RESOURCE TYPE: Class activity

TITLE: Gender Socialization and Children's Halloween Costumes: A Content Analysis Activity

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ABSTRACT:
This content analysis activity allows students to examine the role that mass media and consumer culture play in children's gender socialization. More specifically, students analyze the gendered meanings within marketing materials for children's Halloween costumes. Though the holiday provides individuals with the opportunity to "try on" and "play" a role that is different and outside-of-the-everyday, studies have shown that Halloween costumes tend to be gender-typed in stereotypical, limited ways. Instructors should provide an overview of this previous research and then give students their own sample of costumes to analyze. The set of 40 costumes (names, descriptions, and images) analyzed in this activity was compiled in the fall of 2018 from Walmart.com. Students code the costumes, making note of if/how the costume names, costumes, models, and descriptions are gendered. They list the adjectives used to describe the costume and the potential costume-wearer, and they are also asked to assess whether the model's pose is "active" or "passive." After coding each costume, they identify patterns in their findings. As a class, instructors lead students in a discussion about their findings, how they compare to those from previous research, and what can be learned from content analysis research such as this.

KEY WORDS:
gender; socialization; content analysis; Halloween costumes; children; marketing; consumption

LEARNING GOALS:
1. Explain how the marketing of Halloween costumes may contribute to the process of gender socialization.
2. Analyze costume names, descriptions, and images and identify ways that gender stereotypes are reinforced and challenged.
3. Differentiate between what can and cannot be learned about gender socialization and stereotyping based on content analysis research. Explain how other research methods can be used to answer different types of research questions.

GOALS ASSESSMENT: (255 characters)
1. In response to a written assessment question, students can explain the concept of gender socialization and how the marketing of Halloween costumes can contribute to this process.
2. In discussion and/or in response to a written assessment question, students can identify how costume names, descriptions, and/or images are often gendered in stereotypical ways. Students can also identify ways that those stereotypes are challenged.

3. In discussion and/or in response to a written assessment question, students can articulate what can and cannot be learned about gender socialization and stereotyping from content analysis research.

USAGE NOTES:
This activity was developed for an introductory sociology course at a regional public university. However, I have also used it in an upper-division Sociology of Gender course, and it could be equally well-suited for a Research Methods course. I have used it in classes with 15-40 students, but it could easily be implemented in larger classes. Before starting the activity, instructors should introduce the concept of gender socialization, along with reviewing findings from previous research on the gender-typing of children's Halloween costumes (Nelson 2000). They should then give a brief overview of the content analysis task before putting students into groups of three to four people. Instructors may want to adjust group sizes based on the time they have available, as larger groups should be able to complete the task more quickly. Instructors should encourage groups to review the coding instructions together but then divide the labor of coding. After independently coding a subset of costumes, group members should discuss findings from the whole sample and respond to the provided summary questions. Instructors conclude the class session by leading students in discussion about their findings. No matter the group size, instructors should allow 45-75 minutes for the activity (including the introductory lecture/instructions and the follow-up discussion). See expanded usage notes for more details on implementing this activity.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender socialization is the process whereby we learn (and to varying degrees internalize) our culture's expectations regarding gender, or idealized versions of masculinity and femininity. Though this is a lifelong process, we tend to undergo a particularly intense period of socialization as children (Conley 2020; Spade 2017; Wade and Ferree 2019). This content analysis activity allows students to consider the role that mass media and consumer culture play in children's gender socialization. More specifically, students analyze the gendered meanings within marketing materials for children's Halloween costumes. Halloween is a widely celebrated cultural event in the United States, and the costume industry is a big money-maker (Coyne et al. 2021; Mueller, Dirks, and Picca 2007; Nelson 2000). Though the holiday provides individuals with the opportunity to "try on" and "play" a different, outside-of-the-everyday role for the night, research has shown that Halloween costumes tend to be gender-typed in stereotypical, limited ways (Alexander 2014; Nelson 2000; Sherman, Allemand, and Prickett 2020).

