

Abstract

Purpose: Using gender schema theory, the authors explored how children's graphic t-shirts from clothing retailers in the United States differed on gendered themes for graphic t-shirts targeting boys or girls, in addition to differences for shirts that were higher in cost.

Design: This content analysis of children's t-shirts included 866 child-targeted shirts taken from the online retail portals from eleven clothing retailers in the United States. Shirts were coded for gendered themes on the front torso part of the shirt and included traditional boy themes (e.g., aggression, instrumentality) and girl themes (e.g., compassion, passivity). In addition, the retail prices for each shirt were recorded at the time of data collection.

Findings: The results demonstrated that children's graphic t-shirts starkly differentiate between femininity and masculinity based on their target. Boys' shirts were significantly more likely to feature active themes, whereas girls' shirts were more likely to focus on social belonging and interpersonal connection. Boys' shirts were also more likely to display themes linked to dominance/aggression but not compassion. Girls' shirts were more likely to tout both shyness *and* attention seeking. Lastly, results generally showed that higher priced t-shirts were less likely to feature gender stereotypes than lower-priced t-shirts.

Originality: This is the first known study that has looked at the marketing of children's clothes in retail environments with a specific focus on gender and gender stereotyping.

Paper type: Research paper

Keywords: child consumer socialization; gender typing; gender stereotypes; girl power; toxic masculinity; content analysis

**Boys Go, Girls Go Along: Exploring Gender and Price Differences Regarding Themes
Present on Children's Graphic T-shirts**

The notion of “girl power” is a popular branding strategy, attached to clothing, sports, and entertainment (Banet-Weiser, 2004). In the 1990s, T-shirts emblazoned with “Girls Kick Ass!” and “Girls Rule!” became hot items for elementary-aged girls (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). Indeed, feminism, as a brand, has become popularized, as it is socially acceptable to announce feminism to others. Indeed, the point of popular feminism is to make women's rights visible, as purchasing feminist products is the same as challenging patriarchy (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Thus, with the forces of public policing of the marketing of sexism to children and girl-power marketing at play, one might think that retailers would avoid using gender stereotypes in children's clothing.

Why does gendered clothing matter? Clothes represent an area where broad forces reinforce gender roles. This matters because children are “gender detectives”, they seek information about gender identities/performance, attempt to draw inferences about gender, and apply their conclusions to themselves (Martin and Ruble, 2004). Consequently, even subtle messaging about gender can affect how children see themselves. We argue that an investigation of the thematic differences in clothing marketed as “boy” and “girl” clothing is useful to understanding what children are learning about gender and gender socialization in children's clothing.

Previous content analyses on children's clothing has explored Halloween costumes (Nelson, 2000) and sexualizing features of girls' clothing (Goodin *et al.*, 2011), but in the present study, we explored clothing that is explicitly communicative in nature: graphic t-shirts. Using a content analysis of 866 graphic t-shirts for elementary school-aged children (i.e., between the

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ages of 5 to 11) from popular American clothing retailers, we examine the gendered themes on t-shirts (e.g., aggression) and whether shirts differ by which gender is targeted by retailers. Lastly, we investigate whether these differences exist when looking at the price of the shirt and if the shirt's cost interacts with gendered cues.

Children's Clothing and Gender in a Developmental Context

Gender typing is the process of developing gender roles, or gender-linked preferences/behaviors, valued by society (Golombok and Fivush, 1994). Three components of gender typing occur in early childhood: (1) developing a *gender identity*, which is the knowledge about one's gender; (2) learning *gender role stereotypes*, which are ideas about how gender is supposed to be performed; and (3) enacting *gender-typed behaviors*, which occur when children favor activities traditionally associated with their gender.

Through this process, children learn content-specific information that links behaviors and attributes to gender (Bem, 1981). According to gender schema theory, the developing child builds a cognitive network of gender-related associations that helps them organize and assimilate existing gender-related information. Once gender-specific components are encoded, stereotypical components of gender (e.g., physical appearance) can render another component accessible (e.g., occupation) even without mention (Deaux and Lewis, 1984). Additionally, the child's self-concept gets assimilated into this gender schema (Bem, 1981) as children not only learn what attributes are societally linked to gender, they also learn how their own attributes are linked. Children understand their own adequacy in terms of their gender schema. This explains why children will view their gender schema as a "perspective standard" (Bem, 1981, p. 355), so that their behaviors/preferences conform to culturally accepted notions of femininity/masculinity.

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Children between 5-11 years-of-age are in the “middle childhood” stage regarding gender development (Halim and Ruble, 2010). During this stage, children’s understanding of gender roles becomes more flexible. Between the ages of 2 and 5, children are interested in figuring out gender; they are called “gender detectives” at that age (p. 495), seeking to discern the rules/boundaries of gender and sanctioning anyone who violates these rules. In contrast, children hit a peak in their gender flexibility in late elementary school (Blakemore, 2003). As children in middle childhood are better able to recognize variability, they are capable of understanding and accepting more nuanced gender characteristics and behaviors (Halim & Ruble, 2010). Thus, although their knowledge of gender stereotypes continues to increase in middle childhood, their personal endorsement of stereotypes decreases.

