
The Issue of Gender Roles During Halloween

Every year, many Americans look forward to celebrating Halloween, and dressing up in costume is usually a part of that. I personally love Halloween, but I hate that it seems to amplify the way our culture “does gender,” as Judith Lorber might say. One recent TV commercial for Party City exemplifies how gender is socially constructed in the United States. It shows many children and adults (most of whom are portrayed so that they are assumed to be either male or female) in a variety of costumes. On a superficial level, the commercial may appear to be progressive by showing some girls in traditionally male costumes; however, it still enforces traditional gender roles and limits options for both males and females by feminizing and sexualizing girls’ costumes and not including traditionally feminine costumes for boys. The commercial thus relates to Judith Lorber’s “The Social Construction of Gender,” in which she discusses the fact that while our society seems to embrace some blurring of gendered norms for females, masculinity is always expected of males, and overall we still enforce gender roles.

To a certain degree, this Party City commercial challenges gender roles by showing some women and girls costumed as traditionally male characters. Figures such as Spiderman and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are originally male and usually thought of as such in our society; in the commercial, there are both boys and girls wearing these costumes. These characters are associated with strength and bravery, which are not traditionally feminine characteristics. It’s great to see women and especially little girls having the chance to emulate admired characters and display these traits. Judith Lorber is absolutely correct in asserting that “gendered roles change” and that the lines between femininity and masculinity “seem to be blurring” in some ways (Lorber 55). It is becoming increasingly socially acceptable for girls to show enthusiasm for superheroes and in some other traditionally male interests. Lorber mentions seeing a baby girl on the subway wearing dark-colored clothes and “a Yankee baseball cap” (54). Though sports are still a predominantly male-oriented hobby, girls are more encouraged to get involved or show interest in them. We are certainly starting to see many more opportunities for girls to enter into previously male-dominated spaces.

However, just because it is more acceptable for girls to like things like superheroes or baseball, does not mean that there are not still limitations on their enjoyment. Some people seem to adopt the mindset that this bit of progress is adequate, that we have enough gender neutrality and flexibility. Nonetheless, the constraints of gender roles are still firmly in place. For instance, the baby that Lorber mentions is also wearing “tiny earrings... little flowered sneakers and lace-trimmed socks” (54). Even when choosing to dress their baby in more masculine clothes than are usually seen on baby girls, her parents still feel the need to identify her as female using these markers. Embracing a degree of masculinity is okay for women and girls, as long as they

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retain some femininity and it is still easy for everyone to determine their gender. Likewise, even the girls and women in the Party City commercial who are dressed as superheroes have very feminized versions of these and other masculine costumes. The boy versions look a lot like the characters themselves, while the girl versions have skirts, ruffles, and sparkles. Of course, it's perfectly fine to feminize something if one wishes to adopt those characteristics. The problem lies in the exclusivity: feminization is seen as necessary for girls if they want to step in to boys' interests, but they should have the same freedom that boys do. It's upsetting to see that the girls and women in the commercial can only appear as what's seen as watered-down versions of their male counterparts, more girly and therefore less powerful. Furthermore, even in children's costumes, the girl versions are usually more sexualized, showing off more bare skin and comprising of tighter articles of clothing. Our society still views women as objects of desire, even as children. Not only do we limit girls' and women's gender expression, but we train them from a young age to dress for men's benefit, ignoring physical comfort and female independence.

While there is only superficial progress in the area of girls displaying masculinity, there is none in the area of boys displaying femininity. From what I can see, all of the boys and men in the commercial are in gender-neutral or masculine costumes. Women can be girly superheroes, but men cannot be princesses or fairies. According to Lorber, there are "two socially and legally recognized gender statuses," and "man" is the dominant in our culture (58). Thus, it is okay for women to be masculine, but it is a lowering of status for men to be feminine. It is unacceptable and even dangerous for men to take on feminine roles or characteristics. The only time I've seen a boy in a feminine costume was when my cousin dressed as a girl for Halloween – this was a little embarrassing for him, but ultimately funny, because we are conditioned to find it amusing and ridiculous that a strong boy portray himself as silly and weak and feminine.

Even at a time of year when we are encouraged to take on new personas and be somebody else, we preclude ourselves from taking on any characteristics of the opposite sex. This current Party City commercial is seen as a perfectly normal advertisement, but it strongly enforces the gender roles we have internalized. Men must be strong and powerful, while women are pretty and vulnerable. There is little leeway for women and girls to display masculinity, and none for boys and men to display femininity. Our strict adherence to these gender roles continues on, which is made clear by the fact that excerpts from a book written twenty-one years ago is still perfectly relevant today.

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