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## Crime-Fighting Heroes and Pretty Caped Crusaders: Classroom Content Analysis of Children's Halloween Costumes

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### Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank the journal editors and reviewers for their helpful feedback on this manuscript.

## **Crime-Fighting Heroes and Pretty Caped Crusaders: Classroom Content Analysis of Children's Halloween Costumes**

### **Introduction and Rationale**

Halloween is a widely celebrated cultural event in the United States (U.S.) today, enjoyed by children and adults alike (Coyne et al., 2021; Mueller et al., 2007). As such, the sale of Halloween costumes has turned into a profitable, multi-billion dollar industry (Snider, 2021). Part of the appeal of this holiday is the opportunity it provides revelers to temporarily break from typical social routines and norms. Donning a costume allows people to step outside their everyday roles and “play” at being someone or something different (Mueller et al., 2007, p. 318). In theory, one's imagination is the only limit; however, research has shown that Halloween costumes frequently reflect a stereotypical, narrow version of reality (Murnen et al., 2016; Nelson, 2000).

Particular attention has been given to the way that these costumes are often gendered in traditional, stereotypical ways. Costumes targeted to boys and men tend to portray power, activity, and aggression. In contrast, costumes meant for girls and women commonly emphasize beauty, friendliness, and for older ages, sexiness (Alexander, 2014; Murnen et al., 2016; Nelson, 2000; Sherman et al., 2020). Material culture and mass media are influential agents of socialization; they reflect and transmit cultural values and ideologies (Conley, 2020; Taylor, 2003; Upright, 2015). Thus, it is worth considering the messages about gender and power that are relayed, particularly to children, through these costumes and their marketing.

The content analysis activity described in this article puts students “in the shoes of scholars” (Crawley et al., 2008, p. 15), allowing them to investigate the gendered meanings in marketing materials for children's Halloween costumes. Aligned with principles of feminist pedagogy, this activity can open conversations about how power differences between men and women are reinforced, and how they may also be challenged (Shrewsbury, 1997). These are important questions for students to consider, as gender justice has still not been achieved in the U.S., despite the many advances that have occurred in recent decades (England, 2010; Scarborough et al., 2019).

By conducting their own original analysis, students engage in an active process of discovery. This is the hallmark of inquiry-guided learning, what Atkinson and Hunt (2008) describe as “any teaching method that privileges guiding students to increasingly independent questioning and constructing knowledge” (p. 6). Empowering students and attempting to decenter the instructor's authority in the classroom is also central to feminist pedagogy. Rather than being passive recipients

of research findings, students participating in this activity get to do their own scholarly work and examine data firsthand (Cabaniss & Parrotta, 2022; Crawley et al., 2008; Duncan & Stasio, 2001; Grether, 2022; Shrewsbury, 1997).

The active learning strategy described in this article is featured as a class activity in an online repository for teaching resources (Hendley, 2021). It resembles another developed by Keys (2014), found in the same digital library. While both exercises involve content analysis of Halloween costumes, I focus on children's costumes rather than those made for adults. Childhood is an important period of socialization (Conley, 2020), and parents may be involved in the selection of children's costumes (Dinella, 2017). As such, an analysis of children's costumes may foster discussion of the family as another primary agent of socialization. Moreover, my activity is unique for its analysis of not just costume images, but also descriptions. These descriptions often explicitly mention the qualities (e.g. "brainy beauty"), behaviors (e.g. "pretending to capture the bad guys"), and/or gender (e.g. "your little girl") expected of costume-wearers.

### **Learning Objectives**

There are three primary learning objectives of this activity. The first is that students will be able to analyze costume names, descriptions, and images, and in doing so, identify ways that gender stereotypes are reproduced and/or challenged. The second objective is that students will be able to explain how mass media and consumer culture (specifically, the marketing of Halloween costumes) can potentially contribute to children's gender socialization. Finally, the third objective is that students will be able to articulate what can be learned about gender socialization and stereotyping from content analysis research, and what questions, conversely, are better answered using other research methods.

