



Mr. Active and Little Miss Passive? The Transmission and Existence of Gender Stereotypes in Children's Books

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Abstract

Do popular children's books tend to reflect gender stereotypes, and do parents prefer their daughters to read books reflecting this pattern? We explored these research questions using the popular Roger Hargreaves' Mr. Men and Little Miss collection of children's storybooks, which is a series of individual stories all titled with and based on a binarized gendered character (e.g., Mr. Greedy, Little Miss Sunshine). Using a deductive content analysis approach, Study 1 revealed that the characters in the series' 81 books tend to behave in gender stereotypical ways, with male characters more adventurous and active and female characters more domestic and passive. Books that had female leads were also more likely to have male secondary characters. In Study 2, participants rated the masculinity/femininity and positivity/negativity of the traits of each of the book series' titular main characters without knowing the (gendered) book title. The traits used in Little Miss stories were associated with femininity, and the Mr Men story traits with masculinity. In Study 3, when faced with the prospect of selecting a Little Miss book to read to their daughter, parents preferred counter-stereotypical book choices (e.g., Little Miss Brainy). Perceived consistency with what parents wanted to teach their daughters about women predicted this book choice. Overall, although these books tended to reflect traditional gender stereotypes (Studies 1, 2), and people held these beliefs (Study 3), we found that parents wanted a counter-stereotypical book for their daughter. Implications for the transmission of gender stereotypes via children's literature and parental choices are discussed.

Keywords Gender stereotypes · Gender norms · Children's books · Popular media · Sexism · Mr. Men and Little Miss · Content analysis · Parental attitudes

From an early age, children are exposed to binary gender stereotypes about what men and women are, could be, and should be (Cherney & London, 2006; Wood et al., 2022). Research shows that children readily endorse these gender stereotypes from as young as three years old (Martin & Ruble, 2004) and can make accurate categorisations based on gender from preschool age (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010; Cvencek et al., 2011). Gender stereotypes are both descriptive (i.e., those which describe men and women) and prescriptive (i.e., those which transmit ideas about how men and women *should* look and act; Rudman and Glick, 2001). Studies show that stereotypes are transmitted in both direct

and indirect ways, with parents playing an important role (Hyde et al., 2019).

It has been well documented that children's storybooks have the capacity to communicate gendered information, including norms, stereotypes, and expectations, to children (Lewis et al., 2022; Narahara, 1998). To date, research has demonstrated that pervasive gender stereotypes exist in children's picture books (Axell & Boström, 2021; Lewis et al., 2022; Moya-Guijarro & Ventola, 2021). For example, research shows that children's books more often feature male characters in titular roles (McCabe et al., 2011; Hollis-Sawyer & Cuevas, 2013), as agentic (Weitzman et al., 1972) and as leaders. Women and girls are more often portrayed as subservient, passive and obedient (Allen et al., 1993; Peterson & Lach, 1990). Therefore, children's books may be considered a source of intensified gendered stereotyping (Lewis et al., 2022).

The stereotype contents of storybooks are important to explore given the consequences of exposure to gender

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stereotypes. Indeed, research consistently demonstrates that gender stereotypes contribute to the shaping of children's gendered self-concept (e.g., Abad and Pruden, 2013) and can shape implicit gender stereotypes (Block et al., 2022). As such, they are an important source in shaping children's ideas of gender (Lewis et al., 2022).

The Mr. Men and Little Miss Collection

Research has previously investigated gender stereotypes in a range of popular children's books. These include: the collated Caldecott book prize winners (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Crisp and Hiller, 2011; Clark et al., 2003), the works of Dr. Seuss (Taylor, 2003), the 1974–1984 'The Reading Teacher' collection (Tetenbaum & Pearson, 1989), a collection of 'Notable Books for Children' (Gooden & Gooden, 2001), a selection of books in 'The Horn Book' (Peterson & Lach, 1990), and, more recently, the Wisconsin Children's Book Corpus (Lewis et al., 2022). While demonstrating the far-reaching and frequent nature of gender stereotypes in children's books, arguably none of these sets of books so clearly attribute gender to its characters as the Little Miss and Mr. Men book series by Roger Hargreaves.

The Mr. Men/Little Miss book series has sold more than 250 million books worldwide across 28 countries, spawning an animated feature film (BBC, 2015), stage shows, and extensive product range, including clothing, toys, and homeware (see <https://mrmn.com/>). Whilst the collection began in 1971, the series remains a popular cultural icon in contemporary society. For example, a Little Miss and Mr. Men television series is currently in production (release date 2023) and the Mr. Men and Little Miss complete book collections both rank within the top 1,000 of all books currently sold on Amazon (at position 717 and 654 in 2023, respectively). Weisstuch (2023) notes that the popularity of the book series persists into modern day, owing to their "clean look and clear messages," which means they stand the "test of time." Weisstuch (2023) also explains that the Little Miss/Mr Men books are popular among children but also hold a unique "nostalgic appeal" for Gen X and millennials, which broadens their popularity in contemporary society. Further, as their website claims, the books aim to identify with a 'multigenerational audience through self-expression, colour, simplicity, and humour'. Therefore, this selection lends itself well to an analysis of gender stereotyping, particularly given the ubiquity of the Mr. Men and Little Miss books in contemporary culture. Indeed, the book collection has been referred to as a "cultural phenomenon" which "capture modern stereotypes perfectly" (Freeman, 2019).

Each story in the book collection follows a relatively consistent pattern comprising of three parts: an introduction to the protagonist and their environment, an activity outside of the home, and a return home, often following a moral resolution. These books also have near-identical length and style; the only change in each story is the protagonist, with each book following the story of either a female "Little Miss" or male "Mr. Men" character. This allows analyses to focus explicitly on the gender of the title character, as the gender of the intended protagonist is clear in each book. This clarity differs from other previously studied books, which often feature a variety of primary and secondary characters, with different storylines, themes, tones, and illustrations.