One study that was an important source of inspiration for this activity was Nelson's (2000) content analysis of children's Halloween costumes and sewing patterns. Nelson (2000) examined over 400 unique costumes between 1996-1997. Looking for gender markers in the costume names, descriptions/advertising copy, and costume models (e.g. their hair, accessories, poses, etc.), she coded each costume as masculine, feminine, or gender neutral, and then she did further analysis comparing costumes in the masculine and feminine categories. Nelson (2000) found that most costumes were clearly gendered as either masculine or feminine. The marketing imagery, moreover, remained "largely anchored in traditional gender roles, images, and symbols" and "reiterates an active-masculine/passive-feminine dichotomization" (Nelson 2000:142). The set of costumes (names, descriptions, and images) analyzed in this activity was compiled in the fall of 2018. It thus allows students to examine if/how things have (or have not) changed in the 20+ years since Nelson (2000) conducted her research.

The other source on which this activity builds is Keys's (2014) activity, "Gender Markers in Adult Halloween Costumes," published in TRAILS. Keys's activity also cites Nelson (2000) as an inspiration but involves content analysis of *adult* Halloween costumes (names and images). In contrast, the activity described here entails content analysis of *children's* costumes. A focus on children's costumes is worthwhile for several reasons. First, as previously noted, childhood is a particularly important period of socialization, and wearing gendered costumes does appear to impact children's (specifically boys') preferences and behavior (Coyne et al. 2021). Second, though there are some similarities in the gender-typing of children's and adults' costumes, research has shown that adult costumes, especially those marketed for females, are significantly more sexualized than child costumes (Sherman et al. 2020). Finally, children's Halloween costumes may be selected by children themselves, but they may also be chosen by parents alone or by parents and children together (Dinella 2017). Thus, an analysis of children's costumes opens opportunities for discussion about the role of not only media/marketing, but also of family, as agents of socialization.

Unlike the activity authored by Keys (2014), this activity also requires students to analyze costume descriptions in addition to names and images. This additional source of data is useful because adjectives used to describe the costumes and costume-wearers give insight into the qualities or behaviors children may be expected to display. Moreover, the descriptions often include gender-specific nouns (e.g. "boy") and pronouns (e.g. "she").

In what follows below, I offer instructions for how to implement this activity. I also suggest some additional resources for instructors who want to further explore this (or similar) topic(s) with their students.

EXPANDED USAGE NOTES

Before the content analysis activity begins (~10-15 min)
In an introductory sociology course (which is the course for which this activity was originally developed), it is helpful if instructors can introduce the topic of socialization and its related concepts and theories in a previous class period. This may or may not be necessary if instructors are using this activity in an upper division sociology course on gender or research methods.

On the day of the activity, instructors should explain the concept of gender socialization – the process whereby we learn (and to varying degrees internalize) our culture's expectations regarding gender, or idealized versions of masculinity and femininity. Explain that many different agents of socialization contribute to this process, but that today the focus will be primarily on the role of mass media and consumer culture. Specifically, students will examine marketing materials for Halloween costumes. Instructors can note that play (role-play, games, etc.) is often central to the socialization process (possibly connecting to George Herbert Mead's theory of the social self). We learn important life lessons through engagement with fun and make-believe.

Provide an overview of Nelson's (2000) study. Below is the information I typically provide for students in my introductory sociology course:
- Research question: To what extent are gender markers evident within the marketing for children's Halloween costumes?
- Method: content analysis
- Sample: 469 unique children's Halloween costumes (ready-made and sewing patterns) (acquired between 1996-1997)
- Findings (though this is not a full summary of her findings, it sufficiently captures most findings from the study)
  o Only 41 out of the 469 costumes were coded as gender neutral (categorized as such due to *both* boys and girls being featured as models or because Nelson was unable to detect the gender of the model).
  o Feminine costumes tended to emphasize beauty, passivity, and relationships (e.g. Blushing Bride, Pretty Mermaid, Cute Cuddly Bewitched). They were more likely than masculine costumes to be inanimate objects (e.g. Tea Pot).