### **Explanation**

I developed this activity in 2018 to use in an in-person Introduction to Sociology course. Since then, I have also used it in an asynchronous, online version of Introduction to Sociology, as well as in Sociology of Gender. In order to create the dataset of costumes, I searched for children's Halloween costumes on Walmart.com and selected the first 40 costumes listed (excluding any costumes that were modeled by babies).<sup>1</sup> I selected Walmart.com because Walmart is the only large, general

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<sup>1</sup> Rather than include my own sample of costumes here, I encourage instructors to compile their own samples. Doing so will allow them to keep their data up-to-date and to modify the sample and

purpose retailer in my university town, so its product selection is likely familiar to my students. As noted by Crawley et al. (2008), feminist teaching concerns itself with everyday life and issues of relevance to local communities. Instructors can create their own samples from websites for other retail stores near their own campuses such as Target.com or PartyCity.com, or they may use exclusively online vendors like HalloweenCostumes.com.

Before starting the activity (on the same and/or a previous day of class), I review the topic of socialization, and more specifically, gender socialization. I describe gender socialization as the process by which individuals learn (and to varying degrees, internalize) their culture's expectations regarding gender, or idealized versions of masculinity and femininity. Through their contact with agents of socialization such as family, education, peers, and mass media, individuals develop an understanding of the shared beliefs, values, and norms of their society. This learning process continues into adulthood, but I emphasize that childhood is a particularly intense period of socialization (Conley, 2020; Spade, 2017; Wade & Ferree, 2019).

I introduce the activity by explaining that we will be examining the role that mass media and consumer culture can play in gender socialization. Specifically, students will analyze marketing materials for children's Halloween costumes. What lessons about gender are relayed through materials such as these? I explain that a scholar named Adie Nelson published an article in 2000 based on similar research: a content analysis of over 400 children's Halloween costumes that she acquired between 1996-1997. I briefly summarize her findings, noting that the vast majority of costumes were clearly gendered, remaining "largely anchored in traditional gender roles, images, and symbols" and "reiterat[ing] an active-masculine/passive feminine dichotomization" (p. 142). I frame the activity as students' chance to see if and how things have changed since Nelson published her findings over twenty years ago. Doing so allows students to take ownership of the discovery process (Crawley et al., 2008; Rusche & Jason, 2011).

Before students start working, I pass out coding sheets (see Appendix) and the packet of costume names, images, and descriptions (see Hendley, 2021, for the dataset compiled from Walmart.com), and I review instructions with the entire class. I first explain from where and how I compiled the sample of costumes. I then explain how to use the coding sheet. Simply put, the top row of the coding sheet instructs students to make note of different pieces of information in each column for each costume in the rows that follow. For example, the first column asks them to note if and how the costume name (e.g. Pink Batgirl Halloween Costume) is

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activity to best suit their needs and goals. However, instructors can see Hendley (2021) to access the sample that I originally created.

gendered, coding it as masculine, feminine, or gender neutral. Other columns require coding of the costumes, models, and costume descriptions. After coding is complete, students answer the summary questions (see Appendix) about patterns in the data.

Students typically complete the activity in groups of three to four within about 30 minutes. I encourage them to familiarize themselves with the coding sheet and complete the summary questions as a group, but for time's sake, to divide the labor of coding so that each student has a subset of costumes. Depending on the size of their costume sample, length of the class period, and other considerations, instructors may want more or less group (vs. independent) work.

The follow-up discussion starts with a reporting of findings and a comparison to those of Nelson (2000). I ask the different groups how many costumes they coded as gender-neutral, the adjectives commonly used in the descriptions for masculine- vs. feminine-coded costumes, and the extent to which an active-masculine/passive-feminine dichotomy is reproduced (or challenged) in our data. Additional issues are raised throughout this conversation by students themselves and/or in my response to their comments. These issues include why certain poses were coded as active or passive, if and how the marketing of these costumes contributes to gender socialization, what we can and cannot learn from content analysis research such as this, and how we might use alternative methods to answer those questions that cannot be addressed with this data and method.