Transmission of Beliefs: from Parents and Books to Children

From a gender socialisation perspective, Basow (1992) posits that "parents serve as the initial and major socializing agents in society" (p. 129). Indeed, research shows that parental beliefs about gender predict their child's beliefs well into adulthood. For example, Moen et al. (1997) found that mother's gender role ideology predicts their daughter's gendered beliefs 30 years later. Parents' beliefs about gender are associated with several behavioural and developmental outcomes, including occupations (Barak et al., 1991) and academic outcomes (McFadden et al., 2021; Muntoni & Retelsdorf, 2019). The transmission of 'clear messages' about gender occurs through several routes, including mannerisms and behaviour (e.g., in the transmission of academic gender stereotypes; Gunderson et al., 2012), gendered talk (e.g., during book reading; Endendijk et al., 2014) and gender consistent behaviour (e.g., Humlum et al., 2019). This is in line with Social Cognitive Theory, which argues that the content of gender norms is learned through modelling and tuition in childhood (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). For instance, Kollmayer et al. (2018) assessed parent's judgements about the desirability of gender-typed toys. They found that gender role attitudes, such as stereotype endorsement, may not match up with judgements about gender stereotyped toys desirability. Indeed, research shows that parents more readily purchase gendered toys that are consistent with their children's gender presentation (e.g., McHale et al., 2003).

Studies have shown that books are an important source of how children learn about themselves and the social and physical world (e.g., Abad and Pruden, 2013). Tsai et al., (2007) found, for instance, that children's beliefs about what activities are exciting and calm (and how that relates to happiness) directly reflected books they had been exposed to. Other researchers (Richert & Schlesinger, 2022) have found

that children mirror problem solving that they have been exposed to in children's books, even when the characters are fantasy. In turn, understanding how children make book selections for their children in relation to gender content is an important research topic.

The Present Work

The Mr. Men/Little Miss collection provides a unique opportunity to understand the prevalence of gender stereotypes in books that are clearly gendered, culturally significant, and span from 1971 to present day. Given the impact that exposure to gender stereotypes has on children (Block et al., 2022), it is crucial that psychologists continue to critically and robustly examine the *contents* of books that children read throughout their childhood. Indeed, the Mr. Men/Little Miss books are among the most popular and widely read collection of children's books; however, a systematic analysis of the gendered messaging in these books is notably absent from the literature. This is important because it allows a comprehensive investigation into the kinds of gendered stereotypes that may be present in the book collection.

Therefore, this work has two broad aims: (1) to understand the gender stereotype messaging present in the full collection of Mr. Men and Little Miss books and (2) to investigate how parents make decisions about gendered stereotypes in book choices. These aims fill an important gap in the literature; in particular, while much work has investigated the gender stereotyping of children's books, no published work to date has assessed this series specifically. We then assessed how parents make decisions about book choice, when faced with the prospect of selecting a Little Miss book to read to their daughter. This is the first research we are aware of that directly tests how parents might utilize gender content when choosing books for their child to read.

Our hypotheses were two-fold. Consistent with past research literature identifying gender stereotypes in children's books, we expected in Study 1 that gender consistent behaviour would occur in the books (e.g., that female characters would act more in female stereotypical ways more than male characters, and that male characters would act in more male stereotypical ways). We also predicted due to the ubiquity of gender stereotyping (Eagly & Koenig, 2021) that participants would demonstrate an awareness of the gendered content of the books through a word-sorting task, insofar as words would be readily associated with either feminine or masculine traits, when the actual gender of the book is not shown to participants (Study 2). We also tested if parents prefer to give their daughters a book that is consistent with gender stereotypes (Study 3). Across these studies, we provide the first comprehensive and critical

investigation of the contents and consequences of gender stereotypes within the widely popular Mr. Men/Little Miss children's book collection. This series of studies also allows us to test the potential interplay between using and generating gender stereotypes (Study 2) and wishing to transmit them to future generations (Study 3). It is possible, for instance, given the relative shift in gender ideology, gender roles, and gender representation in recent times (e.g., Hyde et al., 2019), that people might simultaneously adhere to, and use, gender stereotypes while not wanting their children to share these beliefs.

Study 1

We first aimed to empirically investigate the gendered *content* of the Mr. Men and Little Miss books, by focussing on facets of each story, namely: voice, gender representation, gender stereotypes, and the agency or passivity of titular characters. We hypothesised that male and female characters would tend to act in more gender stereotypical ways than their counterparts (e.g., female title characters using less direct speech). Additionally, we hypothesized that male characters would be utilized more in stories in which a female is the lead.

Method

Sample

The full collection of 47 Mr. Men and 34 Little Miss books, published from 1971 to 2014, were analysed for this study (see Table 1 for an exhaustive list). These books were included in the Little Miss and Mr. Men Complete Collection Box Set, which was purchased for the study. Other books have since been published (e.g., Mr Brave, 2021) but these were not analysed, as they do not fall within the complete core collection of the series. That is, the books are typically sold and marketed in "My Complete Collection" book box sets, which do not include the newer additions to the collection.

