

Who Said Woman Was Not Meant to Fly? Teaching Girls to Deconstruct Gendered Media

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ABSTRACT

Media continues to reproduce gender stereotypes that shape adolescents' identities, aspirations, and opportunities. This qualitative case study, grounded in Feminist Media Theory, examines how media deconstruction activities supported five middle school girls in critically interpreting gendered advertising. Through guided analysis of commercials, participants identified patterns of symbolic annihilation, unequal double standards, and humor masking inequities, while also recognizing resistant texts that promoted inclusivity and empowerment. Video observations and interviews revealed how the girls articulated both the personal and societal consequences of stereotypical portrayals and positioned themselves as active, critical viewers. Their reflections highlight the emotional toll of repeated exposure to gendered media, as well as the empowering effect of inclusive alternatives. Findings demonstrate that feminist-informed media deconstruction, when embedded in collaborative learning environments, fosters critical consciousness and media agency. This paper calls for integrating such approaches into middle school digital literacy curricula to align with broader gender-equity goals in education.

Keywords: Feminist Media Theory, media deconstruction, gender stereotypes, middle school, digital literacy, empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Gender Stereotypes in Media

Gender stereotypes in media have been a persistent issue, reinforcing outdated roles and limiting the diverse representation of gender identities. Across television, film, advertising, news coverage, and social media, these stereotypes not only shape public perception but also influence individual identity formation, especially among youth. While progress has been made through advocacy and scholarship, more inclusive storytelling, intersectional representation, and industry reform are essential. Despite decades of progress, gender stereotypes remain deeply embedded in media, advertising, and marketing, influencing societal norms and individual perceptions from early childhood. While contemporary media increasingly features diverse female characters, such as superheroes and professional women, these portrayals often reinforce unrealistic expectations, casting women as "superwomen" balancing career and family seamlessly or objectifying them in hypersexualized ways. Studies reveal that women are still underrepresented in leadership roles and often shown in passive or domestic contexts, while men dominate political, technological, and authoritative spaces (Scarlotta, 2020; Krijnen, 2020; Wood, 1994).

Media sometimes perpetuates traditional gender roles that confine women to domestic, nurturing, or sexualized roles while portraying men as dominant, aggressive, or stoic (Lauzen, 2018). This binary framing restricts individual identity and professional aspirations. For instance, girls exposed to stereotypical portrayals are less likely to perceive themselves as leaders or scientists (Steinke, 2017). Boys, on the other hand, may suppress emotional expression due to hypermasculine norms displayed in media. Women and girls are often depicted in ways that emphasize youth, beauty, and passivity, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. In contrast, men are

typically shown as active, powerful, and emotionally distant (Krijnen, 2020). Krijnen also highlights how media production itself influences representation, with the underrepresentation of women contributing to their symbolic annihilation, where women must either accept limited roles or risk being excluded altogether (Adhikari, 2014).

Advertising sometimes reinforces these divisions, with women frequently shown promoting household items and men aligned with work or innovation (Jacobson, 2005). A multinational study of 1,755 ads found that although women made up 50.7% of primary characters, they were still predominantly portrayed in traditional roles, with cultural context influencing representation (Nasruddin, 2021). In those ads, Women were frequently portrayed in stereotypically feminine roles, while men were more often shown in professional or work-related settings. These portrayals of gender roles varied significantly across countries, with some presenting more non-traditional depictions.

Media and Adolescent Girls

From early childhood through adolescence, girls are exposed to content that consistently underrepresents them and portrays them in stereotypical or sexualized ways. This exposure begins early, as Atkins (2023) shows in her study of preschool-aged girls. She found that children internalize gender beliefs through media, often associating femininity with appearance, emotion, and domestic roles. Girls frequently encounter characters in children's shows and books who are passive, nurturing, and visibly concerned with beauty, leading them to adopt these traits as social expectations.

Media representations continue to shape girls' perceptions as they grow older. Ward & Grower (2020) observed that adolescent exposure to television and digital media contributes to stronger endorsement of traditional gender stereotypes and body image issues. The underrepresentation of females and their portrayal in traditional roles across platforms from children's media to prime-time TV sends consistent messages about what is valued in girls and women. These messages affect career ambitions, relationship expectations, and self-perception (American Psychological Association, 2007). Santoniccolo et al. (2023) further argue that women's portrayals remain constrained across all forms of media, often characterized by sexualization and objectification, which contribute to body dissatisfaction, depression, and anxiety in adolescent girls.

Social media adds a new layer to this influence. Adolescent girls use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest to express themselves, but these spaces often mirror the same objectifying trends. Papageorgiou et al. (2022) found that teenage girls feel pressured to conform to appearance-based expectations on social media, resulting in self-objectification and comparison. Nesi et al. (2023) confirmed that adolescent girls, particularly those with existing vulnerabilities, report anxiety, social pressure, and low self-worth linked to their daily interactions with curated online content. Other researchers echo the same concern, identifying a strong link between social media use and reduced self-esteem in teenage girls (Liberato, 2024; Perkovich, 2021). The platforms that girls engage with most often are also those that commodify appearance, reinforce thin ideals, and profit from insecurity.

