral norms, and categorize characteristics of groups as either desirable or undesirable (Skočajić et al., 2020). Gender stereotypes can take the form of internalized beliefs, or ideas a person possesses about a topic that are influenced by sources the person values, such as close peers or the media (Coyne et al., 2014). When developed as young as the preschool age, gender stereotypes and internalized beliefs about gender can lead to rigidity in appearance and preferences (Halim et al., 2018). This can present as a young girl refusing to wear blue because it is a "boy color" or a young boy wanting to play exclusively with other boys. No matter how it manifests, this lack of flexibility can be harmful when it closes young children's minds exploring gender beyond what is stereotypically expected. Consequences of gender stereotypes include preschoolers sanctioning gender counter-stereotypical behavior more often than they accept or even tolerate it (Skočajić et al., 2020). Additionally, when a person's appearance does not match their internal and societally imposed ideals, they are at higher risk for depression (Halim et al., 2018; Hyde et al., 2008). These consequences persist in adulthood, for

example, through sex-based discrimination in the workplace (Herz, 2014). Thus, gender stereotypes create harmful rigidity at a young age that persists throughout an individual's life.

Although gender stereotypes can be created from interactions with various environments and stimuli, such as family or school, one factor that remains consistent across cultures is the exposure to and impact of media. Researchers define children's media as television, movie, video game, and literature content designed for an early childhood target audience (Martin, 2017; Walsh & Leaper, 2020). When interviewed by Jaggi (2017), caregivers of young children referred to television as a "necessary evil," admitting that while they do not love all the content their children are viewing, or the effects it seems to have on their children's behavior, they can acknowledge how helpful it is for providing a necessary and entertaining distraction (p. 195). Other research supports Jaggi's conclusions, reporting that most children interact with the media in some capacity daily (Dinleyici et al., 2016; Dore et al., 2020; Huber et al., 2018).

For this study, the media examined includes television and movies because of the uniqueness and relative newness of screen-based media, as the television only rapidly grew in popularity within the last century (Edgerton, 2007). This study does not include video games because there is limited available research on video games targeted at the age of study participants (three to five). Additionally, this study does not include literature because of the commonality of literature in the home and the vast array of literature subjects available. As part of this study, caregivers were asked to report their perceptions of the gendered narratives displayed in television and movies consumed in the home. Examples include television shows such as *Sesame Street* and *Curious George*, and entire networks such as *Disney Jr., Nick Jr.,* and *Cartoon Network* (Martin, 2017; Walsh & Leaper, 2020).

This study specifically explored caregivers' perceptions of three representations of gender within children's media: gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors. This study also examined the patterns among representations of gender and preschool girls' internalized beliefs about gender. *Gender distribution* refers to the quantifiable representation of gender in children's media. That is, the numerical count of female characters compared to male characters, the amount of screen time allotted to each gender, the hierarchal roles of each gender, and the lines spoken by each gender. *Gender presentation* refers to the color and style of clothing and the accessories each gender wears. *Gender-stereotyped* behaviors refer to the character traits, preferred items, and activity engagement characters display which are traditionally assigned to one gender or the other.

The media plays an influential role in shaping how children perceive the world around them, a concept proposed and explained by the cultivation effect. The cultivation effect proposes that when a person is consistently exposed to a theme over time, they tend to "adopt a particular perspective of the world" that corresponds with the images and messages depicted in the media they have been consuming (APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007, p. 19). This cultivated perspective can shape itself into internalized beliefs about gender. Research defines internalized beliefs as perceptions that a person develops after hearing them voiced by individuals or groups whom they respect or admire, such as their family, friends, or through the media (Coyne et al., 2014). The cultivation effect suggests that consistent representations of gender in children's media could lead to internalized beliefs about gender in young children consuming the media.

An abundance of past research has been conducted to examine the relationship between Disney princess media and preschoolers' gendered play and beliefs. While this research is

important to expanding the knowledge of children's media and gender, there is a need for more research on the broader concept of children's media as a whole and how the representations of gender within relate to preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender. This study aims to fill this gap in the research by exploring three representations of gender in children's media – gendered distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors – and preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will examine the wide variety of previous research conducted on gender representations within children's media, internalized beliefs about gender, and how these two variables are related. While the present study is focused on television and movies regarding media categories, this review will examine gender representations in several types of media, including literature, movies, television, and television commercials. Similarly, although the present study is focused on preschool-aged girls, this review will examine internalized beliefs about gender at all ages and gender identities. This review will first describe gender representations in children's media and internalized beliefs about gender and conclude by examining the implications of one variable in relation to the other.

Children's Media

Media plays an active component in children's lives across age groups and geographical locations. For example, preschool-aged children in Australia watch television for an average of 69 minutes daily (Huber et al., 2018). In Turkey, 42.6% of children watch up to an hour of television a day, and 35.2% watch between one and two hours (Dinleyici et al., 2016). In the United States, 53% of children from preschool to third grade engage in two to three hours of media usage everyday (Dore et al., 2020). Although media consumption varies across cultures and nations, it is clear that the media plays some role, even if a small one, from an early age. The present study will investigate three representations of gender within children's media: distribution, presentation, and stereotyped behavior.

Gender Distribution in Children's Media

Though not the form of media focused on in this study, it is important to highlight previous research regarding children's literature, as it is a commonly studied and significantly impactful area of children's media that also highlights gender disparities. Children's books have been a popular form of media for over 100 years and have been depicting disproportionate distributions of gender for just as long. In the twentieth century, men and boys were depicted more often as characters in both human and animal form, in children's book titles, storylines, and illustrations (McCabe et al., 2011). The twenty-first century has continued to show male protagonists outnumbering women and girls in storyline and title, sometimes as frequently as three times more, although longitudinal research shows the ratio trending closer to equitable (Casey et al., 2021; Filipovic, 2018). Beyond the literature itself, in illustrations male characters are present at least twice as often as female characters. Though this disparity has slightly lessened over time, male characters continue to significantly outnumber female characters in the pictures accompanying children's books (Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Filipovic, 2018). The extensive research performed on the literature aspect of children's media highlights a common thread of overly represented male characters in children's books.

Another major category of children's media is movies. Before the movie even begins, posters are released to generate buzz and promote ticket sales, portraying a single-shot depiction of the film to attract diverse audiences and create expectations for the upcoming movie (Aley & Hahn, 2020). In an investigation of 152 children's movie posters, Aley and Hahn (2020) found that of 233 main characters depicted, 93.4% were male. Content analyses of the movies themselves showed results aligning with the character gender distribution in movie posters. Male characters in G-rated films are represented at a ratio of 2.57 to every 1 female character (Smith et al., 2008). In a similar trend to children's literature, while the ratio of male to female characters

in terms of representation and discussion in children's movies still favors males, research suggests that this disparity is moving toward a more equitable distribution (Gálvez et al., 2019). Despite the trend towards equitable distribution, children's movies in the twenty-first century exhibit over twice as many male characters as female (Gálvez et al., 2019). While it is important to note the progress children's movies have made in gender distribution, the depth of disparity cannot be overlooked.

Just as with children's literature and movies, children's television has been shown to favor male characters regarding gender distribution both historically and presently. In the twentieth century, female characters comprised 16.4% of the total characters present in animated cartoons (Klein & Shiffman, 2009). Presently, female characters are continually significantly outnumbered by male characters in both male-led and mixed-led shows. In female-led shows, there is either no difference in distribution, or the women and girls are still outnumbered (Martin, 2017; Walsh & Leaper, 2020). For example, Dora the Explorer's lead character and titular role is Dora, who is a girl. However, Dora is surrounded by male characters, which suggests a gender bias towards men and boys despite the female lead (Martin, 2017). The disproportionate gender distribution does not stop with the television show. As commercials are played between television segments, female characters remain outnumbered by their male counterparts, with 63.3% of characters on the popular kids' channel Nickelodeon being male (Peruta & Powers, 2017). Although visible male characters outnumber females, voiceovers for commercials are female significantly more often than male (Matthes et al., 2016). Both within the television and the commercials in between, men and boys are continually represented at a higher rate regarding screen time and the number of roles. The research on disproportionate distributions of gender in children's television aligns with the conclusions for gendered distribution in children's movies

and literature, suggesting an overrepresentation of male characters in children's media across the board.

Gender Presentation in Children's Media

Gender presentation manifests itself in the physical appearance of characters and its stereotypical gendered associations. The current study will specifically focus on the color and style of clothing and accessories (e.g., bows, jewelry, baseball caps). Regarding clothing, stereotypically feminine colors are pink and purple, while stereotypically masculine colors are blue, brown, gray, black, and the combination of black and red together (Skočajić et al., 2020; Walsh & Leaper, 2020). The style of clothing can also be categorized into stereotypical gender associations. Characteristics of stereotypically feminine clothing include hearts, bows, frills, jewelry, dresses, and skirts (Gutierrez et al., 2020; Halim et al., 2014). Characteristics of stereotypically masculine clothing include camouflage, superheroes, bagginess, ties, baseball caps, and sports jerseys (Gutierrez et al., 2020; Halim et al., 2014). Content analyses of children's television concluded that female characters wear feminine stereotyped colors and styles significantly more than their male counterparts (Walsh & Leaper, 2020). At the same time, there was no significant difference in the presence of masculine stereotyped colors and styles (Walsh & Leaper, 2020). This research suggests that masculine gender presentation is the norm, while feminine gender presentation is the exception.

Examination of children's literature resulted in similar conclusions. Non-human male characters in children's books typically look like the non-human object or animal they are impersonating (Filipovic, 2018). Conversely, non-human female characters tend to emphasize a curvy, sexualized body type, full lips, and long lashes; some even go so far as to wear bras (Filipovic, 2018). As with the gender presentation in children's television, this depiction in

children's books implies that the stereotypical male appearance is the norm or given. Across the realm of children's media, the message that the stereotypical female appearance is an oddity – or the exception to the rule – is being reinforced by character presentation.

Gender-Stereotyped Behavior in Children's Media

Gender-stereotyped behavior can be separated into three categories: character traits, preferred items, and activity engagement. Research defines male stereotypic characteristics as anger, assertiveness, leadership, and aggression and female stereotypic characteristics as emotional, affectionate, helpless, and nurturing (Martin, 2017). Female characters are presented with stereotypically female emotions, showing less depth and range than their male counterparts (Martin, 2017). Similarly, in children's books, male characters show more aggression, bullying, and dominance, while female characters are depicted with more sexual and family-oriented behavior (Sink & Mastro, 2017). Beyond the characters' gendered division of labor, children's media tends to display a disproportionate occurrence rate of masculine themes. Stereotypically masculine themes such as violence, the inspiration of fear, risk-taking behavior, physical strength, bravery athleticism, and assertiveness, appear as common themes in children's animated movies regardless of whether the movie has masculine main characters or not (England et al., 2011; Harriger et al., 2021). Previous research emphasizes that not only do characters typically exhibit emotions stereotypical of their gender, but that stereotypically masculine characteristics are disproportionally represented across all children's media.