Analytical Approach

Study 1 used a content analysis approach to investigate the contents of the Mr. Men/Little Miss books. Content analyses have been used consistently to assess gender stereotyping in books (e.g., Diekman and Murnen, 2004) and is a useful method to establish patterns across qualitative or mixed-modality datasets. This approach is also broadly aligned with other relevant research that investigates the gendered

Table 1 Complete list of books in the final sample, with publication date

Title	Character	Publication Date	
Little Miss	Bossy	1981	
	Naughty	1981	
	Neat	1981	
	Sunshine	1981	
	Tiny	1981	
	Trouble	1981	
	Giggles	1984	
	Helpful	1981	
	Magic	1981	
	Shy	1981	
	Greedy	1981	
	Fickle	1984	
	Chatterbox	1984	
	Dotty	1984	
	Splendid	1981	
	Late	1981	
	Lucky	1984	
	Scatterbrain	1981	
	Star	1984	
	Busy	1990	
	Quick	1990	
	Wise	1990	
	Tidy	1990	
	Brainy	1990	
	Stubborn	1990	
	Curious	1990	
	Fun	1990	
	Contrary	1984	
	Somersault	1990	
	Scary	2003	
	Bad	2003	
	Whoops	2003	
	Princess	2011	
	Hug	2014	
	Mr.	Tickle	1971
		Greedy	1971
Happy		1971	
Nosey		1971	
Sneeze		1971	
Bump		1971	
Snow		1971	
Messy		1972	
Topsy-Turvy		1972	
Silly		1972	
Uppity		1972	
Small		1972	
Daydream		1972	
Forgetful		1976	
Jelly		1976	
Noisy		1976	
Lazy		1976	
Funny		1976	
Mean		1976	
Chatterbox		1976	
Fussy	1976		

Table 1 (continued)

Title	Character	Publication Date
	Bounce	1976
	Muddle	1976
	Dizzy	1976
	Impossible	1976
	Strong	1976
	Grumpy	1971
	Clumsy	1978
	Quiet	1978
	Rush	1978
	Tall	1978
	Worry	1978
	Nonsense	1978
	Wrong	1978
	Skinny	1978
	Mischief	1978
	Clever	1978
	Busy	1978
	Slow	1978
	Brave	1990
	Grumble	1990
	Perfect	1990
	Cheerful	1990
	Cool	2003
	Rude	2003
	Good	2003
	Nobody	2010

content of children's books (e.g., Crabb & Bielawski, 1994; Tetenbaum and Pearson, 1989) and the presence of gender stereotypes in other forms of media (e.g., advertisements; Sandhu, 2019; graphic t-shirts; Lapierre et al., 2022). The aim of content analysis is to establish and interpret meaning from textual or visual content. *Directed* content analysis was chosen for this study, given its utility with large qualitative datasets (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Directed content analysis also allows researchers to be attentive to inductive codes, while staying grounded in the literature (Assarroudi et al., 2018) and is, therefore, suitably flexible.

Coding Procedure

We coded the books across four key categories (Table 2). The books were independently coded using a deductive variant of content analysis, as per previous research which investigates gender stereotypes in various contexts (e.g., Aley and Hahn, 2020; Collins, 2011; Rudy et al., 2011), including work on the gender norms present in children's books (Anderson & Hamilton, 2005). All coding was initially completed by the first author and discussed with a supervisor, and any issues were resolved. All coding was completed on hard copies of the books using hand-written notes and pen-and-paper coding.

We followed Neuendorf's (2010) recommendations for a valid, reliable, and systematic content analysis procedure. This process starts, as Neuendorf (2010) notes, with an appreciation of the analyses' theoretical and conceptual backing. Our content analysis here was guided by our theory that the Little Miss and Mr. Men characters would demonstrate gender stereotyped content in terms of gender representation and presence of gendered activities. The coding tool that we developed and applied to the data was comprised of four pre-selected, deductive items: voice (occurrence of speech), gender representation (i.e., peripheral character gender), stereotypes, and agency-passivity. This tool aimed to be a robust and reproducible measure of gender stereotype prevalence within the books, offering a quantitative count approach to the occurrence of gender stereotyping (as per the guidelines of previous research, e.g., Engel, 1981).

Occurrence of Direct Speech. The occurrence of direct speech from the title character of each book was counted and recorded on a spreadsheet. Direct speech was defined as any text, including slang words and words of expression, displayed in speech marks (""). Only the direct speech of the titular characters was recorded.

Peripheral Character Gender Presentation. In most of the books (79 out of 81), the protagonists interact with

Table 2 Coding framework

Coding category	Description	Coding approach	Example
Voice	Number of words directly spoken by titular character for each book	Number of words recorded	“Help!” She cried. “Somebody help!” = 3 words coded
Gender representation	Gender presentation of characters other than the titular character for each book	Number of male/female of each peripheral characters recorded	“Oh yes please” replied Jack. (Mr Daydream) 1 male peripheral character coded
Gender stereotypes	Masculine versus feminine stereotypes, using Macionis (2001) framework	Qualitative codes made on the books.	Masculine stereotype: “Mr Greedy, being a curious fellow, decided to explore” Feminine stereotype: “Little Miss Fun simply adores parties”
Agency and passivity	One code (active vs. passive) assigned to each book’s titular character	Active versus passive code for each book	Passive codes: “Because she was a Princess she had lots of people to do everything for her” Active codes: “Mr Perfect opened his presents”

other peripheral characters. The gender presentation of these peripheral characters was coded and recorded. As well as appearances from other Little Miss/Mr. Men characters within the storybook franchise, there were also ‘townspeople’ that featured in several stories. The gender presentation and occupation of these characters was recorded, drawing upon textual clues and illustrations. This was done using visual cues that were aligned with binarized genders (e.g., beards for male characters, eyelashes for female). Additionally, animal characters were included in the peripheral character coding, as per Engel’s (1981) character count guidelines.

