critical media project

Topic Overview: Gender

have you ever wondered...

...why the aisles in toy stores are color-coded (pink for girl toys and blue for boys)?
...why certain foods and drinks are marketed to women, while others are marketed to men?
...why advertisements for pickup trucks use male voices and fast paced editing?
...why women are supposed to like romantic comedies while men are supposed to like action films?

key concepts

- Sex is a system of classification based on a combination of biological and physiological factors (generally male or female, but also intersex). Gender is an evolving concept that refers to both the cultural meanings ascribed to a person's sex or body (often manifesting as masculine or feminine) as well as our internal sense of self or personal experience of our own body.
- Masculinity and femininity are the terms often used to identify a set of characteristics, values, meanings, and cultural expectations tied to gender. In our society, the values tied to masculinity have been generally seen as superior to those associated with femininity.
- From an early age, children are socialized and encouraged to perform specific gender roles and conform to gender roles. The repetition of gendered narratives and images in media has helped to shape these cultural norms around what it means to be a man or a woman, masculine or feminine. Because the traditional gender binary is so ingrained in our values, ideas, media and products, we see fewer alternative gender models that open up possibilities for transgender and non-binary gender identities.

keywords

gender, masculinity, femininity, transgender, intersex, social construction, ideology, convention

the big picture

Media creates meanings about gender, and plays an important role in the way we understand it as part of our identity, our history, our social institutions, and our everyday lives. Gender is a word we hear in everyday conversation. It has traditionally been used to describe an individual's identity as male or female. However, the term "gender" is actually more complicated, and is more commonly understood to be a spectrum that incorporates a range of identities that can also shift over time.

Sex is a system of classification based on a combination of biological and physiological factors (genitalia, chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs). Biology is not always distinctly male or female, as there are some who are born as "intersex," with some variations in chromosomes or sexual organs.

Gender can refer to the cultural meaning that is ascribed to a person's sex. In this respect, we can think of gender as a social construct, an idea, or ideology, a way of seeing. Because gender is a lens or social construct, it means different things in different parts of the world and at different times in history. Gender can also refer to our internal sense of self or the personal experience of our body.

When we think about gender in the context of media and culture, we often see it represented and understood as a simple binary-- "masculinity" and "femininity"--that conjures a fairly rigid set of characteristics, values, and meanings. These meanings, in turn, play a central role in how we understand ourselves as well as the people we encounter.

In Western society (that is, in countries like the United States and Western Europe), we historically have adhered to certain ideas and values that define masculinity and femininity:

masculinity	femininity
strength	weakness
dominance	submission
aggression	compliance/vulnerability
independence	dependence
empowerment	disempowerment
active	passive
rational thought	emotion
production	consumption
breadwinner	nurturer
subject	object
outdoors	indoors
technology	nature

After examining these two lists, think about your own life. Do you believe that the characteristics associated with masculinity are seen as more valuable, less valuable, or equally valuable to those associated with femininity? Do you feel like you're supposed to be on one side or the other?

The important thing to remember is that masculinity and femininity are not only oppositional; They are also hierarchical. The values tied to masculinity, by and large, have been seen as superior to those associated with femininity.

This does not mean that men are superior to women; rather it suggests that the characteristics associated with masculinity are culturally valued above those associated with femininity. In our culture, we tend to value strength over weakness. We value being rational over emotional. We value independence over dependence.

Given that masculinity and femininity are embedded with cultural values and meanings, it's important for us to think about how those meanings circulate in our everyday lives and the media. We need to consider the way our thoughts, values, and media representations are gendered—the way in which femininity and masculinity shape:

- who we are
- how we are perceived and seen or misunderstood and invisible
- how we see the world and interact with it

gender in everyday life

Before we are even born, gender can become a key factor in shaping who we are.

Imagine your aunt was going to have a newborn baby boy, and you went out to buy your new baby cousin a gift. Do you think the baby's sex would influence what you purchased?

Clothing.....Toys..... Room décor.....

Many of these items are purchased based on assumptions about what it means to be a boy or a girl. Girls get pink, flowers, butterflies, and dolls. Boys get blue, trucks and balls.

You might be asking yourself – why does gender play such an important role in shaping people, from such an early age? And was it always this way?

Not necessarily. Until World War II, for example, the colors pink and blue were not exclusively assigned to either sex. In fact, some sources from the early 20th century indicate that the social rules were reversed: boys wore pink and girls wore blue. This does not mean that gender did not matter in previous eras. Quite the contrary, it simply shows that our understandings of gender norms are socially constructed and can vary in different times, cultures, and contexts.

Assumptions about what is right or appropriate for girls and boys has an influence well beyond whether their room is painted pink or blue. Gendered assumptions often lead to very different codes of conduct.

Girls play quietly and gently, and it's ok for them to cry. By contrast, boys "rough house" and should always be tough, never showing emotion.

When boys and girls don't adhere to these "rules" or assumptions, they may be criticized or ostracized. This often is the case for transgender or other non-binary individuals. Children are generally socialized or encouraged to perform specific gender roles and conform to gendered norms. These norms are circulating all around us. We see them acted out by our peers, family members, and role models. We see them in school, at work, in politics, and in the media.

why it all matters... food for thought

It may seem natural that men go to work and women stay home. It may seem natural that men are warriors and women are sex objects. It may seem natural because we see these images over and over again. These images are repeated in the movies and television we watch, the books we read, and in the conversations we have with friends and family. They become familiar conventions, and we tend to treat them as if they have always existed as common sense facts.

Often the roles men and women play in media echo and reinforce the ideas and values tied to masculinity and femininity (see above). Men and boys might take on the role of hero, protagonist, do-er, while females might be more passive or nurturing. When women do take on the hero role, they may simultaneously be objectified and sexualized. In the professional world, men might have more powerful jobs as politicians, athletes, corporate leaders, while women may take on more marginal roles or be valued for their appearance.

But are these representations and ideologies really "natural"? It's important to think critically about how gender plays a role in the way we produce and consume information, stories, images, words, characters, and products. This will help us gain a better understanding of the world around us, help us decide whether we think certain representations promote the types of values we believe in, and help us come up with ideas for how we might work to change things for the better.

As you look through the media examples on this site, use them along with this overview as building blocks and avenues to dig deeper into this facet of identity and ask questions. We might start by asking:

- How are masculinity and femininity represented in the media?
- What specific images and words contribute to our understanding of what masculinity and femininity mean?
- Does the media make assumptions about what men/boys like and how they (should) behave? Are there similar assumptions made about women/girls?
- What representations do we see of transgender and/or non-binary individuals? How do they relate to other individuals who adhere to gender norms?
- What impact do such media representations have on real-life opportunities and possibilities offered individuals of various gender identities in their personal and professional lives?

select sources:

Judith Lorber, "Believing Is Seeing"
Gender Spectrum, "Understanding Gender"
Michael Messner. "Barbie Girls versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender."