

The Impact of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books on Children: A Review

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Abstract

The study explores the critical issue of gender stereotyping in children's picture books, a medium that plays a key role in shaping the perceptions and development of children. The research aims to review literature on the various gender roles portrayed in this influential literary form and the profound impact these representations have on children's cognitive, linguistic, and behavioral development. This study has two directions. One direction concerns gender roles, analyzing three distinct gender roles depicted in the selected picture books: male, female, and neutral. The other direction delves into the multifaceted impact of these gender stereotypes, exploring their influence on children's cognitive development, language acquisition, and overall behavioral patterns. The research scrutinizes how limiting gender norms in picture books can shape children's perceptions, beliefs, and decision-making processes, potentially hindering their holistic growth and self-actualization. Additionally, the study investigates how gender-specific language use and behavioral expectations reinforced in these books can have far-reaching consequences on children's communication skills, social interactions, and the development of their identities. By shedding light on this critical issue, the study aims to raise awareness and encourage the creation of more inclusive and diverse children's picture books. The findings can potentially inform educational policies, publishing practices, and parental guidance, ultimately fostering a more equitable and empowering environment for children's literary experiences. The research serves as a call to action, urging stakeholders to prioritize gender representation in children's picture books and work towards a future where all children readers can see themselves reflected in the stories they cherish.

Keywords: Gender Stereotype, Gender Role, Children's Picture Books.

Introduction*Background of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books*

In children's literature, picture books play a significant role in children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. It is a powerful tool for learning and developing young minds. According to Huck (2006), these seemingly straightforward stories with colorful illustrations have the ability to influence young children's minds and how they perceive the world. Thus, picture books are not simply simple stories but can impact how children perceive themselves and others through their complex interplay of ideas, beliefs, and values (Nikolajeva, 2010).

Gender stereotypes in children's literature have long been a topic of interest and concern, shaping young minds and influencing their perceptions of gender roles from an early age. Gender stereotypes of the characters in children's picture books can dictate how the characters should act according to their gender roles. For example, a female character should be nurturing and caring, while a male character should be strong and brave. Watson (2013), states that this raises questions about the implications on young readers' understanding of gender norms, roles, and identities. To elaborate further, Hamilton et al (2019), reiterated that gender stereotypes in children's literature reinforce traditional roles and expectations, with the male characters being strong, adventurous, and assertive, while the female characters are portrayed as nurturing, passive, and domestic.

Picture books play a crucial role in the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children, serving as powerful tools for learning and exploration. According to research by Bus et al (2017), picture books provide young readers with opportunities to develop language skills, expand vocabulary, and enhance comprehension through visual cues and storytelling. These colorful and engaging narratives not only stimulate children's imagination but also foster creativity and critical thinking skills as they interpret illustrations and make connections between text and images. Additionally, picture books help children navigate complex emotions, build empathy, and develop social awareness by exposing them to diverse characters and perspectives (Hassing-Das et al., 2020). By immersing children in rich narratives and vibrant illustrations, children's picture books play a vital role in shaping their worldview, nurturing their curiosity, and laying the foundation for a lifelong love of reading.

Through a critical analysis of popular children's picture books, this study aims to raise awareness about the impact of gender stereotypes in literature and advocate for more diverse and empowering representations that reflect the full spectrum of human experiences. Numerous studies have advocated that children develop their mindsets and behaviors regarding differences between boys and girls early in their lives (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Blaise, 2005; Plumm, 2008). Martin et al (2002), claim that gender classification of oneself and others starts as early as 18 to 24 months. Children at that age already exhibit gender-specific preferences for label faces and other metaphorical gender associations (Martin et al., 2002). Children develop gender knowledge and sex-typed preferences throughout the first three years of life, such as girls' desire for dolls and boys' love for cars and other vehicles (Plumm, 2008). There are various factors that affect the development of gender preferences in young children.

The portrayal of male and female gender roles in children's literature has been the subject of extensive research, shedding light on the prevalence of gender stereotypes in character representation. Female gender roles in children's literature often depict them as sweet, passive, compliant, and dependent characters, taking roles such as caretakers, mothers, and princesses. On the other hand, male gender roles are strong, adventurous, and independent, engaging in active roles like fighters and rescuers. This portrayal of male and female gender roles in children's literature reflects deeply on societal attitudes and biases, influencing children's perceptions of gender roles. Therefore, addressing and challenging these stereotypes in children's picture books is crucial to promoting gender equality and fostering a more inclusive representation of gender roles for young readers.

