

Development of Gender Differences in Children's Responses to Animated Entertainment

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This study examined gender differences in children's responses to animated scenes from an action adventure versus a sad film, and to animated previews of a prototypical "male" versus "female" movie. Females were more likely than males to express sadness in response to the sad scene, and gender differences in intensities of sadness increased with age. Children were much more likely to stereotype the "male" preview as most liked by other boys, whereas the majority of children perceived the "female" preview as liked by either gender equally. In terms of enjoyment of the "male" and "female" previews, gender differences in enjoyment of the "male" preview were apparent only among children who perceived the film as more appealing to boys, and gender differences in enjoyment of the "female" preview were apparent only among children who perceived the film as more appealing to girls. Implications for children's programming are discussed.

Although recent analyses of prime-time television entertainment programming suggest a trend toward more equitable gender representation (Davis, 1990), children's programming continues to feature primarily male characters designed to appeal to a male-viewing audience (see Gerbner, 1993). For example, Thompson and Zerbinos' analysis of 175 children's cartoons aired on network and cable channels reported that among major characters, males

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outnumbered females more than 3 to 1, and that among minor characters, males outnumbered females almost 5 to 1 (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1995). In addition, male characters were more likely than female characters to show ingenuity, to use aggression, to show leadership, to express opinions, to issue threats, and to show anger. In contrast, female characters were more likely than male characters to show affection, to ask for advice or protection, and to engage in routine services. Gender-stereotyped portrayals such as these have attracted much attention and concern. As one media critic described, "Contemporary shows are either essentially all male, like 'Garfield,' or are organized on what I call the Smurfette principle: a group of male buddies will be accented by a lone female, stereotypically defined" (Pollitt, 1991, p. 222).

Not surprisingly, research exploring the effects of stereotyped media portrayals suggests that these sorts of images may encourage gender-role stereotyping and intensify gender differences among viewers, and particularly so for younger children (Herrett-Skjellum & Allen, 1995; Signorielli, 1990; Van Evra, 1990). For example, several studies have reported that higher levels of television viewing among younger children and adolescents are associated with higher scores on measures of gender-role stereotyping (Beuf, 1974; Frueh & McGhee, 1975; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). In addition, the majority of social scientific research on media violence reports that the viewing of violent portrayals often targeted to male audiences results in higher levels of aggression, greater willingness to use violence as a means to solve problems, and greater levels of desensitization (Condry, 1989; Gunter, 1994).

Given public concern about gender-role portrayals in children's media entertainment, why has the entertainment industry not made greater strides to produce media content that features more egalitarian portrayals? In some respects, the answer to this question may be that the industry *has* responded. For example, in 1999, the Fox Family Channel debuted two new cable channels, the Boyz Channel and the Girlz Channel, designed to appeal to 2- to 14-year-old male and female children respectively ("Fox Family," 1998). While Fox Family executives suggested that the new channels provided greater choices for children that reflected their interests (Petrozello, 1998), these new channels also generated considerable concern that the programming and advertisements would feature and encourage traditional gender-role behaviors (e.g., Mifflin, 1998; "Stereotypical TV," 1998). Ultimately, many of these concerns are now somewhat irrelevant, as the two channels generated less than 100,000 subscribers each, and the Fox Family Channel discontinued the channels after 1 year (Berstein, 2000). Although it is unclear how Fox's lack of success in targeting specific genders may impact future programming, some researchers have suggested that the media industry may be generally sluggish to respond to cries for more female-oriented

entertainment because of fears that male viewers will avoid such programming (Kuryla, 1996).

Are these fears founded? Are gender-role portrayals important in children's responses to media entertainment? Although research suggests that children *notice* differences in the frequency and behaviors of male and female characters in children's entertainment (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997), it remains unclear as to the ways in which children respond to these portrayals in terms of emotional reactions, liking, and stereotyping of entertainment along gender-linked lines. However, the examination of these types of responses is much needed if the industry is able to provide young viewers with attractive, egalitarian programming. Consequently, the purpose of this present study was to explore the development of gender differences in children's emotional responses, liking, and perceptions of the gender-related "appeal" of animated entertainment.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Nature of Gender Differences

Although a substantial amount of research has explored the content and the effects of gender-stereotyped portrayals on viewers, considerably less research has considered the role of viewers' responses to and enjoyment of such content. However, viewer response to media entertainment is crucially important because (1) entertainment fare is often targeted specifically to male versus female audiences (e.g., action adventures), and (2) differential viewing of media entertainment may serve to exacerbate gender-role stereotyping and behavioral differences. Unfortunately, most of the research that has explored viewers' preferences and responses has employed primarily adult samples. These studies with adults find predictable gender differences in media selection, with females reporting greater enjoyment of sentimental fare, romantic dramas, and tear jerkers, and males reporting greater enjoyment of violent entertainment such as action adventures and horror films (Ang, 1990; Condry, 1989; Gantz & Wenner, 1991; Oliver, 1993, 2000; Sparks, 1986).