- o Masculine costumes tended to have special skills or powers and to emphasize action, be it for good or evil (e.g. Sir Lancelot, Grim Reaper, Bronco Rider, Hercules, Policeman).
- o In sum, these costumes and their marketing may "refurbish stereotypical notions of what women/girls and men/boys are capable of doing even within the realm of their imaginations" (Nelson 2000:143).

Instructors who assign her article for students to read (as I have done in a Sociology of Gender course) may instead ask students to provide this information. Highlight the fact that her study relies on data that is 20+ years old and explain that students are going to conduct their own content analysis study to see if and how anything has changed. Instructors should (especially in introductory courses) remind students that the method of content analysis involves systematic analysis of existing materials (e.g. texts, images, audio-visual sources, etc.).

Explain that the sample consists of 40 costumes compiled from Walmart.com in the fall of 2018. I simply searched for children's Halloween costumes and selected the first 40 results (only excluding any costumes that were clearly for babies). Instructors of a research methods course might note that this is what would be considered a convenience sample. Explain that students will be given packets that include each costume's name (numbered 1-40), description, and image.

Explain that the analysis process will involve the use of a coding sheet. The top row of the coding sheet has instructions regarding what/how to code the costumes, and each column asks for a different piece of information. The rows that follow are for each one of the costumes. Explain that after coding of all the costumes is complete, there are a series of summary questions that ask students to identify patterns in their findings.

Instruct students to get into groups of three to four people. Instructors may want to adjust group sizes based on the time they have available, as larger groups should be able to complete the task more quickly. Encourage students to familiarize themselves with the coding instructions together as a group first. Instruct them to then divide the labor of coding so that each student has a subset of the costumes. Once they are finished coding independently, they should complete the summary questions as a group.

Pass out the coding sheets and the packet with the costume images, names, and descriptions (see two separate files). Instructors can determine the number of coding sheets and packets given to each group based on group sizes and/or their own printing/copying limitations.

The content analysis activity (~25-40 min)
Instructors should give students an estimated time-frame for when the class will come back together for a follow-up discussion. Instructors can then circulate and check in with student groups as needed. Ask each group if they have any initial questions, and then return later to check their progress. Encourage them to raise their hand if they have questions for you at any point. As relevant, provide clarification/answers to the whole class (rather than just individual groups/students) so that all students benefit.

Some common student questions (and my typical responses) include:

- "How should the name of the Harry Potter-related costumes be coded?"
    - Explain that if the name suggests that the costume is for the character of Harry, then I would code it as masculine (M). However, if the name suggests that the costume is for any wizard in the *Harry Potter* series, then I would code it as gender neutral (GN).
- "What are adjectives?"
    - Explain that adjectives are descriptive words such as "pretty," "strong," or "clever."
- "How do you decide if the model's pose is 'active' or 'passive'?"
    - Explain that some suggestions are provided on the coding sheet. For example, an "active" stance could involve the *use* of a tool. Ultimately, I let students decide how they want to code this, and I tell them to be clear and consistent with the criteria they are using.
- "Anyone (boys or girls) could wear any of these costumes, so couldn't they all be considered gender neutral?"
    - Explain that, yes, anyone could wear them. But that's not what we're studying with content analysis research. We are seeking to examine how the costumes are marketed (and to whom they seem to be targeted). It would require a different research method in order to investigate which costumes children actually choose/wear.
- "In order to classify a costume as gender neutral, do all three things (name, model, and description) have to be gender neutral?"
    - Explain that according to my instructions for summary question #1, the answer is yes (and explain that they are following the same criteria used by Nelson (2000)). However, I acknowledge that other researchers may assess costume gender neutrality differently. One could, for example, decide that there simply needs to be inconsistency between the coding of the name, model, and/or description in order to warrant the neutral classification. The important thing is again to be clear and consistent, and to be able to justify your decision as a researcher.

