

GENDER, GRAPHICS AND GLITTER: HOW CHILDREN’S GREETING CARDS ENFORCE GENDER STEREOTYPES

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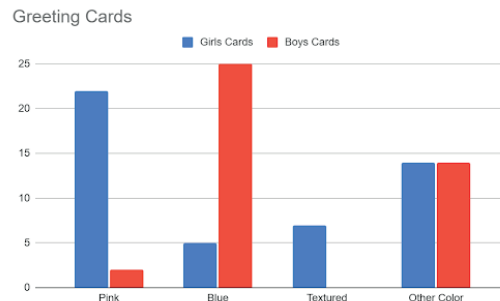
Greeting cards have been a social staple of politeness and good wishes tracing all the way back to Ancient China and Egypt. Although the sentiment has stayed the same, the practice of greeting cards has changed drastically through time. There have been many iterations of greeting cards, with more specific and themed ones appearing in more recent history. Today, when going to the store, one is likely to find shelves with messages of a “Merry Christmas,” “Get Well Soon,” “Happy Birthday,” “Sorry For Your Loss,” and many more. One thing mainly seen in Birthday and Anniversary cards is the unnecessarily gendered colors and text. I elected to study greeting cards, specifically birthday greeting cards for young children because I saw a striking difference between cards meant for young girls versus cards meant for young boys. I initially saw it as gendered because, just from an initial look at the greeting card display case, there was a “line” of sorts separating the pink cards from the blue cards, thus separating the girls’ from the boys’ cards. On closer inspection, I saw vast differences in text, color, and texture between the cards intended for girls versus boys.

I think this difference is important in how we discuss differences between girls and boys, and how the gender binary starts at such a young age. We have talked quite a bit about how performative gender is, and how people actively do gender. In this case of child’s greeting cards, we can see how companies are creating and enforcing this gender binary onto consumers, and therefore children. Chances are, children will receive many cards throughout their young lives, and if they all are perpetuating this idea of what girls are and what boys are, what does that tell the children? Some articles I found important to this discussion were: “Mom transforms American Girl doll into a boy for her son,” and “Blame the Princess” because both writings examined the idea of performing gender, and how we not only perform gender on a daily basis, but enforce said gender ideals on listening youth. Another article I found illuminating on the subject is titled: “How Kids’ Birthday Cards Perpetuate Gender Stereotypes.” Several great points are brought up, and the author discusses many of the same things I noticed in my research in regards to the unnecessary gendering of children’s birthday cards.

To gather data, I went to my local Target and viewed the children’s birthday card aisle. I took pictures of both specific cards, as well as the displays as a whole. At home, I narrowed in on one shelf in particular, assuring there were the same number of cards for the boys’ vs. girls’ section, and went through and counted how many of the cards were pink, blue, different colors, and textured. I then placed

these numbers in a spreadsheet to make a graph, and graphed out the differences between cards meant for girls and cards meant for boys. I decided to focus on color (specifically pink and blue) and texture on the cards because I noticed most differences in these distinguishing features. In my picture, I had a sample size of 82 cards, 41 of those intended for girls and 41 intended for boys.

In my research for the graph for greeting cards, I found some striking differences in cards marketed towards girls or boys. In the Target where I conducted my research, they had labels on the shelves indicating if the cards were meant for girls or boys. My sample picture where I gathered the data is from said display case, where I took a sample of 82 cards: 41 girls’ and 41 boys’. Of the girls’ cards, 22 were mostly pink, 5 were blue, 14 were another color (mostly orange or yellow), and 7 had an element of texture, meaning glitter, shiny print, or fluff on the card. From the boys’ cards, 2 were pink, 25 were blue, and 14 were another color (mostly black, red, or orange), and none of the cards had glitter, shiny lettering, or fluff.



