

I'm a Boy and I Don't Like Pink!

The Influence of Book Covers on Male Elementary Students' Text Selection

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which book choice based on a book's cover was affected by the reader's gender. Researchers collected data via a survey that was administered to 98 third-grade students; 48 males and 48 females. The survey consisted of color pictures of 24 book covers with four yes or no questions accompanying each book cover and a fifth question asking students to elaborate on why or why not they would choose to read that book. The survey included an equal number of fiction and non-fiction texts, as well as three book covers that could be considered targeted more towards female readers and three book covers that could be considered targeted more towards male readers. The results of this study indicated some gender-related differences in specific text selection as well as in the overall likelihood a text would be selected. Knowledge of factors affecting text selection in male and female students can assist educators in offering book choices that are appealing to students of each gender.

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Although there has been ongoing research for several decades into the relationship between gender and reading achievement, there is still little consensus in the research literature regarding the actual nature, cause, and size of the gap in reading achievement between males and females (Badian, 1999; Hyde, 2005; Liederman, Kantrowitz, & Flannery, 2005; Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Fletcher, & Escobar, 1990; Siegel & Smythe, 2005). Nonetheless, female reading achievement continues to outpace that of males on both national (NCES, 2011) and international assessments (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker,

2012). Although several methods have yielded demonstrable results in improving reading achievement, providing readers with a wide range in book choice has proven to be particularly effective, largely because a greater availability of reading selections tends to lead to an increased motivation to spend more time reading (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Reynolds & Symons, 2001).

Several factors tend to influence the manner in which individuals choose books. Because book choice has been shown to be related to reading achievement, it is important to determine if a reader's gender may constrain a reader's book choice, thereby limiting the amount of reading material truly available to that reader. A detailed survey of 194 readers indicated that a book's cover was one of the most frequently cited factors influencing book choice (Ross, 2000), with older readers being influenced by the summary and sample text that are often included on the back cover. It seems that book covers influence selection of books for young readers even more. For instance, in a study of fifth grade male students, researchers found that the majority of males used book covers and text features to choose books (Farris, Werderich, Nelson, & Fuhler, 2009). The influence of gender on literacy identities has received some attention in the research literature (Dutro, 2002; Dutro 2003); the present study adds to this body of work by examining data that show how gender roles can affect book choices based on a book's cover.

Background

Cultural and societal influences and expectations can contribute to an individual's identification with a particular gender role; as children grow, they gain an overall sense of self along with beliefs about the positions and expectations of their sex group (Stockard, 2006). These gender roles are thought to have developed from interactions with the environment. As demonstrated by Sax (2005), parents use different language with males than they do with females, and people react differently to males and females, therefore treating them differently. In a study created to gauge perceptions of gender, Sax split adult participants into two groups and showed each group the same video of an infant; one group was told that the infant was male and the other was told that the infant was female. Overwhelmingly, the participants described the male baby as curious and adventurous, while the female baby was described as

being fearful and anxious. Subconscious perceptions such as these and the interpretations to which they lead can cause differences in the way parents treat the sexes, which can also result in parents encouraging males and females differently. For example, Tenenbaum and Leaper (2003) found that parents of young adolescents perceived that science was less interesting and more challenging for females than males, despite there being no differences in student achievement in their science classes at school. In addition, the study also found that fathers tended to use more cognitively complex language when engaging male children in conversations about science than they did when engaging female children. Furthermore, a study by Meece, Bower-Glienke, and Burg (2006) showed that males tend to have positive motivation related to mathematics, science, and sports, while females show more favorable motivation patterns in language arts and reading.