Prevalence of Stereotypes. We then coded the frequency and occurrence of gendered stereotypes in the books. The coding of stereotypes was guided by Macionis’s (2001) framework of gender themes based on traditional gender stereotypes. This coding framework categorizes character’s attributes as pertaining broadly to stereotypes of femininity (e.g., submissiveness, passivity, emotionality) or masculinity (e.g., achievement, competitiveness, aggression). This framework has been successfully implemented in a previous study of gender stereotypes in a series of children’s books by Taylor (2003), as well as other literary works (e.g., an analysis of gender stereotypes in textbooks, Evans and Davies,

2000, and magazines, Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Every task and activity that the title character performs throughout their story was first recorded, and later categorised as either stereotypically ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ by the first author, drawing upon published literature that investigates the stereotypicality of traits and activities. Recurrent activities that were coded as feminine stereotypes included shopping, housekeeping, and caring. Recurrent activities that were coded as masculine stereotypes included being boisterous, going on adventures, and exploring. Several activities were omitted, as they had no explicitly gendered connotations (e.g., walking). Again, this coding was completed by the first author in consultation and discussion with the second author to resolve any inconsistencies in the coding process.

Agency and Passivity. Each book was coded generally as featuring either an ‘active’ or ‘passive’ titular character. Passive characters typically had less direct speech, featured more peripheral characters, and were generally less pivotal in the plot development compared with those coded as ‘active’. Characters coded as active had more dynamic and eventful stories and were generally positioned as having a higher level of ownership and control over the destination of their story. This element within the coding tool was informed by Davidson’s (1981, p. 331) assertion that the passivity/agency dichotomy within perceptions of men and women is one of the “most pervasive stereotypes in our society.” The notion that women are passive, and men are active, is a ‘cultural mandate’ (Broverman et al., 1972) and, therefore, is likely to encapsulate the overarching gender stereotypes that exist broadly within the books.

Results

All counts of speech, character gender, and stereotype coding were recorded in SPSS. We used analysis of variance (ANOVAs) to test for differences in direct speech and peripheral character gender between the Little Miss and Mr. Men books. We then ran Chi-Squared tests to investigate whether there were gender differences in the ratings of the books’ overall agency, passivity, and stereotype content.

Occurrence of Direct Speech

An initial test for outliers showed that ‘Little Miss Chatterbox’ and ‘Mr. Chatterbox’ had z scores of 2.49 and 6.69 above the mean, so these outliers were removed from analyses of this item. To test for differences in the average number of words in direct speech, we ran a one-way between-subjects ANOVA, which revealed no significant differences in direct speech between the male characters in the Mr. Men books ($M = 61.53$, $SD = 36.01$) and female characters in the

Little Miss books ($M = 53.52$, $SD = 34.98$), $F(1, 77) = 20.08$, $p = .33$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.012$.

Peripheral Character Gender

We then tested whether the book groups differed by the gender of the peripheral characters. Across the books, peripheral characters were significantly more likely to be male ($n = 239$), with fewer female peripheral characters ($n = 44$), $F(1, 80) = 124.539$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.6$. To test the prevalence of peripheral characters within books by gender of titular character, a mixed 2 (gender of main character: Little Miss versus Mr. Men) \times 2 (gender of peripheral character: female versus male) ANOVA was conducted. This interaction revealed that there were significantly more male peripheral characters in Little Miss books ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.70$) compared to Mr. Men books ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.59$), $F(1, 79) = 9.86$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.11$. There were no differences in the number of female peripheral characters in Little Miss books ($M = 0.59$, $SD = 0.92$) compared with Mr. Men books ($M = 0.51$, $SD = 0.78$), $p = .68$.

Prevalence of Gender Stereotypes

After coding each book character as generally ‘active’ or ‘passive’, based on the story activity, theme, and presence of stereotypes described above, a Chi-Squared test revealed a significant difference in agency and passivity ratings by book gender $\chi^2(3, n = 81) = 25.48$, $p < .001$. Specifically, Mr. Men characters were significantly more likely to be described in active terms ($n = 44$) and less passive terms ($n = 2$) compared with Little Miss characters ($n = 16$, $n = 17$, respectively). Further, coding of stereotype prevalence demonstrated that the books were highly gender stereotyped. Little Miss characters were generally positioned as passive and feminine, engaging in activities such as caring for other characters and domestic labor. Some notable examples of this include Little Miss Late, who ends her story by working for Mr. Lazy (i.e., “She cooks and cleans for him!”). The Little Miss characters were also positioned in the storybooks as subjects of moral stories, often facilitated by Mr. Men characters. For example, Little Miss Helpful’s mess is fixed by Mr. Happy, Little Miss Naughty is told off by Mr. Impossible, and the Mr. Men characters give advice to Little Miss Stubborn and Little Miss Busy. Mr. Men characters, on the other hand, were positioned as adventurous and active, often going on adventures within their stories (e.g., “I’m going off on an adventure”, Mr. Daydream).

Beyond activities, feminine emotional expression was also prominent across the Little Miss books. This is noted in Little Miss Giggles story, “She started to cry again. Big fat tears. Oh dear me!” and Little Miss Lucky’s help-seeking

(“Help! She cried. “Somebody help!”), which formed the basis of a moral tale. Another concept that was prominent throughout the books was a sense of paternalism and infantilisation toward the female character’s expressions. For example, in Little Miss Naughty’s story: “I know what that naughty little lady needs” and Little Miss Trouble (“I think there’s something to be done about that little lady!”). Similarly, there were notable examples of masculine stereotypes, which typically centred around adventure and activity. Several of the Mr. Men characters had stories that revolved around adventure, which often included exploring worlds beyond the ‘town’ and meeting new characters, such as wizards and goblins (e.g., Mr. Grumble, Mr. Chatterbox, and Mr. Sneeze).

