

The pervasiveness of sexism in the cartoon show, Paw Patrol, and its impact on the
formation of gender expectations in children

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Introduction

Many children's cartoons reinforce gender stereotypes regarding occupations and behaviour. This research paper will use the television cartoon, Paw Patrol, as an example of sexism in children's programming. Paw Patrol is a Nickelodeon network cartoon that centres on Ryder, a young, white male who enjoys the show's highest status for competence, control, organization and knowledge, and his team of puppies who continuously come to the aid of the residents in the fictional Canadian town, Adventure Bay. Paw Patrol has a sexism problem because of its portrayal, and minimal presence of female characters. There are only two female dogs on the team, and one only makes rare appearances. They and the other female characters are never featured as important, and often exhibit stereotypical feminine characteristics. For a young population with minimal real-world experiences, learning what is normal through televised gender roles like Paw Patrol becomes skewed because they do not prepare children for the realities of the adult world.

Paw Patrol reinforces patriarchal ideals through the dichotomy of men's jobs vs. women's jobs, and expected behaviour. Males are natural leaders who make the decisions and solve problems, and females merely play a supporting role (O'Bryant & Corder-Boltz, p.1; Davidson et al, p.2). This research paper aims to reveal the different ways that Paw Patrol reinforces gender stereotypes while trying to appear progressive. With the help of philosophers like Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Catherine MacKinnon, Jean Beaudrillard, and other scholarly reports, I aim to investigate feminism, sexism and children's

entertainment in general, including issues with merchandising, to explore the impact of sexism in cartoons. Elements of Paw Patrol will be incorporated into the conversation to highlight theories and ideas that demonstrate the show's sexist leanings, with comparisons to other cartoons. There will also be an exploration on how children learn socialization through the Social Cognitive Theory, concluding with reactions from parents, and a reminder that consumers have the power to influence what children are exposed to.

Paw Patrol reminds us that progress is slow

Historically, gender equality in children's television programming has not been the norm (Nathanson et al, p.1; Davidson et al, p.2), however, it is surprising to see a current show reinforce pervasive ideas of gender stereotypes.

Paw Patrol centres on Ryder; a Caucasian boy who fits the role of patriarch. He is the show's sole order-giver, and is relied on to solve all problems, which are the stereotypical characteristics of male leads (Barner, p.5; Davis, p.14). Ryder is reflective of charismatic authority as revealed by Max Weber; "Patriarchal power... is rooted in the supply of the normal, constantly recurring needs of everyday life ... The patriarch is the 'natural leader' in everyday life," (Kivisto, p.91).

Ryder is in charge of a team of anthropomorphized rescue pups, for whom he created custom vehicles, gadget-loaded backpacks, and assigned specific roles. The team embarks on missions to save wildlife, clean up garbage, fix damaged property, and perform good deeds (Kimmel, 2016). The team of pups are Chase, a German shepherd alpha male dog who portrays a police dog; Marshall, a clumsy firefighter

Dalmatian who drives a fire truck; Rubble, a stocky, determined bulldog who operates a construction truck; Rocky, a mixed breed pup who drives a recycling truck; Zuma, a Labrador pup who drives a hovercraft, and Skye, the token female team member, is a Cocker Spaniel adorned in pink and flies a helicopter, with a “lack of character depth (that) is highly problematic,” (Magary, 2016). Finally, Everest, a Husky pup who drives a snowmobile, is rarely featured on the show.

Skye and Everest are never given priority for rescue missions, and neither holds a major role in the show (Davis, p.11). As Conway (2015) mockingly decrees, it would be simply unfathomable to have a female police dog. Their roles are vague, and the vehicles they operate are basic, without the same level of gadgetry included on the male pup’s vehicles. Skye is a support for the ground crew, making her not truly part of the team. The show establishes that female characters aren’t prioritized, aren’t relied on for serious missions, and are accessories to the team. Skye and Everest exhibit typical female cartoon representation, where they make fewer appearances, have fewer lines, and are less active (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.3). Their roles have no major significance to the team, which is reflective of Charlotte Perkins Gilman; “Their labor (sic) is neither given nor taken as a factor in economic exchange,” (Kivisto, p.152), which is reminiscent of an era of normalized gender imbalances, but which are also purported in modern-day cartoon programming.

As Catherine Mackinnon articulated, “The whole point of women’s social relegation to inferiority as a gender is that for the most part these things aren’t done to men,” (Mackinnon, 341). Paw Patrol, like many cartoons, show that male

characters do more of everything simply because there are more of them. Males are technically competent, confident, responsible and strong, and females are cast in caregiving or unspecific roles, are weaker, and sensitive, which is stereotypical and not reflective of the real world (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997, p.14; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.5, p.9, p.18-19; Davis, p.5).