The content of gender schemata is not inevitable; gender schemata are constructed based on children’s environment and experiences (Bem, 1981). Nevertheless, multiple assessments of femininity and masculinity typically agree on some core dimensions (Bem, 1974; Levant *et al.*, 2007). Traditional femininity typically focuses on the core aspects of investing in appearance, purity, modesty, domesticity, and emotionality. Conversely, core aspects of traditional masculinity include emotional restrictiveness, aggression, risk-taking, status-seeking, and primacy of work. However, over time, women have increasingly accepted masculine traits, while men’s acceptance of masculine and feminine traits has remained stable (Donnelly and Twenge, 2017).

We posit that children’s graphic t-shirts are particularly salient markers of gender differentiation during the formative years of childhood. To the extent in which t-shirts reinforce gender schemata, these t-shirts could elicit evaluative reactions from others. Receiving feedback about gender-appropriate themes they are wearing might reinforce and refine children’s gender

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stereotypes and enhance the likelihood that they enact gender-typed behaviors (Bussey and Bandura, 1999).

Further, children's clothing choices represent complex and ongoing interactions between child and parent. First, children play an important role in deciding which clothes they have available and are not passive participants when purchasing clothes (Ironico, 2012). Second, while others exert an important influence on children, parents are vitally important in helping their children make clothing decisions (Åberg and Huvila, 2019) and socializing their children (Maccoby, 1992), particularly when it comes to gender norms/stereotyping (Halpern and Perry-Jenkins, 2016). Although this is not true of all parents or children, many parents have differing gender expectations for children that often start at birth. For example, girls are perceived as vulnerable, and parents traditionally assume that girls will be more interested in social interaction (Golombok and Fivush, 1994; Boe and Woods, 2018).

Retailers and marketers also contribute to gender typing as they ultimately decide on which shirts they offer to consumers. For example, stores that wish to corner a market (e.g., upper-income families) will sell clothes that match the sensibilities of their targeted consumers. Further, fashion is situated within cultural moments that influence consumer offerings. For example, in the 2000s, Disney started marketing princesses to children to cross-promote media offerings featuring these characters (Orenstein, 2006); this marketing campaign soon became a cultural phenomenon and extended to 25,000+ licensed products in just a couple years (Setoodeh and Yabroff, 2007). Consequently, cultural contexts influence what trends and values are highlighted in children's lives (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek, 2011).

Gender and Children's Graphic T-Shirts

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At issue for the current study is how children's graphic t-shirts, which likely cue identity for both the child and the parent, canalize dominant stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity in line with gender schema theory (Bem, 1981). Despite girl-power marketing strategies (Banet-Weiser, 2004) and public policing of sexist messages on children's clothing (e.g., Samakow, 2014), the extant literature on media, children's toys, and children's culture reveal consistent and dominant stereotypes. To discern which gender stereotypes are particularly salient for children in middle childhood, we examined the content analytic literature on cultural artifacts that are directed to children at this age to distill the stereotypes to investigate in the present study.

In popular culture aimed at children in middle childhood, boys are often portrayed as active leaders (Murnen *et al.*, 2016; Luisi, 2019; Harriger *et al.*, 2021). For example, Reich and colleagues (2018) examined the gendered themes associated with LEGO® toy-sets and found that sets targeted to boys were more likely to highlight heroism and technical skill. Meanwhile, girls' toys are more likely to encourage creativity in line with arts/crafts rather than technical skills (Pomerleau, Bolduc, Malcuit, and Cossette, 1990). Similarly, in children's cartoons, male characters are more likely to show ingenuity in problem solving (Aubrey and Harrison, 2004), are more likely to be portrayed as athletic and self-sufficient (Thompson and Zerbinos, 1995), and are frequently portrayed as violent risk takers when compared to female characters (Harriger *et al.*, 2021). Self-sufficiency is also a theme related to masculinity in TV shows most popular with boys ages 7-13 (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2020) and in promoting children's movies (Aley and Hahn, 2020).

Additionally, across Halloween costumes, action figures, and Valentine cards, male characters were more likely to be portrayed in functional clothing that suggest bodies-in-motion

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(Murnen *et al.*, 2016). Meanwhile, girls are often portrayed as socially dependent (Reich, Black and Foliaki, 2018; e.g., caretakers; Luisi, 2019) or as deferential to boys (Aubrey and Harrison, 2004). In children's cartoons, boys are portrayed as more humorous, often at the expense of others (Thompson and Zerbinos, 1995). Also, in television shows popular with boys in middle childhood, boys are encouraged to behave aggressively and are rewarded for such behaviors whereas girls are not (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2020). Additionally, boys are more likely to be targeted with toys that mimic weaponry (i.e., firearms; Auster and Mansbach, 2012). Conversely, girls are socialized to behave in a way that is inclusive and privileges interpersonal connections (Reich, Black and Foliaki, 2018).