Discussion

This content analysis of the Little Miss and Mr. Men books provides some initial evidence to suggest that agency and passivity of the books differ by the titular character’s gender. That is, female characters were more passive and used more indirect speech and male characters were more active. This is consistent with other work that notes the gender stereotypical content of other forms of popular children’s media, such as Disney (Bazzini et al., 2010) and Dr. Seuss (Taylor, 2003). However, though this study shows that gender stereotypes in the books do exist, it is unclear whether the gendered stereotyped content of the books is recognised and adhered to by other people, and whether this informs parental book choice. The next two studies build upon this initial finding.

Study 2

Study 1 demonstrated that the characters were portrayed in ways consistent with gender stereotypes (i.e., female characters were passive, male characters were active). In this second study, we aimed to further test the existence of gender stereotypes in the Little Miss and Mr. Men book series. Specifically, we wanted to investigate whether people viewed the character titles (which are also the book titles) in ways that matched the gender of the book’s main character. We theorised that if participants could readily assign gender to the traits in the book titles without seeing the gender, this would indicate the presence of gendered stereotyping beyond the content of the book’s stories. This tested the idea of character stereotyping independent of author coding and explored whether their defining trait (e.g., Brainy, Strong, Grumpy, Helpful) is gender stereotyped (i.e., associated with a binarized gender). In Study 2, it was hypothesised

that participants would demonstrate awareness of gender stereotypes in a word-sorting task, insofar as the key words in the book titles would be readily associated with either feminine or masculine traits.

Method

Participants

One hundred and sixty-four participants ($M_{age} = 38.60$, $SD = 15.50$) were recruited through social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter. Participants conducted an online survey hosted on the survey platform Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Most participants were female ($n = 140$, 85.37%), 97 (59.15%) were parents, and 103 (62.80%) identified explicitly as a feminist (by way of answering ‘yes’ to “Do you identify as a feminist?”). This study followed a within-subjects design, in that all participants completed all items. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Lincoln School of Psychology Ethics Board.

Procedure

Participants first read an information sheet that advised that the study was interested in “how people associate different words with different genders,” before providing informed consent. Participants were then provided with a list of 64 single adjectives that describe the single adjective from the titles of the Mr. Men ($n = 35$) and Little Miss books ($n = 27$; see Table 3) and were asked to rate each adjective (e.g., bossy, happy, strong) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *entirely feminine* to 5 = *entirely masculine*. Two of the adjectives were aligned with both Little Miss and Mr Men books (greedy and chatterbox). They were then asked to rate the same words on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*entirely negative*) to 5 (*entirely positive*). This was all done without any mention of the gender of those words (i.e., Little Miss Small. was listed as ‘Small’). Participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

Book Perceptions

Ratings of masculinity/femininity did not significantly correlate with perceptions of positivity/negativity, $r = -.13$, $n = 64$, $p = .28$. To test whether perceived positivity and perceived femininity/masculinity differed by book gender, an independent samples t -test was conducted to compare the book groups on these variables. Results demonstrated

a significant difference between Little Miss books ($n = 27$) and Mr. Men books ($n = 35$) on ratings of masculinity/femininity, $t(59) = 2.049$, $p = .022$, Cohen’s $d = 0.530$, such that the traits used in Mr. Men book titles were rated as more masculine ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.42$) and Little Miss books were rated as more feminine ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.30$). There was also a significant difference between the two groups on positivity/negativity ratings, $t(59) = 1.799$, $p = .039$, Cohen’s $d = 0.465$, such that Little Miss book title traits were perceived more positively ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.02$) than Mr. Men book title traits ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.03$).

Discussion

Overall, Study 2 investigated whether the Mr. Men/Little Miss book titles were associated with stereotypical perceptions of femininity and masculinity, to examine further the gender stereotyped portrayals within the book series, extending Study 1. The findings generally confirmed that the Mr. Men books portrayed more traits associated with masculinity, and Little Miss books portrayed more traits associated with femininity. Further, while there was no direct correlation between masculinity/femininity and positivity/negativity, book title adjectives for Little Miss characters (e.g., Brainy, Lucky, Tidy) were perceived to be more positive. Taken together, Study 1 and 2 demonstrated that gender stereotypes exist broadly in the Little Miss and Mr. Men book series. The female characters are generally more passive, the male characters are more active, and a naïve sample of 164 participants associated the titular character adjective with the corresponding gender. This finding is aligned with other recent analyses of gender stereotypes in children’s books. For example, Lewis et al. (2022) showed how children’s books instantiate stereotypes and those may provide children with an early source of gendered associations. To understand whether the perceived stereotypicality of books informs parental book selection, we ran a third study which examined this specifically in the context of the Little Miss collection.

Study 3

In Study 3, we then examined whether parents prefer non-stereotypical or stereotypical books for their children. This is important because the gendered contents of books may be less likely to be adopted by children if parents make active choices to reject books that are considered highly stereotypical (e.g., see Wagner, 2017). Parents play an essential role in the development of gendered beliefs in children (Wagner, 2017; Weinraub et al., 1984) and thus it is useful to

Table 3 Descriptives for the Ratings of Masculinity/Femininity and Positivity/Negativity

