Studying Media Literacy

Kids Take on Gender Stereotypes in Advertising

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Sebastian works on a project.

I'd tell him to make his own darn coffee!" one sixth grader quipped, in response to viewing a black-and-white Folgers coffee television ad from the 1960s. In it, a perky young wife serves her husband a cup of coffee with a chipper, "Your coffee, sir."

The husband, after taking a sip, grimaces and complains, "How can such a pretty wife make such bad coffee?"

"I heard that!" pouts the wife, who then pays a visit to her older and wiser neighbor, Mrs. Olson, who introduces her to Folgers "mountain grown coffee." Now armed with the Folgers, the wife tries again, serving her husband with another obedient, "Your coffee, sir."

The husband sips, this time exclaiming, "How can such a pretty wife make such great coffee?!"

Shock and awe rippled across the library, as my class of twenty sixth-graders processed what they had just seen and heard. It was the first day of a media-literacy unit titled "Gender Stereotypes in Advertising."

Advertising is omnipresent in the lives of young people, whether they encounter it while playing online games, watching YouTube videos, using apps, watching television, or simply traveling to and from school seeing print ads on buses, billboards, and in subway stations. Too often this messaging is flawed, as bias and stereotypes frequently infiltrate advertising, reinforcing and perpetuating specific gender norms in particular. My goal was to provide students (two sections of twenty sixth-graders) with a skill set for recognizing bias and stereotypes in the media, as well as to spur them to begin questioning the media messages they incessantly receive.

To kick off the unit, students engaged in discussions about advertising, its purpose, and its connection to their lives. Examples of humorous commercials were shared. The Super Bowl was mentioned as a showcase for many popular ads. The kids used adjectives such as "entertaining," "boring," "funny," "cute," and "annoying" to describe commercials. All of them agreed on one thing—commercials and advertisements are all around and they are inescapable.

Following their animated and, at times, heated group discussions, students watched a variety of television commercials that I curated, spanning from the 1960s to present day. For each commercial, students analyzed the message of the ad, the bias or stereotype presented (if any), the potential harm of the message, and ways the ad might be changed to make it more inclusive or less biased.

This is where things got interesting, as some students immediately spotted the bias and called it out. Other students argued their case that particular ads contained no stereotypes, that they were simply for entertainment purposes and not "a big deal."

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Some especially media-savvy sixth graders were able to recognize the satire in some ads, particularly a diet soda ad that mocks hyper-masculinity and tries to convince men that this particular soda is acceptable for them to drink because it is "not for women." Disbelief was expressed by many students that advertising executives could be so tone deaf, portraying women as bad drivers, homemakers, trophies, and subservient to men.

Once students had analyzed ten different TV commercials, we moved into a deep dive of LEGO advertising. Our research led us to discover that LEGO ads were once quite inclusive and gender-neutral, especially in the 1980s, portraying girls in overalls building towering structures, airplanes, and trucks right alongside their male counterparts. Fast-forward to the 2010s, and LEGO had launched its LEGO Friends and LEGO City lines, and taken a specific approach to marketing them.

Students were struck by the distinct, biased marketing campaigns. LEGO Friends, designed in pink and purple, were specifically marketed to girls featuring Barbie-like figures in settings such as a beauty salon, animal hospital, and coffee shop. LEGO City featured the standard block-like figures in settings like the police station, a pirate ship, and the Jurassic period. However, it wasn't until the HTML5 Gendered Lego Advertising Remixer was introduced that students were able to fully grasp the biased messaging behind the advertising.

The HTML5 Gendered Lego Advertising Remixer (www.genderremixer.com) created by video remix artist Jonathan McIntosh, is a web-based application that allows users to mash-up or remix gender-specific toy ads to provide insights into the often subtle ways advertisements present messages that reinforce stereotypical gender norms. Students had the opportunity to mash-up LEGO Friends video with LEGO City audio and vice versa.

What they discovered while viewing these remixed ads was often humorous, yet also startling. LEGO was clearly using gender stereotypes to market its product lines specifically to boys and girls. The message was clear—boys like violence, dinosaurs, knights, superheroes, pirates, and dark colors, while girls like beauty salons, hanging out with their friends, domesticated animals, and all things pink and purple.

At this point, students were well equipped to begin the next phase of the unit—creating their own commercials. In self-selected groups, students were tasked with writing a commercial designed to satirize a gender stereotype or challenge an existing gender stereotype. Over the course of five weeks in library class, students collaboratively wrote scripts, designed props, costumes and sets, rehearsed, filmed their ads, and edited them in iMovie.

The final products offered an insightful and comical look at students' application of their understanding of gender bias in the media. One group of students focused on the stereotype of women as nagging their husbands to help out around the house more and designed a stress relief tool to help husbands cope, complete with testimonials from those whose marriages were saved.

Is your wife a bad driver? No problem, according to another group who created an ad for a self-driving and self-parking car for the mom who can't seem to get her kids from point A to point B. A fitness tracker designed to help both men and women achieve their fitness goals "is for everyone," stated an inclusive ad by a third group.

On the final day of the unit, we celebrated with a viewing party. Students watched each other's commercials with a critical eye, sharing patterns noticed across commercials as well as insights into how satire can be used as a valuable messaging tool to make an impact. Based on the student-produced commercials, group discussions, and feedback I received, I felt the goals of the unit were achieved. Students were now thinking about media in new and different ways and felt confident in their ability to recognize and call out bias and stereotypes when they see it.

Much of the student feedback I received via survey was similar in nature. Students expressed how much fun they had engaging in the unit activities while also arriving at new and lasting understandings of the power of media and advertising. A hint of activism could also be detected, as students shared that they now felt more empowered to speak up when they encounter sexism and stereotypes. These conversations also extended beyond the classroom. In social studies class, a powerful conversation was had about feminism and whether or not it is anti-male.

It is estimated that the average American is exposed to anywhere from four thousand to ten thousand advertisements per day.[1] With this bombardment of messages directed at children, educators need to be more vigilant than ever about equipping our students with the tools and strategies necessary to navigate this digital terrain. I hope the students who participated in this project continue to recognize potentially harmful messages they encounter in the media and do something about it beyond the confines of the school building. In an increasingly digital world, young people need the skills and the confidence to be responsible digital citizens. &

Reference

1. Ron Marshall, "How Many Ads Do You See in One Day?," *Red Crow Marketing*, August 3, 2017, www.redcrow marketing.com/2015/09/10/many-ads-see-one-day.