Physiological differences in the way that male and female brains develop, specifically in the area of language use and development, may also play a role in helping to reinforce the gender roles that are created by cultural and societal influences. A longitudinal study by a team of neuroscientists from the National Institute of Mental Health showed that males' brains seem to develop in a different order, time, and rate than those of females in the areas of the brain that affect language (Lenroot, et al., 2007). Hanlon, Thatcher, and Cline's research (1999) suggested that the brain areas involved with language and fine motor skills may mature as much as six years earlier in females than in males. In addition, anatomical differences in the brains of men and women suggest that females process emotions differently than males; women show more grey matter in the limbic system, the part of the brain that supports functions such as emotion, motivation, and long-term memory, suggesting that women may be more emotionally expressive than men (Good, et al., 2001). Although the impact of differences in the lateralization of the brain (i.e., certain tasks are processed in the left or right hemisphere) is debated, research suggests that males and females exhibit different patterns of lateralization in emotional processing (Wager, Phan, Liberzon, & Taylor, 2003). Furthermore, some scientists have come to conclude that differences in emotional processing in the brain might make females more adept at

verbalizing and expressing emotion than males (Sax, 2005). In a study of African American kindergarten and prekindergarten students, researchers Craig and Washington (2002) found that females produced a significantly higher number of different words from language samples taken during play. These findings also apply to conversations of adults – Nordenstam (1992) reported females produce more words than males during adult conversation.

Thus, not only do societal expectations of “acceptable” or “normal” behavior seem to play a role in the development of children’s self-perception of their academic proclivities, but physiological differences in the way that male and female brains develop seem to help reinforce these developing academic identities. Indeed, many children from quite a young age begin to view reading within the home as an activity more closely related to women than men. In one survey (Millard, 1997), children reported not only that their mothers read more than their fathers, but that their mothers also played a more substantial role in teaching them to read. Other surveys have indicated that intermediate grade level males view the act of reading as a feminine activity (Dutro, 2003). The same is true in primary grades: a survey of second-grade students found that 24% of males view reading as feminine (Katz, et al., 2003). Survey results such as these tend to confirm that many children of elementary school age will already have begun to regard reading as a feminine activity.

Because gender identities seem to be influenced not only by cultural and societal influences and expectations, but also by physiological differences between males and females in brain development, the present study sought to examine whether gender identity might be reflected in differences between the types of books selected by males and females based on book cover. Understanding that differences in preference exist between the genders and that book covers are commonly used when readers select a text, the following questions guided the research: (a) What impact does the cover of a book have on text selection?; and (b) How do males differ from females in the selection of a text based on the cover?

Methods

Participants in this study were third-grade students attending two elementary schools in a medium-sized city in the Southeast United States. Three elementary school classrooms from each of the two schools participated. The sample included 49 male and 49 female students for a total of 98 participants of which 63 were African American, 23 were Caucasian, and 12 were Hispanic.

Researchers created a measurement instrument that consisted of a survey containing questions about images of a selection of age appropriate book covers. Considering classroom experiences and observations of students' reading habits, the researchers chose twenty-four books based on various factors including cover design, gender of the character displayed on the cover, and cover color. The researchers included an equal number of fiction and nonfiction books. Three books, *Pinkalicious* (Kann, 2006), *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (Henkes, 2006), and *Crafty Chloe* (Dipucchio, 2012), were included due to their ostensible appeal to female students; three other, *Couple of Boys Have the Best Week Ever* (Frazee, 2008), *Crust & Spray: Gross Stuff in Your Eyes, Ears, Nose, and Throat* (Larsen, 2009), and *Shark vs. Train* (Barton, 2010), were included because of their ostensible appeal to male students. The remaining books were considered to be more gender neutral, and the survey consisted of a selection of books representing an equal number of male and female characters. In addition, an attempt was made to select book covers with which the students were not already familiar.

The survey questions were designed such that third graders of different ability levels would be able to complete them. The survey included four yes/no questions and one written response for each of the 24 book covers (see Figure 1). Students were able to circle yes or no for the first four questions, which included: "Do you like the cover of this book?", "Do you like the picture on the cover?", "Do you like the color of the cover?", and "Would you read this book?" In addition, students were asked to answer a final question about the book that related to the fourth question ("Why or why not"). This final question provided researchers expanded insight regarding the rationale for students' book choices. Limiting the number of book covers/questions to four book covers per page of the survey allowed the

book covers to be reproduced in a large enough size so that the students could make an accurate judgment about them.

The researchers distributed the survey to each of the six classrooms in the two participating schools (one of the researchers was the students' teacher in one of these classrooms). To ensure that students did not lose focus, the researchers divided the survey into two parts consisting of 12 book covers each and administered the entire survey over two days. The students were instructed to look at the picture of each of the book covers and answer the five questions about each book cover. Each portion of the survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete, for a total of approximately 40 minutes over both days. To reduce potential order effects, half of the students received the first portion of the survey on the first day, while the other half completed the second portion on the first day.