## **Debriefing**

It is worth elaborating on how I have navigated some of those questions, noted above, that often arise during this activity. One common issue is student concern with coding things “correctly.” I give some guidance in the top row of the coding sheet, but I also leave room for flexibility. This is purposeful, as inquiry-guided learning is meant to be student-centered, with instructors simply acting as facilitators (Rusche & Jason, 2011). Ambiguity about what are “active” vs. “passive” poses, for example, opens up productive conversations about the importance of being clear about and consistent with coding decisions, establishing intercoder reliability when working in teams, and communicating coding criteria to future audiences of one's research findings. Justifying these decisions is also important, and I explain that our own analysis can be guided by others' work. With this particular coding decision, a physical demonstration of different poses can provide further rationale. Seeing or experiencing the unsteadiness (and hence, unreadiness for action) of poses involving a “bashful knee bend” (Goffman, 1979,

p. 45), for example, can help to illustrate why this pose might be read as passive or submissive.

Another avenue for fruitful discussion often results from student confusion about what can and cannot be known from content analysis research such as this. Tasked with coding costume images as feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral, some students contest that anyone can wear these costumes. This is a good opportunity to affirm their assertion, but also remind them that we are examining for whom the costumes seem to be marketed, *not* who ends up wearing them. This latter question would require different data and an alternative research method. Likewise, when students make claims about the impacts of this marketing, I encourage them to subtly reframe their arguments in terms of *potential* impacts or the messages being relayed rather than how those messages are interpreted. To actually make claims about impacts, we would again need a different research method. Brainstorming with students what these other hypothetical studies could look like is a useful exercise, as is discussing studies that have sought to tackle these questions. For example, Dinella (2017) used observational methodologies and parent-report surveys to investigate children's costume choices, while Coyne et al. (2021) employed an experimental design to study the impacts of wearing gendered costumes on children's helping behavior.

One of the strengths of this activity is that it is highly adaptable. Though I originally designed it to be used in a face-to-face course, it has worked equally well in my asynchronous, online courses. In this setting, students work independently and complete the coding sheet and follow-up questions as a written assignment. Furthermore, instructors can easily compile their own unique samples and/or modify the coding sheet to best suit their needs and learning goals. Students could also be involved with these tasks, giving them even more control over the research process. With regard to the sample, different vendors could be selected, perhaps even multiple, to allow for between-store comparisons. New samples could also be generated every year, eventually enabling students to track changes (or lack thereof) over time. As for the coding scheme itself, students could also note the (perceived) race/ethnicity of the costume models, along with any racial/ethnic stereotyping in the costumes and their marketing (see Mueller et al., 2007 and Wade, 2009 for discussion of this). Doing this would add an important intersectional perspective to the analysis and activity (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989).

The activity is well suited, moreover, for a variety of courses and disciplines. It is a clear fit for courses in women's/gender/feminist studies as well as sociology. As previously noted, I have used it in both Introduction to Sociology and Sociology of Gender courses. It would work equally well in a research methods course, though instructors of such a course might focus more on methodological issues and less on the topic of gender socialization. The activity could also be used in other fields such

as psychology, child and family studies, or marketing. For example, psychology instructors could incorporate it within lessons on stereotyping or children's "gender role" development. In a marketing course, this activity could foster discussions about topics such as gendered market segmentation or how to create more inclusive, and less stereotypical, marketing materials.

### **Assessment**

Aside from the in-class discussion, instructors can assess learning by including any of the following questions on a follow-up written assignment or exam: How might children's exposure to Halloween costumes (and associated marketing) play a role in their gender socialization? How are gender stereotypes reinforced and/or challenged through this marketing? In what ways were findings from our content analysis of children's Halloween costumes similar to or different from Nelson's (2000) findings? What can we learn about gender socialization from content analysis research, and conversely, what questions require different methods to answer?