Although researchers have examined gender stereotypes in children's media/toys, a gap in the literature exists regarding these same stereotypes in children's clothing. We argue that the marketing of clothes is an important indicator of children's gender typing; indeed, their clothing choices likely complements children's toys and entertainment choices. For example, a child who is a fan of Disney princess movies will also likely play with the toys and wear the clothing that features these princesses.

In the literature, we could only locate two published content analytic studies on children's clothing. First, Goodin and colleagues (2011) examined the frequency and nature of "sexualizing" clothing available to girl children (sizes 6-14) in American stores. Sexualization, as one core aspect of femininity, is the idea that girls are expected to care about being thin, attractive, and sexy. The authors argued that for girls, their first opportunity to enact the role of sexual object comes through clothing choices and 29.4% of clothing items in the sample had sexualizing characteristics. Second, Nelson (2000) examined gendered markers in children's Halloween costumes, finding that 91% conformed to gendered stereotypes. Both feminine and

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masculine stereotypes were pervasive in this analysis, but for girls' costumes, roles were limited as femininity was mostly portrayed through beauty queens and princess costumes. The rarity of content analyses of children's clothing establishes the importance of furthering the scholarship of whether shirts differ in their targeting of boys and girls.

For a review of the gender stereotypes examined in the present study, alongside the cultural artifacts that have been shown to reinforce each stereotype, see Table 1.

Cost, Social Class, and Children's Clothing

It is also necessary to consider whether there are differences among children's graphic t-shirts regarding cost. Across the retail landscape, there is significant stratification based on income as certain stores target lower-income shoppers (e.g., Walmart) while others target higher-income shoppers (e.g., Nordstrom; Turow, 1997). In fact, some clothing retailers have unique subsidiaries that are designed to target separate economic groups. For example, GAP Inc. owns the clothing retailer Banana Republic, which targets "sophisticated" higher-income shoppers, and Old Navy which is described as "value-priced" (Gap Inc., 2011). Moreover, clothing and social class are historically linked as clothes targeted to working class populations have traditionally been more ostentatious than clothes for wealthier consumers (Rubinstein, 2001; Kaiser, 2012).

Another consideration is how gender socialization and socioeconomic status are linked and whether one should expect shirts to differ in gendered themes/appearances based on the shirt's cost. Past research on income and gender socialization reveals that children raised in higher-income homes have parents who are more likely to express gender roles that are more egalitarian (Marks, Lam and McHale, 2009) and that these children are also more likely to share their parents' egalitarian beliefs (Kulik, 2002). As such, it is reasonable to expect that higher priced t-shirts will be less gendered in order to appeal to the sensibilities of these shoppers

Current Study

The current study explores differences in children's graphic t-shirts by gender and cost. First, this study looks at the content-specific elements on children's t-shirts. In line with gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), we expected that boy focused shirts would be more likely than girl focused shirts to employ themes that celebrate activity and accomplishment. We further expected that boy's shirts would be more likely to highlight aggression and dominance while shirts marketed to girls would thematically focus on passivity and social belonging. Specifically, we hypothesize that shirts targeted to boys will be more likely to feature commands, humor, along with themes associated with self-sufficiency, intelligence/analytical ability, instrumentality/athleticism, dominance/aggression, decisiveness/leadership, and action. Conversely, we hypothesize that shirts targeted to girls will be more likely to feature themes related to compassion, consensus building, shyness/passivity, attention seeking, and artistry. Third, the study explores whether these features differ by cost. It is expected that higher priced shirts will not employ as many of these themes. We also tested whether gender and price of shirt interacted on these themes.

Method

Sample

The sample of t-shirts was taken from 11 popular U.S. child clothing retailers. The retailers selected had to sell clothes targeting both boys and girls and have an online shopping portal. The selection of stores was based on a review of industry reports highlighting this sector's largest clothing sellers (Euromonitor International, 2017; Weinswig, 2017). The child-only clothing stores were Gap Kids, OshKosh B'gosh, The Children's Place, Gymboree, and Crazy 8.

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The family apparel stores selected were Target, Macy's, Walmart, Sears, Nordstrom, and Old Navy.

To populate the sample, the online portals for each retailer were used. For each portal, clothing was separated by gender by the retailer. Because many of the retailers sold clothing for multiple ages, we selected only clothes that were for children. To populate a sample that was equivalent across retailers, the focus of the current study was on graphic t-shirts targeted for elementary school-aged children who can be considered in the middle childhood stage of gender development (i.e., approximately between 5 to 11-years-old). For the goals of the present study, it makes sense to examine the clothing available to children in middle childhood as we would expect there to be a diversity in gender representations to children during this age because the children are continuing to refine their understanding of gender with more flexibility than earlier in childhood

Larger retailers like Target differentiated age by classifying their clothes as for "boys" or "girls." For stores that were primarily child-clothing retailers (e.g., The Children's Place), they used terminology like "toddlers", "little girls", and "big girls"; in these cases, the classification used was for "big" kids. This selection process was validated by checking the sizes for clothes in the category with sizes matching across retailers.