The second category of gender-stereotyped behavior explored by the present study is preferred items. In television commercials across the United States, female characters utilize beauty or cleaning products, while male characters will engage with technology and cars (Matthes et al., 2016). Furthermore, television shows will depict female characters at home while

male characters in commercials are more likely to be seen in a work setting (Matthes et al., 2016). In children's books, female characters tend to interact with household items (e.g., kitchen utensils and sewing machines) and stay in the home (Crabb & Marciano, 2011). In contrast, male characters are often depicted with production items (e.g., construction and building tools) and working outside the home (Crabb & Marciano, 2011). The research emphasizes a consistent theme of female characters in all media forms gravitating towards domestic settings and props while male characters can be found in public, productive settings with construction-related props.

The third and final category of gender-stereotyped behavior to be examined by the present study is activity engagement. One form of activity engagement often seen in the media is occupation. While men and women are similarly likely to have jobs, male characters in children's films are significantly more likely to work in blue-collar roles (Smith et al., 2008). Another form of activity engagement commonly studied is hobbies. Stereotypically female hobbies are typically more performance-based, artistic, and domestic and include cheerleading, dancing, homemaking, sewing, ironing, reading, and baking (Gálvez et al., 2019; Seitz et al., 2020; Walsh & Leaper, 2020). Stereotypically male hobbies are typically more constructive and physical and include building, firefighting, policing, engineering, farming, inventing, and driving (Gálvez et al., 2019; Seitz et al., 2020; Walsh & Leaper, 2020). Children's movies tend to associate female characters with stereotypically female hobbies and male characters with stereotypically male hobbies, both at a significant rate (Gálvez et al., 2019). Contrary to movies, however, content analysis of children's television did reveal female characters engaging in physical activity more frequently than male characters, although the characters gravitated towards activities traditional of their gender in other aspects, with men and boys participating in more constructive activities and women and girls participating in more performative activities

(Walsh & Leaper, 2020). In lieu of a few exceptions, a continual thread remains in children's media of characters engaging with activities stereotypically associated with their respective gender more often than counter-stereotypic behaviors.

Internalized Beliefs About Gender

The current study will specifically examine girls' internalized beliefs about gender at the preschool age; however, it is important to note that internalized beliefs are relevant at all ages and can affect various aspects of life. Children can differentiate between male and female faces as early as six months old, showing an early recognition of gendered appearance; around the age of two, they begin to gain awareness of gender labels (Fast & Olson, 2018). By the time children have reached secondary education, their internalized beliefs can influence both academics and extra-curriculars. In school, both girls and boys believe that boys get better grades in math and tend to prefer it to girls (del Rio & Strasser, 2013). These internalized gendered stereotypes are reflected in academic performance. Girls report much lower self-esteem, confidence, and performance in academic subjects than their boy counterparts (Wille et al., 2018). As they get older and select extra-curricular activities, girls are more likely than boys to exclusively choose non-sport activities, although this trend has decreased over time (Meier et al., 2018). Outside of the classroom, academic extra-curriculars and after-school clubs tend to have a greater population of girls, while varsity sports tend to be a male-dominated area (Lehman, 2017). Internalized beliefs about gender follow individuals from high school to adulthood. Upon making career decisions and judgements, adults tend to believe that women are better suited to arts-based careers, while believing that careers based in science, engineering, technology, and mathematics, or STEM, are either neutral across genders or better suited for males (Fleming et al., 2020). These career-based gendered stereotypes are reflected in performance, with male

STEM students tending to be more outspoken in the college classroom and earning better grades than their female classmates, although the grade disparity is slight (Grunspan et al., 2016). Even in classrooms where female students were equally as outspoken, if not more, and performed equally as well academically, if not better, male students were given higher celebrity status and spoken of more fondly by their classmates (Grunspan et al., 2016). The consensus remains clear that regardless of age or an individual's own gender, internalized beliefs about gender are inescapable and only get reinforced over time.

Internalized Beliefs About Gender at the Preschool Age

By preschool age, children have already established strong internalized beliefs about gender that continue to get molded by their social and physical environment. Children around the age of three tend to categorize toys based on their stereotypical gendered association, such as trucks for boys and dolls for girls (Freeman, 2007; Skočajić et al., 2019). The tendency to categorize colors, toys, and objects based on gender stereotypes grows stronger as the children reach grade school (Freeman, 2007; Skočajić et al., 2019). Even at the preschool age, boys will define princess stories as books for girls and choose instead to gravitate towards superhero storylines (Baker-Sperry, 2007; Coyne et al., 2014). In addition to categorization, both three and five-year-olds reported that the adults in their life would approve of them playing with toys in their stereotypical gender category (Freeman, 2007). In contrast, they only reported approval from the opposite-sex parent if they were to play with toys that were not in the same stereotypical category of their gender (Freeman, 2007). Internalized beliefs about gender affect the toys children play with and the peers with whom they interact. Children aged three to five tend to choose playmates presenting as the same gender as their own and wear clothing that stereotypically aligns with their gender (Fast & Olson, 2018). Additionally, internalized beliefs

about gender can influence children's outfit choices, with young girls preferring stereotypically feminine clothing styles and colors (Gutierrez et al., 2020). Caregivers of young children note their sons gravitating towards masculine clothing such as baseball caps and sneakers, while their daughters insist on dresses, skirts, and pink attire (Halim et al., 2014). Regardless of which aspect of a child's life is being referred to, past research emphasizes strong gendered beliefs that influence opinions and choices from an early age.

The reason children's gendered beliefs are so entrenched by the preschool age can be explained through theories of socialization. Children develop these strong opinions on gender at such a young age because they "are encouraged and rewarded for engaging in behaviors considered appropriate for their sex" (Coyne et al., 2016, p. 1911). These social rewards can look like a proud smile from a young boy's father when he swings a baseball bat, or words of admiration from a little girl's grandmother when she enters the room wearing a pink frilly dress. Coyne et al. (2016) emphasize the developmental importance of early childhood and note that many gender stereotypes and behaviors are acquired during this time. The emphasis on gender in a child's life from a young age combined with the high amounts of media consumed by children and the gender bias presented in that media create the need for further research into how these variables interact.

While both male and female children develop and possess internalized beliefs about gender, the present study will specifically look at girls' perceptions due to the disparity in female representation in children's media. Female characters are given less screen time, stereotypically feminine presentations, and tend to have less depth and range than their male counterparts (Martin, 2017). As such, examples of femininity for young girls to view in children's media are limited to the stereotypical depictions provided whereas a much wider selection of examples of

masculinity are available for young boys. This study will focus solely on preschool-aged girls due to this limited representation.

Children's Media and Internalized Beliefs About Gender in Preschool-Aged Girls

A myriad of previous research examines the relationship between children's media and preschool-aged girls' beliefs about gender and gendered behavior, focusing specifically on the media company, Disney. Though the current study does not only focus on Disney media, past studies exemplify a connection between stereotypical gendered representations in the media and internalized beliefs about gender. In addition to investigating gendered perceptions, previous research has studied the relationship between gendered messages regarding the ideal body type for women and girls' mental health and self-esteem at preschool and throughout their lives.

Disney Princess Media

Disney media is one of the most prominent forces in gendered images targeted at children (Gill, 2016). A popular category of Disney media is the franchise's princesses, which include movies, television, games, and books depicting the following characters: Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel, Merida, and Moana (Coyne et al., 2021, Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Preschool-aged girls engage with Disney princess media an average of once per week, showing much higher princess engagement than their male counterparts (Coyne et al., 2021; Golden & Jacoby, 2018). With such a high consumption rate for these young girls, it is important to explore the content they are so heavily absorbing.

Research shows that Disney princesses tend to emphasize feminine stereotypes, but the newer princesses appear to be slowly moving towards a more progressive image. The older

princesses, such as Snow White and Aurora, take on more fear and passivity, among other female stereotypes, than their newer princess peers (Gill, 2016). The newer princesses, however, seem to show more counter-stereotypic behavior. For example, Princess Tiana of *The Princess and the Frog* was the first Disney princess to hold a job (Coyne et al., 2021; Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Additionally, Merida of *Brave* and Moana of *Moana* (the two most recent princesses) have character arcs that do not revolve around a love story (Coyne et al., 2021; Golden & Jacoby, 2018). It should be noted, however, that all the present princesses, new or old, maintain a thin body image (Coyne et al., 2021; Golden & Jacoby, 2018).

Research suggests a correlation between the high amounts of Disney media engagement and stereotypically feminine behavior. Young girls who consumed Disney media showcased a high rate of stereotypically feminine behavior, particularly when offered princess costumes (Coyne et al., 2021; Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Most preschool-aged girls chose the princess option between princess and non-princess costumes (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Once wearing their princess costumes, the girls' play became very different from their interactions prior to dressing up. Compared to their male classmates, the girls made more remarks about their beauty and appearance, spending much of their time pretending to brush their hair or apply makeup and seeking accessories to amplify their outfits (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). None of these behaviors were observed when the girls donned non-princess costumes, suggesting a correlation between princess attire and stereotypically feminine behavior. Coyne et al. (2016) further supported this conclusion in their study of preschool children's gendered behavior in relation to Disney media consumption, reporting that engagement with princesses through the media and play "was concurrently related to higher levels of female gender-stereotypical behavior" (p. 1919-1921). In addition to this stereotypical behavior, when presented with princess costumes, girls sought

interactions with other girls, excluding their male peers from play and even going so far as to run in fear from them, fully taking on the role of damsel in distress (Golden & Jacoby, 2018). Furthermore, parents of preschoolers have observed their children gravitating towards gender-specific merchandise and speculating about the association between this choice and the representation of gender their children saw in the media (Jaggi, 2017). Seitz and colleagues (2020) research agreed with the parents' speculations, concluding that children tend to select toys based on the items they see their same-gender protagonists interacting with in the media.

Disney Princesses' Relationship With Girls' Body Image and Mental Health. In addition to gender stereotypical behavior and preferences, young girls are especially susceptible to messages regarding body image displayed in children's media. Disney tends to display princesses who project the thin ideal and emphasize their beauty, which can lead to young girls believing that "attractiveness is a necessary component of the female identity" (Coyne et al., 2016, p. 1912). Some research examined how promoting a thin body image and emphasis on beauty can correlate with self-esteem. Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn (2010) found that exposure to children's media (including Disney) projecting females as beautiful and thin did not play a significant role in young girls' body image. Coyne et al. (2016) also found no association between princess engagement and body image in preschool-aged children, regardless of gender. It should be noted, however, that both studies were performed on preschool-aged children at a single moment in time, so their conclusions can only be applied to children's body image while they are still preschool-aged. Although current research suggests that children's media and an idealized body image does not play a role in young girls' self-esteem while they are still young, there is sufficient reason to believe that exposure to the thin ideal at a young age can present itself in poor mental health later in life. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls

(2007) reports that high exposure to an idealized body image can lead to anxiety, depression, and disordered eating later in a girl's life. Developmental recycling can explain this appearance of poor mental health, suggesting that events from infancy and childhood are recycled throughout a person's life to play a role in various events as they grow up (Sameroff, 2010). Regarding young girls and their body image, excessive exposure to the thin ideal in childhood could reappear as poor body image or anxiety later in life, as explained by developmental recycling. Although the present study will not investigate self-esteem directly, it is important to consider as self-esteem does fit into the general classification of internalized beliefs.