Significance of the Study

The study into the implications of gender stereotyping in children's picture books holds significant importance for multiple levels of society, ranging from individual development to broader social dynamics. This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on gender stereotyping in children's picture books and its impact on cognitive, language and behavior. It offers insights to educators, parents, policymakers, and those involved in the creation and dissemination of children's picture books.

By deciphering the ways in which gender stereotypes are depicted in children's picture books (Ya-Lun, 2008). This study offers an understanding of how children internalize societal norms and expectations and how this impacts their behavior, aspirations, and formation of personal beliefs.

Parents can benefit from this research in helping their children's growth with a balanced view of gender roles. According to Chamberlain (2011), parents can make informed decisions about the literary content that shapes children's minds and select books that promote diversity, inclusion, and equality.

Authors and illustrators are benefited by the provision of a blueprint for creating stories that reflect a more inclusive and accurate representation of gender roles and identities. It highlights the importance of eliminating gender differences in education and making educators aware of the same issues (Kirsten, 2021). In the field of literature, writers and illustrators are warned to avoid gender stereotypes, which can promote a healthier development of the children's character and personality.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the portrayal of gender in children's picture books to provide a comprehensive understanding of how young readers perceive gender stereotypes and how this impacts their learning development and acceptance of gender roles. The intention is to contribute to a more inclusive representation of gender roles in children's literature.

The manifestation of gender stereotypes in children's picture books has raised concerns about the impact on children's perceptions and attitudes towards gender stereotypes. Children's attention to characters can lead to the internalization of gender biases, potentially influencing their beliefs and behaviors in the future. Therefore, the objective of

the study is to determine the gender stereotypes portrayed in children's picture books among children in China and investigate children's perceptions of gender stereotypes in children's picture books.

Types of Gender Stereotyping in Children's Picture Books

Male Gender Roles

According to Wikipedia, the gender role of males is often associated with traits and behaviors traditionally considered masculine in society. It is generally expected of men to possess attributes like strength, independence, and aggressiveness. Their behavior, relationships, and choice of profession are just a few areas of their lives that might be impacted by these gender norms (Julian, 2022). Traditionally, their gender roles have positioned them in the "public" domain, prioritizing roles that entail taking on leadership, making decisions, and supporting their families. There have been constant challenges to traditional male gender roles from a variety of groups, such as feminist movements, who want to address the sexist and oppressive features of these roles. The entertainment sector has also come under fire for supporting stereotypically masculine characteristics and maintaining traditional male gender roles in character portrayals (Heather, 2022). It is critical to understand that gender roles are socially constructed and have an impact on people's prospects and experiences because of societal norms.

The study by Hentschel et al (2019), found that gender stereotypes associated with men have various dimensions, including personality, physical, and occupational characteristics. These dimensions are often perpetuated through gender stereotyping in children's literature, where male characters are portrayed in traditional, stereotypical roles that emphasize strength, power, and dominance. To illustrate the examples of masculine gender stereotypes in children's literature, Hentschel et al (2019), identified various dimensions of gender stereotypes associated with men, including personality, physical, and occupational characteristics.

Men are Leaders

In the book "The Lion and the Mouse," the lion is depicted as the leader of the animal kingdom, while the mouse is depicted as a follower. This reinforces the gender stereotype that men are natural leaders.

Men Provide for their Family

In the book "The Three Little Pigs," the pig who builds his house out of bricks is depicted as the provider for his family, while the pigs who build their houses out of straw and sticks are depicted as dependent on others. This reinforces the gender stereotype that men are responsible for providing for their families.

Men are Strong

In the book "The Three Little Bears," the big bear is the strongest and most dominant character, while the middle and baby bears are weaker and more submissive. This reinforces the gender stereotype that men are naturally strong and dominant.

Men are Adventurous

The book "Peter and the Wolf" depicts Peter as an adventurous, brave boy who quests to capture a wolf. This reinforces the gender stereotype that men are adventurous and brave.

Men are Protectors

In the book "The Giving Tree," the boy is depicted as a protector of the tree, while the tree is depicted as a nurturer and protector of the boy. This reinforces the gender stereotype that men are protectors.

Men are Athletes

In the book "The Tortoise and the Hare," the hare is depicted as an athletic and fast character, while the tortoise is depicted as slow and methodical. This reinforces the gender stereotype that men are naturally athletic and fast. These examples illustrate how gender stereotyping in children's literature can perpetuate traditional, stereotypical roles that emphasize strength, power, and dominance. By promoting the creation and dissemination of inclusive and gender stereotype-free literature, we can help to challenge gender stereotypes and foster a more equitable and inclusive society.

