Gender Segregation on BabyTV

Old-time Stereotypes for the Very Young

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The systematic inequality of gender representations in television programming for preschool and older children throughout the world has been well documented. Very little is known, however, about the nature of gender representations in television programs aimed at children in infancy and toddlerhood. This study aims to fill this gap using the case of *BabyTV*, which is the first television channel in the world directed at infants and toddlers. The qualitative analysis of 39 channel's programs has yielded results that are in line with previous research demonstrating the dominance of male characters in programming that targets older children, as well as gender stereotyping along traditional lines. It seems that the freedom afforded this channel by virtue of featuring animated characters is counterproductive: rather than using animals or objects to present gender equality, the creators default to male characters as the norm, and to stereotypical depictions and behaviors of female characters.

The systematic inequality of gender representations in television programming for children throughout the world has been well documented (Götz & Lemish, 2012; Lemish, 2010). Specifically, white male characters dominate children's screens. Gendered stereotypes are prevalent: Males are typically central to the narrative and are presented as leaders; rational, assertive, and active, they are most of all framed as "doers". Females, by contrast, are typically passive, emotional, and dependent; focused on their appearance and on relationships, they are sexualized from a very young age. Such research, however, has investigated programs targeting children from preschool to early adolescence, when gender identity is already well developed and the gender segregation manifested in earliest childhood is clearly evident in all realms of life. Very little is known, however, about the nature of gender representations in television programs aimed at children in infancy and toddlerhood, a time of life when gender differences are supposedly of less relevance to everyday functioning and pressure to conform to gender norms is less salient. Yet,

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the first two years of life are crucial to the development of a gender identity. This study aims to investigate the gendered nature of the television offerings for this age group.

Development of gender awareness

The ability to perceive distinctions between male and female attributes is a critical component of gender identity-formation. But when does gender stereotyping begin? Research has shown that infants can distinguish between female and male voices at six months, and can discriminate between faces of men and women starting from seven to nine months of age (Bussay & Bandura, 1999; Halim & Ruble, 2010). Moreover, when visual displays are presented on videotape, infants may discern intermodal associations between sex and voices as early as six months of age. Hair length, clothing style and voice pitch are distinguishing features for such discriminations (Leinbach & Fagot, 1993; Poulin-Dubois, Serbin, Kenyon, & Derbyshire, 1994). These findings demonstrate that perceptual discrimination of males and females is based on minimal cues, and occurs already during infancy.

Toward the end of the first year of life, infants also begin to demonstrate the early foundations for developing associations between faces of women and men, and gender-related objects, such as a hammer or scarf (Levy & Haaf, 1994). The finding that infants are able to differentially associate stereotypic objects with the sexes suggests that they are developing the capacity to attend to traditional behavior of men and women, and may in certain circumstances make associations with these social constructs of sex differences.

Infants' knowledge of attributes associated with gender categories increases substantially during the second year. Research on intermodal knowledge has demonstrated that by 18 months of age, children start to associate verbal gender labels (e.g., woman, man) with the categories of faces representing different genders (Poulin-Dubois, Serbin, & Derbyshire, 1998). Likewise, there is evidence that at this age children form masculine metaphorical associations, linking fir trees, bears, and the color blue with males; feminine metaphorical associations were not found to be significant (Eichstedt, Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, & Sen, 2002). Young children, then, develop gender categories and networks of gender-associated attributes well before they can verbalize such knowledge.

Furthermore, by their second birthday children begin to demonstrate awareness of concrete gender stereotypes (Quinn, Kuhn, Slater, & Pascalis, 2006). For example, two-year-olds perform remarkably well in sorting pictures of feminine and masculine toys, articles of clothing, tools, and appliances in terms of their typical gender relatedness (Thompson, 1975, in Bussay & Bandura, 1999); and at around 26 months they become aware of gender differences associated with adults (e.g., physical appearance, roles, and abstract characteristics, such as softness) (Ruble & Martin, 1998).