When looking at the broad category of gender representations in children's media as a whole, the currently available research suggests a disproportionate distribution that favors boy characters over girl characters, an emphasis on traditional gender presentation for both boy and girl characters, and a tendency for characters to engage in behaviors stereotypical of their gender. Internalized beliefs about gender develop at a very young age and continue to get reinforced and shaped through environmental influences, a large one being the media. While previous research has focused on the relationship between these two variables, it has been limited to that of the Disney company. As a result, there is a gap regarding children's media as a whole's relationship with preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender. The present study aims to fill this research gap and is guided by the following research questions: (1) what are the patterns in gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors in children's media? (2) What are the patterns in preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender? (3) How might these patterns relate to the gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behavior displayed in the media with which these children engage?

METHODOLOGY

The current study assessed caregivers' reports of their perceptions of gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors in the children's media viewed in their home and examined preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender. This data were collected through a caregiver questionnaire and a child interview aimed at understanding the child's internalized beliefs about gender. This study examined the patterns among the gender representations in children's media and preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender.

Participants

The researcher used social media recruitment to obtain participants for the current study. A brief summary of the study was posted along with a flyer providing an overview and the researcher's contact information. Participants replied through Facebook comments, Facebook Messenger, and email. Participants who expressed interest in the study through comments or private message were asked to provide their email so the remaining conversations could occur through email format. Once a participant's email address was obtained, the researcher sent a consent form to initiate informed consent procedures and the data collection process; all procedures were approved by the Missouri State Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A).

Eight total participant pairs completed the data collection process. All eight caregivers who responded were White, English-speaking women. Of the eight caregivers, four had master's degrees, two had doctoral degrees, one had an associate degree, and one had completed some college. One caregiver identified a household income ranging between $50,000 and $60,000, while the other seven identified a household income exceeding $100,000. Seven of the eight

children who participated were White and one caregiver identified their child as mixed race. Three of the children were aged three, three were aged four, and two were aged five.

Procedure

Initial recruitment occurred through simple random sampling. The researcher used online searches to create a list of all preschools within fifteen miles of the researcher's residence in Jessup, Maryland. Five preschools were randomly selected and recruited via an email providing a brief summary of the study along with a flyer providing an overview and the researcher's contact information. The researcher followed up with preschools they had not heard back from after two weeks. When no preschools consented to offer participation to parents, the researcher used social media recruitment to obtain participants. A social media post containing the same information utilized in the email was made on the researcher's personal Facebook page. Prospective participants were asked to comment on the post or email the researcher for more information. When a participant expressed interest, the researcher first emailed them a consent form.

When the consent form was signed and returned to the researcher, participants were provided with a link to a Qualtrics demographic survey, media survey, and a questionnaire aimed to examine the gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors in the media the child views at home. The demographic survey included a section for the caregiver and the child participating in the study. The demographic study also presented caregivers with an open-ended question asking them to describe their parenting philosophies in relation to gender. Following the demographic survey was a brief media survey (see Appendix B) created by the researcher and modified from Bleakley et al. (2014) analysis of the Annenberg Media Environment Survey. The media survey asked caregivers to indicate the accessibility of various

media devices, in which room the devices are located, and the average daily time spent with the media devices by both the caregiver and child.

Following the demographic and media surveys was a questionnaire inquiring about caregivers' perceptions of three different gender representations in the children's media engaged with at home and is split into three sections. The first section of the questionnaire asked caregivers to identify their agreement with statements related to the distribution of gender in the media with which their children engage (see Appendix C). The second section of the questionnaire was related to gender presentation and asked caregivers to identify the frequency with which male and female characters present with various colors and accessories (see Appendix D). The third and final section of the questionnaire was related to gender-stereotyped behaviors and asked caregivers to identify whether girl or boy characters more often engage in various behaviors (see Appendix E). The researcher coded the questionnaires to interpret the level of traditional and stereotypical gender representations present in the children's media, such that higher scores indicate more traditional gender representations (several items were reverse-coded; coding further described below). Caregivers were asked to complete the survey via Qualtrics. In addition to filling out the demographic survey and questionnaire, the caregivers were informed that their child will be asked to participate in a brief interview via Zoom. They were asked to provide two to three windows of availability for the interview to occur.

Upon their caregiver's consent, the participating children were invited to engage in a virtual interview with the researcher. The researcher conducted a pilot study using a small pool of child participants to determine the effectiveness of an interview conducted via Zoom. The pilot study illustrated that data can be successfully collected through a Zoom and screen-share format. The researcher worked with the caregiver to ascertain an appropriate time for the

interview to take place. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher showed the child two images (see Appendix F) via screen-share, one showing a stereotypically presenting girl child, labeled as "person one," and one showing a stereotypically presenting boy child, labeled as "person two." Both children in the images were drawn to be relatively the same age and ethnicity as the child being interviewed. The researcher presented a series of questions (see Appendix G), each regarding a specific characteristic stereotypical of either boys or girls. The child was asked to verbalize which image best fits each characteristic in question, by answering "person one" or "person two." The child was also given the option to point to either person. If the child chose this option, the caregiver was asked to recite to the researcher to which person the child pointed. The child's answers were recorded by the researcher, with a note being made if the child did not clearly select either picture. The researcher then coded the child's answers to determine the level of traditional internalized gender stereotypes the child possesses.

Measures

The current study included two data collection techniques: a questionnaire filled out by the caregiver and a child interview conducted and coded by the researcher. The caregiver questionnaire included a demographic survey for both caregiver and child, a media engagement survey, and a questionnaire divided into three sections, each corresponding with a different representation of gender: gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors in children's media characters. The questionnaire and interview were scored by the researcher and converted to a decimal score on a scale of 0 to 1, where 0 would reflect completely counter stereotypical representations or internalized beliefs while 1 would reflect completely stereotypical representations or internalized beliefs.

Gender Distribution

Section one of the caregiver questionnaire examined the distribution of gender in children's media. The section consisted of four questions directly modified from Walsh & Leaper's (2020) attributes coded for in their analysis of children's media. The questions had four fixed answer options to ascertain the level of caregiver agreement with the four questions (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree). A point system was used to interpret the level of traditional gender distribution, with a higher point total equating to a higher level of traditional gender distribution. An answer of "strongly agree" was equal to three points, "somewhat agree" was equal to two points, "somewhat disagree" was equal to one point, and "strongly disagree" was equal to no points. Questions two and four are female-led and were reverse-coded as such. The maximum score achievable by this section was 12, where a 12/12 or score of 1 would reflect a strong display of traditional gender distribution.

Gender Presentation

Section two of the caregiver questionnaire examined gender presentation in children's media. The first six questions were created by the researcher using Walsh & Leaper's (2020) appearance-related gendered traits. The seventh and eighth questions were created by the researcher using the lists of stereotypically masculine clothing presented by Gutierrez et al. (2020) and Halim et al. (2014). The section asked about the frequency of appearance of two sets of colors and jewelry for both boys and girls. Four fixed answer options were used to assess the frequency of the presentation for each gender. The answer options were always, often, occasionally, and rarely. A point system was used to interpret the level of traditional gender presentation, with a higher point total equating to a higher level of traditional gender presentation. An answer of "always" as equal to three points, "often" was equal to two points, "occasionally" was equal to one point, and "rarely" was equal to no points. Questions two, three,

five, and eight were reverse-coded as they asked about the frequency of an appearance trait for the gender with which that trait is not stereotypically associated. The maximum score achievable by this section was 24, where a 24/24 or score of 1 would reflect a strong traditional gender presentation.

Gender-Stereotyped Behaviors

The third and final section of the caregiver questionnaire examined which gender is more frequently seen engaging in various gender-stereotyped behaviors. The questions followed the three categories of: character traits (questions one and two), preferred items (questions three and four), and activity engagement (questions five through 12). Questions one, five, six, and seven were created by the researcher using the gendered activities and characteristics coded for in Walsh & Leaper's (2020) children's media content analysis. Question two was created by the researcher using the stereotypically feminine character traits suggested by Martin (2017). Questions three, four, eight, nine, and 10 were created by the researcher using the appendixes listing stereotypically gendered actions in Seitz et al. (2020). Questions 11 and 12 were adapted from table one in Golden & Jacoby's (2018) analysis of behaviors typically seen by Disney princesses. This section listed gender-stereotyped behaviors and asked the caregiver to select who is more often seen participating: male or female characters. The caregiver could also select the option "both equally" or "activity does not occur." A point system was used to interpret the level of traditional gender-stereotyped activities, with a higher point total equating to a higher level of traditional gender-stereotyped activities. If the caregiver selected the option "male characters" or "female characters," a point was counted if the selected gender matches the stereotyped gender for that activity. If the caregiver selected the gender not stereotypically associated with that gender, a point score of zero was counted for that question. If the caregiver

selected "both equally" or "activity does not occur," the question was negated and not included in the total score. The maximum score achievable by this section is 12, where a 12/12 or score of 1 would reflect a strong display of traditional gender-stereotyped behaviors. Because this section had the potential for questions to be negated, the researcher noted both the point score and the total score out of which the points were rewarded.

Preschool Girls' Internalized Beliefs About Gender

To explore preschool girls' internalized beliefs about gender, the researcher conducted interviews with the child participants via Zoom at a time agreed upon by the child's caregiver and the researcher. The child was shown two images via screen share of children who appear to be approximately the same race and age as the child being interviewed. The images were created by a local artist and modified to match gender stereotypes by the researcher. One image was labeled as "person one" and showed a stereotypically presenting female child (long hair with a bow, wearing a dress with hearts and frills) and one image will be labeled as "person two" showed stereotypically presenting male child (short hair; wearing a baseball cap, shorts, tee shirt, and sneakers). Both images showed the children in all green clothes, as the researcher deemed green gender-neutral due to its lack of presence in past research about gender stereotypical colors. The child was asked 13 questions that all began with either the phrase "which person should…" or "which person is…" The child being interviewed was asked to identify the image they felt best answered the question by verbalizing "person one" or "person two." If the child chose to point to an image rather than verbalize the number, the researcher asked the child's caregiver to identify whether the child pointed to person one or person two. The researcher recorded the answers. A note was made if the child did not point to an image or chose to ignore the question. Questions one through seven of the child interview were directly modified from

sections two and three of the caregiver questionnaire. Questions eight through 13 of the child interview were directly modified by the researcher using the verbs provided by the supplemental interview question in Golden & Jacoby's (2018) study. The child interview was scored using a point system, in which one point was rewarded for each answer by the child that matches the stereotypical gender associated with the question. If the child did not clearly select an image, the question asked was negated. The maximum score achievable by this section was 13, where a 13/13 or score of 1 would suggest the child interviewed had strong internalized stereotypical perceptions of gender. Similarly to section three of the caregiver questionnaire, because this section had the potential for questions to be negated, it was important that the researcher noted both the point score and the total number of questions successfully answered by the child being interviewed.