Sample collection was conducted in early April of 2018. For each retailer, 40 shirts for each gender were selected at random for inclusion in the sample. The second author saved a high-resolution image of the t-shirt and recorded the listed price of the shirt. The sampling procedure resulted in 866 total t-shirts as 14 were not able to be located due to misidentification. Of these shirts, 49.7% ($n = 430$) were targeted to girls, and the average price for the shirts was \$11.79 ($SD = 10.43$).

Coding Procedure

Because this is the first known study to content analyze children's t-shirts and their gendered content, the researchers developed the coding scheme. We were guided by gender schema theory (Bem, 1981) in understanding the content-specific dimensions of traditional masculinity/femininity on children's graphic t-shirts; thus, we used the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974) to develop the codebook. The BSRI classifies select traits as either masculine or feminine. The masculine traits are defending beliefs, independent, assertive, strong personality, forceful, leadership abilities, risk taking, willing to take a stand, aggressive, self-reliant, athletic, analytical, decisive, self-sufficient, individualistic, competitive, ambitious, and acts as a leader. The feminine traits are affectionate, sympathetic, sensitive to others, understanding, compassionate, eager to soothe feelings, warm, tender, loves children, gentle, yielding, cheerful, shy, flatterable, loyal, soft-spoken, gullible, childlike, and does not use harsh language. Although first conceptualized in the 1970s, follow-up research has shown that these categories can still be used to validly categorize men and women of varying ages (Oswald, 2004). Further, a meta-analysis showed that, with the exception of women's masculinity scores on the BSRI (which have increased since 1993), women's femininity scores, and men's femininity and masculinity scores have remained stable (Donnelly and Twenge, 2017).

Using these traits as the starting point, the authors explored conceptual overlaps between these categories to identify coding categories. The analysis of gender traits identified by the BSRI highlighted other themes that could be explored with the codebook which centered on traditional masculine and feminine traits (see Table 1 for a full list of traits and coding descriptors for each variable). We identified these coding categories as being "traditionally" feminine: compassion, consensus building, shyness/passivity, attention seeking, and artistry.

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Conversely, the following traits were identified as being “traditionally” masculine: commands on shirts, use of humor, self-sufficiency, intelligence/analytical ability, instrumentality/athleticism, dominance/aggression, decisiveness/leadership, and engaged in action. For each variable, coders indicated presence/absence (i.e., 0 or 1). Lastly, the codes were not mutually exclusive as shirts could be coded for having multiple thematic elements.

Coding was conducted by four trained research assistants and led by the second author. The coders underwent approximately 15-20 hours of training over a period of three months, and when they achieved consistently adequate levels of intercoder reliability, they coded the main sample. In order to standardize our approach, only the front torso part of the shirt was coded. Coders were also instructed that for the messages on shirts, they should assume that the message of the shirt was self-referential (unless context made it clear that the message was directed to others).

Intercoder reliability was established from all coders coding 9.2% ($n = 80$) of the total sample. We calculated intercoder reliability with Gwet’s AC2 statistic, which is a preferable index of reliability when there is high percent agreement among coders yet one category of a variable is over-represented (Neuendorf, 2016) as this was the case with most of these variables.

Analysis Strategy

Multiple logistic regressions were used for all analyses. In addition, because the t-shirts were each nested within retail outlets, there was a likelihood that the error terms associated with the in-store observations would be correlated (i.e., the shirts any store sells are likely to be more similar to one another than shirts at other stores), which would have violated the independence of error assumption (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). As such, mixed effects logistical regressions

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were used with stores serving as the clustered variable, all data were analyzed using STATA 14 (StataCorp, 2015). For significance testing, alpha was $p < 0.05$.

Results

Table 2 presents regression findings for the presentation of themes on shirts by gender and income. The first thematic element explored was the appearance of commands on t-shirts. The main effects model was not significant, $\chi^2(2) = 5.80, p = 0.055$, as shirt price was marginally associated with the increased presence of commands on lower priced shirts. The interaction term was not significant.

The next variable tested was whether the shirt employed humor. The initial main-effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 36.10, p < 0.001$ as both variables significantly predicted the presence of humor as shirts targeted to boys and lower cost shirts were more likely to feature humor. The interaction term was not significant.

The third thematic coding variable tested was the presence of self-sufficient themes on children's shirts. We did not find any differences by either gender or shirt price in the main effects model, $\chi^2(2) = 3.98, p = 0.137$. The interaction term was not significant.