Among the studies that have examined young children's responses, many have reported gender differences that parallel adults' reactions. For example, research on television program preference has reported that boys show a greater preference for violent content than do girls, with this difference evident among children as young as 3–5 years old (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997; Donohue, 1975; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972). Other studies that have examined emotional responses to frightening stimuli tend to report higher

levels of fear among girls than among boys (e.g., Hoffner & Cantor, 1990, 1991; Valkenburg, Cantor, & Peeters, 2000). Although few studies have explored television or film entertainment that is likely to appeal to girls specifically, gender differences in preferences of themes within *books* has been examined. In particular, Collins-Standley, Gan, Yu, and Zillmann (1996) presented preschool children with a series of fairy-tale books featuring romantic, violent, and scary stories. Gender differences in book preferences were not present among the youngest children. However, by age 4, girls were significantly more likely than boys to prefer romantic themes, whereas boys were significantly more likely than girls to prefer violent themes.

Development of Gender Differences

The results of Collins-Standley et al.'s research reporting increases in gender differences as children age (Collins-Standley et al., 1996) are consistent with numerous theoretical explanations of gender-role development. For example, according to cognitive-developmental models, the development of gender constancy (the understanding of one's gender as constant over time and over transformations of appearance) allows for the categorization of behaviors and attributes along sex-related lines, and leads to a heightened motivation to observe and imitate same-sex behaviors and characteristics (Kohlberg, 1966; Slaby & Frey, 1975). Consistent with this reasoning, Luecke-Aleksa, Anderson, Collins, and Schmitt (1995) reported that among the preschool boys in their sample, gender constancy was associated with greater viewing of adult male characters and with greater viewing of sports and action programs.

Social learning approaches concerning gender-role development also imply stronger gender differences in media-related behaviors among older than younger children, albeit for different reasons than cognitive-developmental models. In general, social learning approaches suggest that children develop gender-related characteristics through differential reward and punishment of sex-typed behaviors or through observational learning of models who are rewarded or punished for their behaviors (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Huston, 1983; Mischel, 1966, 1970). From this perspective, the development of gender differences in media preferences may reflect children's observations of entertainment selection by males and females in their environment (e.g., parents, peers, etc.) or through explicit lessons concerning which programs are appropriate for "boys" versus "girls."

In addition to predicting differences in program preferences per se, gender developmental models also help explain males' and females' differential emotional responses to media entertainment. Stereotypes of male

and female characteristics and behaviors often imply that females are more emotional in general than are males (Briton & Hall, 1995; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, & Zellman, 1978; Williams, Bennett, & Best, 1975), with sadness and fear associated with females more than males, and anger associated with males more than females (Brody & Hall, 2000; Birnbaum, Nosanchuk, & Croll, 1980; Shields, 1987). Given that stereotypes of emotions appear to develop early (Birnbaum et al., 1980), with parents discouraging boys from displays of sadness and fear, and girls from displays of anger and aggression (Block, 1973, 1978), one might expect that responses to and enjoyment of media entertainment would reflect these stereotypes. Specifically, gender stereotyping of emotions would suggest that females should be more likely than males to experience and/or express greater emotionality, and particularly sadness and fear in response to entertainment. In addition, females should be more likely to report enjoyment of entertainment that is likely to elicit "female appropriate" emotions (e.g., sad films, romance), whereas males should be more likely than females to report enjoyment of entertainment that is likely to elicit "male appropriate" emotions (e.g., violent films, action films).

PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine two related questions concerning gender differences in young children's responses to animated entertainment and the relationship between gender differences and age. The first question explored in this study concerned gender differences in emotional reactions documented in prior research pertaining to emotions *per se*, and to emotional responses to media in particular. That is, the first question examined gender differences in reactions to media associated with gender stereotyped emotional responses (i.e., sadness, fear). The second question explored in this study concerned how gender differences in enjoyment of media entertainment may reflect perceptions of media offerings as more or less appealing to one gender. That is, the second question was interested in examining if children perceive media content along gender-linked lines, and if these perceptions play a role in their enjoyment of entertainment.

In the first part of this study pertaining specifically to emotional responses, children viewed two short video segments: one featuring a sad scene and one featuring an action adventure scene. Enjoyment of and emotional responses to each film segment were assessed. Based on prior research concerning gender differences in media enjoyment and emotional responses,

and on models of gender-role development, the following hypotheses were examined:

- H_1 : Females will express greater enjoyment and sadness in reaction to a sad scene than will males, with gender differences becoming more pronounced as children age.
- H_2 : Males will express greater enjoyment and less fear in reaction to an action scene than will females, with gender differences becoming more pronounced as children age.

The second part of this study examined children's enjoyment of and gender stereotyping of prototypical "male" and "female" entertainment. Children were shown previews of *Beauty and the Beast* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and were asked to indicate their enjoyment of the film and whether they believed the film was one that would be liked mostly by boys, by girls, or by both genders equally.² As in the first part of the study, gender and age differences in enjoyment were expected. Because prior research has suggested that children notice gender-role portrayals in media entertainment (Thompson & Zerbinos, 1997), it was also expected that (1) participants in this study would notice gender-related behaviors, and would therefore engage in gender stereotyping of the entertainment (i.e., perceiving *Beauty and the Beast* as a "female" film, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* as a "male" film), and that (2) this gender stereotyping would increase with age.