Analyses

The current study examined three representations of gender in children's media and preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender. Descriptive statistics were generated to examine the demographic characteristics of the caregivers and children participating in the study. Descriptive statistics were also used to study the types of media devices available in the home, duration of use, and rooms in which the devices are available. The researcher coded the caregiver questionnaire and child interview answers for raw scores, which were then converted to scores on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 would reflect completely counter stereotypical representations or internalized beliefs while 1 would reflect completely stereotypical representations or internalized beliefs. The decimal scores were inserted into graphs, with the internalized beliefs scale on the x-axis and the gender representation scale on the y-axis. The researcher used these graphs to look for patterns in the data, examining if higher internalized beliefs scores corresponded with higher

gender representation scores. The researcher also used bar charts to examine the distribution of answers for the gender presentation and gender-stereotyped behaviors categories of the caregiver questionnaire, as well as for the child interview.

RESULTS

The aim of this study was to explore three categories of gender representation in children's media (gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors) and preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender, via a caregiver questionnaire and a child interview. Caregivers were also provided with questionnaires regarding demographics and media access.

Media Access and Use

Regarding access to media devices, all eight children had access to a television, three had access to a DVD player, six had access to a tablet, and one had access to a computer. The total amount of media devices the children have access to ranged from one to three, with one child having access to one media device, four having access to two media devices, and three having access to three media devices (see Figure 1 for a breakdown). The children's average daily time watching movies and/or television ranged from 20 minutes to 120 minutes, with a total average of 61.88 minutes. Figure 2 compares the number of media devices a child had access to with the child's average daily screen time. The only child with access to just one media device was also the child with the lowest average daily screen time, at 20 minutes a day. The child with the most average daily screen time (120 minutes) had access to two devices, while the two children with access to three media devices averaged 75 and 45 minutes of screen time a day.

Gender Representation and Girls' Internalized Beliefs

In order to analyze the data pertaining specifically to the research questions, the caregiver questionnaire for gender representation and the child interviews were scored for levels of

stereotypical representations and beliefs. Note that a higher score equates to stronger stereotypical gender representations and beliefs. Scores were presented in both their raw form as well as converted to scale of 0 to 1 for comparison purposes. A score of 0 would indicate completely counter stereotypical gender representation in children's media, while a score of 1 would indicate completely stereotypical gender representation in children's media.

The child interview portion had a maximum score of 13. Two of the eight children did not answer all of the interview questions, so their raw score was out of a lower total possible points. Of these two children, the first answered a total of five questions and scored four out of five, or 0.80. The second child answered a total of 12 questions and scored a total of nine out of 12, or 0.75. Both of these scores suggest high levels of stereotypical internalized beliefs about gender. Of the other six children, who answered all 13 questions, the average raw score was 8.33, or 0.69. When including the two children who did not answer all 13 questions, the average score of all eight children was 0.68, which indicates a high level of stereotypical internalized beliefs about gender. Table 1 shows a full breakdown of the raw scores and converted percentage scores for each category of gender representation in the media the children viewed at home (gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors) and the child interview. The following sections will compare girls' internalized beliefs scores (on a scale of 0 to 1) with each of the three categories of gender representation.

Gender Distribution and Girls' Internalized Beliefs

Scores for stereotypical gender distribution in the media the children viewed at home ranged from three (0.25) to 10 (0.83), with a minimum possible score of zero (0.00) and a maximum possible score of 12 (1.00). The average score was 6.75 or 0.56, suggesting that over half of the gender distribution was stereotypical. A majority (5/8) of the caregivers expressed a

level of agreement that the media their children viewed had more male characters than female and that most of the lead characters were boys. Caregivers were split evenly regarding whether female characters speak more than male characters (four somewhat agree and four somewhat disagree). The final question of this category posed whether female characters were in positions of higher power than male characters and the answers showed a sharp contrast. Six of the eight caregivers selected "somewhat disagree," aligning with stereotypical gender distribution. Two caregivers, however, selected "strongly agree" for this question, which suggests a strong counter-stereotypical distribution of gender. One of the girls whose caregiver strongly agreed that female characters were in higher positions of power than male characters also scored a 0.92 for internalized beliefs about gender, which was the highest score of all eight girls, and suggests very strong stereotypical internalized beliefs. Despite their caregivers strongly agreeing that female characters were in higher positions of power than male characters, both of these girls still answered "boy" when asked "which person is powerful?"

Figure 3 provides the level of stereotypical gender distribution in the media viewed by all eight children in relationship to the level of stereotypical internalized beliefs about gender held by the children, both shown in their decimal score on a scale from 0 to 1. The graph shows a general trend towards higher levels of stereotypical gender distribution in the media corresponding with higher levels of traditional internalized beliefs about gender, however, outliers are present. The two children with the lowest score for gender distribution (3/12 or 0.25) were at the opposite ends of the spectrum for internalized beliefs about gender. One of the children scored 12/13 (0.92), while the other child scored 3/13 (0.23).

Gender Presentation and Girls' Internalized Beliefs

Scores for stereotypical gender presentation in the media the children viewed at home ranged from 15 (0.63) to 20 (0.83), with a minimum possible score of zero (0.00) and a maximum possible score of 24 (1.00). The average score was 17.25 or 0.72. This suggests a higher level of stereotypical gender presentation compared to gender distribution (0.72 for gender presentation vs 0.56 for gender distribution).

Figure 4 provides a visual representation of the gender presentation questionnaire regarding colors for both male and female characters. The column chart shows the frequency in which each gender of character is seen wearing both gender stereotypical and counter-stereotypical colors. Male stereotypical colors were identified by this study as blue, black, or red. Male stereotypical colors were most observed being worn by men and boys often (7/8 caregivers) and by women and girls occasionally (5/8 caregivers). Conversely, female stereotypical colors were observed being worn less frequently. Female stereotypical colors were identified by this study as pink and purple and were most observed being worn by women and girls often (7/8 caregivers) and by men and boys rarely (6/8 caregivers).

Figure 5 provides the level of stereotypical gender presentation in the media viewed by all eight children in relationship to the level of stereotypical internalized beliefs about gender held by the children, both shown in their decimal score on a scale from 0 to 1. Similar to gender distribution, the graph shows a general trend suggesting that higher levels of stereotypical gender presentation in the media corresponded with higher levels of traditional internalized beliefs about gender, however, outliers are present. The two children with the highest scores for gender presentation (20/24 or 0.83) were on opposing ends of the spectrum for the child interview. One of the children scored 10/13 (0.77), while the other child scored 4/13 (0.31). Additionally, this graph's trend is not as clear as gender distribution due to the range of scores for gender

presentation being more compact (0.63-0.83 for gender presentation and 0.25-0.83 for gender distribution).

Gender-Stereotyped Behavior and Girls' Internalized Beliefs

The gender-stereotyped behavior section of the questionnaire did not have a fixed total point score. Any questions answered with "action does not occur" or "both equally" were negated from the total score as the researcher was specifically measuring stereotypical versus counter-stereotypical behavior. Because of this, the scores and totals varied more in this category than the other three. None of the caregivers identified counter stereotypical behaviors in the media watched by their children, which resulted in all eight caregivers scoring 1.0 for this section. A score of 1.0 indicates completely stereotypical gender-stereotyped behaviors. Six out of the eight caregivers identified at least one behavior that was demonstrated by both the male and female gender equally.

Figure 6 shows a breakdown of how each individual question in this section was answered. The action of characters brushing their hair, doing their makeup, and/or selecting their outfit was most commonly identified as being performed more often by the stereotypical gender, with seven out of eight caregivers selecting girls/women. The second most commonly identified stereotypical action was playing with dolls, with six out of eight caregivers identifying it as being performed more by girls/women than boys/men. The most common action identified as being performed by both gender characters equally was sports and/or physical activity, observed by five out of eight caregivers. The actions of sewing, ironing, folding, and/or washing clothes and aggressive behavior were most identified as not occurring, with five out of eight caregivers and four out of eight caregivers, respectively.

Girls' Internalized Beliefs About Gender

This section will first examine the girls' internalized beliefs about gender alone, then how these internalized beliefs might relate to the gender representation in the media with which these children are engaging. To do this, the three previous categories (gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors) have been combined into one overall variable of gender representation. Regarding the child interview individually, 11 out of the 13 questions were answered with the stereotypical gender more often than the counter stereotypical gender. The question most often answered with the stereotypical gender was "which person should sing and dance?" with seven of the eight children identifying the drawing of the girl. The second most often stereotypically answered question was a tie between "which person is pretty?" (six out of eight children answered girl), "which person should play sports?" (six out of eight children answered boy), and "which person should wear pink?" (six out of eight children answered girl). One of the 13 questions was answered with the counter stereotypical gender more often than the stereotypical gender. This question was "which person is smart?" with four of the eight children identifying the girl, three identifying the boy, and one child answering "both." One question had equal answers of stereotypical and counter stereotypical answers, which was "which person should build things?" Figure 7 shows the full distribution of answers for the child interview section.

Figure 8 provides the composite score for all three categories of gender representation in the media viewed by all eight children in relationship to the level of stereotypical internalized beliefs about gender held by the children, both shown in their decimal score on a scale from 0 to 1. Consistent with the previous sections' observations, the graph shows a general trend suggesting that higher levels of stereotypical gender representation in the media corresponded

with higher levels of traditional internalized beliefs about gender, however, outliers remain present. The two lowest child interview scores were on opposing ends of the spectrum for gender representation in the media. The child with an internalized beliefs about gender score of 3/13 (0.23), suggesting a low level of stereotypical internalized beliefs, scored 24/41 (0.59) for gender representation in the media they view at home, also suggesting a low level of stereotypical gender representation. The child with the second lowest score for internalized beliefs about gender, however, scored 4/13 (0.31), on the interview, and scored 42/48 (0.88) for gender representation in the media, which was the highest score of all the children and suggests a high level of stereotypical representations of gender.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore three categories of gender representation in children's media (gender distribution, gender presentation, and gender-stereotyped behaviors) and assess patterns with preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender. A caregiver questionnaire was used to determine the level of stereotypical gender representation in the media viewed by the children participating. A child interview was used to determine the level of stereotypical internalized beliefs held by the child. Both the questionnaire and interview were scored using a point system such that the higher the points/score, the greater level of stereotypical representation/internalized beliefs. Two of the three caregiver questionnaire categories (gender distribution and gender presentation) had fixed score totals, while the third category (gender-stereotyped behaviors) and the child questionnaire had flexible score totals in that certain answers were result in the question being negated from the total score. Since some score totals were flexible, the scores were interpreted at both their raw numbers and their converted to decimal scores and placed on a scale from 0 to 1 in order to be comparable. A score of 0 would indicate completely counter stereotypical gender representation in children's media, while a score of 1 would indicate completely stereotypical gender representation in children's media. The total scores for gender representation in the media from the caregiver questionnaire ranged from 22/38 (0.58) to 42/48 (0.88) while the total scores for internalized beliefs about gender from the child interview ranged from 3/13 (0.23) to 12/13 (0.92).