Children learn stereotypes from an early age, and the acceptance of occupational gender stereotypes is firmly established by the time they enter kindergarten, and can express what they'd like to be when they grow up (O'Bryant & Corder-Bolz, p.2). Learning distinctions in jobs and identity according to gender classification at an early age sets an unrealistic and unfair precedent, and cartoon programming should be more attuned to the limitless capabilities of each gender.

Initially, Paw Patrol seems to be a forward-thinking cartoon based on the other female characters. The mayor of Adventure Bay is Mayor Goodway; a dark-skinned woman who gives the show a progressive air, however, she is undermined by being irrational and unable to solve problems, and has a pet chicken named Chickaletta she named Deputy Mayor (Conway, 2015). Mayor Goodway demonstrates that women are poor, unreliable leaders. Another female character is Katie, a blonde, pink-clad girl with no discernable role in the show. She is only ever seen working in a pet salon, where she spends her time shampooing her pet cat, or attempting to enter the Paw Patrol into fashion competitions. Katie fulfills the stereotypical female role of only appearing indoors (Smith, p.4-5) and being primarily concerned with appearances (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997 p.1; Davis, p.5). Paw Patrol's Wikia page describes Katie as kind, loving and caring, maintaining the

stereotype that females are natural caregivers (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997, p.2; Paw Patrol Wikia, 2016; Smith, p.4-5). Katie also honours the female niche of occupying a lower-status occupation, and of being less knowledgeable than Ryder (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.1; Barner, p.12). Another minor female character is Farmer Yumi, who is Asian in appearance, operates a farm and is a martial arts instructor. She is Paw Patrol's best effort at a competent, well-rounded woman, but is only a minor character, which prevents her from having an impact.

Gender as a social construct

In a world where women still have to fight for equality, sexism in cartoons should be the exception rather than the norm. Gender is not a set of traits, but the product of social doings (Kivisto, p.329). It is disappointing that the creators of Paw Patrol didn't consider a female police pup, or assign a female a recognizable occupation. Gender as an issue of equality then makes women struggle to be accepted in the same positions typically held by men, and forces them to adapt masculinity as the norm in order to be taken seriously, "Who have to show in effect that they are men in every relevant respect," (Kivisto, p. 339).

Maleness has become the standard for occupations such as police, fire fighter, and construction workers, even jobs in garbage or recycling collection (Smith, p.5). The results of pushing gender stereotypes is clear because children have been reported as perceiving cartoon characters in these stereotypical ways, where boys are rough and active, often outdoors, and girls are responsible, polite, concerned with appearances, and spend most of their time indoors (Thompson & Zerbinos, p.1,

p.14, 1997; Thompson & Zerbinos, p.3, 1995; Smith, p.4). Katie, whose biggest concern is making cats and dogs look nice, reinforces this stereotype. We see another stereotype with Skye, who is frequently shown playing a game called Pup Pup Boogie; a dancing simulator that requires participants to match dance moves on a screen. This reinforces the female stereotype of following rules and behaving (Smith, p.8), and demonstrating a preference for play complexity (Cherney & London, p.6-7). A good contrast to Skye is Marshall, the firefighting pup, who is clumsy and often disrupts order on the show, fitting with the male stereotype that boys get in to trouble, but girls do not (Smith, p.5, p.8), and that girls experience less pressure to perform important duties (Cherney & London, p.7). This demonstrates a narrow range of modeled behaviours and equal employment possibilities for children to observe.

When children learn about jobs through television, they learn which genders are to be associated with these jobs. Interestingly, however, in studies where gender roles were switched in cartoons, girls changed some of their preferences for having 'male' jobs, which demonstrates the power of media (O'Bryant & Corder-Bolz, p.9-11). As Smith says, television has the opportunity to let children imagine a variety of roles for their futures, but they are being limited in a wide range of experiences if television only exposes them to traditional gender roles (p.8-9).

Stereotyped gender roles in cartoons are as old as the first television sets

Gender stereotypes in cartoons were heavily investigated in the 1970s when televisions sets became a regular household item (Davis, 2003, p.5). Concern began

to grow over the influence fictional cartoon characters were having on young minds. Children start watching television as early as 18 months, and do not distinguish reality from fiction (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997, p.1-2; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.2; Davis, p.4). It was discovered that children who watched a lot of television associated more strongly with traditional gender role development, which led to the conclusion that more TV means more acceptance of stereotypes, and more sexism towards women, according to Social Cognitive Theory (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.2; Barner, p.5).