- H_3 : Children will stereotype entertainment along gender lines, perceiving *Beauty and the Beast* as a "female film," and *Turtles* as a "male film," with gender stereotyping increasing with age.

Based on cognitive models of gender-role development suggesting that children are motivated to attend to and emulate same-sex models, and on social learning theories of gender-role development suggesting that gender "appropriate" behavior is associated with rewards and approval, whereas "inappropriate" behavior is associated with punishments and disapproval, it was expected that gender differences in children's enjoyment of media entertainment would vary as a function of their gender stereotyping of the entertainment.

- H_4 : Gender differences in enjoyment of entertainment will be more pronounced among children who gender stereotype the entertainment (i.e.,

²The selection of these previews was guided largely on the basis of prior research on gender differences in responses to media entertainment among adult samples. Specifically, the gender of the main character and the focus of the theme suggested that a focus on a female character and a relational/romantic theme would best represent "female-enjoyed" entertainment, whereas a focus on a male character and on a violent theme would best represent "male-enjoyed" entertainment (see Oliver, 2000, for a review of this literature).

perceive *Beauty and the Beast* as a “female film” and *Turtles* as a “male film”) than among children who do not stereotype the entertainment.

Finally, although no specific hypotheses were tested concerning the reasons why children may stereotype entertainment along gender-linked lines, this study gathered open-ended responses from children concerning their reasons for stereotyping. That is, this study also examined the following exploratory research question:

R₁: What are the reasons that children give for perceiving media entertainment as more appealing to one gender than another?

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this project were 176 children (96 males and 80 females) ranging in age from 3 to 9 years ($M = 6.71$, $SD = 1.60$). Sixteen of the children (9.1%) were recruited from a daycare housed at a large mid-Atlantic university, 22 (12.5%) were recruited from a daycare in the local community, and 138 (78.4%) were recruited from preschool through third-grade classes at a local, public elementary school.³

Procedures

All experimental sessions were conducted with individual children during regular school hours, with each testing session lasting approximately 30 min. Male and female undergraduate and graduate students served as experimenters.

During the first part of the session, children viewed two short scenes from children's G-rated movies. One scene featured an action adventure theme represented by either *The Rescuers Down Under* or *Ferngully*. The other scene featured a sad theme represented by either *The Lion King* or *The Fox and the Hound*.⁴ The order of the movie themes and the specific

³Although demographic information other than age and gender was not collected, this population of children approximated the largely Caucasian, middle class sample of the small local community in which the study was conducted.

⁴Both scenes from the action segments featured portrayals of characters who were clearly in danger, but who were shown narrowly escaping from their perilous situations. For example, in *The Rescuers Down Under*, a character is shown being thrown off a boat and floating rapidly toward a waterfall until a large bird comes to the rescue. In *Ferngully*, a character is shown being threatened by a large, ill-defined monster until other characters aid in an escape. Both sad scenes feature characters who expressed sadness after experiencing a loss. For example,

film segments employed were counterbalanced. All movie segments were approximately 1 min and 40 s in length.

*Enjoyment of and Emotional Responses to Sad Film Segments
and Action Adventure Segments*

Measures of emotional responses and enjoyment were based on several previous studies that have examined developmental differences in children's responses to media portrayals (see Cantor, 1996; Hoffner & Cantor, 1985; Wilson, Hoffner, & Cantor, 1987). After each segment, children were asked to report how they felt as they watched. These self-reports involved the experimenter pointing to a laminated poster board containing cartoon illustrations of a person expressing the following responses: happy, sad, scared, angry, and "just ok." If the child selected one of the first four responses, the experimenter asked the child to report the intensity of his or her response. Emotional intensity was measured with the aid of a poster board illustrating a cartoon person expressing increasingly intense responses (e.g., a little bit sad, pretty sad, very sad, or very, very sad).

Children's enjoyment of the movie segments was measured on a scale ranging from 0 (*Not at All*) to 4 (*Very, Very Much*). Children indicated their level of enjoyment by pointing to a laminated poster board containing increasingly large boxes, with the larger boxes indicating higher levels of enjoyment.

Finally, children's prior exposure to the movie segments was measured on a scale ranging from 0 (*Never Seen*) to 4 (*Seen Many, Many Times*). As with enjoyment measures, children indicated their level of prior exposure by pointing to a laminated poster board containing increasingly large boxes, with the larger boxes indicating more frequent exposure.⁵

Enjoyment and Gender Stereotyping of Films

To assess children's enjoyment and stereotyping of films as "male" versus "female," children were shown previews of a prototypical "female" film,

in *The Lion King*, a child character discovers that his father has been killed, and he tries to awaken his dead father. In *The Fox and the Hound*, a small fox is left in the forest by his owner, and he does not understand why he has been abandoned. Analyses were conducted to examine differences in responses to the two sad examples and to the action adventure examples. No effects of film example or interactions with film example and gender or age were obtained. Consequently, responses within example type were combined and are reported together.