Children's gender-linked information is formed, first and foremost, by observing models provided by their immediate environment, e.g., parents and other caregivers

(Fagot & Leinbach, 1995). In addition, the mass media offer pervasive modeling of gendered roles and conduct (Anderson, Huston, Schmitt, Linebarger, & Wright, 2001; Bussay & Bandura, 1999; Halim & Ruble, 2011). The role of media in the construction of gender schemas and identities is particularly important in light of the fact that media characters demonstrate forms of femininity and masculinity to children, and offer them a host of models for identification and imitation. Research examining the impact of media on the construction of gender roles in older children, for example, has found a relationship between viewing television at a young age and holding stereotypical views regarding various roles occupied by men and women, and gendered attitudes about women and men (Gunter, 1995). While many of these studies were correlational in nature, or presented short-term results under experimental conditions, they nevertheless reinforce what we know about children's tendency to learn from television content (Signorielli, 2012). Similarly, reception studies of both girls and boys suggest that television content is processed by children in their meaning-making efforts to construct their own gender identity and sense of self, as well as their developing sexual orientation (Lemish, 2015).

In view of the importance of media influence on children's gender identity construction, it is surprising that no attention to date has been given to understanding the prevailing gender images and stereotypes in television shows that target infants and toddlers. This article aims to fill that gap, using the case of *BabyTV*, which is the first television channel in the world directed at infants and toddlers. Launched in 2003 in Israel, *BabyTV* gained international attention, as for the first time infants became a specifically targeted TV audience (Carvajal, 2008; Fuenzalida, 2011; Krieger, 2012). In 2007, *News Corp's Fox International Channels* acquired a major stake in *BabyTV*, placing it alongside *Fox Crime, FX, National Geographic* and other worldwide distributed channels. Today *BabyTV* is distributed in more than 100 countries, broadcasting 24/7 in 18 languages. According to the channel's official website, *BabyTV* is "built around nine developmental themes (first concepts, nature and animals, music and art, imagination and creativity, building friendships, songs and rhymes, guessing games, activities and bedtime), which cover all early learning skills and developmental milestones for toddlers" (https://www.babytv.com/corporate-brand-activities.aspx). In the main, *BabyTV* shows feature 2D and 3D animation, puppets, and material figures (e.g., clay puppets or cork). Live action, by contrast, is only infrequently featured.

Methodology

For the sample composition, we first developed a list of all shows (45 in total) broadcast during June 2016 on the *BabyTV* channel in Israel. Then we verified which of these shows are available online both in Hebrew and in English, to confirm the shows' international relevance. This selection process yielded a sample consisting of 39 shows available worldwide. Most of the shows in the sample were animated (19 were 2D animation and 13

were 3D animation), four shows featured puppets; two shows featured material figures and one show featured live action. In three shows puppets and animated characters were the main characters, with children and adults appearing as background actors. One randomly selected episode of each show was analyzed, in an attempt to examine the main gender representation of all characters taking part in the episode. Altogether 184 characters were analyzed.

The first step of the analysis aimed to classify the characters according to their gender (i.e., female, male and no clear gender identification) and according to the characters' main identifying form (i.e., humans, bugs and animals, objects such as fruits, geometrical figures and numbers, and anthropomorphous unidentified creatures that we call "aliens"). In addition, we analysed the narrator's voice by classifying it as female or male. The second step entailed a thematic analysis of the shows, using qualitative procedures according to the following categories: (1) characters' appearance, such as body features, style of dress and accessories; (2) their role in the script, such as who is responsible for the storyline development and who is a leader; (3) "traditional" versus "alternative" gender roles and activities, such as cleaning or taking care of others versus building or driving a vehicle; and (4) the main features of the characters' behavior, such as fearfulness, timidity and immaturity versus assertiveness, boldness and maturity that could be interpreted as "stereotypical" or "alternative" depending on the character's gender.

Findings

Quantitative representation of female and male characters

As Table 1 suggests, among 184 characters analyzed, males outnumbered females by more than 100% (107 vs. 46). The gender representation of human characters was the most balanced of the categories, whereas gender representation of imaginary anthropomorphous characters ("aliens", animals/bugs and objects) was extremely imbalanced. This finding suggests that the more freedom of choice the animators have to determine gender, the less egalitarian they become and the stronger their preference for defaulting to male characters, as was found in programming for older children in previous research (Götz & Lemish, 2012). Likewise, we found a strong dominance of male voices in the category of narrators (8 versus 3), which is rather unexpected in light of systematic evidence suggesting that babies and toddlers have a stronger preference for female voices (Nakata & Trehub, 2004; Standley & Madsen, 1990).