The sexualization of girls in media has profound developmental implications. The American Psychological Association (2007) reported that constant exposure to sexualized imagery is associated with low self-esteem, eating disorders, and an increase in mental health problems among girls. Herring & Kapidzic (2015) found that teenage girls often present themselves online according to culturally enforced norms of beauty and sexuality, seeking validation through likes and comments. This desire for approval reinforces gender norms and limits the space for authentic self-expression.

Expression in Gendered Media

Women's freedom of expression online is not only about individual empowerment but also collective participation in democratic processes. The Association for Progressive Communications (2022) describes this right as vital for women's movements to function as effective digital counter-publics. However, it also acknowledges that this potential remains unrealized for many due to persistent structural inequities.

The APC (2022) describes how gender-based abuse ranging from sexualized hate speech and stalking to doxxing and threats of violence leads to self-censorship, account deletion, and withdrawal from public discourse. Women journalists, activists, and politicians are particularly vulnerable, facing coordinated and often politically motivated harassment campaigns (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [IACHR], 2018; Chocarro). Such abuse disproportionately impacts women from marginalized groups such as women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those with disabilities who face intensified forms of intersectional violence (UNESCO, 2022; Chocarro, 2019). These experiences often result in severe mental health consequences, job abandonment, and decreased visibility in public life.

A recurring theme across literature is the inadequate response of both states and technology platforms to online violence against women (Moolman et al. 2020; Gans, 2020). Zinnbauer (2024) criticize the inconsistent and often sexist application of community standards and content moderation policies. Women advocating for sexual and reproductive rights or critiquing patriarchy frequently face account suspensions or content removal, while threats and abuse directed at them go unpunished.

While digital spaces hold transformative potential for women and girl's expression and empowerment, they are also sites of exclusion and violence (Krings, 2022). To uphold the freedom of expression for women and girls online, a systemic, multi-level approach is essential, one that addresses not just the symptoms but the root causes of digital gender inequality (Varghese, & Kumar, 2020). Only through coordinated action by states, tech companies, civil society, and communities can we build a digital future where all voices can be heard without fear.

This research is part of a larger study that explores how adolescents engage with media, including their use of both digital and non-digital tools, their perceptions of media creation and consumption, their collaboration with others, their media production and sharing practices, and their confidence in recognizing false information.

This research does not aim to simply rehash the well-documented ways in which media, both overtly and subtly, reinforces gender stereotypes - casting girls and women in domestic, nurturing, or sexualized roles while portraying men as dominant, aggressive, or inherently successful. Instead, the goal of this paper is to share the stories of five adolescent girls who, through media deconstruction activities, developed the ability to recognize and interpret symbolic meanings in media, particularly in the advertisements presented to them. In this study, we sought to answer the question: How does the process of media deconstruction influence students' critical understanding of gender representation in media content?

The conversations around ads from Pantene Labels against women ad, 2019 Volkswagen ad, Philadelphia cream cheese, Nike, LEGO, Toys R Us, and CBeebies demonstrate how students learned to parse both explicit and implicit meanings, draw connections to broader societal messages (like gender norms), and understand the implications of representation and omission in media.

Feminist Media Theory

This study is grounded in Feminist Media Theory, which provides a critical lens for examining how media constructs, reinforces, and sometimes resists gendered power relations. At its foundation, feminist media theory critiques the symbolic annihilation of women in media (Tuchman, 1978), where women's voices, roles, and stories are trivialized, narrowly represented, or excluded altogether. Media texts often reproduce binary portrayals of women as passive, nurturing, or sexualized, and men as dominant, ambitious, or authoritative (Krijnen, 2020). Such portrayals carry ideological weight, shaping how young audiences understand gender roles, identity, and possibilities for their futures.

In the context of this study, feminist media theory frames how adolescent girls interpret gendered representations in advertising. It highlights both the persistence of unequal power relations in media and the potential for resistant readings. For example, participants in this study critiqued the Volkswagen commercial for showing men in adventurous roles and women in passive caregiving roles, reflecting a feminist awareness of exclusion and inequality in representation. At the same time, their engagement with Nike's "Who said

WOMAN was not meant to fly” ad illustrates feminist theory’s recognition of resistant texts that challenge historical gender constraints and reposition women in aspirational roles.

By situating the study in feminist media theory, the analysis underscores how media deconstruction becomes both a critical and emancipatory practice. Through guided reflection and dialogue, participants were able to identify double standards, question stereotypes, and articulate alternative narratives. In doing so, they enacted what feminist scholars describe as developing media agency, which is the ability to resist dominant ideologies and imagine more equitable representations (Gill, 2008; Kellner & Share, 2007). This framework therefore not only supports the study’s focus on critical media literacy but also aligns with its broader educational goal of fostering gender equity and empowering young people to become critical, reflective media consumers.

What did we do in the Media Creation Bootcamp?

The participants developed media projects that reflected their personal interests and addressed broader societal issues such as climate change, community support, reading, gaming, and entrepreneurship. At the start of the camp, the facilitators used students’ prior knowledge to introduce the concept of misinformation. Through interactive games like Fake It to Make It and Lamboozled, students learned how false information is created, spread, and detected.

Simultaneously, participants began designing infographics with Canva, selecting topics of interest, developing narratives, and identifying relevant resources. They used tools WeVideo, and Google Sites to create engaging media, including commercials. Collaboration was key because students brainstormed, gave peer feedback, and sometimes worked in pairs, like two students who co-created a Google Site.