⁵The majority of children reported having seen all types of stimuli employed in this study at least one time. Eighty-six percent of the children reported having seen the sad film ($M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.41$), 66.5% reported having seen the action film ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 1.47$), 82.9% reported having seen *Beauty and the Beast* ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.48$), and 56.6% reported having seen the *Turtles* ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 1.55$).

Beauty and the Beast, and a prototypical "male" film, *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. The order of the presentation was varied between each subject. For each preview, children's enjoyment and prior viewing of the film was measured using the procedures described above. In addition, after each preview, children were asked if they thought the movie was "a movie that mostly boys would like, a movie that mostly girls would like, or a movie that both boys and girls would like the same." If the child answered either "mostly boys" or "mostly girls," the experimenter asked, "Why do you think that mostly boys (girls) would like this movie?" Answers to these questions were coded using the following categories: fighting or violence, common knowledge (e.g., "Everyone knows it's a boys/girls movie"), the character's sex (e.g., "The movie has a girl in it"), the character (e.g., "The film has the *Turtles* in it), other friends or family members of a specific gender like the movie (e.g., "My uncle likes the movie," "Sara likes the movie," etc.), the film features love/romance, the film is of high quality (e.g., "It's a good movie), the film is pretty, and other (e.g., "We saw the movie at the mall," "I like the movie," etc.). Although most children mentioned only one reason for stereotyping the films as "male" versus "female," some children mentioned more than one reason. Consequently, each reason was coded as a separate variable, with a score of 1 assigned if the child mentioned the reason and a score of 0 assigned if the reason was not mentioned. One graduate student coded the entire sample of responses, and an additional student coded a randomly selected subset of responses ($N = 35$), yielding a reliability of .96 using Holsti's method (Holsti, 1969).

Facial Expression Measures

Because self-report measures may be susceptible to a number of potential biases (particularly with young children), children's facial expressions were videotaped during viewing to assess emotional responses during both the short movie segments (sad film and action adventure) and during the two movie previews (*Beauty and the Beast* and *Turtles*).⁶ Subsequently, these facial expressions were analyzed for emotional responses with the use of the Affex facial coding scheme (Izard, Dougherty, & Hembree, 1983). This coding scheme allows for minute coding of specific facial movements associated with 10 primary emotional expressions and has been employed in numerous studies concerning children's responses to media portrayals (see Hoffner & Cantor, 1990). One graduate student coded the entire sample, and an additional student coded a randomly selected subset

⁶The facial expression data for 10 children were lost due to equipment malfunction.

of participants ($N = 42$), yielding a reliability of .93 using Holsti's method (Holsti, 1969).⁷

RESULTS

Analyses

Two primary types of analyses were employed to examine the research questions under consideration. Analyses of continuous-level measurements (e.g., reported liking) employed hierarchical linear regression, with prior exposure to the stimulus under consideration entered on the first step as a covariate, gender and age entered on the second step, and the product of gender and age entered on the final step as a test for the interaction (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). Analyses of categorical variables (e.g., expression of sadness while viewing) employed logistic regression, with prior exposure to the stimulus under consideration entered on the first step as a covariate, gender and age entered on the second step, and the product of gender and age entered on the final step as a test for the interaction (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989; Norusis, 1992). For the logistic regression analyses, $\text{Exp}(B)$ represents the extent to which the odds change for the dependent variable when the predictor variable increases by 1 unit. Thus, when $\text{Exp}(B)$ is less than 1, the odds are decreased; when $\text{Exp}(B)$ is greater than 1, the odds are increased (Norusis, 1992).

ENJOYMENT OF AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO FILM SEGMENTS

Sad Segments

Hypothesis 1 predicted that females would report greater enjoyment and sadness in reaction to a sad scene than would males, and that gender differences would increase with age. Self-reported liking of the preview and facial expressions indicating enjoyment were examined as indicators of enjoyment, and self-reported sadness and facial expressions indicating sadness were examined as indicators of sad reactions.

⁷Using procedures outlined by Izard et al. (1983), the two coders first practiced coding facial expression data with the use of a sample videotape and coding manual provided with the instructional materials. Once the coders had established an acceptable level of accuracy in coding these practice materials, facial expression data from the present study were coded.

Enjoyment

Hierarchical linear regression was employed to examine liking scores. Contrary to predictions, the only effect obtained in this analysis was a main effect for age, with age negatively related to enjoyment, $\beta = -.23$, $t = -3.16$, $p < .01$. No significant effects were obtained for gender, $\beta = -.04$, $t = -.50$, $p = .62$, or for the predicted Gender \times Age interaction, $\beta = .14$, $t = -1.39$, $p = .14$.

An examination of facial expressions revealed that almost 100% of the time children viewed, their facial expression was that of interest ($M = 98\%$, $SD = 0.07$). Consequently, rather than analyze durations of facial expressions (which would involve extreme problems with skewness), separate variables were created for each emotional expression. For each expression, participants were assigned a score of 1 if they expressed the emotion during viewing, and a score of 0 if they did not express the emotion during viewing. With this scoring system, 18.1% of the children displayed happiness/joy.