	Masculinity/Femininity		Positivity/Negativity	
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev
Bad	3.18	0.48	1.59	0.61
Bossy	2.50	0.77	1.98	0.61
Brainy	2.96	0.45	4.12	0.71
Brave	3.39	0.66	4.21	0.77
Busy	2.68	0.54	3.04	0.64
Chatterbox	2.19	0.63	2.71	0.84
Cheerful	2.87	0.44	4.56	0.60
Clever	2.99	0.36	4.22	0.69
Clumsy	3.02	0.62	2.22	0.69
Contrary	2.66	0.78	2.25	0.74
Cool	3.31	0.61	4.03	0.74
Curious	2.84	0.56	3.96	0.66
Daydream	2.67	0.62	3.18	0.92
Dizzy	2.38	0.58	2.45	0.71
Dotty	2.26	0.60	2.67	0.75
Fickle	2.52	0.64	1.95	0.59
Forgetful	2.97	0.56	2.11	0.57
Fun	2.95	0.37	4.57	0.64
Funny	3.05	0.41	4.50	0.56
Fussy	2.47	0.74	1.98	0.65
Giggles	2.03	0.56	4.25	0.72
Good	2.93	0.33	4.53	0.70
Greedy	3.31	0.53	1.64	0.65
Grumble	3.45	0.63	1.98	0.51
Grumpy	3.54	0.66	1.71	0.61
Happy	2.88	0.42	4.74	0.54
Helpful	2.65	0.49	4.47	0.60
Hug	2.54	0.62	4.59	0.60
Lazy	3.38	0.54	1.65	0.66
Lucky	2.98	0.36	4.10	0.73
Magic	2.78	0.60	4.15	0.75
Mean	3.02	0.55	1.46	0.63
Messy	3.19	0.69	2.03	0.62
Mischief	3.21	0.70	2.66	0.80
Muddle	2.86	0.46	2.31	0.63
Naughty	3.12	0.68	2.22	0.77
Neat	2.64	0.59	3.67	0.75
Noisy	3.18	0.63	2.29	0.70
Nonsense	3.05	0.47	2.22	0.78
Nosey	2.49	0.68	2.14	0.65
Perfect	2.73	0.59	4.09	1.06
Princess	1.32	0.55	3.13	1.13
Quick	2.99	0.48	3.48	0.65
Quiet	2.82	0.49	2.98	0.55
Rude	3.29	0.57	1.18	0.43
Rush	2.93	0.62	2.63	0.62
Scary	3.23	0.54	1.73	0.72
Scatterbrain	2.39	0.64	2.22	0.68
Shy	2.72	0.62	2.79	0.56
Silly	2.93	0.68	2.71	0.83
Skinny	2.51	0.64	2.73	0.80
Slow	3.18	0.48	2.32	0.63
Small	2.70	0.54	2.90	0.48
Splendid	2.89	0.59	4.45	0.69

Table 3 (continued)

	Masculinity/Femininity		Positivity/Negativity	
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev
Strong	3.52	0.74	4.13	0.67
Stubborn	3.08	0.69	2.12	0.71
Tall	3.50	0.60	3.23	0.61
Tidy	2.76	0.49	3.94	0.74
Tiny	2.39	0.61	3.06	0.57
Trouble	3.28	0.65	1.69	0.65
Uppity	2.78	0.71	1.83	0.69
Wise	3.09	0.58	4.40	0.60
Worry	2.68	0.56	2.02	0.65
Wrong	3.11	0.44	1.78	0.70

Note that higher scores for masculinity/femininity indicate more masculinity. Higher scores on positivity/negativity indicate more positivity

understand what motivates book choice and whether awareness of gendered messaging impacts this selection.

Method

Participants

A total of 53 participants were recruited online. Eligibility criteria included parents who had at least one daughter under the age of 13 years old. Participants' reported that their daughters were, on average, 5.7 years old ($SD=3.66$, minimum age = < 1 years old, max age = 13 years old). We chose to focus on perceptions of books from parents with daughters, given the evidence that suggests that girls are more attuned to gender stereotyping from a young age (Block et al., 2022) and that traditional gender stereotypes typically present men as powerful and women as passive, which can have unique consequences for girls (Aley & Hahn, 2020). In the sample, although we welcomed all gender participants, 90.7% self-identified as women. There was a roughly even split of parents with only daughters (49.2%) and those who had both sons and daughters (50.8%). Age of participants was determined using categories (< 20, 20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50, 59, and 60+) and the majority of participants (87%) were over 30 years old. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Lincoln School of Psychology Ethics Board. Participants were recruited online through social media sites and parenting groups and the study was hosted on Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT).

Materials and Procedure

Book Perceptions

Participants were invited to a study on “*how parents decide which books to read to their children.*” Participants read an information sheet, provided informed consent, and reported

demographic information. Participants were then given two choices of books from the Little Miss book series. In the first instance, participants were asked to identify which book they would be most likely to read to their daughter. First, participants chose between Little Miss Brainy (counter-stereotypical example) and Little Miss Princess (stereotypical example) books. These books were selected for Study 3 based on Study 2 ratings of their stereotypicality; in Study 2, Little Miss Princess was perceived to be highly feminine ($M=1.32$, $SD=0.55$, where lower scores indicate more feminine), whereas Little Miss Brainy was perceived to be more masculine ($M=2.96$, $SD=0.45$; see Table 3). In the no stereotype condition, participants chose between the Little Miss Sunshine and Little Miss Helpful books. Participants were asked “which book would you be most likely to read to your daughter?”. Participants were shown a picture of the two book's original front cover and did not receive information about the story or book content. Participants then rated four items about their reasons for the book choice, including those which relate to the books' aesthetic qualities (“*I liked the illustration more*”, “*the title character more closely resembles my daughter*”), story content (“*I imagine that the story would be more simple and easy to follow*”), and its perceived gendered content (“*It is more consistent with what I want to teach my daughter about women*”). Items were rated using a 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 7 (*Strongly Disagree*) response scale. We also provided participants with a free-text box to explain their answers more.

Feminist Identity

Based on evidence that suggests feminist identity influences the endorsement of gender stereotypes (Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010), we also measured participants' feminist identity. Participants indicated their agreement with the Active Commitment subscale of the Feminist Identity Development Scale (FIDS; Bargad and Hyde, 1991), which comprises 14 items including “*I owe it not only to women*

but to all people to work for greater opportunity and equality for all". Although feminist identity is inherently multifaceted, the FIDS is an appropriate measure with generally good internal consistency in this literature (Siegel & Calogero, 2021). Items were rated on a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) response scale. This scale had good internal validity in our sample, Cronbach $\alpha = 0.89$.