There were three primary phases in the camp:

Play with Media (Weeks 1–2): Students used Canva to explore and express their interests through low-stakes creation of images, videos, and interactive elements. They experimented with design templates, clickable features, and creative visuals, aiming to engage viewers without pressure.

Designing TV Commercials (Week 3): This phase focused on constructing and deconstructing ads (media content). Students storyboarded their concepts, filmed footage, and edited content using Canva and WeVideo. We demonstrated the commercial-making process to guide students through each step: planning, scripting, filming, and editing.

Final Media Project (Weeks 4–6): Students synthesized their previous work into a cohesive final project. They refined visuals, aligned audio and message, and ensured their media conveyed a compelling story.

Throughout, students received structured instructions via videos and discussions covering media’s role in society, internet search strategies, misinformation, and media construction and deconstruction. This structured, hands-on approach empowered students to build digital literacy skills, think critically about media, and creatively express their ideas through technology.

Process of Deconstruction of Media.

We focused on helping participants develop a deeper understanding of the intended messages and purposes behind media content, particularly through constructing and deconstructing media activities. Participants learned to identify underlying themes, persuasive techniques, and hidden agendas in media messages, with a specific emphasis on how these relate to concepts of gender stereotypes. After discussing the meaning of media deconstruction and demonstrating the related skills through examples, we asked participants to apply what they had learned by deconstructing a TV commercial. They watched five TV commercials and used the same prompts to deconstruct them. Students answered questions about how media deconstruction can help identify false information in media.

Some of the prompts include who’s responsible for the ad. (Look for the logo, which is the symbol representing the brand. When you find it, ask yourself what you know about the brand). Do you like it? Does it

have a good reputation? Type of media? What is the ad saying? (Remember to look at more than words. Everything in an ad is a message to you: the pictures, the colors, the feel and the words). What does the ad want me to do? How are they trying to get your attention? Do you think everybody, e.g., boys; girls; women; men; rich; poor; not so rich, not so poor, will take this ad the same way? Who do you think this ad is for? Who is being targeted? How do you come to this conclusion? What do you see that makes you think that? Who's represented in the message? And who's missing? e.g., their age, ethnicity, class, profession, interests, etc. What emotions should we evoke? What's our message, and why?

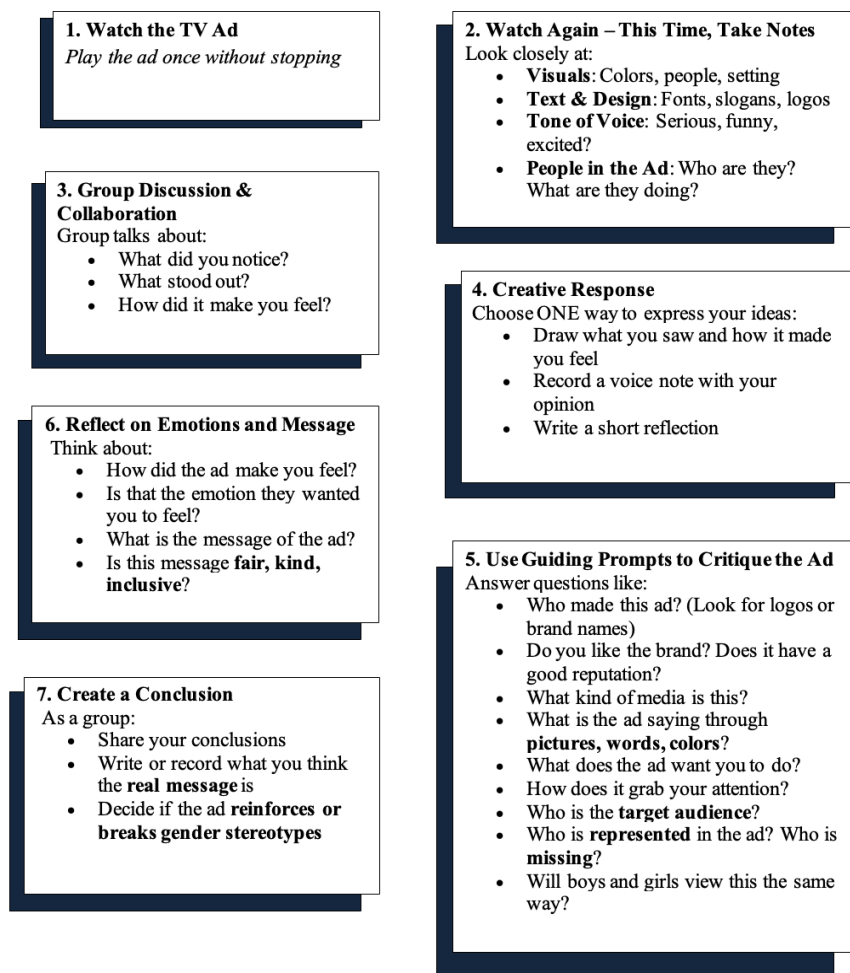
Figure 1 & 2

Some TV Commercials the Participants Deconstructed



Figure 3

Process of Deconstruction of Media.



9. Share with the Class

Present your ideas (drawing, writing, or voice notes)

- Encourage peer feedback
- Celebrate different points of view

8. Recommend Improvements

Think critically:

- What was wrong with the ad?
- How can it be improved to promote **equality and inclusion**?
- How can it better represent **everyone**?