Given that the expression of happiness/joy was indicated by a dichotomous variable (the emotion was expressed, or it was not expressed), logistic regression was employed. As with self-reported liking, the only effect obtained in this analysis was for age, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.68$, $W = 8.05$, $p < .01$, indicating that expressions of enjoyment/joy decreased with age. No significant effects were obtained for gender, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.88$, $W = 2.23$, $p = .14$, or for the predicted Gender \times Age interaction, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.92$, $W = 0.70$, $p = .40$.

Sadness

The first analysis of sadness examined open-ended responses concerning children's reactions while viewing the sad-film segment. A total of 112 participants (64%) reported feeling sad while viewing. To analyze these open-ended reports, logistic regression was employed. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, this analysis revealed a main effect for gender, $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.11$, $W = 4.10$, $p < .05$, with a larger percentage of females (70.0%) than males (58.3%) expressing sadness. In addition, a main effect for age revealed that expressions of sadness increased with age, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.95$, $W = 29.60$, $p < .001$, although the predicted Gender \times Age interaction was not obtained, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.96$, $W = 0.35$, $p = .55$.

The second analysis of sadness employed hierarchical regression to examine self-reports of intensity of sadness. A main effect for age was obtained in this analysis, with sadness intensity positively associated with age, $\beta = .22$, $t = 3.04$, $p < .01$. Although the main effect for gender was not significant, $\beta = .11$, $t = 1.54$, $p = .13$, the predicted Gender \times Age interaction

was obtained, $\beta = .22$, $t = 2.16$, $p < .05$. Further examination of this interaction using Bonferroni corrections showed that among the youngest children (5 years and younger), males expressed slightly higher intensities of sadness ($M = 1.25$, $SD = 1.81$) than did females ($M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.96$), though this difference was not statistically significant at $p < .016$ (corrected alpha), $t(33) = 1.73$, $p = .09$. In contrast, females expressed slightly (though not significantly) higher intensities of sadness than did males among children in the middle age range (6- and 7-year olds; females, $M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.37$; males, $M = 1.19$, $SD = 1.41$), $t(101) = 1.97$, $p = .05$, and marginally significantly higher intensities of sadness among children in the older age range (8- and 9-year olds; females, $M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.28$; males, $M = 1.23$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(36) = 2.47$, $p < .018$.

The final analysis employed logistic regression to examine the presence or absence of facial expressions of sadness while viewing. A total of 5.4% of the participants displayed sadness. However, the only effect obtained in the analysis of sad expressions was a main effect for gender reflecting that a larger percentage of females (10.5%) than males (1.1%) expressed sadness, $\text{Exp}(B) = 11.30$, $W = 5.01$, $p < .05$.

Action Adventure Segments

Hypothesis 2 predicted that males would report greater enjoyment and less fear in reaction to a action adventure scene than would females, and that gender differences would increase with age.

Enjoyment

Hierarchical linear regression was employed to examine liking scores for the action segment. Contrary to predictions, the only significant effect obtained in this analysis was a main effect for age, with age negatively associated with enjoyment, $\beta = -.27$, $t = 3.58$, $p < .001$.

A total of 47 of the 166 children (28.3%) with valid facial data expressed enjoyment/joy while viewing. Logistic regression was employed to examine the presence or absence of expression of enjoyment/joy. As with the analysis of self-reported liking, this analysis revealed only a main effect for age, with increasing age associated with a lower likelihood of expressing enjoyment/joy, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.75$, $W = 6.05$, $p < .05$.

Fear

In response to the open-ended question concerning emotional responses, 8% of the children mentioned fear. Logistic regression was employed

to examine predictors of self-reported fear. Contrary to predictions, no significant main effects or interactions were obtained. Similarly, the only significant effect obtained in the regression analysis of intensity of fear was a main effect for age, with age negatively associated with fear intensities, $\beta = -.21$, $t = -2.70$, $p < .01$. Finally, an examination of the facial expression data showed that only 8 of the 166 (4.8%) children with valid data expressed any fear while viewing. Given that less than 5% of the children expressed fear, facial expressions of fear were not analyzed.