Social Cognitive Theory was coined by Alberta Bandura in the 1960s as a way of demonstrating that behavioural factors and environmental events influence each other reciprocally (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997, p.1-2). Meaning is assigned to symbols (i.e., fictional cartoon characters), which elicit a response that fulfils standards that we value. Vicarious thought is one part of our capacity of self-reflection, and is what makes it easy for young children to nurture misconceptions about people, places, or things through the distorted versions of reality presented on television. This theory explains that children learn how to behave according to their gender by copying role models in their environment (Smith, p.1-2; Barner, p.2).

Modern communications has taken advantage of this learning model to repeatedly reinforce stereotypical ideals and sell merchandise (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997, p.3), and to teach children what is normal vis-à-vis how gender fits in society, through validating behaviour exhibited by cartoon characters (Barner, p.2). This is what Émile Durkheim would have referred to as a social fact, which

pressures individuals to follow societal norms, much like the process of the indoctrination of gender stereotypes from a young age (Kivisto, p.45), through a slow process of reinforcement.

Television is a compelling socialization model for children because the characters are attractive and have influence over their environment and outcomes (Smith, p.1-2; Barner, p.2). TV creates heavy exposure to a version of the authentic state of human lives (Davis, p.4), which is a form of education that imposes a way of seeing, feeling and acting that could not have occurred spontaneously to a child (Kivisto, p.46). Children are exposed to a televised education on how boys are different than girls, and how they're expected to behave.

Cartoon programs are heavily invested in gender stereotypes. Females are misrepresented as helpless, ultra-feminine, and attractive if they're good, and ugly if they're bad. Female leads appear less often, have fewer responsibilities, and are quieter, as has been demonstrated by Skye, Katie, Everest, Mayor Goodway, and Farmer Yumi. Males are misrepresented as brave and adventurous, as leaders, rarely appear emotional or have a need for security, easily make decisions and solve problems, and easily distribute and manage tasks, as we have seen with Ryder (Davis, 2003, p.3-4; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.2-4). Much of the differences between male and female characters depend on how female characters look.

In an analysis of the cartoon show, Scooby Doo, Davidson et al (1979) found that one female lead character, Velma, contributed equally with the boys in planning and solving problems, but was physically unattractive. Daphne, the other female lead, was attractive, but passive. Both characters play heavily into female

stereotypes; that a girl has to choose to be pretty and popular, or ugly but smart (p.4). Traditionally portrayed females are weak, easily controlled by others, sensitive, and passive (Davis, p.5). Paw Patrol caters to this stereotype through Mayor Goodway, who is often portrayed as helpless. One episode that demonstrates this is when she is planning an Easter egg hunt, and calls on the Paw Patrol to 'rescue' her by painting the Easter eggs. Along the theme of damsel in distress is an episode where Chase worries about Skye, who has embarked on a solo mission. Chase is never shown expressing concern when any male pup works alone. Helpless women that need saving by dependable men is, of course, not reflective of the real world that children also observe.

While cartoons are recognized as a form of entertainment and not intended to reflect reality, researchers have revealed that children, especially pre-school aged children, have their socialization process heavily influenced by television and the media. Studies reveal that media influence on gender development is stronger than parental influences for modeling gender specific behaviour (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997, p. 2, p.4; Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.2, p.21; Cherney & London, p.2; Barner, p.5).

Children are in the process of forming their values, beliefs, and social habits, and are considered vulnerable to learning gender stereotypes, because they lack real-world experiences (Davis, 2003, p.3; Nathanson et al, 2002, p.922). Realistic, healthy portrayals of men and women will nurture a healthy gender development, and unrealistic expectations result in negative development by enforcing sexist gender expectations (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.2; Barner, p.12). Cartoons and

commercials, according to Davis (2003), "Provide excellent opportunities for (the) subtle indoctrination of children," (p.3), and as one CBS president said, "Children's television has always been male dominated," (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.3). Male-centred children's entertainment is purposefully crafted so that the consumer will not have to work hard to understand different situations (Davis, p.16).

That sexism and gender stereotypes persist today should come as no surprise since television networks and merchandising work hard to keep it that way though early proselytization, and children become invested in the characters they watch, and begin to 'know' them (Barner, p.12), and want to imitate them in play.