The "Today We Play" commercial by Toys R Us showed modern children's lives filled with too much stress and overly structured schedules. It aimed to position Toys R Us stores as spaces where kids could freely play and explore without the constraints of structured activities and sports that have become overly competitive. Meanwhile, the LEGO "Shake Up Imagination" commercial showed unsuspecting children being given unbranded, wrapped presents and were asked to guess the contents. Upon shaking the boxes and hearing the sound, they began to imagine everything they could build, illustrating how LEGO encourages creativity and imagination before the box is even opened. The CBeebies commercial, designed to celebrate diversity, inclusiveness, and kindness, showcased a real pair of friends who, despite their differences, struggled to point them out, highlighting the idea that children view differences differently compared to adults. Pantene 'Labels Against Women' Digital Ad, is an advertisement that addresses the issue of gender-based double standards in professional settings. It highlights how identical behaviors are often perceived differently depending on whether a man or a woman exhibits them. In 2019, a Volkswagen eGolf advertisement depicted a series of scenes showing men in active and adventurous roles: two male astronauts floating in space, a male para-athlete with a prosthetic leg performing a long jump, and a man camping on a cliffside. In contrast, the women featured were portrayed in more passive roles, such as one sleeping in the tent during the cliffside scene and another sitting on a bench next to a pram, observing the eGolf as it drove by. The commercial concluded with the slogan, "When we learn to adapt, we can achieve anything." Lastly, a 2019 Philadelphia cream cheese commercial featured two men distracted by a conveyor belt of food, accidentally placing their babies on it. The babies then rolled away on the belt, and the dads hurried to retrieve them. The ad ended with a tagline about how Philadelphia is "so delicious, it's easy to get distracted."

METHODOLOGY

Research method and participants

This study is a qualitative case study to examine how five girls in middle school use media deconstruction activities to gain critical understanding of gender representation in media content. The study's relatively small sample size, led to a preference for qualitative case study investigation. This choice allowed for a more in-depth exploration of middle schoolers' personal and collective experiences in making meaning of gendered media. The selection of participants was contingent upon their expressed interest in media creation and using a convenience sampling technique. To ensure safety and confidentiality, Institutional Review Board policies from Clemson University were followed, and pseudonyms were used, including but not limited to contacting participants and not collecting data until receiving IRB approval. The study was voluntary, and participants had the right to opt-out at any time without repercussions. We protected the study participants' privacy and confidentiality by utilizing pseudonyms. Anonymity was linked to confidentiality, so those participants' names and other distinctive identifiers were kept private.

Data instruments and collection

Observation Protocol (In-Person and Swivl)

As part of this project, we observed students for approximately 60 minutes each day of the camp as they created media and collaborated with their peers. The observation protocol was adapted from the study by Arastoopour Irgens et al. (2022) to better understand how participants engaged with various camp activities.

We used Swivl for video observation. During these sessions, we focused on participants' conversations, collaboration styles, sources of support, media creation and sharing, and individual task performance.

The direct observations primarily reflect the researchers' perspectives on the behaviors exhibited by middle school students. We recorded the types of activities students engaged in, along with timestamps. Instances of errors or misunderstandings during tasks were noted. Our observations included participants' interactions, levels of interest, body language, and questions, especially those related to media deconstruction.

Semi-Structured Interviews

We conducted 20-minute, individual semi-structured interviews (Rabionet, 2011) with participants after the camp to explore their experiences with media deconstruction. These interviews were designed to provide space for students to reflect on and articulate their perspectives.

Interview questions covered several topics, including:

Their overall thoughts on the camp experience

Their understanding of media deconstruction

Whether any media content made them feel uncomfortable or confused

Their reactions to the videos

Why it is important to question media content

Any stereotypes noticed and what would they change

Qualitative Analysis

We used inductive, and open coding approaches to obtain our codes directly from the data (Creswell & Clark, 2018). We approached inductive and open coding without preconceived codes or themes. Instead, we allowed the codes to emerge from the data itself as patterns and themes became apparent during the analysis. This inductive and open coding method was applied to address the research question.

By employing these approaches, we explored the participants' responses and narratives. This was achieved by examining their responses from various data sources, which allowed me to capture the subtleties and nuances that might have gone unnoticed had we used a rigid analysis approach. For instance, utilizing video observation afforded me the opportunity to witness every aspect of the participants' actions and conversations during the media deconstruction process. This included moments of frustration and elation, providing valuable context to their media creation process. As we read through the data, we wrote short memos to improve codes, identify emergent codes, and revise the code book. During the coding process, equal attention was given to each data item to identify interesting aspects of the data relevant to answering the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To answer the RQ, we conducted open coding to explore what the participants see and respond to what they watch in the TV commercials as regards to gender stereotypes. Some of the codes that stood out to me include: "Persuasive vs. Pushy" labeling, "We need to ask more questions when we see ads", "Gender-Inclusive Play and Imagination", "Who said woman was not meant to fly?" We took a more granular approach and the more we reread and dug more into the data the more we understand the nuanced meanings the girls have towards gendered media. This iterative coding process generated a set of codes and themes. Throughout this iterative coding process, we continually collapsed some codes and expanded others to refine the analysis further. Some of the categories that emerged include "Freedom to Be Oneself" and "Emotional Reactions to Portrayals." Whenever a new code emerged, we updated the code book and recoded all previous data to ensure consistency in the analysis; for instance, the category "Emotional Reactions to Portrayals" emerged from a deeper analysis of comments about challenging gender stereotypes in TV Commercials.

We utilized MAXQDA to analyze our data, using features like text retrieval to find relevant data related to specific codes and creating memos and annotations to record interpretations and reflections. It assisted in

organizing, coding, and analyzing the data (text, audio, and video). A code frequency analysis helped identify prominent themes for inclusion. Thematic analysis was then employed to identify common patterns and themes in the data, providing insights into participants' perspectives and experiences. This process enabled me to first organize the codes into categories and then further condense them into meaningful themes, facilitating a concise and interpretable presentation of findings. To ensure accuracy, the data set and derived themes were carefully examined, and the themes were verified to accurately represent the data. The qualitative findings are presented through descriptions, themes, and perspectives, supported by evidence such as quotes, multiple perspectives, and rich descriptions (Table 1).

Table 1 Codes, Categories and Themes Exemplars

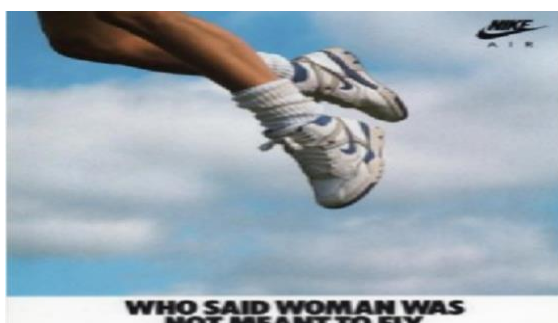
Codes	Categories	Theme
“Made me feel seen... but also sad” “Girls: be perfect. Boys: laugh it off” “Men can’t handle watching their own kids”	Emotional Reactions to Portrayals	Challenging Gender Stereotypes in TV Commercials
“Persuasive vs. Pushy” labeling “Who said woman was not meant to fly?” “We need to ask more questions when we see ads”	Challenging Gender Norms	
“It’s okay to do what you like...” “Anyone can build anything...” “They were so different, but they didn’t care”	Freedom to Be Oneself	Promoting Freedom of Expression
“Playing is for everyone” “Acceptance was natural” “Girls don’t have to play quiet games...”	Gender-Inclusive Play and Imagination	

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Challenging Gender Stereotypes in TV Commercials

The TV commercials the participants deconstructed include that of Pantene Labels Against Women ad, 2019 Volkswagen ad, Philadelphia cream cheese, Nike, LEGO, Toys R Us, and CBeebies. The Nike advertisement features a pair of Nike Air sneakers. The tagline reads, “Who said woman was not meant to fly.”

Figure 4 Nike Commercial



The participants engaged in the deconstruction of a Nike Advertisement (See Figure 4). Some of the conversations that ensue include:

Researcher: What does the advert tell you?

Sidney: Who said women woman (pointing to the deliberate use of WOMAN) was not meant to fly, so it is saying something more than what is written here

Tanya: Like, mistreatment for women, maybe.

Sidney: I think it's saying like they don't support the mistreatment of women, like the message should go beyond the stereotypes by flying.

Researcher: What does this ad want you to do?

Tanya: Buy shoes from Nike. Okay.

Sidney: Make us to think that we are buying more than a shoe, like empowering women?

Researcher: Who is targeted?

Asbury: WOMAN Oh, oh women are the target audience. I came to the conclusion because this was in the words.

Asbury: It says WOMAN. Like when MAN landed on the moon? Like, it's not one man; it was referring to everyone. This advert, too, is addressing every single woman.

Sidney: Yeah, that's what I was going to say. I was referring to how the news of the moon landing was conveyed "Man lands on the Moon," so the Advert says WOMAN, but it's referring to every single woman.

Tanya: But it's grammatically correct; it means the whole, entire gender of every single woman. It just sounds odd.

Asbury: It's not saying that a 12-year-old girl with blonde hair and green eyes couldn't fly. Right?

Researcher: How did they try to get your attention?

Tanya: I think there's two ways they're trying to get your attention I think like they're trying to also advertise shoes, but also advertise women, not advertising for women.

In this example of media deconstruction, the participants discussed how they recognize that media often carries a deeper or underlying meaning. The participants suggested the advertisement speaks to the issue of mistreatment of women and confronts gender stereotypes. They perceive the ad as a means of empowering women and championing gender equality. They also identify women as the primary target audience, drawing this conclusion from the wording and overall message of the advertisement. The students also engage in a discussion about the linguistic choice in the ad, specifically the use of "woman." While acknowledging its grammatical correctness, they find it peculiar in the context. They emphasize how it can influence perceptions of gender and advocate for equality, while also serving as a marketing tool for shoes.

Participants extended these conversations when discussing Pantene's "Labels Against Women" ad (See Figure 5). They identified the ad's message about gender-based double standards in professional behavior—how women are labeled as "bossy" for actions that earn men praise as "leaders." Some of the conversations that ensue include:

Tanya: Who do you think the ad is targeting?

Asbury: I think it's mostly for women and girls like us. But also maybe for guys .. to help them see the unfairness. Like, some of them might not even realize it's happening.

Jade: Yeah, I agree. I came to that conclusion because of the way it showed both men and women..but it focused on how the women were labeled. Like the man was "persuasive," but the woman was "pushy."