PERCEPTIONS AND ENJOYMENT OF "MALE" VERSUS "FEMALE" ENTERTAINMENT

Stereotyping

Hypothesis 3 predicted that children would stereotype the movie previews along gender-linked lines, perceiving *Beauty and the Beast* as a "female film," and *Turtles* as a "male film," with gender stereotyping increasing with age. The first analyses examined the frequencies of children's perceptions of the previews as appealing to males, to females, or to either gender. The analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* revealed partial support for this hypothesis. Although the largest percentage of children (62.1%_a) rated the preview as "appealing to either gender," the next most frequent response was "more appealing to females" (31.6%_b), followed by "more appealing to males" (6.3%_c), $\chi^2(2, N = 174) = 81.35$, $p < .001$. Post hoc analyses using the Scheffé analogue for categorical responses showed that each response category differed from the other categories at $p < .05$ (Marascuilo & Serlin, 1988). Table I reports the reasons participants gave for reporting that *Beauty and the Beast* would be more appealing to girls. Excluding "don't know" and

Table I. Reasons Given for Stereotyping "Beauty and the Beast" as a Female Film and "Turtles" as a Male Film

	% Citing reason		
	<i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (<i>N</i> = 55)		<i>Turtles</i> (<i>N</i> = 111)
Character's sex (female)	25.5	Fighting/violence	32.4
Common knowledge	16.4	Common knowledge	18.0
Love story theme	14.5	"Turtle" characters	12.6
Liked by other females	9.1	Character's sex (male)	9.9
Film is pretty	3.6	Liked by other males	6.3
"Beauty" character	3.6	Film is high quality	6.3
Other	12.7	Other	6.3
Do not know/no answer	14.5	Do not know/no answer	13.5

“other” responses, the most frequent reason was a mention of the main character’s sex (25.5%), followed by the idea that it was “common knowledge” that *Beauty and the Beast* was a “girls’ film” (16.4%), followed by a mention of the love scenes in the movie (14.5%).

To examine gender and age differences in children’s stereotyping of *Beauty and the Beast* as a “female” film, responses were first collapsed into two categories: “female stereotyped” and “non-female stereotyped” (including “either” and “male” categories). This variable was then analyzed using logistic regression. This analysis revealed a marginal main effect for age, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.21$, $W = 2.74$, $p < .10$, reflecting a slightly greater tendency to perceive *Beauty and the Beast* as a “female” film as age increased. No other main effects or interactions were obtained.

The analysis of gender stereotyping of the *Turtles* revealed strong support for the idea that children would stereotype the film as most appealing to males. The largest percentage of children rated the preview as “more appealing to boys” (64.2%_a), followed by “appealing to either gender” (34.7%_b), followed by “more appealing to girls” (1.2%_c), $\chi^2(2, N = 173) = 103.16$, $p < .001$. Responses were subsequently collapsed into “male stereotyped” and “non-male stereotyped” (including “either” and “female” categories), and were then analyzed using logistic regression. Consistent with Hypothesis 3, this analysis revealed a marginally significant trend for children to stereotype the *Turtles* as a “boys” film as they aged, $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.20$, $W = 3.09$, $p < .10$. This analysis also revealed a main effect for gender, reflecting greater stereotyping among males (72.0%) than among females (55.0%), $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.58$, $W = 7.21$, $p < .01$. Table I reports the reasons participants gave for reporting that the *Turtles* would be most appealing to boys. Excluding “don’t know” and “other” responses, the most frequent reason given was that the film contained fighting or aggression (32.4%), followed by the idea that it was “common knowledge” (18.0%), followed by a mention of the Turtle characters (e.g., “Because the film has the Turtles in it,” 12.6%).

Enjoyment as a Function of Stereotyping

Hypothesis 4 predicted that gender differences in enjoyment would be more pronounced among children who stereotyped the entertainment than among children who did not stereotype the entertainment. That is, for *Beauty and the Beast*, gender differences were expected to be more pronounced among children who perceived it as more appealing to females than among children who did not perceive it as more appealing to females. Similarly, gender differences were expected to be more pronounced for the *Turtles* among children who perceived it as more appealing to males than among children who did not perceive it as more appealing to males. To explore the

role of gender stereotyping on children's self-reported enjoyment, hierarchical linear regression was employed to examine liking scores, with prior exposure to the preview entered on the first step as a covariate; gender, age, and stereotyping entered on the second step; and the product terms on the third and fourth steps as tests for 2-way and 3-way interactions respectively. Similarly, logistic regression was employed to examine the presence or absence of facial expressions indicating enjoyment/joy.

Beauty and the Beast

The analysis of self-reported enjoyment of *Beauty and the Beast* revealed main effects for age, $\beta = -.19$, $t = -2.76$, $p < .01$; gender, $\beta = .18$, $t = 2.51$, $p < .05$; and female-stereotyping, $\beta = -.38$, $t = -5.46$, $p < .001$. These main effects reflected lower levels of enjoyment as age increased, greater enjoyment among female ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 1.43$) than among male children ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.10$), and greater enjoyment among children who did not female-stereotype the movie ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 1.12$) than among children who did female-stereotype the movie ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.39$). However, these main effects for gender and stereotyping should be interpreted in light of the predicted Gender \times Stereotyping interaction that was also obtained, $\beta = .30$, $t = 2.74$, $p < .01$. Table II shows the means associated with this interaction, illustrating that among the children who did not stereotype the film as a "female" film, gender differences were nonexistent. However, among children who did stereotype the film, males reported significantly lower levels of enjoyment than did females. No other effects involving stereotyping of the preview were revealed in this analysis.