My assessment of this activity has occurred during the class discussions in my in-person courses and through review of the written work completed by my online students. Through this experience, I can say that most students have readily identified key patterns in the sample I compiled. Similar to Nelson's (2000) findings, students note that there are relatively few gender-neutral costumes, the costumes marketed for girls are more likely to emphasize beauty (i.e. passivity), and the costumes marketed for boys are more likely to emphasize strength (i.e. activity). Some students also point out some notable changes, such as the appearance of female superheroes (e.g. Batgirl) and other powerful characters like *Frozen*'s Elsa. Online students' written work suggests that they recognize how these costumes send stereotypical messages about the behaviors, careers, clothing, etc. that are expected of, or deemed acceptable for, girls and boys. Moreover, most astutely acknowledge that based on the content analysis alone, we do not know what children think about these costumes or which ones they prefer or wear.

Anecdotal evidence from end-of-semester feedback suggests that students in my in-person courses have found the "group work" and "group activities" (potentially including, but not limited to, this activity) to positively contribute to their learning. Moreover, existing scholarship has shown the effectiveness of similar activities involving analysis of visual and/or textual material. As described by other teacher-scholars, students have reported that this sort of hands-on engagement enhanced their learning beyond what reading and lecture alone could provide (Sargent & Corse, 2013). They recognize that being able to construct knowledge and see for themselves is ultimately more meaningful (Upright, 2015).

Even if students correctly anticipate what they will find through their work, they credit the activities with showing the extent of the problems that their analyses reveal. As one student noted, reflecting on their content analysis of children's books: "Until someone actually sits down and...analyzes every picture and word, you don't see the hidden messages or problems with inequality that kids are being exposed to" (Taylor, 2003, p. 307). I believe the activity I have developed is similarly eye-opening and effective for students in a variety of courses and university contexts.

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**Appendix: Coding Sheet and Summary Questions**

<p>Costume number and name</p>	<p>Is the costume name gendered? (For example, names like Pirate Boy or Maiden are gendered, as are character names like Luke Skywalker ) Indicate below masculine (M), feminine (F), or gender neutral (GN).</p>	<p>Is the costume and/or the model gendered? (For example, certain clothing items like dresses are gendered, as are certain hairstyles) Indicate below masculine (M), feminine (F), or gender neutral (GN).</p>	<p>Is the costume description gendered? (For example, nouns such as “boy” or “girl” and pronouns such as “she” or “his” are gendered. Indicate below masculine (M), feminine (F), or gender neutral (GN).</p>	<p>What adjectives are used to describe the costume and/or the potential child who will wear it? (For example, adjectives are descriptive words such as pretty, strong, scary, etc.) Write them below.</p>	<p>Consider the model’s pose. Does it suggest activity or passivity? (For example, are they using some sort of tool? Do they look ready to engage in action? Is their stance steady and centered, or are they offbalance?) Indicate active (A) or passive (P) below.</p>
<p><i>Instructors provide information here (e.g. 1. Pink Batgirl Halloween Costume).</i></p>					
<p>2.</p>					
<p>3. and so on...</p>					

1. Based on your group coding of the costume names, costumes and models, *and* costume descriptions, how many of these costumes could we consider to be “gender neutral”? (NOTE: If *any one* of those things is clearly gendered, that costume would *not* be gender neutral).
  
2. What adjectives are commonly used in the descriptions for the masculine-coded costumes?
  
3. What adjectives are commonly used in the descriptions for the feminine-coded costumes?
  
4. What sorts of poses/postures did you code as active or passive, and why? Do you see any gendered patterns? (e.g. Were masculine-coded costumes more likely to be coded as “active”? Were feminine-coded costumes more likely to be coded as “passive”? Or...?)
  
5. 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?