Table 1. Characters' classification according to gender and main category

Category Type	Female	Male	No clear gender identification	Total
"Aliens"	1	9	2	12
Narrators	3	8	-	11
Humans	20	34	-	54
Animals and bugs	13	38	20	71
Objects	9	18	9	36
Total	46	107	31	184

Characters' appearance

Within the category "characters' appearance" we analyzed characters' hairstyle and facial features, use of "stereotypical" colors (pink, purple and blue) versus "neutral" colors, outfit and accessories. At first glance, it seems that *BabyTV* makes a deliberate attempt to de-emphasize, and sometimes even to erase, characters' gender characteristics. Thus, about two-thirds of the shows avoid "gendered" colors, featuring, instead, green, orange and yellow. Furthermore, a majority of shows (28 out of 39) feature non-human characters (such as bugs, animals, objects and "aliens"), where gender characteristics are supposed to be less prominent. When the shows feature humans, their body shapes do not indicate any gender characteristics, since by and large they have the body structure typical of babies and toddlers.

Yet, careful examination of the female characters reveals certain stereotypical features intended to emphasize femininity, such as "gendered" hairstyle (ponytail holder and/or bow tie hair ribbon), enlarged eyelashes, and an intensive use of pink and purple for the characters' clothing, hair and body color. This is especially evident in shows that feature non-human characters, such as geometrical shapes, numbers, bugs, animals or objects. In these shows, female characters are easily identified by their long eyelashes, enlarged eyes and highlighted lips, "girly" hair accessories, and pink and purple coloration. For example, in *Mitch Match*, which features four puzzle pieces, the sole female puzzle piece is pink. *Kenny and Gurie*, with two almost identical kangaroos, features a female kangaroo in pink. Moreover, in *Pim and Pimba*, of two penguins, Pimpa (the female penguin) wears a red bow tie hair ribbon, and Billy, the older bear sister in *Billy and Bam Bam*, has pink fur and a red bow tie hair ribbon.

As against such female color-gendering, the use of "gendered" colors and accessories for male characters was much less frequent. Although blue is still the ultimate color symbol of masculinity, we found a heavy use of "neutral" colors, such as yellow, green or brown, for the male characters' body and clothing. Moreover, pink was sometimes used in this context, marking a shift in male representation (e.g., Tickles-Tickles, the pink "alien" in *Cuddlies* and Tuli, a pink snail from *Tuli* show). This change, however, is

not fully realized, since both of these characters are extremely gentle, and could thus be perceived as "feminine". In terms of facial features, most male characters had a "sweet" or "cute" "baby-face", which can be explained by the very young age of the target audience of *BabyTV*. In other words, since it is socially acceptable for a baby boy to be "sweet" (but much less so for an older boy), the male characters of *BabyTV* feature big eyes and chubby cheeks. No male character, however, had the type of eyelashes that seem to serve as the ultimate marker of femininity.

Finally, in the few cases that diverged from stereotypical female appearance, there was kind of "amendment" (compensation) of the character's other features, which could be interpreted as an attempt to present a more "balanced" gender appearance. For example, Lily, a young girl from *Lily and Pepper*, has tangled hair and wears eyeglasses and overalls. At the same time, the entire set, as well as most of Lily's clothes and her bird friend's (Pepper) accessories, are colored in shades of pink and purple, leaving her femininity unquestionable. Similarly, although Miss Kettle (a female kettle in *Baby Chef*) is "neutrally" colored (orange and green), her lips are enormously full and her cheeks are extremely red – which overemphasizes the character's femininity, while depicting her in a somewhat grotesque light.

Characters' behavior and role

Within this category we tried to identify behaviors that can be seen as stereotypical, such as expressions of hesitation, fear or shyness for female characters versus leadership and assertiveness for male characters. Similarly, we analyzed "traditional" gender roles and hobbies, such as cleaning or taking care of others versus building or driving a vehicle. The same characteristics used for portraying an opposite gender would be seen as alternative and even progressive representation. In addition, we examined the character's role, pointing to her/his dominance versus marginality and initiative-taking, versus being led by others.