Sidney: Exactly. And as a girl, it kind of makes me feel seen... but also sad. Like, I don't want to grow up in a world where I have to act "less" just to be accepted.

Jade: Me too. But it also made me feel stronger ... like we can notice these things now, talk about them, and not let them define us.

Tanya: Facts. I think if more people watched that ad, they'd start paying attention to how they speak to girls and what they expect from us. I'm glad we watched it.

Figure 5 Pantene's "Labels Against Women" ad



Tanya and Jade expressed frustration but also a sense of empowerment. They shared personal experiences of being unfairly labeled in school, using these reflections to deepen their understanding of the ad's impact. They emphasized that media like this can spark awareness and inspire girls to resist stereotypes.

When analyzing the **Volkswagen commercial** (See Figure 6), the girls critiqued how the ad portrayed men in adventurous roles (astronauts, athletes), while women were shown in passive caregiving roles (e.g., sitting with a pram). They express frustration at how the ad reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, making them feel that society still expects girls to stay in the background while boys are encouraged to be bold and ambitious. Asbury remarks, "It kind of annoyed me. Like, what is that supposed to say? That boys get to be astronauts and do cool stuff, and girls are just... watching babies?" Sidney supports this by saying, "Right? It felt like they were showing men being active and brave, and the women were just quiet and passive. As a girl, it makes me feel like society expects us to sit on the sidelines." They analyze visual techniques used in the ad. Jade observes:

"I think they were trying to get our attention by showing big, dramatic scenes.... astronauts, cliff climbing, sports. That stuff pulls people in. But if you notice, all those 'wow' moments are with men. The woman just sits quietly next to a stroller. That's the moment that sticks out to me."

Here, the students are applying their understanding of how visual emphasis in advertisements can reinforce gender hierarchies, even subtly. Tanya connects this to the ad's target audience:

"That's how I came to the conclusion that they were targeting men more. Like, 'Hey, guys, this electric car is powerful and cool...just like you!' Meanwhile, we're supposed to... relate to a woman sitting on a bench?"

Her analysis reflects on how advertising shapes and limits identity through exclusion and narrow portrayals. Importantly, Asbury also gestures toward a hopeful shift in public awareness: "And the sad thing is, it's not just this ad. It's everywhere. But seeing this ad banned makes me feel like maybe people are starting to notice. Like, 'Hey, this isn't okay.'" This moment signals a sense of empowerment, suggesting that calling out problematic representations can lead to social change.



Figure 6 2019 Volkswagen ad

The Philadelphia cream cheese commercial (See Figure 7) offered a more complex reaction. While participants initially found it humorous, they quickly reflected on its deeper message that men are often depicted as carefree and forgiven for parenting mistakes, while women would be criticized for similar behavior. The students identify and critique the portrayal of gender in the cream cheese commercial. Sidney observes, “Okay, that commercial was kinda funny... but also kinda annoying? Like, why do the dads have to be so clueless?” This moment initiates a group discussion about how media often uses humor to reinforce outdated stereotypes. Jade adds, “Right?! It’s like they’re saying, ‘Men can’t handle watching their own kids.’ That wouldn’t be funny if it was a mom, though.” The students try to deconstruct the ad’s intent and tactics. Jade prompts, “Let’s try breaking it down like we learned in media class. What does the ad want us to do?” Ava replies, “Buy cream cheese, obviously. They’re using humor to make the brand memorable. Like, ‘Haha, silly dads! But wow, that cream cheese looks good.’” Sidney expands on the technique: “They’re trying to get our attention with that whole unexpected twist—like, ‘Whoa! Did he really forget his baby?’ It’s kinda shocking, so it sticks with you.” This exchange demonstrates how students are beginning to recognize the ways advertisers use stereotypes and humor to manipulate viewer emotions and consumer behavior.

Importantly, the students do not stop at identifying techniques, they consider the deeper social implications. Ava reflects, “But who are they targeting? It’s probably adults who have families, right? Especially men—they’re trying to make dads feel like it’s okay to mess up a little, as long as you have snacks.” This insight underscores how media can subtly shape norms around parenting and gendered expectations. Eventually, the emotional impact of these portrayals becomes increasingly evident. Tanya notes:

“Honestly, as a girl, I feel like this stuff just builds up over time. Like we keep seeing things where women are serious and responsible, and men are goofy and forgiven for it. That gets tiring.”

Ava reiterates: “It’s like the message is, ‘Girls: be perfect. Boys: it’s okay to mess up, just laugh it off.’ That sticks in your head.” Finally, Sidney challenges her peers to practice active inquiry when consuming media:

“I think we need to ask more questions when we see ads. Like, What do I think of it as a girl? Do I feel seen? Or am I just supposed to laugh at something that actually makes me uncomfortable?”



Figure 7 The Philadelphia cream cheese commercial

Throughout these open discussions, participants questioned the normalization of gender roles, reflected on how media representations connect to their own experiences, and expressed a desire for greater fairness and representation.

Theme 2: Promoting Freedom of Expression

In addition to challenging gender stereotypes, participants also engaged with media that promoted the freedom to be oneself, especially in the context of childhood play and friendships. Through deconstructing commercials from LEGO, Toys R Us, and CBeebies, they reflected on how these media pieces challenge restrictive norms and celebrate a sense of belonging.