To "set the mood" (especially if you happen to be doing this activity near Halloween), instructors may consider playing Halloween-themed music softly in the background while students work. Songs like "Monster Mash" or other classics can be fun.

Discussion after the content analysis activity (~10-20 min)
To conclude the activity, get the class back together for a follow-up discussion. Instructors should at minimum ask students to report findings from their analysis and compare/contrast to those of Nelson (2000), but there are a number of ways to take the conversation in additional, different directions. Below are suggestions for discussion questions:

- How many costumes did your group code as "gender neutral"? (Note: Inevitably, groups will come up with different numbers. I use this as an opportunity to discuss the importance of having clear criteria for coding and the importance of establishing intercoder reliability. No matter the exact number they identify, the most important thing is to establish that the number of gender-neutral costumes in our sample, like Nelson's, is very small.)

- What adjectives are commonly used in the descriptions for the masculine-coded costumes?
- What adjectives are commonly used in the descriptions for the feminine-coded costumes?
- Nelson (2000:142) argues that "gender stereotyping in children's Halloween costumes…reiterates an active-masculine/passive-feminine dichotomization." To what extent do we see this pattern in our own sample?
    - While discussing this question, I ask students how/why they coded certain poses/postures as active vs. passive. There is usually some disagreement about what is an "active" or "passive" pose, so this is another opportunity to note the importance of being clear and consistent in coding and being able to justify decisions made as a researcher. It can also be helpful to, for example, physically demonstrate the unsteadiness (and hence, unreadiness for action) of poses involving a "bashful knee bend" (Goffman 1979:45).
    - While this sample of costumes shows many similarities with that of Nelson (2020) in terms of gender stereotypical marketing, students should also identify some differences (e.g. the inclusion of several girl superheroes, an ER Doctor costume modeled by both a boy and a girl, etc.). Instructors may ask them to consider what may account for these changes?
- Based on content analysis research like this, we can learn about the messages that media/marketing send about gender, masculinity, femininity, and expectations for boys and girls. However, what do we *not* know (about gender and children's Halloween costumes) based on this study? (Or more directly – Based on this study, do we know what costumes children wear and why? Do we know anything about how they may use/modify these costumes?) What research method(s) could we use to answer these questions?
- This content analysis shows the role that media/marketing can play in gender socialization. How might families also be involved as agents of gender socialization when it comes to Halloween costumes?
- How might Halloween costumes be racialized (or reinforce racial/ethnic stereotypes), along with being gendered?

Possible exam/assessment questions
Below are questions that could be asked on an exam in order to further assess learning from this activity. Instructors may decide which question(s) to use based on the course topic, course level, etc.

Q1. What is gender socialization? How might exposure to children's Halloween costumes (and the marketing for said costumes) play a role in this process? What expectations regarding femininity and masculinity does this marketing most often teach?

Q2. Consider children's Halloween costumes. Using this example, describe how 1) media/marketing and 2) families can operate as agents of gender socialization.

Q3. In what ways were findings from our content analysis activity of children's Halloween costumes similar to Nelson's (2000) findings? In what ways were they different?

Q4. What can we learn about gender socialization from content analysis research (like what you did with Halloween costumes)? However, what questions (about gender and children's costumes) cannot be answered using this method? What method(s) would you use instead? Describe a hypothetical study.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
- For other TRAILS resources on gender socialization, see for example, Blakely (2007), Corrota (2018), Harris (2010), and Rosen and Synder (2013).
- For more on gendered body postures/poses, see Goffman (1979) (a source on which Nelson (2000) draws) and the film, *The Codes of Gender* (Jhally 2009).
- For research on gender and Halloween costumes that examines children's costume choices and the impacts of these costumes, see Coyne et al. (2021), Dinella (2017), and Ogletree, Denton, and Williams (1993).
- For content analysis research of adult Halloween costumes, see Alexander (2014) and Sherman et al. (2020).
- For resources on racial/ethnic stereotyping in Halloween costumes, see Mueller et al. (2007) and Wade (2009).

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