Table II. Self-Reported Enjoyment of as a Function of Sex and Preview Stereotyping

	Gender	
	Males	Females
<i>Beauty and the Beast</i>		
Stereotyping		
Nonfemale stereotyped	3.03 _a (1.20)	3.18 _a (0.99)
Female stereotyped	1.46 _b (1.17)	2.65 _a (1.23)
<i>Turtles</i>		
Stereotyping		
Nonmale stereotyped	2.70 _a (1.42)	2.47 _a (1.48)
Male stereotyped	2.89 _a (1.31)	1.30 _b (1.00)

Note. Liking scores could range from 0 (*not like at all*) to 4 (*very, very much*). Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. Within each film, means with no subscripts in common differ at $p < .05$ using Scheffé post hoc comparisons.

The analysis of facial expressions of enjoyment/joy while viewing *Beauty and the Beast* revealed main effects for both age, $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.80$, $W = 4.26$, $p < .05$, and gender, $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.00$, $W = 4.08$, $p < .05$. These main effects reflected that expressions of enjoyment were less common as children aged, and were more common among females (63.2%) than among males (46.7%). No other main effects or interactions were obtained in this analysis.

Turtles

The analysis of self-reported enjoyment of the *Turtles* revealed main effects for age, $\beta = -.23$, $t = -3.56$, $p < .001$; gender, $\beta = .35$, $t = 5.21$, $p < .001$; and male-stereotyping, $\beta = -.15$, $t = -2.30$, $p < .05$. These main effects reflected lower levels of enjoyment as age increased, greater enjoyment among male ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.33$) than among female children ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 1.47$), and greater enjoyment among children who did not male-stereotype the movie ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.44$) than among children who did male-stereotype the movie ($M = 2.09$, $SD = 1.52$). Again, however, this main effect should be interpreted in light of the predicted Gender \times Stereotyping interaction that was also observed, $\beta = -.38$, $t = -3.16$, $p < .01$. Table II shows the means for this interaction and illustrates that among the children who did not stereotype the movie, males and females expressed equal enjoyment scores. In contrast, among children who did stereotype the movie as "male," females expressed significantly less enjoyment than did males. No other effects involving stereotyping of the movie were revealed in this analysis. Likewise, the final analysis of facial expressions while viewing revealed no main effects or interactions involving gender, age, or stereotyping.

DISCUSSION

This study suggests that many gender differences in responses to media entertainment are evident among children and parallel many of the types of responses observed in adult samples. In addition, this study lends some support to models of gender-role development suggesting that gender differences should become more pronounced as children age from very early years into middle childhood.

In terms of emotional responses, the most pronounced gender differences observed in this study occurred for reactions to the sad segments, with females being more likely than males to report and express sadness. In addition, gender differences in self-reported intensities of sadness were shown to increase with age. The idea that females would report greater sadness than would males is consistent with prior research on adults' responses

to sad films or tear-jerkers (e.g., Oliver, 1993, 2000), and is also consistent with developmental theories implying that gender differences in emotional responses should increase as children age.

Despite showing that gender differences in sadness increase with age, though, the results of this study do not explain *why* these differences may exist. For example, one possible explanation that is consistent with social learning perspectives is that young boys are discouraged from displays of sadness, or that young girls are encouraged to display empathic concern in response to others' suffering. Alternatively, cognitive-developmental models might suggest that boys and girls are motivated to observe and model same-sex viewers, and that the children's responses may have reflected what they had seen other viewers express on previous occasions. Certainly, future research would benefit from exploring these options, taking into account both children's socialization of gender-typed emotions and children's opportunities to witness other viewers' responses to entertainment.

In addition to examining the reasons why gender differences may increase with age, future research would also benefit from more closely examining the nature of the responses themselves. That is, one possible interpretation for gender differences in response to sad portrayals may be that boys actually feel lower levels of sadness than do girls. Alternatively, it is important to keep in mind that self-reported emotional responses to media portrayals may be susceptible to social desirability problems, and therefore gender differences in self-reported sadness may reflect males' underreporting of their actual feelings of sadness. Although the gender differences in facial expressions of sadness observed in this study may make this interpretation less likely, future research examining emotional responses to media would benefit from attempts to distinguish between reported responses and experienced responses to media entertainment.

In contrast to the sad segments, emotional responses to the action adventure segments showed no gender differences. Although this lack of difference is inconsistent with prior research concerning children's fright reactions to media entertainment (e.g., Hoffner & Cantor, 1990, 1991), perhaps males' and females' similar responses to the action adventure scenes reflect the fact that the video clips employed in this study were relatively devoid of violent content. That is, much prior research has reported that females express greater disturbance in response to violent entertainment than do males, whereas males express greater enjoyment than do females (Blanchard, Graczyk, & Blanchard, 1986; Cantor & Nathanson, 1997; Sparks, 1986; Tamborini & Stiff, 1987). However, the action adventure scenes employed in the present study displayed only exciting scenes in which characters were in danger, but these scenes did not feature explicit displays of violence or aggression. If the lack of gender differences in fear reflects the lack of

violent portrayals in the scenes employed, these findings may suggest that action adventures that avoid explicit displays of aggression or violence may be attractive entertainment fare for both boys and girls.