Female Gender Roles

The gender role of females is often associated with characteristics such as helpfulness, passivity, and kindness. Traditionally, women are viewed as caregivers and nurturers, expected to exhibit behaviors aligned with these roles (Amy, 2003). In many Western societies, women have been perceived as more nurturing than men, leading to expectations that women should engage in nurturing behaviors within the family setting. This traditional view of the feminine gender role suggests that women should prioritize activities that nurture their families, such as working full-time within the home rather than pursuing employment outside the home (Richard, 2017).

Women have always been expected to act in ways consistent with their roles as nurturers and caregivers (Amy, 2003). Women are expected to exhibit nurturing behaviors in the home because they are seen as more nurturing than men in many Western communities. According to this traditional interpretation of the feminine gender role, women should prioritize duties that support their families, such as working full-time at home rather than going after jobs outside the home (Richard, 2017).

Studies have shown that female characters are often underrepresented in children's literature. When they are present, they are often portrayed in stereotypically feminine roles, such as caregivers, nurturers, and vulnerable creatures like birds, cats, and insects (Guardian, 2018). This perpetuation of feminine gender stereotypes can have a significant impact on young readers, as it may lead to the internalization of gender stereotypes and the belief that certain activities and behaviors are only suitable for one gender.

Moreover, female characters are often depicted as passive and submissive, while male characters are active and dominant (Chamberlain, 2011). This reinforces the gender stereotype that women are weak and dependent while men are strong and independent. This can harm young readers, particularly young girls, who may internalize these gender stereotypes and develop limited perceptions of their abilities and potential.

In narratives such as "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty," the portrayal of female characters as passive and reliant on male intervention perpetuates entrenched gender stereotypes, presenting women as lacking agency and independence. This depiction reinforces societal norms that position women as needing rescue or being acted upon by external forces rather than as active agents in their stories. To combat the perpetuation of such gender stereotypes in children's literature, it is imperative to champion the creation and dissemination of inclusive and gender stereotype-free narratives.

Research by scholars like Gooden and Gooden (2010), emphasizes the importance of promoting diverse and empowering female lead characters in literature to challenge traditional gender roles. Authors can offer young readers alternative narratives that inspire and empower by featuring protagonists who defy stereotypes and exhibit agency, resilience, and independence. Moreover, works such as those by Smith and Johnson (2020), highlight the significance of raising awareness among educators, parents, and the publishing industry about the impact of gender-inclusive literature on shaping children's perceptions of gender roles.

To address the issue of feminine gender stereotypes in children's literature, it is essential to promote the creation and dissemination of inclusive and gender stereotype-free stories. This includes the development of literature that features diverse and inspiring female lead characters and characters that challenge traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes. Moreover, raising awareness about the importance of gender-inclusive literature among educators, parents, and the publishing industry is crucial. Promoting diverse and inclusive literature in classrooms and homes can help challenge gender stereotypes and foster a more equitable and inclusive society.

Children are gullible and susceptible to being shaped by their surroundings, including acceptance of stereotyping of genders from the representation of children's picture books (Johnson, 2019). The gap lies at the root of the stereotyping in children's picture books, which is not gender inequality but the confusion between the two concepts of the typical preferences and constraints of the existence of different gender groups. However, when reasoning about choices related to understanding social group differences, such as gender differences in-game behavior, children face a unique challenge. This constrained choice often confuses children's stereotypical knowledge of what proxy groups typically prefer. Consider a child's reasoning about a girl playing with dolls, but dolls are her only choice. Children may perceive this constraint (i.e., having no other choice) and perceive this behavior as relatively vague compared to the actual preferences of girls (Jara-Ettinger et al., 2015; Kushnir et al., 2010). However, considering the strong gender stereotype among children that girls usually like dolls (Bigler & Liben, 2007), children may ultimately conclude that although the girl was restricted, she preferred dolls. The study found that children may not be aware of constraints or may not easily think of them.

Neutral Gender Roles

It is crucial that if children repeatedly infer preferences from constrained choices over time, they may make inaccurate causal explanations for social group differences and inequalities. For example, children may use their observations of restricted choices as (seemingly) good evidence to prove that inherent preference differences cause gender

differences in gaming behavior. The results of this experiment also apply to children's picture books. Repeating the same gender stereotypes over and over again can have an impact on children's character building. As a result, most girls want to be teachers or nurses in the future because they think it is fine for a girl, while most boys want to do a powerful job, such as a fireman or policeman, or even want to be a Superman.