Results and Discussion

Researchers focused their data analysis by identifying the three books most selected by each gender and the three books least selected by each gender. The top three books chosen by females were: *Bunnies* (Elora, 2011); *Please, Puppy, Please* (Lee, 2005); and *How to Make a Liquid Rainbow* (Shores, 2011). Out of these three books, *How to Make a Liquid Rainbow* and *Please, Puppy, Please* displayed female characters on the cover, and two of the covers contain animals. *Bunnies* and *How to Make a Liquid Rainbow* are nonfiction, while *Please, Puppy, Please* is fiction. The bottom three books chosen by females were: *Go Figure* (Ball, 2005); *A Couple of Boys Have the Best Week Ever*; and a third-place tie between *Crust and Spray* and *The Cloud Spinner* (Catchpool, 2012).

The top three books chosen by males were: *Shark Vs. Train*; *How to Make a Fizzy Rocket* (Shores, 2010); and a third-place tie between *Dog Breath* (Pilkey, 2004) and *Dragons Love Tacos* (Rubin, 2012). Three of the books were fiction, *Dog Breath*, *Dragons Love Tacos*, and *Shark vs. Train*, and one book was nonfiction, *How to Make a Fizzy Rocket*. One book shows a male character on the cover, and the others show animals. The bottom three books chosen by males were *Pinkalicious*, *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*, and *Crafty Chloe*.

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The present study's results contain several points of interest. First, third-grade males were nearly unanimous in rejecting books that would characteristically be associated with female readers. Some of the male responses to the survey question asking why they would or would not read a book included: "This is for girls.", "It looks too girly.", "It has too much girly dancing.", "Don't like girly stuff.", "It is about a prissess(sic) and I am not a girl.", and "Do not like purple or purses." Second, the female responses to the same survey question also indicated gender-influenced book choices, e.g., "No, it is for boys.", "It sounds boyish.", and "No it's cartoonish and has boys." However, there were not nearly as many gender-based rejection responses for the females as there were for males. Several of the female rejection responses were directed toward the subject matter as in *Crust and Spray*, e.g., "I would not because it looks gross." and "It looks disgusting(sic)." (It is worth noting that *Crust and Spray* was also towards the bottom of the selection list for male students, even though the researchers had initially believed that this book would appeal to a male audience). Third, the majority of the top three books selected by females were non-fiction, while the majority of top three books selected by males were fiction. Furthermore, *Go Figure!*, a non-fiction book of mathematics facts, was rejected almost equally by both genders, ending up fourth from the bottom of the books on the male selection list. Finally, the overall percentage of "yes" responses to the survey question "Would you read this book?" was 65% for females versus 58% for males, indicating that females seemed more likely to select books for reading from the survey list than males.

The present study was limited by several factors including (a) a relatively small sample size, (b) a demographic composition that makes generalizing the study's results problematic, (c) a researcher-created survey instrument, and (d) a choice of books that may not have been representative of the range of commercially available books. The authors suggest that further research be conducted regarding the extent to which both genders have access to an equal selection of appealing books. To that end, the authors recommend the development of more sophisticated survey instruments with more focused questions, a wider and more refined selection of commercially available books, and an exploration of

other factors that may play a role in book selection based on book cover, such as a student's ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

The present study's results seem to suggest that males tend to exhibit more gender-based constraints in their book choices than females. Given the gender gap that exists in reading achievement, it is especially important for educators and literacy specialists to be cognizant of the fact that not only might males be more reluctant to read certain books, but that school and classroom libraries might not contain a balance of books that will afford both genders an equal choice of appealing reading material. Several studies have indicated that the two largest factors influencing reading motivation and achievement were (a) personal choice of what to read, and (b) student access to multiple books (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Krashen, 2011). Moreover, providing access to *self-selected* texts (emphasis added by authors) for summer reading can provide a cost-effective means of helping to close and/or eliminate summer learning loss in terms of reading achievement (Allington, et al., 2010). Thus, it is incumbent upon educators to make available to both genders an equal number of books that each finds appealing.

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