Here too gender stereotypes were affirmed rather than refuted. Thus, for example, in *Mitch Match*, when three male puzzle pieces jump fearlessly into the water, the female puzzle piece remains fearfully outside. Her friends create a ladder and a boat to help her, to no avail: she remains hesitant. Thus, the female puzzle piece not only presents stereotypical behavior, she also plays out the traditional script of "damsel in distress" who waits for her male savior. Interestingly, only in those shows that are predominantly masculine are the male characters permitted to express fear or timidity. For example, in *Bath Tubbies*, which features three male animals) elephant, frog, and chick), the chick (representing in all narratives a vulnerable baby) is fearful of water, a fear that his male friends help him to overcome. We found no instance, however, of a fearful male character who receives help from a brave female friend.

Regarding roles, we found that male characters more often play leading roles than do female characters: he (but not she) usually shows the way, offers solutions, or provides

instructions. Thus, for example, in *Baby Chef*, the male chef gives orders to his voiceless, obedient female assistant, Miss Kettle. Similarly, in *Tiny Beats*, featuring four bugs (only one of which is female), the (red) female bug almost always follows the (blue) male bug, who is invariably the first to try out a new toy or drive a vehicle. In the few cases that the former tries something new first, such initiative is depicted as happenstance (she bumps into the item).

This pattern is especially striking in those shows where gender characteristics are erased for most characters, but not for the "leader", who is clearly male. For example, in *Egg Birds*, which features a group of colored eggs with no gender indications, the team leader has a typical male haircut (black short hair resembling a punk hair style or a rooster's crest), whereas the rest of the eggs are hairless (and also genderless). Similarly, in *Mice Builders*, where a team of seemingly genderless mice (only in the last frame of the episode is it possible to see that some of them have ponytails) are playing a guessing game, the delivery mouse, who brings the object to be guessed by the team, is definitely male, since he is the only mouse who wears blue overalls and a blue postman-style cap. Moreover, when characters did not have a clear gender identification, a male character would play the role of an "anchor" for recognizing one gender at least. For example, in *Popiz*, featuring two "aliens", Pop (an assertive, sometimes-angry red creature with a low voice) is clearly male, whereas the gender of the gentle, blue Piz is debatable. Likewise, in *Pitch and Potch* (another show from the "aliens" category featuring two shapeless creatures of yellow and brown), much larger Potch is easily recognized as male by his low voice, whereas smaller Pitch remains "genderless".

Dominant male characters are presented as the same age as (or even younger than) other characters; hence it is precisely the "leadership qualities" of such figures that make them leaders. Thus, for example, in *Charlie and the Numbers*, Charlie is a young boy who visits a place populated by numbers. The numbers appear to be older than Charlie (indicated by their adult voices and clothing), but he solves their problems through recourse to his outstanding cognitive abilities and creativity. In stark contrast, in a show which is apparently parallel in design (*Zoe Wants To Be*) featuring a young girl as a main character – Zoe is drawn into new adventures by animals whom she meets, her role is limited to playing with them by imitating their behavior.

Furthermore, in the three shows that feature a dominant female character who displays better skills and stronger abilities than other characters, the character is older, hence fitting the stereotypical pattern of a female caregiver, such as an older sister, babysitter, mother, or kindergarten teacher. Thus, for example, in *Billy and Bam Bam*, featuring Billy (a large pink female bear) and Bam Bam (a much smaller blue bear), Billy appears to play the role of responsible, patient big sister of reckless and impulsive Bam Bam. The latter's younger age is underscored not only by his smaller size, but also by his limited language fluency. Thus, it is clear that he is "just a baby", justifying Billy's dominance.

In four shows only did we find a balanced representation of male and female characters in terms of behavior and role. All of these shows feature two characters (male and

female), which play a similar role and display similar behaviors within the show. Thus, for example, in *Nico and Bianca*, two characters with a slight resemblance to dogs (he is brown and wears a baseball cap while she is purple and wears a bow tie hair ribbon) take turns painting a picture and the other character tries to recreate the picture using playdough as a medium. Similarly, in *Kenny and Gurie*, the two nearly identical kangaroos, distinguished only by color (he is brown and she is pink), play a guessing game; the kangaroos take turns creating an object and guessing its identity. Here too, we did not find any stereotypical behaviors or a dominance of one character over another.