Due to the small sample size of this study, correlation statistics were unable to be generated, however, observations and patterns were noticed and implications for future research were determined. Although outliers presented themselves throughout the data, the graphs

generated suggested a general direction where higher levels of stereotypical gender representation corresponded with higher levels of traditional internalized beliefs about gender. Additionally, six of the eight girls scored 0.75 or above on the child interview, indicating very high levels of stereotypical internalized beliefs.

Gender Representation in Children's Media

In addition to examining gender representation in children's media and preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender, this study also included a media questionnaire to determine what media devices the children have access to and how often they use them. Previous research had found that 53% of children from preschool to third grade engage in two to three hours of media usage everyday in the United States (Dore et al., 2020). The current study's participants averaged 20 to 120 minutes of screentime daily, placing them below a majority of United States' children.

Gender Distribution in Children's Media

Prior research had found a disproportionate representation of male characters to female characters in both movies and television shows. Male characters tend to be represented far more often both in general character count and in lead character count (Aley & Hahn, 2020; Smith et al., 2008). While sometimes the ratio of male-to-female characters was equal, when equal distribution was not seen, the female character count rarely surpassed the male character count (Martin, 2017; Walsh & Leaper, 2020). The current study aligned with the research regarding distribution, in that five of eight caregivers generally agreed that male characters outnumber females; however, three caregivers identified themselves as somewhat disagreeing with the statement, suggesting a more equitable distribution of characters. This finding could corroborate

previous research's conclusions that children's media is moving towards equal distribution of male and female characters (Gálvez et al., 2019). Additionally, two of the eight caregivers identified they strongly agreed that female characters are in position of higher power than the male characters. While this finding could also corroborate conclusions of progress in equitable gender distribution, it is also possible that this data reflects the media being viewed specifically by the children in this study, rather than the progress of children's media in general.

Gender Presentation in Children's Media

In terms of gender presentation and clothing, stereotypically feminine colors are pink and purple, while stereotypically masculine colors are blue, brown, gray, black, and the combination of black and red together (Skočajić et al., 2020; Walsh & Leaper, 2020). Prior research has been conducted regarding gender presentation in children's media and concluded that female characters wear feminine stereotyped colors and styles significantly more than their male counterparts (Walsh & Leaper, 2020). At the same time, there was no significant difference in the presence of masculine stereotyped colors and styles (Walsh & Leaper, 2020). This previous research suggests that masculine gender presentation is the norm, while feminine gender presentation is the exception. The findings of the current study aligned with prior research regarding gender stereotypical colors. Both males wearing stereotypically male colors and females wearing stereotypically female colors were identified as occurring often by seven out of the eight caregivers. When looking at the counter stereotypical colors, however, there was less agreement. Female characters were observed wearing stereotypically male colors occasionally by five of the eight caregivers and often by one. Male characters, however, were observed wearing stereotypically female colors rarely by six of the eight characters and occasionally by two. This aligns with prior research's conclusions that masculine gender presentation and colors are the

norm, while female gender presentation and colors remain the exception. It is important to note, however, that the current study is an analysis of the media specifically viewed by the children in this study, rather than the progress of children's media in general. As such, the conclusions made by this study cannot accurately be applied to all children's media.

Gender-Stereotyped Behavior in Children's Media

Previous research had identified stereotypically male characteristics as anger, assertiveness, leadership, and aggression while stereotypically female characteristics are emotional, affectionate, helpless, and nurturing (Martin, 2017). Female characters are more often depicted at home and interacting with beauty, household, or cleaning products, while male characters are typically depicted in a work setting interacting with technology, productive items, and cars (Crabb & Marciano, 2011; Matthes et al., 2016). These findings suggest a consistent pattern of female characters gravitating towards domestic behaviors and props while male characters gravitate towards productive settings and props. The findings of the current study suggest alignment with prior research; however, since caregivers had the opportunity to identify behaviors as not occurring or occurring between both genders equally, a definitive conclusion cannot be drawn. In the current study, the action most identified as being performed by both genders equally was sports and/or physical activity. The actions most identified as being performed by the stereotypical gender were brushing their hair, doing their makeup, and/or selecting their outfit and playing with dolls (both female). These two actions align with the previous research's conclusions that female characters are more often seen participating in domestic behaviors. Once again, it is important to note that the findings of the current study are applicable to the media viewed specifically by the children in this study but are not indicative of patterns in children's media in general.

Gender Representation in Children's Media and Girls' Internalized Beliefs About Gender

Regarding opinions on toys, previous research had concluded that by age three, children tend to categorize toys based on their stereotypical gendered association, such as trucks for boys and dolls for girls (Freeman, 2007; Skočajić et al., 2019). The current study stood in agreement, with five of the eight children identifying that the female person should play with dolls. Further, prior research had found that young girls gravitate towards dresses, skirts, and pink attire (Halim et al., 2014). Again, the current study aligned with prior research in that six of the eight children identified that the female person should wear pink. While the small sample size of the current study prevented correlation calculations from being performed, there could be a relationship between the gender representation displayed in the children's media viewed by these participants and their internalized beliefs about gender. For example, the second most common action identified as being performed by the stereotypical gender in the media (females playing with dolls) was the third most stereotypically answered question in the child interview. Additionally, females wearing pink was one of the second most stereotypically answered questions in the child interview and was identified as occurring often in the media by seven of the eight caregivers. This question was further emphasized when six out of eight caregivers identified male characters as rarely wearing pink or purple.

While these internalized beliefs about gender in the children could be related to the media they are viewing, it is important to note that all eight children participating in this study had parents with gender neutral and/or gender inclusive philosophies on parenting. When asked in the demographic questionnaire to describe their philosophy of parenting related to gender, all eight caregivers described an approach to parenting that includes toys in the household stereotypical of both genders, as well as emphasizing to their children that they can do, be, and

wear anything they choose regardless of their gender. It is possible that this parenting style also influenced the children's internalized beliefs about gender, in addition to the media they are viewing.

Implications

This study was not able to determine correlations between the three categories of gender representation and preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender due to the small sample size; however, it did find that all eight children did have some level of stereotypical internalized beliefs. Additionally, all eight caregivers identified some level of stereotypical gender representation in the media with which their children interact. While this level varied, the scores for gender representation in the media was above 0.5 for all eight children, which suggests that the media is still heavily stereotypical in its representation of gender. In other words, no media viewed by the children and no child's internalized beliefs were completely void of stereotypical representations and ideas. Not only that, but none of the eight caregivers identified counter stereotypical behaviors in the media their children interact with, which suggests a need for more counter stereotypical representations of gender in children's media. To counteract this bias, children's media could show more girls working as firefighters, playing sports, and fixing cars. More boys could be styling their hair, baking, and playing with dolls. Nickelodeon's Dora the Explorer does not have to be the only character wearing pink, her peers can don the stereotypically feminine color too. Disney's next princess could be a construction worker who loves basketball. The stereotypical representations of gender do not need to disappear from children's media, but they should be matched equally by counter-stereotypical representations of gender in all categories of distribution, presentation, and behaviors.

While the current study focuses on gender representation in children's media, they are not the only responsible party in contributing to children's internalized beliefs about gender. Although two of the girl's child interview scores reflected largely counter stereotypical levels of internalized beliefs about gender (0.23 and 0.31), the other six girls scored 0.75 or above on the child interview, indicating very high levels of stereotypical internalized beliefs. The media represents one entity that can shape them, but close family and friends also aid in a person's development of internalized beliefs (Coyne et al., 2014). As such, children's caregivers hold some of the responsibility for reducing the high levels of stereotypical internalized beliefs about gender seen in this study. Caregivers can adopt gender-inclusive language, present their children with gender-inclusive wardrobes not limited by stereotypical colors or fashions, and provide a variety of toys ranging from dolls to racecars, regardless of their child's gender. Even though this study indicated that children's media displays largely stereotypical representations of gender, parents can also screen the media their child is engaging with and emphasize media that depicts more counter-stereotypical representations.

Limitations

The current study aimed to recruit a minimum of 30 participants but was only able to recruit eight. As such, the sample size was too small to do a correlation calculation. Recruitment proved to be a barrier as no preschools selected in the simple random sampling process responded to the researcher's initial inquiry. Because of this, the author had to resort to social media sampling which brought in a much smaller recruitment pool than anticipated. The sample was also all white, English-speaking female caregivers and only one child was non-white. The lack of diversity could have resulted in biased results. The ideal participant pool would have consisted of more diverse demographics. Similarly, the socio-economic status was not diverse, as

all but one household had income exceeding $100,000. The higher socio-economic status could have also led to biased results. It is possible that the household income could have been related to the number of media devices available in the home and accessible to the child. The caregivers who participated were also all female, which could have led to bias in how the questionnaires were answered. As such, the results are limited in their ability to generalize to the larger population, and more research needs to be done with larger and more diverse samples.

Within the measurements themselves, the interview being virtual rather than in person was a barrier. Since most of the children opted to point to the images rather than provide verbal answers, the researcher had to rely on the child's caregiver to relay the information. An in-person interview would have provided a more direct line of communication. All eight children also participated in the interview with their female caregiver next to them, which could have influenced how they chose to answer. If done in person, the children could have answered the questionnaires without caregiver assistance, which could have resulted in different answers. Additionally, some of the children struggled to stay focused, possibly due to the virtual aspect of the interview. It is possible that the researcher could have engaged the children more easily if the interviews occurred in person. Regarding the caregiver questionnaire, the third category having a flexible point total proved challenging in analyzing and comparing the results. Although conversions to decimal points on a scall from 0 to 1 made the data easier to compare, a fixed total would have allowed the data to be more easily interpreted.

While the current study focused on the relationship between children's media and internalized beliefs about gender, it also did not rule out additional influences that may be related to internalized beliefs about gender. It is possible that other factors played an equal or even

greater role in a child's perceptions of gender, such as parenting style, interaction with peers, and the toys available in the child's home.

Future Directions and Conclusion

Because the small sample size precluded a correlational analysis, future research could conduct a similar study utilizing a larger sample size to allow for correlation calculations. Further, an in-person interview with the children could be implemented in order to reduce bias and caregiver influence while also increasing child engagement. Future research may also examine other factors related to internalized beliefs about gender beyond children's media, such as parenting style, interaction with peers, and the toys available in the child's home. Additional studies may be needed to analyze a more direct relationship between children's media and internalized beliefs about gender. Because the media examined in this study was limited to what the child was viewing in their home, an additional study in which the researcher preselects a variety of children's media could be used to examine how various representations of gender are related to children's internalized beliefs.