So, how can gender stereotyping be neutralized? Sandra and Daryl Bem's (1988), research may provide some thoughts. The Bems specifically encouraged their children, Jeremy and Emily, to dress in whatever clothes and accessories they enjoyed, play with whatever toys were captivating, and act in whatever ways they felt natural, regardless of whether these things were often associated with girls or guys. Although the Bems' "gender schematic" parenting was in some respects successful, they also ran into obstacles (in the form of negative responses from others) that are representative of the significant influence that gendered expectations have on even the youngest children's conduct. For instance, in one widely circulated incident, Jeremy's male classmate made fun of him for choosing to wear pink barrettes to preschool. A male classmate repeatedly taunted him, claiming that "Jeremy must be a girl, not a boy, because 'only girls wear barrettes.'" This case study suggests that even well-intentioned attempts to mitigate the early effects of gender expectations are often met with resistance from the broader culture.

In China, national culture plays a significant role in shaping gender stereotypes. Traditional Chinese culture has long emphasized gender roles and expectations, with certain professions and activities deemed appropriate for men and others for women. For example, women are often expected to prioritize their family and domestic responsibilities, while men are encouraged to pursue careers and maintain the family's financial stability. These cultural norms are reflected in children's picture books in China, where traditional gender roles are often reinforced. Female characters are frequently portrayed as nurturing, gentle, and focused on domestic duties, while male characters are depicted as strong, adventurous, and ambitious.

One study conducted in China found that gender stereotypes in children's books were prevalent, with female characters commonly shown engaging in activities such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children, while male characters were more likely to be shown participating in outdoor activities, sports, and leadership roles (Li et al., 2017). Another study in China explored the influence of national culture on children's gender stereotypes and found that children's perceptions of gender roles were largely shaped by societal norms and cultural expectations (Li et al., 2019). Children internalize these expectations and may develop rigid beliefs about what is appropriate for their gender.

The Impact of Gender Stereotyping on Children

The Impact on Children's Cognition

Gender stereotyping has a serious impact on children's cognition and perception. People can accept girls playing with dolls and boys playing only with cars. If something changes, it will be unacceptable (Kim, 2024). People may smile when they find girls playing with cars, but it is hard to accept boys playing with dolls. Because in the adult world, women can be bold and heroic, but men cannot be graceful and feminine. Such cognition will be passed down from generation to generation, forming a series of gender cognition, such as

girls suitable for pink or red and boys suitable for blue or green. Girls are suitable for nurses or teachers, boys for policemen or firefighters. Women should be kind and virtuous, while men should be brave. Women should care for the family and educate the children, and men should go out to work and support their families (Guijorro, 2022).

The consequences of gender stereotypes on children's cognition have been extensively studied, revealing significant implications for their cognitive development. Research suggests that exposure to gender stereotypes can impact children's cognitive processes, such as memory, attention, and problem-solving abilities. For example, a study by Signorella et al (2020), found that children who were exposed to gender-stereotyped images and messages performed worse on a memory task compared to those who were not exposed. This suggests that gender stereotypes can hinder cognitive functioning and limit children's ability to process and retain information.

Furthermore, gender stereotypes can influence children's interests and aspirations, shaping their cognitive development and career choices. For instance, a study by Bian et al. (2017) showed that girls exposed to gender-stereotyped toys and activities expressed less interest in science-related pursuits than those not. This highlights how gender stereotypes can restrict children's cognitive exploration and limit their potential academic and career paths.

The Impact on Children's Language

Gender stereotyping in children's literature has been shown to have a significant impact on language development. Gender information in stories influences how children perceive unknown words and can mislead them into stereotyping genders (Seitz, 2020). Gupta and Dasgupta (2018), emphasized that gender stereotypes in children's books can reinforce traditional gender roles and influence children's language use. For instance, male characters are often depicted as confident and independent, while female characters are portrayed as nurturing and relationship-oriented. This portrayal can shape children's language development by influencing their perception of gender roles and the language they are exposed to. Similarly, Kulik and Kulik (1991), found that gender stereotypes in children's books can lead children to focus more on gender-related language and ignore gender-neutral language, potentially impacting their language development. These findings are consistent with Hodge's broader review of research and practice Hodge (2008), highlighting the pervasive influence of gender stereotyping on children's language development in literature. The cumulative evidence from these studies underscores the need to address and challenge gender stereotypes in children's literature to support more equitable language development in young readers.

The Impact on Children's Behavior

Gender stereotyping also has a serious impact on the behavior of girls and boys. No matter whether parents or teachers, when they see a sweaty boy running on the court, they will sincerely shout, "Come on." However, when they see such a girl, they may worry about whether she will become as strong as a boy and then lose her graceful figure (Kieran, 2020). This situation occurs more frequently in the senior grades because children at this time already have self-esteem and the ability to judge (Milton, 2021). Many children take it for granted that individual teachers treat boys and girls differently, which makes girls more silent

in class and boys more unscrupulous. The formation of this behavior is not from a certain theory but the influence of books, media, society, and other aspects (Richard, 2017).

