

A Critical Essay Exploring the Evolution of Female Gender Identity in the Media.

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Abstract: This article examines the evolution of female gender identity in the media through the comparative analysis of two influential texts: Mark Twain's 19th-century novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and the contemporary animated series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. The study utilizes gender schema theory and social learning theory to explore how these texts shape children's understanding of gender roles. While *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* reinforces traditional gender stereotypes with male-centric narratives and the marginalization of female characters, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* breaks these norms by presenting diverse and empowered female characters who lead the story and challenge conventional gender roles. This shift reflects broader societal changes towards gender equality and diversity. The essay highlights the significant impact of media representations on children's gender identity development and underscores the importance of providing diverse and equitable gender role models in media to foster a more inclusive society.

Keywords: Gender Identity; Media Representation; Child Development; Gender Schema Theory; Social Learning Theory; Gender Stereotypes; Female Empowerment; Gender Roles; Developmental Psychology; Gender Equality.

1. Introduction

This article will analyze how the media shapes and influences female gender identity during children's development through two texts. "Gender identity" is not biologically or naturally determined but is continuously constructed culturally through a series of repeated behaviors, rituals, and social norms (7). "Gender norms" are a set of social expectations and standards set by society for how men and women should behave and present themselves (29). These normative gender ideas come together to create ideologies about the expected appearances and behaviors of females and males (25). "Development" refers to the structure that occurs in humans or other organisms, progressive changes in functioning and behavioral patterns (1). Children will continue to form their own gender identity during their development, and this process will be influenced by family, peer groups, and media (15).

Family is one of the influencing factors in children's development. Parents and other family members may teach children about gender norms and expectations in their culture. These behaviors, expectations, communication styles, and presentation of gender roles will have an important impact on the formation of children's gender identity and gender roles (22). In addition, as children grow, they will be influenced by their peer groups, and through social activities and conversations, they can imitate and absorb the gender-related behaviors and attitudes displayed in their peer groups (21).

The media can provide children with a variety of gender roles and behavioral models that far exceed the gender models they encounter from their families or peers (41). These media characters are often designed to be more "attractive", which increases the possibility that media characters will be regarded as ideal role models by children (28). According to Jimenez (17), male characters tend to be more common than female characters in children's TV shows and movies. How do such representations of gender in the media impact the formation of children's gender identities? In order to get further into this topic, this article selects two media works that

represent the construction and display of gender roles in different eras as texts. The first text is the 19th century classic literary work *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and the second text is the contemporary animated series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.

In the next section of the article, I will briefly describe the two texts, and explain the reasons for their selection. Afterwards, I will compare the two texts to identify differences and similarities, and how they relate to developmental psychology. Next, I will use gender schema theory and social learning theory to investigate how the information conveyed by the text affects the development of children's gender identity. At the end of this article, I will reflect on my experiences and understanding of gender identity and summarize the main arguments of this article.

2. Text Description

Text One is *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. This book is a classic novel written by Mark Twain, first published in 1876. The book is set in the United States in the 19th century and tells the story of the protagonist Tom Sawyer as well as the adventures of his pals Huckleberry Finn and Joe Harper. Tom is an impulsive, naive boy who loves to travel and seeks independence. He couldn't stand the boring life and decided to take risks. His adventures include treasure hunting, witnessing a murder, testifying in court, living on a sandbank and pretending to be a pirate. These stories are not only full of fun, but also reflect Tom's growth and psychological changes. Becky Thatcher is an important female character in the book. She is Tom's crush, and her existence is of great significance to Tom's life and experience. The daily routines and social mores of an American small town are often described in this book, along with the childhood experiences of American youths in the 19th century. This work is very popular among children around the world and has been adapted into movies, animations, comics and radio dramas many times.

Text two is *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (hereafter referred to as MLP:FiM). It is an American cartoon, produced

by Lauren Faust, and first aired in 2010. This show tells the story of a smart and adventurous pony named Twilight Sparkle, who came to Pony Town with her assistant Spike to learn about the magic of friendship, and in the process met five good friends, Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, these characters represent honesty, generosity, kindness, loyalty and joy respectively, which are different aspects of friendship. They overcome obstacles and find solutions together, demonstrating the power of friendship. The show has been praised for breaking simple and traditional gender stereotypes and providing a diverse range of female character types. It is deeply loved by audiences and its influence extends far beyond children, attracting a wide range of audiences including adults. MLP:FiM has been adapted into comics, video games, toys, collectibles and a range of lifestyle items bearing the series' logo or characters.