Results

We first assessed the general frequency of book types selected in both conditions. We then ran multiple regressions to test which of the four reasons predicted book choice for both pairs. We then tested whether scores on the feminist identity measures predicted book choice.

Book Selection

When choosing between Little Miss Princess and Little Miss Brainy, participants overwhelmingly preferred the non-stereotypical option ($n = 44$, 83.0%), and a one-sample *t*-test showed that this was a significant difference, $t(51) = 6.85$, $p < .001$. Participants were generally split between their preference for Little Miss Sunshine ($n = 30$, 56.6%) and Little Miss Helpful ($n = 22$, 41.5%), with no significant differences between book choice, $t(51) = 1.11$, $p = .27$.

Motivations for Book Selection

We then investigated whether the four variables of book choice impacted book choice for both pairs of potential selections. A multiple regression for each book pairing was conducted with book choice between each pair as the dependent variable and the four predictors (consistency with 'what I want to teach my daughter about women', illustration, ease of the story, and title character resemblance) as independent variables. The first regression, with Little Miss Brainy vs. Princess as the outcome showed that consistency with what participants want to teach their daughters about women significantly predicted book choice ($\beta = -0.74$, $p < .001$). Preference for illustrations was also a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.212$, $p = .04$).

Participants were provided with space to elucidate their choice further in a free-text context, which provide more insights into these findings. For some of the parents, active resistance of gender stereotypes fuelled the decision to select Little Miss Brainy (e.g., "I try not to reinforce stereotypes about girls being all pink and princessy" and "to actively reduce daughter's expose to the 'Princess Culture'!). For other parents, the decision to select Little Miss Brainy was centred around wider consideration, for example, "looked

a more interesting story" and "I prefer image of funkier blue character rather than twee sparkly frothy image of princess book". However, for the parents who selected Little Miss Princess, there was also consideration of what children are encouraged to be, through books. One parent, for example, explained that they would choose Little Miss Princess because "I don't believe children at such a young age should worry about being brainy, but to be encouraged to try their best.". Similarly, another parent discussed how their daughter's preference guided their decision, above and beyond concerns for gender roles: "While it's important to me to demonstrate positive role models for my girls, it's also important to follow their interests! My eldest loves princesses, so would be far more interested in this book."

We ran a second multiple regression with the four book choice reasons as predictors and Little Miss Helpful vs. Sunshine book choice as the outcome variable. This showed that only illustration preference was a significant predictor of book choice ($\beta = 3.85$, $p < .001$), such that participants who chose Little Miss Helpful preferred the illustration of this book, but no other variables significantly predicted book choice.

We then explored the free-text comments, as with the previous pair. Here, decisions also appeared to be driven by awareness of stereotypes for some parents (e.g., "not keen on teaching my daughters they must be helpers"; Little Miss Sunshine). Similarly, a parent who selected Little Miss Helpful shared similar views: "It's important to me to choose reading materials that reflect positive values and role models. In this case, being helpful seems more positive and active than being sunshine". In this condition, parents also shared their overall views on the Little Miss/Mr Men book series more generally, rather than focusing on their preference between Little Miss Sunshine and Helpful too. For example, "I despise Mr men and little miss books and would only read them under duress" and "I'm not really a fan of the Little Miss books". For example, one participant discussed this: "I dislike the implication carried by both books, that girls should either be cheerful (sunshine) or helpful. I also think 'little miss' is patronising when compared to 'mr men'." Beyond this, parents in this condition based their choice on other factors, including familiarity ("I know this story better"), and aesthetics ("The brighter yellow is more eye-catching", and "looks fun").

Feminist Identity and Book Choice

We theorised that feminist identity may predict book choice, and ran a second regression with feminist identity as a predictor and book choice as the outcome to test this idea. This was not significant for the choice between Little Miss

Princess vs. Brainy ($p = .64$) or for Little Miss Sunshine vs. Helpful ($p = .82$).

Discussion

The findings of Study 3 suggest that parents generally prefer to select counter-stereotypical books (i.e., Little Miss Brainy) relative to highly stereotypical options (i.e., Little Miss Princess) (Study 3). The qualitative comments provide richness to this finding; parents frequently discussed factors such as positive values, role models, and gendered messaging that informs their book choice. The importance parents placed on gendered information helps mitigate the likelihood that these results were due to the applicability of the traits (i.e., that parents with children on the older end of our 0–13 years old requirement might not be interested in being a princess as much as younger kids, and as such parents chose the non-stereotypical book). Also, the average age of daughters was within the reading age of the Little Miss/Mr Men books ($M = 5.7$ years old), which bolsters the applicability further.

Feminist identity did not impact perceptions of the books as expected; however, this is possibly due to the high overall preference for counter-stereotypical books across the sample (in that the majority preferred Little Miss Brainy). Taken together, these findings broadly suggest that parents are indeed attentive to the gendered content messaging of the Little Miss books, which informs choices about what books to select to read to their daughters.

General Discussion

Across three studies, we tested the presence of, and reaction to, gender stereotypes in a popular book series: Hargreaves' Little Miss/Mr Men book series. Using a content analysis approach, guided by previous works and informed by recommendations for content analysis in gender scholarship (Neuendorf, 2010), we found that these books are generally consistent with the stereotype that women are passive and domestic, whereas men are active and adventurous (Study 1). Beyond the book contents, the adjectives assigned to each Little Miss/Mr Men title character were also readily categorised by gender even in the absence of any book or gendering information, further corroborating the gendered stereotypical nature of the books and indicating that people readily use and are aware of these stereotypes (Study 2). We also showed that parents generally prefer counter-stereotypical books to read to their daughters (Study 3), and this was not associated with feminist identity. Study 3 also demonstrated how, qualitatively, book choice is guided

by consideration of gender stereotypes, and that at least in some cases parents prefer not to transmit gender stereotypical messages to their children. Ultimately, the three studies reported here contribute to the growing literature on gender portrayals in children's books.