The presence of intelligence/analytical ability was tested next, and the main effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 10.54, p = 0.005$. Of these main effects, targeted gender was significant as boys' shirts were more likely to feature this theme. The interaction term was not significant.

We then explored the presence of instrumental/athletic themes on the shirts. The results of the main effects model were significant, $\chi^2(2) = 60.57, p < 0.001$, as shirts targeting boys were more likely to feature this theme. The interaction term was not significant.

The dominance/aggression theme on t-shirts was tested next. The main effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 85.29, p < 0.001$. Boys were significantly more likely to have these themes

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featured on their shirts. There was no effect for the price of the shirt, and the interaction term was not significant.

The themes of decisiveness/leadership were tested next. The results showed that the main-effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 6.19, p = 0.045$. Of these effects, only shirt price was a significant predictor as higher priced shirts were less likely to contain these themes. The interaction term was not significant.

The next test examined compassionate themes. The main effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 155.70, p < 0.001$, as girls' shirts and lower priced shirts were more likely to have this theme. The subsequent inclusion of the interaction term was also significant. Very few shirts targeted at boys featured compassion; yet, as the cost of shirts increased for girls' shirts, the appearance of these themes decreased (see Figure 1).

We then explored the presence of consensus building themes on these shirts. The results showed that the main-effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 22.22, p < 0.001$, as girls' shirts were significantly more likely to display these themes. Lower priced shirts were marginally more likely to have these same themes. The interaction term was not significant.

The next test determined whether there were differences regarding themes related to shyness/passivity. The main-effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 21.06, p < 0.001$ as girls' shirts were more likely to feature this theme. The interaction term was not significant.

The next test explored the presence of attention-seeking themes. The main effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 16.70, p < 0.001$, as both gender and shirt cost were significant. Specifically, girls' shirts and lower priced shirts were more likely to feature this theme. The interaction term was not significant.

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We then tested whether themes of artistry were found on t-shirts. The main-effects model was marginally significant, $\chi^2(2) = 5.26, p = 0.072$, but targeted gender was significantly associated with artistry as girls' shirts were more likely feature artistry. Neither the price of the shirt nor the interaction term was significant.

Our last test looked at the depiction of action on t-shirts. The main-effects model was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 26.82, p < 0.001$. We found that on boys' t-shirts, the characters were significantly more likely to be engaged in action. There was no effect for the price of the shirt. The interaction term was not significant.

Discussion

In the first known study on this subject, we examined whether the gendered themes on graphic t-shirts were different for shirts targeting boys and girls, in addition to differences for shirts based on cost. The results suggest that there were consistent gender-based differences and that these differences closely matched traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. Specifically, as expected, boys' shirts were more likely to feature humor and themes related to intelligence/analytical ability, instrumentality/athleticism, dominance/aggression, and depicting action on their shirts. Moreover, in line with expectations, girls' shirts were more likely to feature themes related to compassion, consensus building, shyness/passivity, attention seeking, and artistry. Consequently, despite girl-power marketing (Banet-Weiser, 2004) and public policing of sexism in children's clothing (Samakow, 2014), the reliance on gender stereotypes appears to be a common practice for children's graphic t-shirts. This tendency to reinforce gender stereotypes through clothing is consistent with findings looking at other cultural objects for children, such as toys (Reich, Black and Foliaki, 2018), television programs (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004), and costumes (Murnen et al., 2016). Thus, as children are developing gender

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awareness, graphic t-shirts help reify traditional gender stereotypes. Furthermore, we found differences for these shirts based on cost as gender differences were typically played down more as the cost of shirts increased as this relationship was found for humor, decisiveness/leadership, compassion, and attention seeking. In the following paragraphs, the main effects for gender will be discussed, and we will then explore the cost-based effects.

When contextualizing these findings, it is crucial to note the complex web of influences that shape children's fashion choices as the prevailing culture influences what themes are highlighted (Barnard, 2002; Calefato, 2004). Retailers make choices regarding what they offer, parents are crucial influences via their primary purchasing power, and children, especially as they get older, have some say in what clothes they are going to wear. Consequently, in understanding why we found these differences, it is not possible to determine just who is primarily responsible. Yet, these findings can help us understand the environment in which children are learning about gender.

Gender Differences in Children's T-shirts

In examining the content-specific information that likely represents children's developing gender schema (Bem, 1981), we used the BSRI (Bem, 1974) to conceptualize how graphic t-shirts communicate about traditional gender stereotypes. In terms of these themes, shirts targeted to boys were significantly more likely to employ humor, were more likely to highlight intelligence, athleticism, aggression, and were more likely to depict scenes of action. Girls' shirts were more likely to feature compassion, consensus building, shyness, attention seeking, and artistry. Taken together, the results of the present study suggest that shirts targeted to boys are more likely to highlight action, aggression, and abilities, whereas girls' shirts were more likely to focus on getting along with others, coyness and one particular type of ability- artistry.