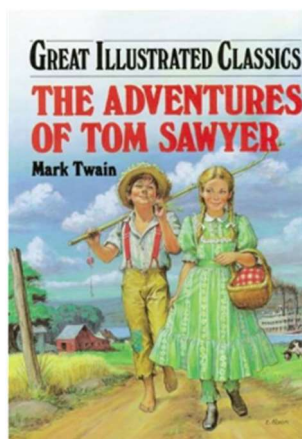


Fig.1 Naughty Tom and Becky, a traditional female figure wearing a skirt and carrying a basket (37).



Fig. 2 Female ponies with different personalities (24).

3. Reason for Selecting the Text

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer was one of my favorite books to read as a child, and I was fascinated by Tom's adventures. Looking back on the book, I found that it followed traditional, stereotypical gender norms, with a male character leading the narrative. Becky seems to exist only to establish some connection with Tom, her image is marginalized and full of stereotypes. She has no independent adventure or plot line of her own and exists dependent on Tom. This emphasizes the dominance of male and the subordinate status of female, which is in line with the concepts and expectations of men and women in the United States in the 19th century.

In contrast, MLP:FiM presents a world led by female ponies, and the story does not drive the plot in a gendered manner, but revolves around the adventures and friendships of female characters. These female ponies are not dependent on male characters as they can be very powerful on their own or with the help of another female character. My 8-year-old sister is a big fan of the cartoon. Her motto is "I am who I am, and I do what I want to do based on my own ideas, not what others ask of me." This made me realise that MLP:FiM subtly helped her understand her gender identity. Therefore, I want to choose these two works as research objects for comparison to reveal how the media affects the female gender identity of

child viewers and readers.

4. Text Comparison

4.1. Difference: The Centrality of Gender Characters

First, there is a difference in the centrality of gender roles presented in the two texts. The main characters in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer are Tom and his male companions. Becky doesn't have a separate plot and just exists as Tom's object of desire. This shows that women represented by Becky are placed in a supporting or secondary position rather than as independent and complex individuals. This phenomenon is called "the Smurfette Principle" by feminist essayist Katha Pollitt (27), "Boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral; boys are individuals, girl types. Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys" (27). In social culture, media and literary works have a profound impact on people's values, self-identity, and expectations (2; 9). Boys rarely encounter stories in which men only play minor roles. They only see simplified female images, unimportant female images, and unhelpful female images. Therefore, they learn a simple truth: girls are not so important (27). Because they are underrepresented in literature, women may feel that their experiences and tales are not respected, which might have a negative impact on their self-esteem and self-efficacy (39).

However, MLP:FiM breaks "the Smurfette Principle" phenomenon. The story revolves around six female ponies, who are the leaders of the story. There is only one male regular character on the show, Spike, who is the assistant to the protagonist Twilight Sparkle. This reversal of gender roles, with women in major roles and men in minor roles, challenged gender stereotypes and was a breakthrough in most cultural fields. Gender identity messages presented through the media during childhood can influence their long-term gender perceptions and behaviors (38). Therefore, the non-traditional gender role models and diverse gender expressions provided by MLP:FiM will promote children's understanding of gender equality and diversity. This understanding may continue to influence their gender cognition as they grow up and help form a more inclusive and equal worldview.

4.2. Difference: The Presentation of Gender Characters

The second difference is the presentation of gender roles. According to Aubrey and Harrison (3), when female characters are stereotyped, their roles and identities are often defined based on their appearance or relationships. In The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Becky is described as having "charming blue eyes; blond hair braided into two long braids; and Tom fell in love with her at first sight" (3). Becky's individual aspects such as talents and qualities are not described, but her appearance and attractiveness are emphasized. This stereotypic depiction of girls' appearance can cause female to internalize this view and increase their tendency to self-objectify (14). Additionally, this is a microaggression. This affects girls' self-identity and self-esteem, causing them to believe that their value lies mainly in their appearance without focusing on developing other qualities (30).

MLP:FiM encourages audiences to question stereotypes,

especially regarding the traits and behaviors women and girls should have. For example, Rainbow Dash loves sports and is competitively oriented, the traits typically associated with men in traditional gender role stereotypes. MLP:FiM's female characters and images are not reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes just because they are female. According to Francis (13), when children are exposed to more diverse models and activities, different areas of their brains actively develop. This shows that when girls see ponies who are similar to or resonate with themselves in MLP:FiM, they will enhance their awareness of their own value and potential. And boy audiences can learn a lot of skills they don't usually get from boy-oriented shows, such as problem-solving outside of the use of violence and embracing emotions instead of hiding them.