It is a popular distinction between gender to assign pink to girls and blue to boys. But where does this idea come from? I turned to some writing by Maleigha Michael, who, in an article titled “Sexism in Colors - Why is Pink for Girls and Blue for Boys?” discusses the history behind the color assignments. She explains that, in the 19th century, people began using pastel colors for babies. Blue was meant to compliment blue eyed and blonde haired children, whereas pink was meant to compliment brown eyed and brown haired children. Blue was then associated with girls, with it being seen as a dainty color, and pink with boys being seen as a powerful strong color. Then, as people began associating red with romance and romance with women, pink became a “girls” color. Although there have been many movements to disregard this color binary, the idea persists through capitalist consumption, and therefore through our society and children. When I was a nanny, I once had a conversation with the

five year old girl I cared for about colors, and she was very insistent that pink was for girls and blue was for boys, and that because of that, her brother could not like pink. It was interesting, as an adult, to see how much importance she put both on the color assignment, and the binary based on that.

One of the other most important findings I had with greeting cards was the text both on the front of the card and on the inside, as well as the toys or games some cards came with. I took special note of four cards (two for girls and two for boys) that paralleled each other, as well as two additional cards meant for girls. For the four cards, I made sure to pick ones that paralleled each other, for example, making sure both had superhero themes, so that I could directly compare the two.

My first example is “Frozen” themed, with the girls’ card featuring Elsa and the boys’ card featuring Sven and Olaf. On the front of the girls’ card it says, “Wishing You a Perfect Birthday,” with sparkly snow fluttering around Elsa and a pink and light blue color theme. On the front of the boys’ card is written “On Your Birthday, Everything’s COOL!” with no special sparkles or textured text, and a royal blue and orange color theme. Inside the “Elsa” card is the text: “You’re as bright as sunshine, a princess through and through – That’s why this birthday wish is filled with hugs for you!” and “Enjoy Your Special Day.” The card also boasts a cut-out paper doll, once again full of sparkles. Inside the “Sven and Olaf” card is written “...but not as cool as YOU! Hope it’s the happiest!” and a memory game along with stickers. Aside from the cosmetic differences in look and color, a big issue I found with these cards were the toys they came with. The card intended for girls came with a doll whereas the card intended for boys came with stickers and a memory game. This perpetuates the idea that girls are to sit quietly and play with dolls (thus practicing their caretaking), whereas boys are to think and learn.

Next, I analyzed two cards that had superhero themes. The card intended for girls shows Wonder Woman, and the card intended for boys shows Batman. The text on the girls’ card reads, “A hero is kind, smart, courageous, and true...” in a shiny gold print, surrounded by shiny gold stars with a light blue and red color theme, whereas the boys’ card reads “Birthday Hero... It’s your day to hang out and have fun!” with a black, red, and yellow color theme. Inside the Wonder Woman card, it continues, “that’s why a hero is someone like you! Happy birthday” with a wearable button of Wonder Woman. On the other hand, the Batman card says “...you can always save the world later! Happy birthday to a great kid.” The card comes with a toy Batman mask for kids to wear. The issue in these cards comes in how they relate with children and their relationship with superheroes. For girls, they are stating that the recipient of the card is someone like a superhero, not an actual superhero, and on top of that, the only aspects they list and deem worthy for a female superhero are her at-

tributes surrounding what she can do for others in an emotional and caretaking way. On the other hand, the boys’ card assumes the boy is a superhero and knows it, and acknowledges him taking a day off to have some fun. Never in the girls’ card does it mention her resting and having fun, only how she can emotionally serve others like a superhero.

Finally, the two girls’ cards I analyzed separately both had pink and sparkly themes. On the cover, one reads “Future Girl Boss” over a pink cheetah print background full of sparkles. Why must the card specify that she will be a girl boss? Why can’t she simply be a boss? This negatively plays into the notion that women are not full bosses as men are, but simply women play acting as bosses as girls. The word girl in many contexts has been associated with more negative connotations, such as being weak, or not as intelligent, which adds another dimension of sexism and suppressing women from youth to this birthday card. The second card reads “Little Miss” over a dark blue background, with bright pink sparkly shoes with bows and flowers. “Little miss” is a term often used with young girls, as a way to both compliment them and age them in a way. The title “miss” is used with women to distinguish them as being unmarried women who have not been married, essentially categorizing and labeling them based on their relationship (or lack thereof) with a man. By calling young girls “little miss,” we unfortunately subsequently categorize children with the same notion. In addition to this, the nickname can be used and seen as a way of demeaning children—somehow both aging them up and aging them down for a confusing dynamic and power play.