Compared with balanced representation, alternative gender representation was even rarer, with only one salient example found in *Cuddlies*, featuring four "aliens" living in a commune. Red Yam Yam (the biggest male in the group, who speaks in a very low male voice) cooks and cares for his childish friends. The pink male, Tickles-Tickles, is gentle and even "feminine". It ought to be noted that, like the pattern of alternative representation of physical appearance that was identified with respect to male characters only, here too the rare examples of alternative gender roles and personal characteristics were found only in relation to male characters, those part of a predominantly masculine team. As such, this shift in gender roles hardly taps into the potential of progressive gender representation.

Conclusions

Our analysis of gender representations on *BabyTV* has yielded results that are in line with previous research demonstrating the dominance of male characters in programming that targets older children worldwide, as well as gender stereotyping along traditional lines (Götz & Lemish, 2012). It seems that the freedom afforded these shows by virtue of featuring animated characters is counterproductive: rather than using animals, objects or "aliens" to present gender equality, the creators default to male characters as the norm, and to stereotypical depictions and behaviors of female characters.

This is particularly surprising given the age bracket of the target audience, well before clear gender segregation and peer pressure take their effect. It is hard to explain why a program for babies and toddlers would not present equal numbers of males and females, or why leadership roles would only be assigned to male characters. One possible explanation is that the show's creators have in mind stereotypical gender perceptions that are appealing or intimidating in the eyes of parents. Considering the evidence in the literature that parents perceived "feminine" toys and activities as more gender stereotypical than "masculine" ones, which contributes to their greater acceptance of cross-gender conduct by girls than by boys (Campenni, 1999), it is plausible that the program's creators aim to make their "product" more appealing for the parents of boys in order to preserve an important segment of their audience. As a result, even in programs designed for infants and toddlers, the rehashed industry argument that "girls will watch

boy characters and narratives but boys will not watch girl characters and narratives" (Lemish, 2010) applies, although this argument is not necessarily evidence-based, and screen choices are not made by young viewers.

The dominance of male voice-over is a further case in point. Despite the documented preference of infants for a female voice, it is a male voice that they usually hear in such a role. Arguably, this could be interpreted as a progressive choice, namely, to balance the predominance of female caregivers during the early stages of development. However, if this was true, we could expect a balanced representation of female and male narrators. Hence, we suggest that this finding reflects the producers' assumption that parents of young children would prefer the "authoritative" male voice that would supposedly provide the children with a credible interpretation of objective reality, echoing research on preference for narrators and voice-over in adult programming (Lemish & Tidhar, 1999).

This interpretation accords well with previous studies done on the children's media industry, which is dominated by male norms, and the resulting gender discrimination from birth that passes as neutral and normal (Lemish, 2010). Apparently, this hegemonic culture work is so entrenched and assumed that it carries over to the production world for the youngest of audiences. This observation stands regardless of the gender composition of the media professionals: Women, just as men, internalize the industry's norms and produce programming that matches those expectations. Even when well-intentioned professionals develop gender sensitivity and wish to make changes, they are often confused about how to do so in a way that will not alienate their audiences and result in financial loss. Hence, they continue to rehearse the formulas that seem to be working well (ibid).

Simple changes, such as having the same number of male and female characters of all kinds, presenting smart girls who don't wear pink and do lead others, or boys with eyelashes who receive help from girls, could be easily implemented, with very little social and commercial "risk". Currently, only androgynous creatures escape stereotypical representation, and even then, a clearly straight-male character is presented alongside, to reinforce traditional masculinity. Older female characters, those that can be perceived as a big sister or caregiver, are also sometimes presented in a less gender-stereotypical manner. Hence, we are witnessing here a real missed opportunity to socialize young viewers to gender equity and to a non-stereotypical world- view in regards to appearance, behavior, and gendered role segregation at a pivotal point in gender-perception development. The world presented to them on the screen is one of male dominance and beautified femininity across all fields – human, animal, object, and even "alien". Crucially, while *BabyTV* originates in Israel, its content is distributed to more than 100 countries around the world, making the trends we identified a global concern.

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