4.3. Difference: Social Norms about Gender Characters

A final difference is the social norms surrounding gender characters. The Adventures of Tom Sawyer reflects more on the gender concepts of the era in which it was written, with male characters often engaging in adventurous activities, while female characters are usually depicted as more in line with the expectations of women of that era, who are gentle, virtuous, and more family oriented. According to stereotypes, women belong in the house and men belong in the office (16). This is a form of benevolent sexism, and although they appear to be just positive stereotypes, they limit women to a specific role to justify men's social dominance. Such role distinctions will be extended to children's daily activities (18). If stories in which men are always risk-takers, isolated to pursue more competitive and risky careers, and women are always housewives, children may internalize these roles and thus follow these stereotyped roles and behavioral patterns (26). This will limit their personal choices and potential and can also cause stress.

MLP:FiM breaks many traditional social norms. Each female pony has different interests and careers, as well as complicating personality types, showing that there are many ways to be a girl and that girlhood is not defined. Witt (40) stated, "As children move through childhood and adolescence, television is an important influence on their gender role socialization." The cartoon helps children develop an understanding of gender, re-evaluate femininity, and helps girls realise that they can pursue any interests and dreams regardless of gender.

5. Text Analysis in Developmental Psychology Study and Broader Literature

5.1. Bandura's Social Learning Theory

According to the social learning theory of Bandura (5), individuals learn by observing the behaviors, attitudes and results of others. This learning process is called observational learning or imitation learning. As the primary source of information and entertainment, media has a profound impact on audiences' perceptions and values. Especially for children, media is a keyway for them to understand the world, form concepts, and recognize their own identity (39). From this, we know that children can shape their views of the world and their views on gender by observing characters in books or on television. However, when media content is simply exposed

to children, it does not mean that they will automatically adopt the values or behaviors displayed (33). In other words, viewers don't blindly accept everything they see in the media. However, when they are frequently exposed to media content containing gender stereotypes, they may begin to internalize these concepts and consider these impressions to be correct and acceptable (4). This internalization may affect their behavior, interests, career choices, and even relationships. The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is a best-selling book and has been read by thousands of children. When children read similar gender roles again and again, children will deepen their sense of identity with the gender identity described in the book.

Additionally, if characters or models in media are perceived by audiences to be attractive, similar to the audience, or to have admirable qualities (e.g., popularity, success, etc.), then the likelihood that the audience will imitate the behaviors of these characters is higher. For example, Twilight Sparkle from MLP:FiM is a very popular pony. She is very confident and dares to challenge authority. Girls who like this character will imitate her when they see her. These characters challenge traditional gender norms and can provide young audiences with alternative models that are not restricted by traditional gender constraints. When the character's behavior is accompanied by praise or success, it will increase the child's imitation rate. But if the protagonist's behavior is criticized or fails, children will be less likely to imitate (12). In addition, the media often provides simple one-dimensional models and behavioral patterns that are straightforward, which makes media content particularly suitable for the social learning process, and it is easier for the audience to understand and internalize the behavioral patterns displayed by the characters (2). Undeniably, families, schools, peer groups, and broader social culture also play a role in shaping these perceptions. The influence of media is the result of interaction with these other factors (35).

5.2. Gender Schema Theory

According to the gender schema theory proposed by Bem (6), this theory mainly explains how individuals organize and process information about themselves and others according to gender, thereby forming a perception of gender identity. This theory focuses on how differences in gender and cognitive development affect children's gender grouping, or how they psychologically accept and apply gender role gender schemas (34). According to Sullivan (36) children are driven to learn and imitate behaviors and characteristics associated with their gender because they want to conform to society's definitions of femininity and masculinity.

In The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Becky embodies to a large extent the traditional ideas about female roles in American society in the mid-19th century. Becky is portrayed as a gentle, elegant, and sometimes fragile girl, the characteristic that fit the typical expectations of women in society at the time. She was often depicted as an object in need of protection, further reinforcing the ideas of female vulnerability and dependence at the time. For example, during the spelunking plot in the story, Becky relies on Tom for guidance and protection, which highlights the concept of traditional gender roles of "men as protectors and women as protected." It further reflects the image of "guardian" and "hero" in traditional male roles. Her character demonstrates how women at the time were expected to behave, be viewed, and their place in society and relationships. Through the

character of Becky, we can see the application of pattern theory in the formation and performance of gender roles. Becky's behavior largely imitates and internalizes the expectations of men in the society of her time. And when little girls read this book, Becky's character may have an implicit educational effect on them about how women should behave. This may limit female children's imagination and expectations of their own roles, making them think that they should be weak and in need of protection, rather than independent and strong. Female children may also compare themselves when reading about characters like Becky. If they find themselves behaving differently to Becky, it may raise self-identity issues and they may question whether they fit into the "typical female" image, which may affect their self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

However, with the progress of society and the improvement of the concept of gender equality, these traditional gender schemas have been challenged. When children see more diverse gender roles in the media, they are likely to view previously traditional roles with a more critical eye and learn from them the importance of gender diversity and equality.