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These findings are not surprising when considering the broader context of gender and culture. For example, boys' shirts were more likely to feature humor when compared to girls' shirts, which has its roots in long-standing stereotypes that women have a more complicated relationship with humor than men do and that women "aren't funny" (Stanley, 2008). Not only are shirts targeted to girls less likely to feature humor, but they are also less likely to have shirts that highlight their ability to actively accomplish a range of tasks (with the exception of art). In other words, on children's graphic t-shirts, boys' shirts reinforce the societal expectation that boys like and attend to humor more favorably than girls. Further, research has shown that boys have been found to use power-based and psychological functions of humor to achieve goals; girls, on the other hand, use humor to establish solidarity (Hay, 2000). Women bringing solidarity to conversation, again, emphasizes that girls are taught to be polite and friendly while boys are supposed to use power in social interactions.

Themes of aggression and dominance frequently appeared on boys' shirts compared to compassionate themes. As seen in Figure 1, themes related to compassion were almost never featured on shirts targeted at boys (2.3%). Conversely, 33.9% of shirts targeted to boys featured themes related to dominance/aggression. In other words, boys are nearly 15 times more likely to find a shirt that highlights domination and/or aggression than a shirt that features connection to others. This featuring of aggression and dominance paired with the absence of compassion, suggests that boys' graphic t-shirts feature themes related to "toxic masculinity" (Kupers, 2005) whereby a drive to dominate is coupled with a hesitancy to connect with others (Parent, Gobble and Rochlen, 2018). This is problematic as evidence suggests that toxic masculinity is linked to increased mental health issues (Parent, Gobble and Rochlen, 2018) and less egalitarian gender attitudes (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). To be clear, we do not conclude that these shirts lead

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to such outcomes among children; rather, we are suggesting that these shirts appear to reflect the consumer culture in which boys are socialized.

Of note for shirts marketed to young girls are the seemingly paradoxical findings that these shirts feature themes of shyness *and* attention-seeking compared to boys. It is important to note here these themes did not often co-occur on the same shirt; shirts featured either shyness *or* attention seeking. Both are acceptable roles for girls: girls can be shy, manifesting in self-consciousness and fear of novel social situations (Doey, Coplan and Kingsbury, 2014), *or* they can be princesses, seeking attention and admiration from others (Orenstein, 2006). Although these are contradictory themes, they can be seen as reflective of a postfeminist sensibility in which themes of “girl power” appear alongside themes that girls are naturally shy (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020).

Additionally, in thinking about how these two stereotypes co-exist and circulate in children’s fashion, it is possible that the combination of shyness and attention-seeking broadly reflect an acceptable temperament of coyness, defined as a performed or feigned shyness or modesty to be alluring. As girls move into late childhood and early adolescence, they typically self-report more shyness than boys, which is likely a reflection of their greater social anxiety (Doey, Coplan and Kingsbury, 2014). At the same time, they learn that it is valuable to them for boys to admire their bodies and appearance (Goodin *et al.*, 2011). Thus, the availability of both themes on graphic t-shirts allow girls to embrace either component of coyness that is salient to them at given points in their development.

In line with our argument that clothing is a salient marker of a child’s gender identity, the gender stereotypes that appear on children’s graphic t-shirts underline the process of gender typing in childhood (Bussey and Bandura, 1999). According to the social cognitive theory of

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gender development and differentiation, when boys wear shirts with masculine themes (e.g., aggression, intelligence), they are likely to elicit positive feedback from others, which will help boys refine and reinforce their burgeoning understanding of masculinity. Similarly, when girls wear shirts with feminine themes (e.g., compassion, shyness), they are also likely to receive positive feedback. In contrast, when boys wear shirts that communicate compassion, or girls wear shirts that highlight dominance, they would likely be ignored or reprimanded by others, which again would provide direct tuition for children's extrapolations to behavioral outcome expectancies. For example, in a series of experiments with adults, Sullivan and colleagues found that adults sanction children who violate gender stereotypes even among very young children (Sullivan *et al.*, 2018). Girls should not be dominant but kind and caring. Boys should not be caring and nurturing but aggressive. T-shirts remind children and others that these are the acceptable rules of gender.

Lastly, there was a null finding that deserve mention. Although we found differences with shirts that portray boys as more active and girls as more socially focused, there were no differences for self-sufficiency and leadership/decisiveness themes between genders. This might be one area in which girl-power marketing has taken hold (Banet-Weiser, 2004). That is, while it might be socially acceptable to market other gender stereotypes to children, the ideas that girls must follow boys or are reliant on them are off limits on children's graphic t-shirts. Both of these codes focused on themes that highlighted a sense of confidence, which is a common theme among popular forms of feminism today. The theme of self-confidence circulates easily and with remarkable reach in popular media, social media, and advertising, all imploring girls to have as much confidence as boys (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Although the active/passive and social belonging dimensions of children's shirts differed for boys and girls, shirts targeting both boys

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and girls put forth an “I can do it” attitude. Just what “it” is differs, as boys’ shirts display greater confidence about “going it alone” while girls’ shirts express confidence about “getting along.”