The class readings I connected strongly with this topic were “Mom transforms American Girl doll into a boy for her son,” and “Blame the Princess,” due to their discussions of performing gender. In “Mom transforms American Girl doll into a boy for her son,” a mother is described creating an American boy doll for her son, who is sad he could not buy one like his sister had. The child wants to take care of his doll and interact with it, but because of the binary which barred him from getting a doll, he did not have the same option as his sister. This connects to the greeting cards because as seen with the “Frozen” cards, the girls were given a paper doll and the boys stickers and a game, failing to take into account the young boys who like Elsa more or may want a doll. In “Blame the Princess,” the author describes how, for girls and women, their end all be all goal is to get married and have a family. The article describes many women who have been planning their wedding for years, longing for that fairytale perfect princess wedding. I believe that the greeting cards connect here because many of them refer to women based on their emotions and the emotional services they can give others, which strongly links them to the construct of emotions and therefore weddings. In more general terms, there are also many more greeting cards designed for women which have to do with marriage than for men. For example

anniversary cards, wedding shower cards, and wedding cards in general are more heavily marketed with women as the recipient in mind. The way in which we perform gender is highly evident in both the greeting cards and in weddings, given how the narrative is often “the woman getting married, usually a princess, is often the center of attention, she wears a long white dress, has a huge bouquet of flowers, a huge wedding party and so on. As girls age, they mimic this script. ‘While little boys also get scripts, those usually focus on empowerment, like being a superhero or firefighter’” (Ellin 2014). By having children’s birthday cards focus heavily on girls being princesses and caretakers and boys being superheroes and manly men, it drives home this narrative that the wedding is the end all be all for women and a career is the end all be all for men.

The article “How Kids’ Birthday Cards Perpetuate Gender Stereotypes” also lends insight into this discussion about cards, and the author laments how “card companies portray two and three year-olds—who may or may not even know their full name or address—to have narrow personalities that fit into one mold: a teensy, tiny, smile-bringing girl!” (“How Kids’ Birthday Cards Perpetuate Gender Stereotypes” 2020). In her research for her blog, the author also pulls together visual aids documenting words used for girls’ cards and boys’ cards. As shown below, girl cards are likely to display soft and emotional wordage, whereas boy cards are likely to display more active and rigid words. gender stereotypes in kids’ birthday cards gender stereotypes in kids’ birthday cards



Figure 1. Words used for girls’ cards and boys’ cards. From <https://thinkorblue.com/birthdaycards/>

In my research I found stark differences between birthday cards meant for girls and birthday cards meant for boys. The cards intended for girls painted a pink picture of fluff, sparkles, and an emotional child who is dainty and small, whereas cards intended for boys painted a black and blue picture of heroes, duty, and fun, and a carefree child whose only focus should be on bettering himself and learning. These harmful stereotypes connect to major ideas in class in discussions of how we do gender, and how we force gender onto children from a young age with items such as greeting cards.

As they currently stand, the concept of gendered greeting cards, specifically gendered birthday cards for children, damages youth’s perception of gender and gender roles, and therefore what their gender role should be. By the logic of these cards, girls should hope to be like superheroes, and they should value being kind, compassionate, and (emotionally) intelligent above all else. On the other hand, boys should expect to be superheroes, and expect days off to relax and have fun. Not once is importance placed on young boys worrying about being kind or thoughtful of others—no, his whole focus should be on himself and his enjoyment of life. By giving children these notions, they have the potential to grow up thinking of themselves in unnecessarily gendered ways and further packing themselves into the box made by society to be the ideal versions of women and men who will continue to perpetuate the gender binary.

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