Previous research related to gender representations in children's media suggests a disproportionate distribution that favors male characters over females, an emphasis on traditional gender presentation for both male and female characters, and a tendency for characters to engage in behaviors stereotypical of their gender (Gálvez et al., 2019; Walsh & Leaper, 2020). Internalized beliefs about gender develop at a very young age and continue to get reinforced and shaped through environmental influences, a large one being the media (Freeman, 2007; Skočajić et al., 2019). Prior research regarding the relationship between gender representation in children's media and preschool-aged girls' internalized beliefs about gender was largely limited to the media produced by Disney. The current study aimed to fill this gap in research by looking

at gender representation in the media in general, beyond just Disney. The small sample size prevented correlation calculations; however, the current study provided compelling trends that suggest the need for more research. Additionally, regarding the gender representation in the children's media viewed by this study's participants, all eight children scored over 50%, suggesting high levels of stereotypical gender representation. This data, in combination with no observations of counter-stereotypical gendered behavior, suggests a need for more counter-stereotypical representation in children's media. Gender distribution, presentation, and behaviors should be equitable across all genders of characters in the media in order for all children to see themselves represented and know their options are not limited by their gender.

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TABLES

Table 1. Raw and converted scores for individual sections and combined.

	Child 1	**Child 2**	**Child 3**	**Child 4**	**Child 5**	**Child 6**	**Child 7**	**Child 8**
Distribution raw score	8/12	3/12	10/12	7/12	10/12	5/12	3/12	8/12
Distribution percentage	0.67	0.25	0.83	0.58	0.83	0.42	0.25	0.67
Presentation raw score	17/24	16/24	20/24	18/24	20/24	15/24	16/24	16/24
Presentation percentage	0.71	0.67	0.83	0.75	0.83	0.63	0.67	0.67
Behavior raw score	5/5	6/6	11/11	8/8	12/12	2/2	5/5	2/2
Behavior percentage	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total raw score	30/41	25/42	41/47	33/44	42/48	22/38	24/41	26/38
Total percentage	0.73	0.6	0.87	0.75	0.88	0.58	0.59	0.68
Interview raw score	4/5	12/13	10/13	11/13	4/13	9/12	3/13	10/13
Interview percentage	0.8	0.92	0.77	0.85	0.31	0.75	0.23	0.77

FIGURES

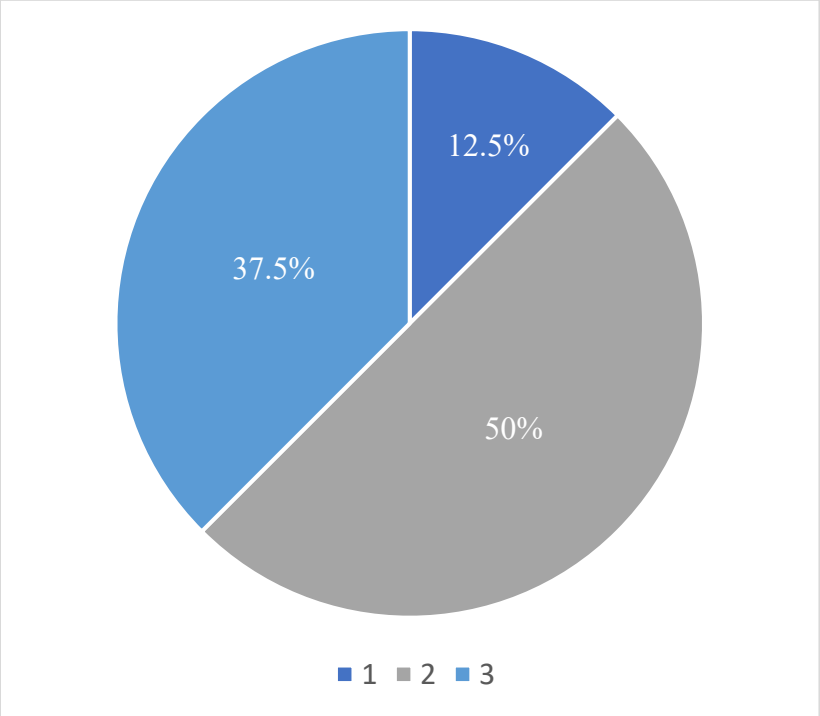


Figure 1. Media devices child has access to.

Note: The pie chart represents the distribution of media devices the child has access to (1 = one device, 2 = two devices, and 3 = three devices).

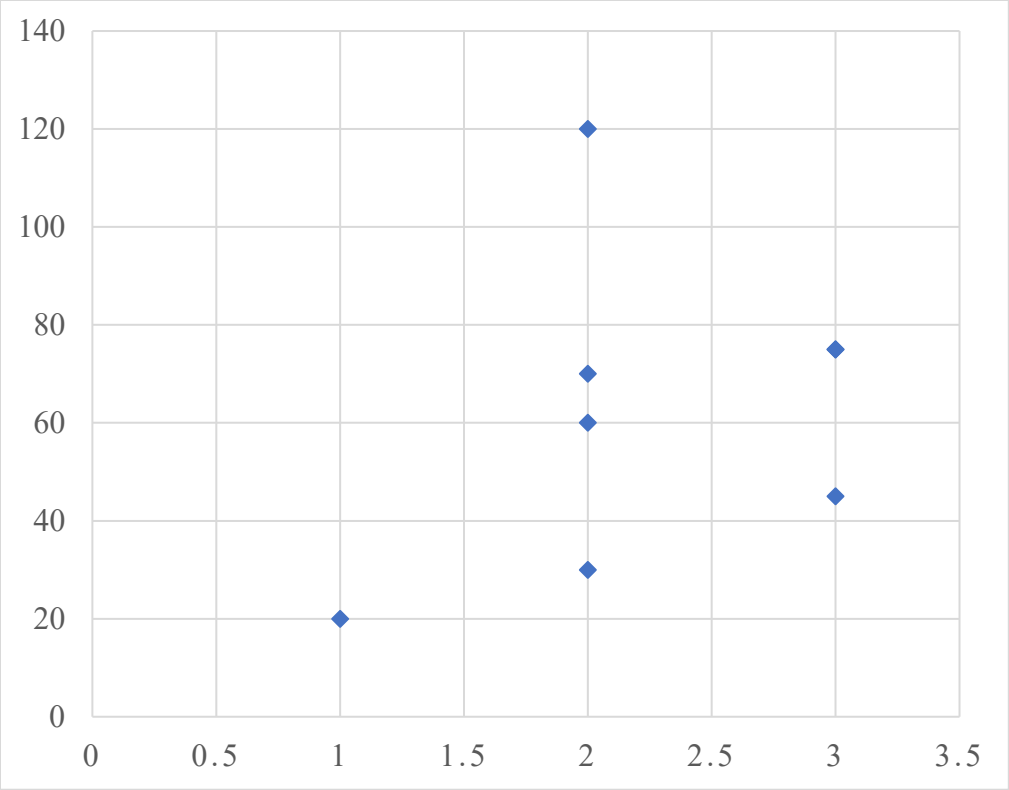


Figure 2. Number of media devices child has access to vs. average daily screen time in minutes.

Note. The graph displays the number of media devices accessible by child (x-axis) compared to the child's average daily screen time in minutes (y-axis).

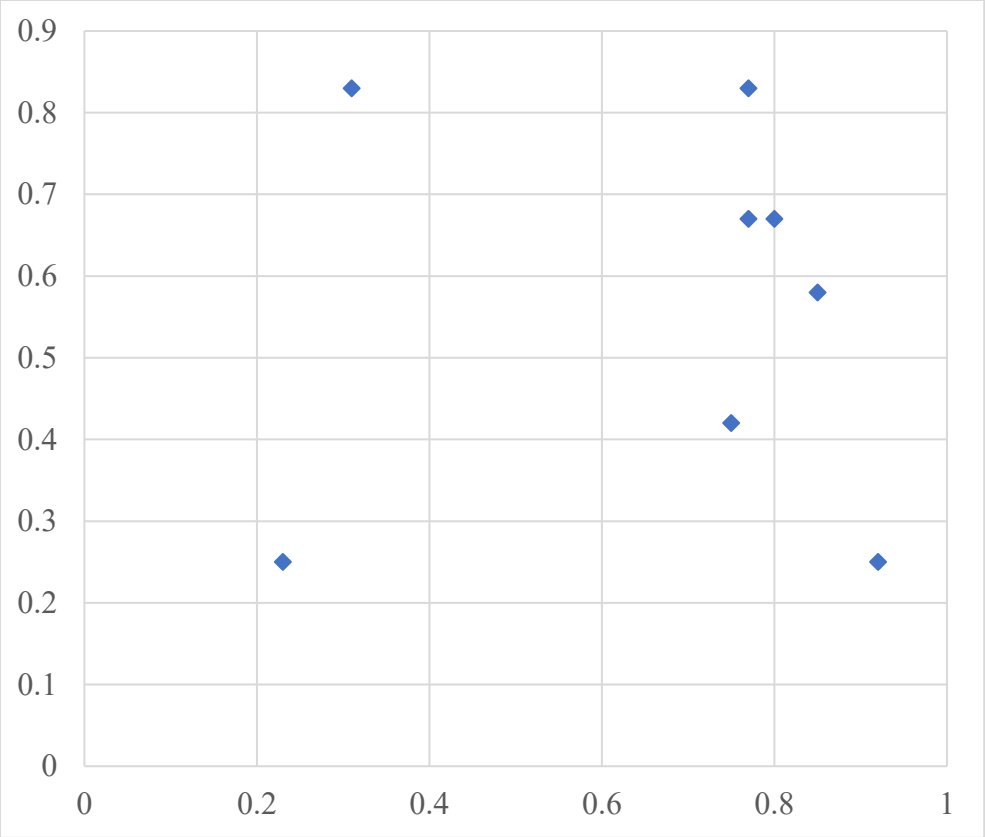


Figure 3. Internalized beliefs about gender vs. gender distribution.

Note: The graph displays the child interview scores (x-axis) to the gender distribution in the media scores (y-axis), both converted to the decimal scores on a scale from 0 to 1.