The contemporary cartoon MLP:FiM shows female characters that are diverse and different from traditional gender schemas. There are not only characters like Fluttershy who display traits traditionally considered "feminine" such as gentleness and caring, but there are also "masculine" female characters like Rainbow Dash who display a spirit of adventure and competitiveness. This helps children expand their gender schemas and helps them expand their understanding of gender roles. Help girls realise that they can be whoever they want to be, and gender cannot stop them from doing what they want to do.

6. The Implication of the Text

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and MLP:FiM show different understandings of gender roles in different eras. These changes also reflect that with the progress of society and the popularization of education, people have re-evaluated and defined women's roles. These female gender representations in the media not only affect personal development, but also affect society's views on women's roles in different fields (31). Women still face discrimination and inequality in various countries. They face violence, abuse, and unequal treatment at home, at work, and in the wider community, and are even denied opportunities to study and work (8).

In the early days, as shown in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, fewer female characters appeared, implying that women were marginalized and devalued in society (10). Women are unable to have their voices heard in political and social decision-making, and there is a lack of female role models in various fields. When women appear in the workplace, their occupations are often consistent with those gender stereotypes (16; 20; 32). For example, women engage in nursing work and domestic service, industry, textile industry (19).

With the passage of time and social progress, women's status and role in society have undergone significant changes. The feminist movement is a key driver, with more and more women entering higher education and entering career fields previously dominated by men. MLP:FiM embodies this change, showcasing diverse and strong female characters that challenge entrenched gender norms and stereotypes. These media works will have a positive impact on the gender

identity and socialization process of children and adolescents by providing rich gender role models. Girls realise their potential and possibilities, and boys can also develop more well-rounded qualities, such as empathy and creativity (23). When children and adolescents grow up in a gender-diverse educational environment, they will become a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Girls and women are able to develop their potential in a wider range of fields, while boys and men are able to escape the constraints of traditional gender roles and enter fields and roles that are traditionally considered "feminine". This change affects not only individual behavior and attitudes, but also social policy, corporate culture, and public discourse. Over time, this change will lead to a more equal and diverse social structure, as well as an innovative and inclusive ethos (29).

7. Reflective Towards My Own Experience and Expertise

In my childhood, my dream was to be a princess, live in a big castle, have a closet full of clothes, bags, shoes and beautiful jewelry. When I was in high school, a female classmate in my class shaved her head. I still don't know the detailed reasons. Whether it's to represent her personality, or whether it's because her long hair is difficult to manage and delays her studies, this behavior is out of her will. But as an East Asian girl, this is undoubtedly equivalent to a death sentence. Our classmates gave her the nicknames "bald girl" and "tomboy", and even the teacher would scold her, "You are a girl, and you don't have girly looks. It will have a bad influence!" That was the beginning of my feminine awareness awakening. I became aware of the deeply embedded gender norms around me when I noticed that the language was rife with discrimination and preconceptions.

I've come to realise that women are always playing gender. Long hair, dresses, high heels, and exquisite appearance, the beauty we understand does not come naturally from women themselves but is shaped and strengthened by social concepts and cultural traditions. Once women fall outside these norms, they are labeled as "other" and face misunderstanding, criticism, and rebuke from society. Women's value seems to be limited to these external symbols. Such gender norms are reinforced in the media. TV programs, advertisements, books, and cartoons constantly tell us which are "girls' things", and which are "boys' things.", what girls should be like and what boys should be like.

My sister, who is ten years younger than me, does not follow the same rules as I do. Compared to my single princess dream at that time, although her current dream is still being pondered, she believes she can do anything. MLP:FiM had a huge impact on her, teaching her what it meant to be a girl, what it meant to be a human being, and what it meant to be a friend.

As I learned more about gender issues, I began to look at these phenomena more calmly. We need to give society some time and confidence. Those things that shape us, influence us, change our daily experiences and personnel changes are themselves the concrete manifestation of "history". We are living in history and we are making history.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (11).

8. Conclusion

This article explores how the media shapes and represents female's gender identity during child development. By

comparing *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, we found significant changes in gender role presentation and social expectations. From marginalized and stereotyped images of women to today's diverse and powerful female roles, these changes reflect society's re-evaluation and definition of women's roles.

Female characters in media productions such as *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* provide positive role models for young girls. The autonomy and agency shown by these characters encourage young girls to realise that they can transcend the limitations of traditional gender roles, helping a new generation of children learn the concepts of gender diversity and equality from an early age. This education also has an impact on social policy, corporate culture and public discourse, promoting a more equal and diverse social structure. Going forward, the media needs to encourage audiences to reconsider and recognize the limitations of society's ideas about how girls should be.

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