Interpreting fictional cartoons as reality is heavily implicated in the norms children absorb and will recapitulate in the future. As Herbert Marcuse said, "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment," (Kivisto, p.442). Marcuse is right in criticizing how much consumerism, including television consumption, fabricates our identities. One way fictional television is translated to real life is through imitation in play.

Children form their worldviews through play, and gender stereotypes are prevalent here as well. In play, children imitate same-gender characters more than opposite-sex characters, and children model their behaviour based on what they see on television (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.2). Boys naturally prefer traditionally male jobs more than girls prefer male jobs, as television teaches them (O'Bryant & Corder-Bolz, p.9; Cherney & London, p.1). One alarming trend is teaching children

that female characters don't need to be present in the shows themselves, and in merchandise, even if they are part of the team.

Downplaying female characters is a strategy used by corporations to generate more revenue. As noted by an industry insider in a Telegraph article by Rebecca Hawkes, "We know what sells... No boy wants to be given a product with a female character on it. Diminishing of girl characters is common in the industry... Power Rangers asked us to do it. Paw Patrol, too." Female characters are purposefully omitted from merchandise because companies fear products would be less appealing to boys.

Profit is, unsurprisingly, a key motivator, as stated by Hawkes's insider, "It's all about the carrot and stick of economics. If people buy products featuring ... female characters, it will happen," (Hawkes, 2016). This has outraged some parents. Posters, clothing, bedding, even Paw Patrol board games rarely feature Skye (Conway, 2015; Kimmel, 2016). One parent wonders, "What is that telling boys and girls about (Skye's) importance? What is that teaching my 3-year old son and daughter about the value of girls in our society? ... You might not think a missing pink dog is worth getting upset about, but this is where it begins. It's not one huge life altering event that teaches girls that they are less than, it's all the tiny little insidious things that chip away at their armor (sic) over time," (Kimmel, 2016).

Merchandise for boys features Paw Patrol's catch phrases, like "ruff ruff rescue," and "ready for action," while merchandise for girls contain hearts and declarations of friendship in place of the show's go-getter language (Kimmel, 2016). This gender representation is alarming because advertising is a clear expression of a

culture, and our willingness to go along with a set of controlled semantics (Kivisto, p. 503-506). This is an obvious lapse in gender equality, which reinforces sexist ideals that women are to be ignored and remain powerless and inconsequential (Barner, p.12) through continued underrepresentation in television programs by as much as a three-to-one ratio (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.1; Barner, p.5). One cartoon writer was told by their network that female characters need to be one step behind the boys, and to not be as smart or as interesting (Gloudeman, 2014). As Mackinnon said, "(our) speech is not just differently articulated, it is silenced," (Kivisto, p.340).

Children notice this sexist phenomenon (Davis, p.4). In one study, Thompson & Zerbinos, (1997) discovered that most children recognize that boys talk more than girls in cartoons, and that boys are selected for more gender-stereotyped jobs than girls. These stereotypes become more potent as children achieve gender constancy, which is when a child becomes aware of their own gender. At this point, children are more attentive of the gender models they are pressured to imitate through televised reinforcement (Smith, p.2).

Conclusion

The depictions of gender roles that children are exposed to through cartoons and merchandise can impact the expectations they develop around relationships, their behaviour and what they want to be when they grow up. It has been shown repeatedly that children don't always distinguish between reality and fiction, which sets a false precedent for real life (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997, p.15-16).

The standards set by television and their cognisant appropriation of gender roles in cartoons and merchandising puts children at a disadvantage for exploring the truth about themselves and the world around them. As children develop and mature, many of them will work to undo the damage of sexist cartoons to discover the truth about what they want (Taylor, p.2-4). Currently, the entertainment industry is failing children with respect to gender expectations by viewing them as passive rather than active viewers (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997, p.4). But as Cornel West in Taylor said, “try again, fail again, fail better,” (p. 16). As the supply and demand model of our economy dictates, if it is demanded, it will be produced. As Kimmel (2016) said, if consumers refuse to buy sexist merchandise, manufacturers will learn that it isn’t acceptable to popularize the disposability of girls. Davis agrees, that by refusing sexism, a tremendous difference could be made (p.18).

Cartoon creators are aware of the impact their characters have on children, which gives them the opportunity to play a positive role in their lives, and of changing stereotypic views by portraying a more realistic view of the diversity of the workplace (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995, p.2; O’Bryant & Corder-Bolz, p.11). If we are not preparing younger generations for the reality that both men and women partake in leadership roles, and do not all exhibit the stereotypes portrayed on television, we are discounting their futures. But if children see a rich tapestry of opportunities untainted by what television wants them to be, gender equality in society may just become the norm.

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