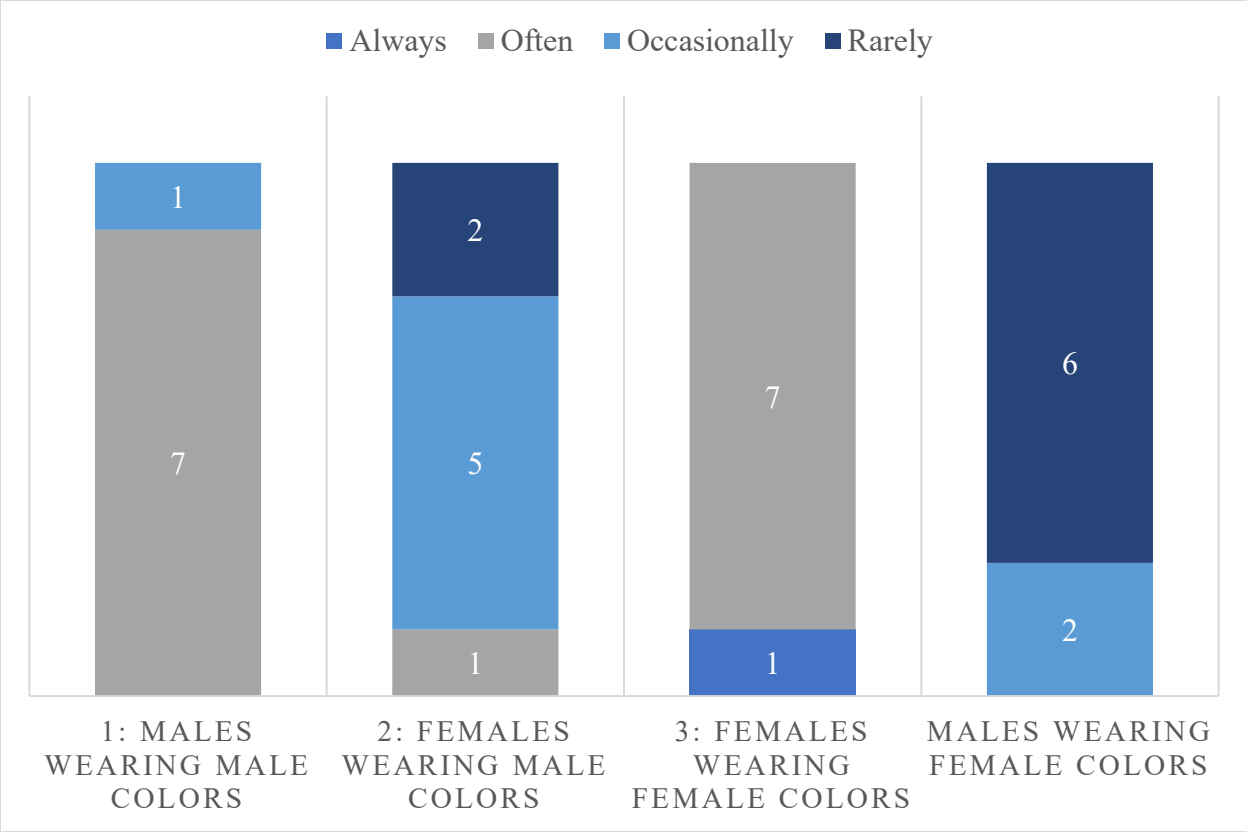


Figure 4. Gender presentation by stereotypical color.

Note: The column chart displays how questions 1-4 of the caregiver questionnaire for gender presentation were answered.

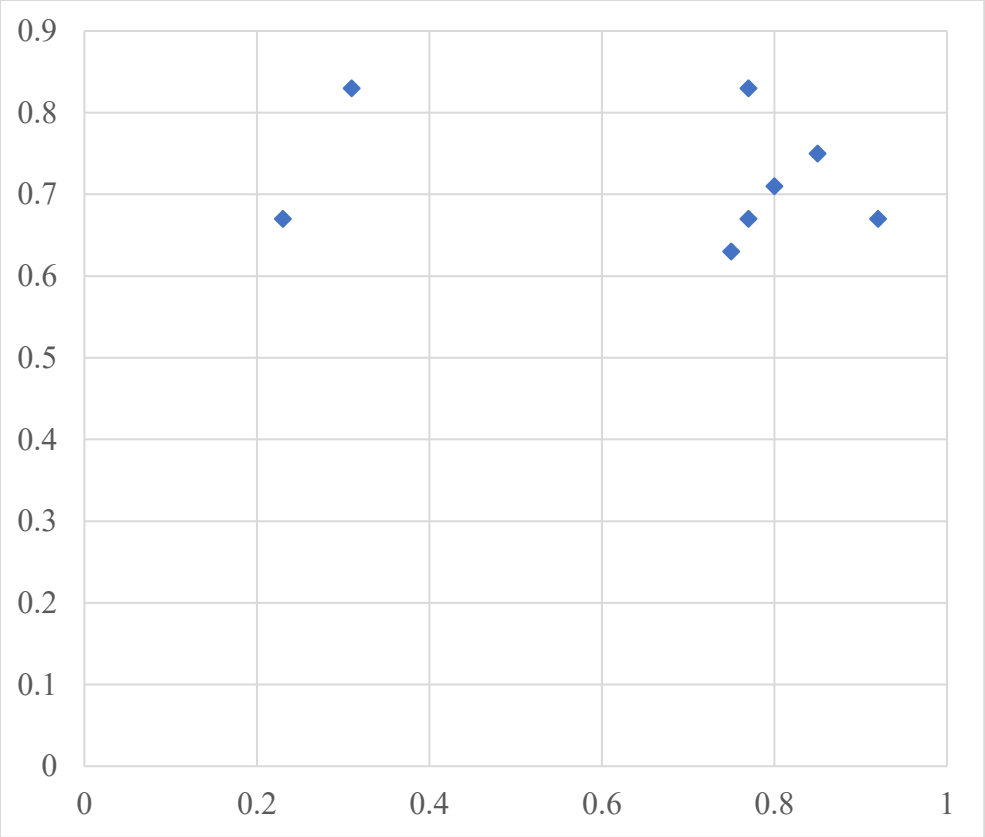


Figure 5. Internalized beliefs about gender vs. gender presentation.

Note: The graph displays the child interview scores (x-axis) to the gender presentation in the media scores (y-axis), both converted to the decimal scores on a scale from 0 to 1.

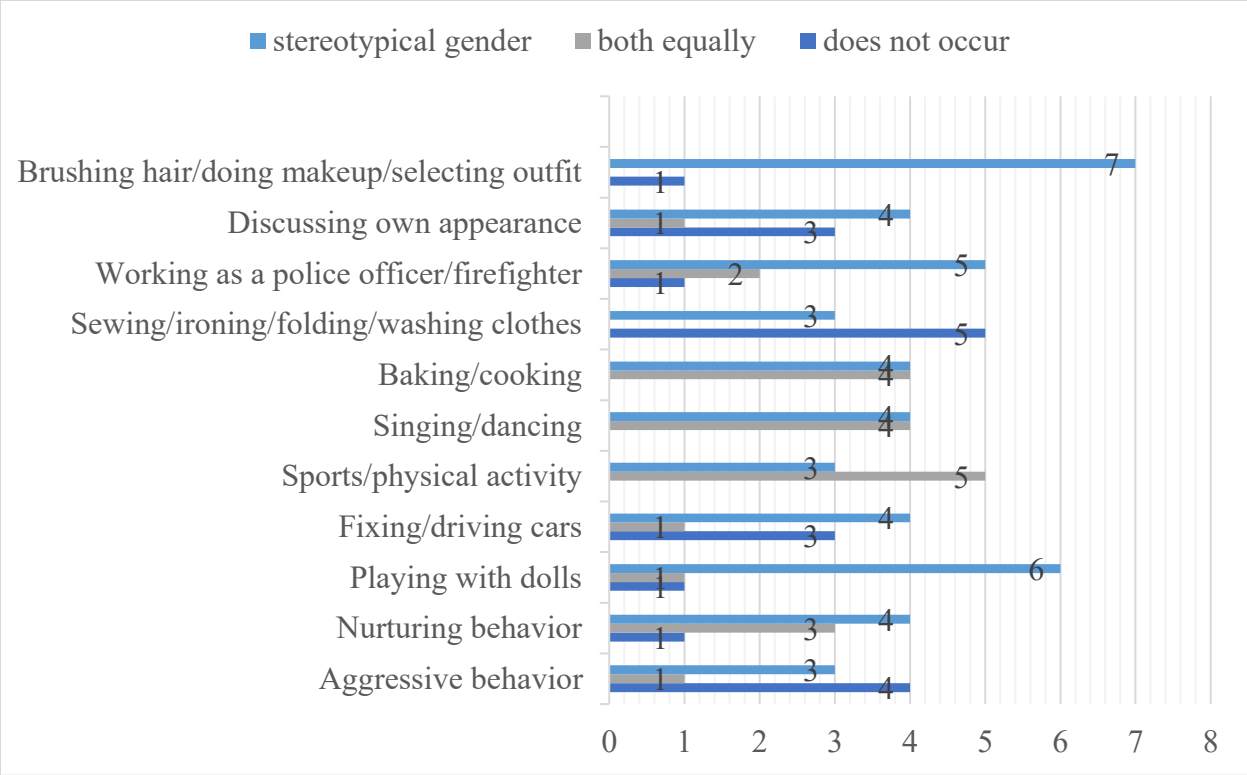


Figure 6. Gender-stereotyped behaviors: bar graph distribution.

Note: The bar chart displays how each question of the caregiver questionnaire for gender-stereotyped behavior was answered.

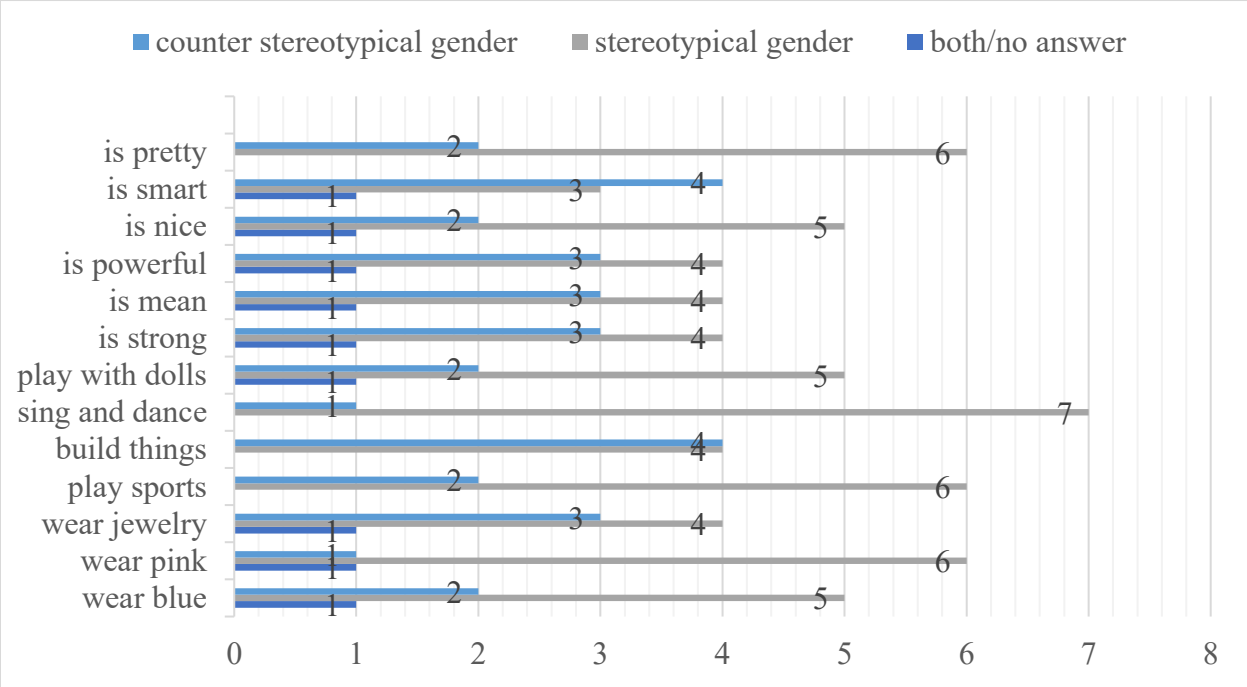


Figure 7. Child interview: bar graph distribution.

Note: The bar chart displays how each question of the child interview was answered.