At issue is why these gendered themes in children’s t-shirts persist. The most convincing argument from Banet-Weiser (2018) who argues that this marketing practice packages feminism as “safe” and affirmative; it is not a “killjoy” type of feminism that actually provides critique of structure. Because this type of marketing needs a neoliberal capitalist context, it is necessarily conservative. As such, it nudges us back to the status quo; in this case, that means girls are sugar and spice and everything nice with maybe a little dab of sass (but not too much). There are some visible examples of girl power, but this research suggests that these are still the exceptions and not the rule. Our findings revealed few expressions of boy femininity; which is not surprising as there seems to be little appetite for this in the consumer market as gender normativity is privileged. Specifically, parents want their kids to be masculine or feminine in a way that conforms to their biological sex which is particularly true for boys (see Kane, 2006). Consequently, these t-shirts allow parents and kids (who police gender in early childhood, e.g., Nabbijohn *et al.*, 2020) to express gender typically.

It is important to contextualize the gender typicality findings with regard to the developmental period (i.e., middle childhood) under investigation. Children in middle childhood are more flexible in their understanding of gender than they were in early childhood, and likewise, they are more flexible than they will be by the time they reach adolescence (Halim and Ruble, 2010). Thus, if there ever was a time in youth to expect diversity in gender representation, it would be for children in this age group. That we still find rather rigid stereotypes by gender is telling of our cultural values that privilege gender typicality.

Price Differences in Children’s T-shirts

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The results regarding the cost of t-shirts revealed a consistent pattern in line with expectations. That is, the higher the cost of the shirt, the *less* likely the shirts were to use gendered themes. In particular, the results showed that as the cost of shirts increased there was less reliance on humor, less attention to themes of leadership, fewer displays of compassionate/interpersonal themes, and fewer instances of attention seeking on these shirts.

Historical explorations of clothing and class based differences have revealed that higher status populations have tended to wear clothes that are less audacious when compared to working class populations (Crane, 2000; Kaiser, 2012). For example, in looking at the results of the current study, the more thematic nature of lower priced shirts may be used by wearers to set themselves apart. For the most part, our findings align with this historical record as the higher cost shirts are less conspicuous than lower cost shirts. However, because of the relative dearth of research in this area, future research is necessary to unpack this set of findings.

Implications

There are some key implications for researchers, consumers and marketing/advertising practitioners that should be addressed. First, the study provides some implications for researchers interested in children, marketing, and gender stereotyping. Specifically, by extending this exploration of gender typing (Bem, 1981) into children's clothing, the current study can provide potential opportunities for other researchers to examine how gender typing is reflected in the marketing of other child clothing products or other ages. To be clear, other studies have examined clothing in this context, but there have been very few and these studies are not very recent (Nelson, 2000; Goodin *et al.*, 2011). As such, the current study sheds light on an area where theories related to gender typing can be extended.

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Second, when considering the implications for consumers, it is important to note that children are active participants in consumer settings, particularly as it relates to fashion (Ironico, 2012). Consequently, it is important for both children and parents to be aware that the consumer environment for clothing, as it relates to children, is quite gendered. Moreover, with previous research showing that gender stereotypes affect gender beliefs and preferences (Meyer and Gelman, 2016), such stereotyping in children's t-shirts may affect children's own self-conceptualizations regarding gender.

Regarding the implications for marketing/advertising practitioners (including retailers), research on gender stereotyping suggests that using such stereotypes may produce blowback, particularly from consumers who have more feminist leanings (Banet-Weiser, 2018) or are hesitant to celebrate themes associated with toxic masculinity. Yet, our findings indicate that some practitioners and retailers are still using heavily stereotyped approaches and may want to reconsider this practice if they want to appeal to a broader base of potential consumers.

Limitations and Future Research

This is the first known study to analyze the gendered themes present on children's clothing. As such, this study offers an initial glimpse at an area of inquiry where the authors were unable to rely on previous research to guide the study. The benefit of being first in an area is that the researchers can ask questions that have not been asked before and can help draw the conceptual boundaries. However, the obvious drawback to being first is that there are likely some oversights regarding decisions that were made and limitations in what populations were examined. For example, future research should examine t-shirts target to other age groups and cultural contexts to determine whether the current findings extend into other areas.

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One key limitation associated with this study is the use of the price of the t-shirt as an indicator for the income class targeted. Using price as an indicator certainly lacks precision as obviously no one is prohibited from shopping at a particular store, as it is case that those with more economic resources shop at lower cost stores and those with limited resources shop at more expensive stores. However, American retail environments are classified by these divisions and stores do cater to particular income targets (e.g., Whole Foods vs. Albertsons; Schlossberg, 2016; Turow, 1997), so it was important to capture these potential differences in price. Future research should identify other potential proxies for income differences that offer more precision.