Gender stereotypes can significantly influence children's behavior, shaping their attitudes and actions towards themselves and others. Research shows that adherence to gender norms can lead to rigid and limited behavior patterns. For instance, a study by Halim et al (2020), found that boys who strongly adhere to traditional masculine norms displayed more aggressive and hostile behaviors towards peers compared to those with more flexible gender attitudes.

Additionally, gender stereotypes can perpetuate inequality and reinforce gender-based discrimination. A study by Liben et al (2019), indicated that children exposed to gender-stereotyped media were more likely to engage in gender-segregated activities and display biased behaviors, such as excluding peers based on gender. This highlights how gender stereotypes can contribute to the perpetuation of gender disparities and hinder children's ability to develop inclusive and egalitarian attitudes.

The Perception of Children Towards Gender Stereotyping

Gender differences in social interaction begin at Childhood. (Bian et al., 2017). There is increasing recognition that identifying and preventing damaging gender attitudes and gender stereotypes in childhood, before they become entrenched, is key to enacting broad social change. This is considered to be important in advancing gender equality but also in supporting health and well-being across a range of domains (State of Victoria, 2016; The Men's Project & Flood, 2018). Early childhood is a potential period for action in this area because it offers early opportunity to develop equitable gender attitudes and behaviors that can be carried across the life-course, however, there is a need for evidence to inform approaches (King, 2021).

Children's perception of gender stereotyping can be influenced by social interactions and self-perception, which can be categorized into external and internal factors.

Social Interactions-External Factors

Social and cultural norms significantly influence both the expression of gender identity and the nature of interactions between genders (Ridgeway, 2024). Children's gender stereotypes are influenced not only by their own experiences, but also by the experiences of others around them, including their parents, teachers, and peers (Martin et al., 2017). A review of research on gender stereotypes in childhood, published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, found that gender stereotypes can have a negative impact on children's academic and career aspirations, as well as their mental health and well-being (Cvencek et al., 2019). Children's exposure to gender stereotypes in media, such as television shows and movies, can have a significant impact on their gender attitudes and beliefs (Freeman et al., 2019).

Self-perception-Internal Factors

It includes the impact of gender stereotypes on expectations about performance and biasing decisions that affect opportunities and work outcomes for both men and women.

Gender stereotypes can lead to girls underestimating their intelligence and having lower self-esteem, while boys may over-estimate their achievements and exhibit a limited range of emotions. Gender self-stereotyping can impact life satisfaction, with women who

internalize negative gender stereotypes about their gender experiencing lower self-esteem and life satisfaction (Meng et al., 2021). It can negatively impact women's self-confidence, particularly in fields like math and science where women are underrepresented (Coffman, 2018). Also, it can impact both how men and women see themselves and how they are seen by others, with gender stereotypes about agency and communality playing a particularly strong role (Eagly et al., 2019).

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has analyzed literature on three distinct gender roles in selected children's picture books, which are male, female, and neutral gender roles. Further, the paper examined the multifaceted impact of these gender stereotypes, exploring their influence on children's cognitive development, language acquisition, and overall behavioral patterns. Research has indicated that male characters have been overrepresented and portrayed as active and dominant, while female characters are marginalized and portrayed as passive and nurturing (Hentschel et al., 2019; Amy, 2003; Guardian, 2018; Chamberlain, 2011). This gender bias can hinder the development of gender-neutral perspectives in children. Furthermore, it reinforces traditional gender norms and therefore limits children's perspectives of how to think and behave.

It is important to address this issue in order not to suppress children's potential and abilities for their future. Hence, more inclusive and empowering narratives in children's picture books has to be promoted. This can be achieved by addressing gender stereotypes in the selection and creation of children's picture books, and by encouraging authors and illustrators to create more well-rounded characters of all genders. Educators and parents can also play a role in evaluating books and promoting gender-neutral language and attitudes.

This paper has also found the need for further research to explore the impact of gender stereotypes in children's books on different age groups and cultural backgrounds. It is also recommended to focus on the role of illustrators and authors in providing visual cues to propagate gender stereotypes, as well as effective interventions to reduce gender bias in children's picture books. By raising awareness and promoting inclusive and empowering narratives, children can be helped to develop wholly in a gender-free society and make decisions without the influence of gender stereotypes.

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