Aside from responses to the sad and action scenes, children's responses to the prototypical "male" versus "female" previews showed general support for the idea that children perceive entertainment along gender-linked lines, and that this gender stereotyping shows a slight increasing trend with age. In particular, the vast majority of children perceived the *Turtles* as more enjoyed by boys, whereas very few children perceived it as more enjoyed by girls. In contrast, though, the majority of children perceived *Beauty and the Beast* as enjoyed by either gender. However, when children *did* associate *Beauty and the Beast* with one gender, they were more likely to associate it with females than with males. The idea that children would more strongly gender stereotype the "male" film than the "female" film was unexpected, and therefore deserves greater attention in this and future studies.

On the one hand, these unexpected results may reflect that the stimulus materials used to represent a prototypical "female" film were simply not prototypical enough in this case. This potential problem is compounded by the fact that only one example of a prototypical "female" and "male" film was employed. Consequently, these two films differed on a host of characteristics other than "maleness" and "femaleness," including genre, characters, music, and theme, among hundreds of others. These differences strongly imply, then, that future research would obviously benefit from employing multiple examples of more unambiguous materials that may be considered more clearly representative of prototypical "male" and "female" children's entertainment. On the other hand, the stronger stereotyping of the "Turtles" may imply that the media industry's strategies for targeting male viewers may be misplaced because "male-oriented" programming that includes a great deal of violence is perceived as more exclusionary of female viewers than is "female-oriented" programming exclusionary of male viewers. That is, one interpretation of these findings is that portrayals featuring female characters and relational themes can be perceived as appealing to both genders, whereas portrayals that feature male characters engaging in aggressive and violent behaviors tend to be perceived as most appealing to males in particular.

The idea that viewers may be more fluid in their interpretation of "female-oriented" programming than of "male-oriented" programming is similar to the suggestion by some researchers that male gender roles are more rigidly defined than are female gender roles (Brannon & David, 1976; Pleck, 1981). For example, O'Brien et al. (2000) employed this reasoning in their study that found that while female stereotypes were more familiar to preschool-aged girls than to boys, male stereotypes were equally familiar

to both genders. These authors interpreted their findings as suggesting that male stereotypes are more consistently portrayed and are more strongly enforced than are female stereotypes. Applied to children's perceptions of media content, this line of reasoning suggests that stereotypical "male" content may be more readily perceived as masculine by children because the stereotypes it tends to portray (e.g., aggression, fighting) are more consistent than are the stereotypes associated with "female" programming (e.g., female characters, relational themes). Of course, this interpretation is speculative at this point, but it does suggest that future research would benefit from explorations of content that lead to unambiguous "female stereotyping" of media entertainment. Clearly, the colloquial use of gender-linked terms to refer to media entertainment among adult samples (e.g., "chick flicks") suggests that viewers do readily identify some entertainment as particularly appealing to females.

In addition to showing that children tend to perceive media content along gender-linked lines (and particularly so for "male" entertainment), this study also showed that gender differences in children's reported enjoyment of media entertainment depended upon whether or not the children perceived the entertainment as appealing to the other gender. That is, males reported less enjoyment than did females of *Beauty and the Beast* among the children who perceived it as a "female" film, and females reported less enjoyment than did males of the *Turtles* among the children who perceived it as a "male" film. When female- and male-stereotyping of the films was not perceived, however, gender differences in reported enjoyment were nonexistent.

How might the relationship between gender-stereotyping and enjoyment be interpreted? On the one hand, these results may suggest that when children have a particular affinity for a given type of entertainment, they tend to assume that the entertainment is liked more by other children of the same gender. From this point of view, children's entertainment preferences serve to affect the way in which the entertainment is stereotyped. On the other hand, these results may suggest that when children perceive entertainment as liked by a particular gender, their own entertainment preferences follow along same-gender lines. From this point of view, children's stereotyping of entertainment serves to affect entertainment preferences. Although the present study cannot definitively argue for one interpretation over the other, it is likely that both processes play some role in explaining the relationship between preferences and stereotyping.

Although future research would benefit from exploring the causal relationship that exists between preferences and stereotyping, the mere existence of this relationship and the patterns that emerged in this study suggest some interesting implications for the types of portrayals that may be most

enjoyed by children of both genders. In this study, while children did not evidence a particular affinity for films when they perceived the films as appealing to their own gender, both males and females did evidence a distaste for films when they perceived the films as appealing to the other gender. Although numerous factors obviously contribute to children's perceptions of entertainment as more liked by one gender than the other, including advertising, parental guidance, and peer viewing, among hundreds of others, content-related portrayals likely play a large role in children's perceptions. Consequently, future research should more closely examine the types of portrayals that lead children to stereotype entertainment in the first place, and should explore portrayals that are perceived as equally appealing to both males and females. By avoiding overtly gender-related portrayals, new forms of entertainment may not only stand to benefit from a larger viewing audience, but also avoid many of the detrimental portrayals such as violence, or exclusionary portrayals such as the "Smurfette principle" that have been the focus of much criticism and debate.

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