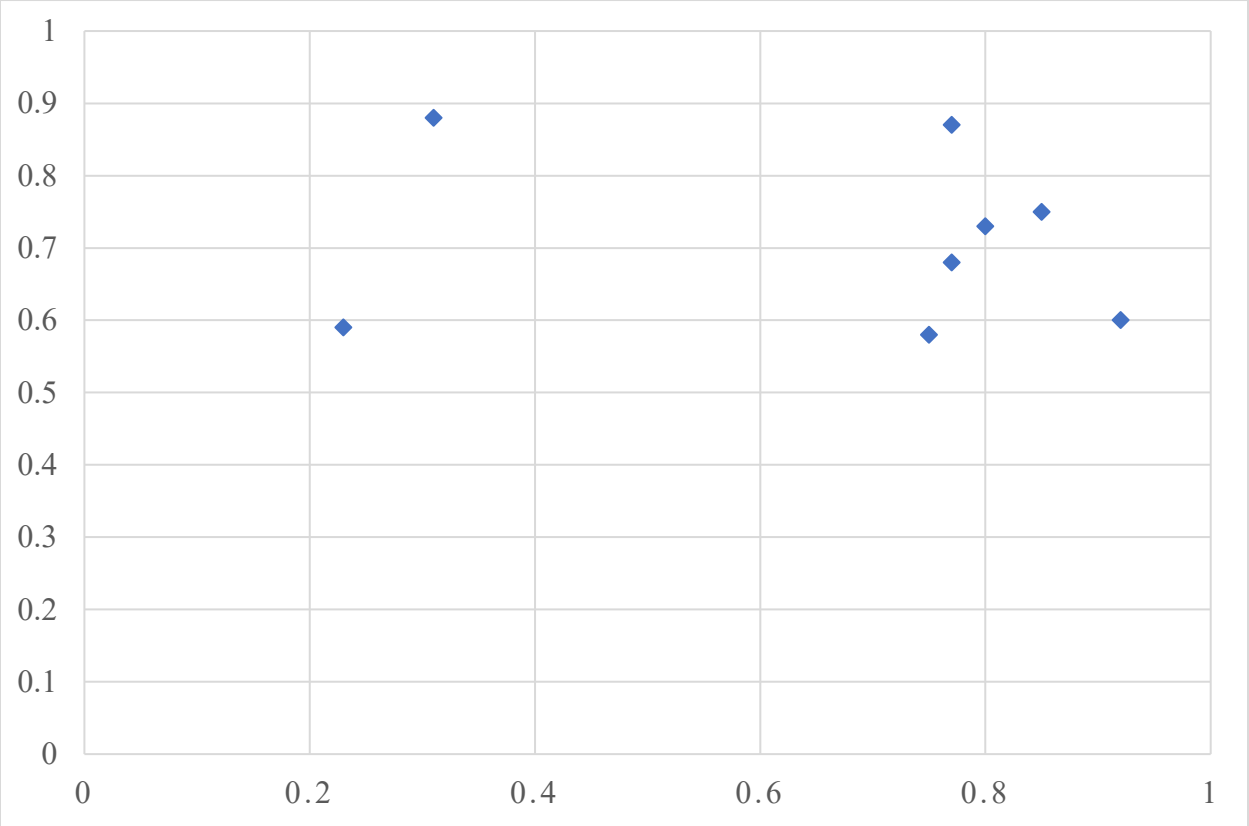


Figure 8. Internalized beliefs about gender vs. gender representation in children's media.

Note: The graph displays the total gender representation in the media score (x-axis) compared to the child interview score (y-axis), both converted to the decimal scores on a scale from 0 to 1.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval

To:
Elizabeth King
Childhood Ed & Fam Studies

RE: Notice of IRB Approval
Submission Type: Initial
Study #: IRB-FY2023-543
Study Title: Gender Representation in Children's Media and Preschool-Aged Girls' Internalized Beliefs About Gender
Decision: Approved

Approval Date: June 28, 2023

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:
PI: Elizabeth King
Co-PI:
Primary Contact: Jessica Atkins
Other Investigators:

Appendix B: Caregiver Media Survey

Tell us about the media access and usage in your home.

1. Which of the following media devices are available in your home (select all that apply)?

___ Television

With or without internet access? _____

___ DVD player

___ Tablet

With or without internet access? _____

___ Computer

___ None

2. Which of the following media devices do *your children have access to* (select all that apply)?

___ Television

With or without internet access? _____

___ DVD player

___ Tablet

With or without internet access? _____

___ Computer

___ None

3. Please indicate which rooms the following media devices are available in (leave blank if N/A):

	Television	DVD Player	Tablet	Computer
Child's Bedroom				
Caregiver's Bedroom				
Living/Family Room				
Kitchen				

Dining Room				
Playroom				
Other				

If Other, please indicate where:

4. Please indicate *your* average daily time spent with the following media:

Television _____

Movies_____

5. Please indicate your *child's* average daily time spent with the following media:

Television_____

Movies_____

Appendix C: Caregiver Questionnaire: Gender Distribution

Section 1: Gender Distribution

Think about the media (television and movies) your child watches. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

1. There are more male characters than female characters.
    a. Strongly agree.
    b. Somewhat agree.
    c. Somewhat disagree.
    d. Strongly disagree.

2. The female characters speak more than the male characters.
    a. Strongly agree.
    b. Somewhat agree.
    c. Somewhat disagree.
    d. Strongly disagree.

3. Most of the lead characters are male.
    a. Strongly agree.
    b. Somewhat agree.
    c. Somewhat disagree.
    d. Strongly disagree.

4. The female characters are in positions of higher power than the male characters.
    a. Strongly agree.
    b. Somewhat agree.
    c. Somewhat disagree.
    d. Strongly disagree.

Appendix D: Caregiver Questionnaire: Gender Presentation

Section 2: Gender Presentation

Think about the media (television and movies) your child watches. Please indicate the frequency in which the characters can be seen wearing the following colors and accessories.

1. Male characters wearing blue, black, or red.
    a. Always
    b. Often
    c. Occasionally
    d. Rarely

2. Female characters wearing blue, black, or red.
    a. Always
    b. Often
    c. Occasionally
    d. Rarely

3. Male characters wearing pink or purple.
    a. Always
    b. Often
    c. Occasionally
    d. Rarely

4. Female characters wearing pink or purple.
    a. Always
    b. Often
    c. Occasionally
    d. Rarely

5. Male characters wearing jewelry (e.g., necklaces, piercings, bracelets).
    a. Always
    b. Often
    c. Occasionally
    d. Rarely

6. Female characters wearing jewelry (e.g., necklaces, piercings, bracelets).

a. Always
b. Often
c. Occasionally
d. Rarely

7. Male characters wearing athletic clothing (e.g., baseball caps, sports jerseys, sneakers).
    a. Always
    b. Often
    c. Occasionally
    d. Rarely

8. Female characters wearing athletic clothing (e.g., baseball caps, sports jerseys, sneakers).
    a. Always
    b. Often
    c. Occasionally
    d. Rarely

Appendix E: Caregiver Questionnaire: Gender Stereotyped Behavior

Section 3: Gender Stereotyped Behavior

Think about the media (television and movies) your child watches. Please indicate whether male or female characters participate in the following activities more often than their counterpart.

1. Aggressive behavior. Aggression is defined as "direct or indirect acts that potentially harmed another person" (Walsh & Leaper, 2020).
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

2. Nurturing behavior, such as taking care of young children.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

3. Playing with dolls.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

4. Fixing and/or driving cars
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

5. Sports and/or physical activity.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

6. Creating and/or building.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

7. Singing and/or dancing.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

8. Baking and/or cooking.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

9. Sewing, ironing, folding, and/or washing clothes.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

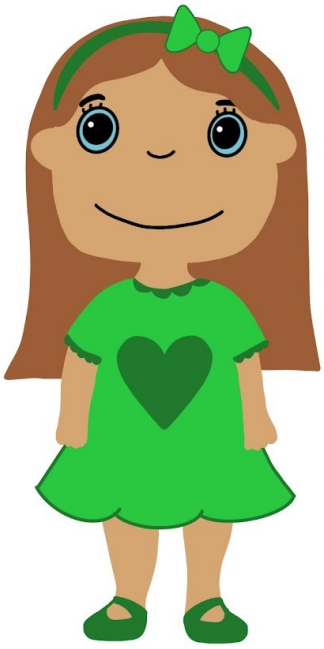
10. Working as a police officer or firefighter.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

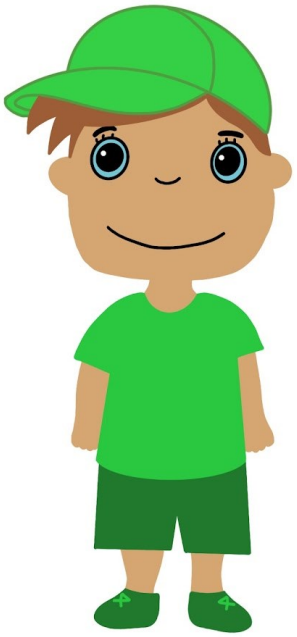
11. Discussing their own appearance, either physical appearance or clothing.
    a. Male characters.
    b. Female characters.
    c. Both equally.
    d. Activity does not occur.

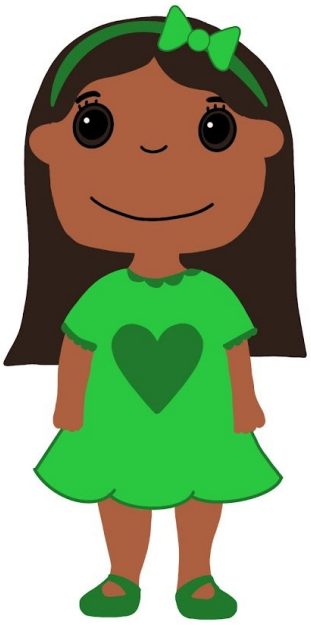
12. Brushing their hair, doing their makeup, or selecting their outfit.

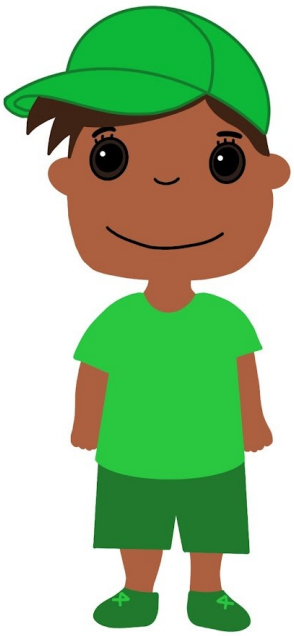
a. Male characters.
b. Female characters.
c. Both equally.
d. Activity does not occur.

Appendix F: Images Used in Child Interview









Appendix G: Child Interview

1. Which person should wear blue?
2. Which person should wear pink?
3. Which person should wear jewelry (can clarify necklaces, earrings, bracelets if child doesn't know the word)?
4. Which person should play sports?
5. Which person should build things?
6. Which person should sing and dance?
7. Which person should play with dolls?
8. Which person is strong?
9. Which person is mean?
10. Which person is powerful?
11. Which person is nice?
12. Which person is smart?
13. Which person is pretty?