Conclusion

In the first known study to look at gender and price differences in the messages shown on children's graphic t-shirts, the findings revealed that shirts targeted to boys were more likely to display themes celebrating activity while girls' shirts were more likely to highlight social belonging and connection to others. Moreover, the study found that boys' shirts were significantly more likely to include themes of dominance and aggression and few references to compassion/interpersonal warmth which is associated with themes of "toxic masculinity". Regarding the cost of shirts and differences in themes, higher priced shirts were generally less likely to display thematic elements that would indicate starker gender differentiation when compared to lower priced shirts. These findings can help researchers understand children's cultural environments and offer new avenues of potential inquiry in understanding how children learn gender stereotypes in retail settings.

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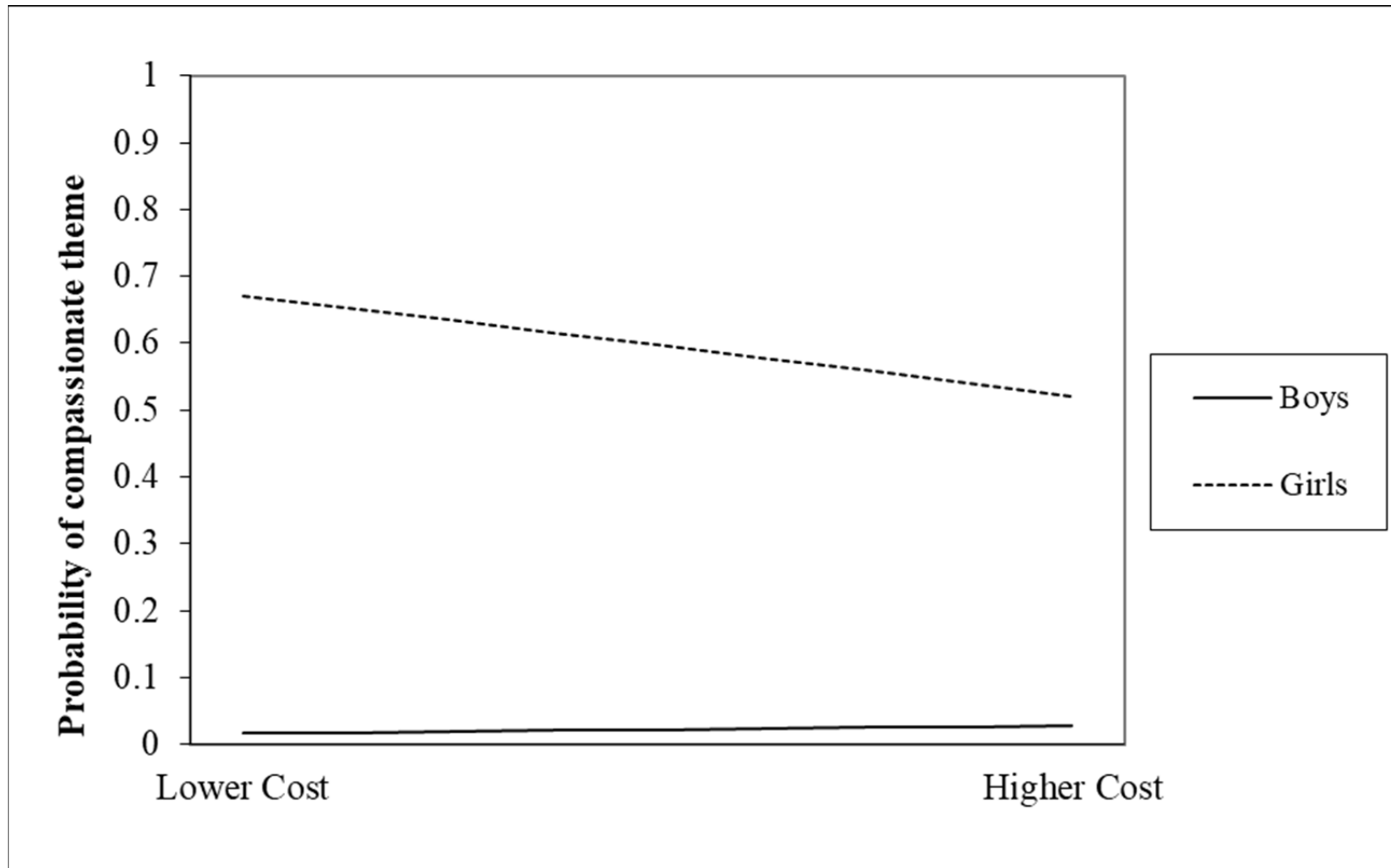
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Figure 1: Plot of significant gender targeted by price interaction for presence of compassionate themes.