The LEGO “Shake Up Imagination” commercial encouraged children to use their creativity and imagine without boundaries. Participants responded positively to the idea that toys are not limited by gender expectations. Asbury observed that “anyone can build anything with their imagination, no matter if you're a boy or a girl,” while Sidney noted that the commercial pushes back against the pressure for children to act a certain way based on their gender. Sidney also mentioned, “Well, they were more than just toys. They were trying to say something about how kids are pressured to act a certain way because of their gender.” The participants discuss how the LEGO Commercial does not prescribe any specific roles or limitations based on gender. By showing children engaging in imaginative play without predetermined gender roles, it challenges the idea that certain toys are meant for boys or girls only. Tanya echoed this idea by suggesting the ad aimed to change how society thinks about play: “Like, it's okay for boys to play with ‘girl’ toys and vice versa.”

Similarly, the Toys R Us “Today We Play” commercial resonated with participants by depicting the structured and stressful lives of modern children and proposing unstructured play as a remedy. From observing the participants’ discussion and response to the guiding questions, they interpreted the commercial as creating a space where children can express themselves freely, regardless of gender roles. Sidney reflected, “I liked how the commercial showed kids being all serious at first, like they were stuck doing boring adult stuff. But then they got to just be kids and have fun. That felt real.” Asbury appreciated the autonomy to be themselves without restriction, saying, “It’s cool how the ad didn’t say, ‘boys do this’ and ‘girls do that.’ Everyone just got to play however they wanted.” Tanya emphasized that, “It didn’t matter if you were a girl or a boy, you could build stuff, run around, pretend, whatever. It showed that playing is for everyone.” By observing and discussing these commercials, students began to recognize how media shapes their perceptions of what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how those roles can be questioned, subverted, or affirmed. Sidney made a good point about this, saying, “It kind of reminded me that it’s okay to do what you like, even if it’s not what people expect you to do. Like, girls don’t always have to play quiet games and boys don’t have to be super wild.”

The CBeebies commercial, designed to celebrate diversity and kindness, was also highly impactful. It featured two friends who, despite looking different, could not identify their differences. Tanya shared during a discussion, “I liked the one with the two friends in the CBeebies commercial. They were so different, but they didn’t care.” Asbury added, “And maybe they want us to realize that we should be more accepting of our differences, just like those friends in the CBeebies commercial.” Ava connected the message to a broader social lesson, saying, “Yeah, I think I get it now, just like the Nike advert. It's like they’re trying to break those rules that say what we can and can’t do.” The idea that both commercials pushed back against restrictive norms helped students see that media can also be used to challenge the status quo, not just reinforce it. We noted in the in-person and video observations recordings that Asbury said, “I think it shows that people can be friends even if they don’t look the same or act the same. That’s what made it feel good to watch.” Sidney chimed in, “It made me think about how we sometimes judge people just because they’re different. But in that ad, the kids didn’t even notice, they were just happy being together.” The participants appreciated how the ad modeled a world where acceptance was natural and differences were embraced, not highlighted or ridiculed. This helped them reflect on their own experiences and beliefs, and recognize how media can be a tool for inclusion and social change.

Overall, the discussions show that young people are attuned not only to stereotypes but also to progressive interpretations that foster belonging, imagination, and freedom. They welcomed commercials that depict

children as imaginative, open-minded, and accepting, and saw such representations as a model for a more equitable society.

DISCUSSION

Our discussion builds on the girls' insights from deconstructing five different commercials. Rather than imposing interpretations, we encouraged them to express their views. The conversations we observed and interviews we conducted revealed that critical media literacy remains a powerful tool for helping young people analyze media content, particularly in ways that support the promotion of gender equity in society. Two major themes emerged: challenging gender stereotypes and promoting freedom of expression. These themes are illuminated when viewed through the lens of Feminist Media Theory, which argues that representation in media is inseparable from systems of power and gendered ideology.

This study explores how five middle school students, through conversations, interactions, and guided critiques of selected TV commercials, engaged in learning and meaning-making around how media can contribute to the repression of girls and women in society. Through structured prompting and questioning, the participants could recognize, interrogate, and challenge gender stereotypes embedded in media advertisements. This process aligns with previous research highlighting the value of critical engagement with media texts in fostering students' socio-political awareness and media agency (Kellner & Share, 2007; Mihailidis, P. & S. Viotty (2017).

Challenging Gender Stereotypes in TV Commercials

Participants' deconstruction of the Nike advertisement revealed an engagement with the ad's subtext, particularly its challenge to traditional gender narratives. The slogan "Who said WOMAN was not meant to fly" prompted discussions about visibility, empowerment, and linguistic representation. Through a feminist media lens, this engagement highlights how advertisements can symbolically resist symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978) by reclaiming women's visibility in cultural discourse. The girls decoded the message as promoting women's autonomy and ambition, resisting historic gender constraints (Djerf-Pierre & Edström, 2020). Their focus on the capitalization of "WOMAN" demonstrates how language can function as a tool of empowerment and resistance, a key tenet of feminist media analysis. By comparing the slogan to the historical phrase "Man lands on the Moon," participants recognized how women have often been excluded from dominant narratives and how corrective representation can reclaim space for them.