Our results also show that awareness of the gendered messaging in books is a predictor of parent's counter-stereotypical book choice (Study 3). This has important implications for theories of children's gender socialisation, through a lens of social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Parents who demonstrate awareness of gendered messaging of children's books may 'permit' more diverse non-stereotype conforming book selections, which can serve to challenge and resist some of the gender stereotypes that children are exposed to in other arenas (Mulvey & Killen, 2015). Therefore, the ways in which parents make decisions about whether to select a gender stereotype (non) conforming book to their children is useful to understand.

Our finding of gender stereotypical contents of the books is largely consistent with previous literature which finds high levels of gendered messaging across children's books (e.g., Crisp and Hiller, 2011; Gooden and Gooden, 2001). Interestingly, our findings also corroborate that of Lewis et al. (2022) who note a pattern of female-stereotyped books as more gender biased compared with male-stereotyped books. This is a finding reflected across our three studies; for example, in Study 1 we noted how there were significantly more male peripheral characters in Little Miss books compared to Mr. Men books. This pattern aligns with Lewis et al.'s (2022) notion that children's books tend to position male characters as the 'default' and female characters as 'other'. In this sense, in the context of the Little Miss/Mr. Men book series, Mr. Men characters are the default and Little Miss characters exist within a Mr. Men world.

It is also interesting that, although participants associated specific traits with being male or female (Study 2), they tended to not want to transmit those same gender stereotypes to their children in their book choices (Study 3). As such, people seem to not only be aware of these stereotypes, but further, to spontaneously endorse them. In conjunction, this suggests that people might simultaneously adhere to stereotypes, yet not want close others to hold (or share) these beliefs. This could suggest that people hold (at least some) beliefs around gender that they perceive as undesirable, but are still very cognitively active. This, perhaps, reflects a distinction between implicit, automatic, beliefs and attitudes (often deriving from childhood teachings; Rudman et al., 2007) and explicit, conscious, reflective, beliefs that could be tested in future research. Given the centrality of sharing beliefs and experiences to psychological well-being and feelings of closeness to others (e.g., Pintel, 2018) this desire to not transmit these held views with children could have

interesting implications for parent-child, and inter-generational relationships, more broadly.

Given recent evidence that children's books may serve as an early source of gender stereotypes (Lewis et al., 2022), it is crucial that psychologists continue to address the gendered contents of children's books to understand what kind of messages children may be exposed to through these media. As Casey et al. (2021) suggest, analyses of frequency of male and female characters are important because it allows a comprehensive and big-picture summary of the state of gender norms. They argue that numerical gender disparities in books are problematic because it contributes to the societal marginalization of girls and women.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This work has tested how mothers make decisions about which books to select to read to their daughters, through a lens of gender norm research. This is a useful line of inquiry, which helps us to understand how stereotypes may be endorsed or resisted in the transmission to children. However, the present work has not tackled the complex issue of *how* these books, and the stereotypical content therein, are perceived by children themselves.

Our results should also be interpreted in the context of our chosen sample. Our core research question in Study 3 was investigating the factors that affect (counter-) stereotypical book selection, in the context of a mother selecting a book to read to her daughter. Most of our participants in this study were mothers, which contextualises some of the findings. Research has shown, for example, that generally fathers have more traditional views about gender (Apparala et al., 2003; Kollmayer et al., 2018). However, work also suggests that there are no differences in mothers' and fathers' endorsement of gender stereotypes in toy selection (Fisher-Thompson, 1993) and activities (Lytton & Romney, 1991). Moreover, research should also test this in relation to boys whose experiences when learning about gender likely differ from girls. Additionally, the Mr. Men/Little Miss collection is an apt sample for this kind of work, as the characters are clearly gendered in a binary way and have a high level of consistency in the narratives. While this is arguably a methodological strength, future research is needed to test how well these findings apply to a broader range of children's books.

Finally, it is worth noting that the sample of books used in this study range from 1971 to 2014, thus spanning four decades. However, whether the landscape of gender stereotypes has changed considerably over these years is unclear, with some scholars arguing that gender stereotypes are changing and others disagreeing (e.g., Haines et al., 2016). Some scholars have thus reported a temporal

shift in children's books, claiming that sexism in books has dwindled since the late 1970s, and Collins et al. (1984) noted an increase in female title characters during this time period. Therefore, the Mr. Men and Little Miss books series should, in theory, encapsulate this social change. However, more recently, Casey et al. (2021) analysed a large corpus of children's books from 1960 to 2020 and found that male protagonists continue to be overrepresented even in recent years, suggesting that the shift has reduced the gender gap more than eliminated it.

Conclusion

Overall, these three studies suggest that although the Mr. Men/Little Miss books do portray gender stereotypes (Studies 1 and 2) and parents preferred to have their children read non-stereotypical book choices from this series (Study 3). Given the long-lasting influence parents beliefs about gender plays in their children's lives (Moen et al., 1997), it is potentially problematic that these stereotypes persist in this popular children's book series. Nevertheless, that people chose to less frequently share books with their children expressing those stereotypes (than counter-stereotypical books) suggests a potentially important shift in gender beliefs over time. That people might hold gender beliefs that run counter to what they wish to pass onto their children is also an interesting venue for future research.

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Data Availability Not applicable for Study 1. Available upon request for Study 2 and Study 3.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethics approval Ethical approval for all three studies was granted by the University of Lincoln, School of Psychology Ethics Board.

Conflicts of Interest/Competing interests None to declare.

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