The participants' conversations about the Pantene "Labels Against Women" ad revealed a nuanced awareness of gendered double standards. They noted how identical behaviors were framed positively for men ("persuasive") and negatively for women ("pushy"), echoing feminist critiques of unequal symbolic value attached to gendered behaviors. Their emotional responses, feeling both "seen" and saddened, demonstrate what feminist media theorists describe as the dual effect of representation: simultaneously validating lived experiences and exposing the persistence of inequality (Gill, 2008). This ability to connect media critique to their personal identities underscores the feminist principle that media is never neutral but deeply tied to structures of power.

The Volkswagen ad analysis illustrated the participants' frustration with women's continued confinement to passive, caregiving roles while men were depicted in adventurous, heroic contexts. From a feminist perspective, this reflects the ongoing reinforcement of patriarchal hierarchies, in which women are rendered subordinate or absent in aspirational spaces. Their recognition of the emotional toll of repeated exposure to such portrayals affirms feminist arguments about how media functions as an ideological apparatus, shaping identity formation and limiting perceived opportunities (Carlsson & Weibull, 2018; Ward & Grower, 2020).

Participants' reactions to the Philadelphia cream cheese commercial further demonstrate how humor operates as a carrier of inequality. By critiquing the ad's portrayal of fathers as "clueless but forgiven," the girls exposed how humor normalizes unequal gender expectations, allowing men more leniency while demanding perfection from women.

This aligns with feminist critiques of advertising's reliance on seemingly light portrayals to disguise deeper inequities (Jhally, 1990). Their statement, "girls: be perfect. boys: it's okay to mess up," articulates a feminist reading of how media trivializes women's labor and responsibility while excusing men's failures, reinforcing systemic inequity.

Across these discussions, the participants moved from passive viewing to what feminist media theory describes as resistant readings, actively questioning portrayals, identifying double standards, and reasserting their own interpretive power. Sidney's reflection, "we need to ask more questions when we see ads," illustrates the development of media agency, a core feminist objective: to empower marginalized groups to critically interrogate and resist dominant ideologies.

Promoting Freedom of Expression through Play and Identity

Beyond critiquing stereotypes, participants also embraced commercials that modeled inclusivity and freedom of identity, aligning with feminist calls for alternative, counter-hegemonic media narratives. The LEGO "Shake Up Imagination" ad, for example, was praised for avoiding gendered toy assignments and instead celebrating creativity without boundaries. Students' comments such as "anyone can build anything" highlight a feminist reimagining of childhood play as a site of resistance against restrictive norms. This affirms feminist media theory's recognition that representation can function as a site of empowerment by opening spaces for fluid and inclusive identities (Comber & Nixon, 2008; Coyne et al., 2016).

Similarly, the Toys R Us "Today We Play" commercial resonated with participants by depicting a stark contrast between rigid adult expectations and the liberating nature of play. Feminist theory reminds us that such portrayals are powerful because they validate children's experiences and challenge the social scripts that define gendered behavior (Marsh, 2010). Participants' appreciation for ads that showed all children playing freely, without division into "boys'" and "girls'" activities, echoes feminist advocacy for dismantling artificial boundaries in identity formation.

The CBeebies commercial was valued for its affirmation of diversity and difference. Feminist media scholars argue that inclusive portrayals not only resist marginalization but also foster a sense of belonging and collective empowerment (Rideout, 2014). Participants' reflections, that differences "didn't matter" and friendship prevailed, demonstrate how feminist-aligned media can promote solidarity and self-acceptance.

Putting all these together, these commercials functioned as resistant texts, aligning with feminist media theory's recognition of media as a contested site where oppressive ideologies can be disrupted and alternatives imagined. By responding positively to ads that celebrated diversity and inclusivity, the girls not only identified what they reject in media but also what they aspire to see, models of equity, play, and self-expression.

Implication for Practice and Conclusion

These findings suggest that when provided with a critical framework and supportive learning environment, young people can thoughtfully engage with media, detect underlying ideologies, and articulate their own positions. Situating this work within Feminist Media Theory further highlights media deconstruction as an emancipatory practice: students were not only decoding advertisements but also developing interpretive power to resist symbolic annihilation, challenge double standards, and articulate more inclusive narratives.

The pedagogical implications extend beyond this single study. The paper demonstrates that curriculum integration of feminist-informed media literacy, particularly in middle school digital literacy programs, can provide students with critical tools during a formative stage of identity development. Embedding such practices across curricula would support broader efforts to align with UNESCO's (2022) framework on gender and media, which calls for systemic interventions that dismantle stereotypes and promote equitable participation in digital culture. By connecting participants' reflections to these global frameworks, we underscore how classroom-based interventions contribute to international gender-equity goals.

To enhance theoretical clarity, this work also points toward a conceptual model of “media deconstruction and empowerment.” Such a model would depict the iterative process observed here: (1) exposure to media messages, (2) guided deconstruction of underlying ideologies, (3) recognition of stereotypes and inequities, and (4) empowerment through resistant readings and alternative meaning-making. Framing findings within such a model helps illustrate how adolescent girls move from passive consumers to active interpreters and potential agents of change.

Finally, from a scholarly standpoint, improving the explanatory clarity of figures, tightening redundancies in descriptions, and linking findings more explicitly to broader gender-equity policies in education will elevate this study’s contribution. By weaving together feminist media theory, participant voices, and policy frameworks, the paper positions itself as both a pedagogical intervention and a theoretical contribution to debates about gender, media, and adolescent empowerment.

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