

# Girl Power-Less

Karlyn Williams  
December 4, 2009

American television has a plot to destroy girls' perceptions of themselves and others. Based on programs that include stereotypical female characters in search of their role in society, young girls are being influenced to believe they must behave or look a certain way in order to have a role in society. Until about the age of ten, children can't fully distinguish reality from fantasy. Those who are influenced are sacrificing their "true" selves. Culture is splitting adolescent girls into true and false selves. Culture is escalating and the media plays a large role in this escalation primarily in girl culture. Once a girl trades her "true" self for a "false" version she is vulnerable to a culture that is happy to use her for its many purposes. In losing truth, girls are left to struggle with mixed messages in the media. <sup>1</sup>

In this paper I will highlight the cartoon genre of television and how female gender role stereotypes and socialization is portrayed through direct examples from *Winx Club*, a female characterized cartoon superhero program that airs on the weekend line up on *The CW*. In addition, I will discuss its relationship to young girls identity within the escalating culture.

Julia Wood author of Gendered Lives offers two key points about gender and its relationship to contemporary media. First, today's media present both traditional and non-traditional portrayals of gender. Second, though less evident, under the more modern non-traditional images of men and women are some traditional gender stereotypes. Though she

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 22; Kaysee Baker and Arthur Raney, "Equally Super?" Gender-Role Stereotyping of Superheroes in Children's Animated Programs," *Mass Communication and Society* (2007): 25; Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Packaging Girlhood* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2006), 57-72.

focuses on both men and women I will only be examining female roles within the media because they are under-represented.<sup>2</sup>

For more than two decades females have been under-represented on television, in commercials, and more importantly, in cartoons geared for children. In a study by Kaysee Baker and Arthur Raney specifically targeting superhero themed cartoons, out of the 70 characters coded, 65.7 percent were male superheroes. This means that male superheroes outnumber female superheroes about 2 to 1.<sup>3</sup>

Today, for a show to be popular it must to appeal to both boys and girls. Boys are unlikely to watch cartoons that star a girl as the main character and since girls will watch cartoons that star boys as main characters, boy characters tend to dominate the screen. Therefore, male characters appear for the sake of ratings and profit. If cartoons have female characters at all they have “fewer lines, are less active, occupied fewer positions of responsibility, and are less noisy.” Females are portrayed as younger, married (more likely), altruistic, focused on relationships, and use personal charm to accomplish tasks or goals. This is true in specific superhero cartoons as well. Female characters are also seen as a housewife or mother, girlfriend, aunt, maid, nanny, nurse, teacher, singer, TV reporter, and witch. Most of these roles are under the care giving category, and none are professional jobs, though the TV reporter may fit that mold. Males have the significant roles, often with higher socioeconomic statuses, use of violence or trickery, and emphasize success and achievement. Males have a larger spectrum of roles and occupations often have power, violence, and strength as prime characteristics. These differences

---

<sup>2</sup> Julia Wood, *Gendered Lives* (Belmont, CA.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 257.

<sup>3</sup> Kaysee Baker and Arthur Raney, “Equally Super?” Gender-Role Stereotyping of Superheroes in Children’s Animated Programs,” *Mass Communication and Society* (2007): 32.

between male and female cartoon characters, though not accurate portrayals of reality, do reflect the concerning traditional gender-roles. <sup>4</sup>

“Gender portrayals in the media are cause for concern because of the importance of the media in the socialization process for children and adults.” Stereotypical characters exist within all television shows and cartoons are no exception. Simply, men and boys are active, powerful, and aggressive, while women and girls are thin, beautiful and passive. The feminine ideal for the media is the “young and thin preoccupied with men and children, enmeshed in relationships or housework.” In children’s programming the majority of female characters watch the males do things. <sup>5</sup>

However, within this “ideal,” the media have created opposing images of women: the good and the evil. The good is pretty, faithful and focused on home and family and usually depicted as the main character. The bad is depicted as a witch, whore, or bitch. An example of a bad character would be the evil stepmother from *Cinderella* or Ursula the octopus character from the *Little Mermaid*.

In an effort to strike the stereotypes, program creators have been offering non-traditional images. For example, the elite character Rose from *Titanic* is a non-traditional character on the surface because she is strong, successful, and knows what she wants. The feminine ideal masks this non-traditional surface level image. As viewers, we have to take the time to notice that though Rose is a strong woman, she also meets the criteria of the feminine ideal, the traditional,

---

<sup>4</sup> Teresa L. Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos, “Television Cartoons: Do Children Notice It’s a Boy’s World?,” *Sex Roles* (1997): 415-30; Teresa L. Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos, “Gender Roles in Animated Cartoons: Has the Picture Changed in 20 Years?,” *Sex Roles* (1995): 651-672.

<sup>5</sup> Teresa L. Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos, “Gender Roles in Animated Cartoons: Has the Picture Changed in 20 Years?,” *Sex Roles* (1995): 652; Julia Wood, *Gendered Lives* (Belmont, CA.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 258, 259.

the stereotypical image of a woman. Unfortunately, in media non-traditional images cannot exist without traditional images.<sup>6</sup>

This is true even within cartoons. *Winx Club* theme song begins with “believe in yourself, that’s how it starts.” But yet the save-the-world-one-puppy-at-a-time fairies are dressed in thigh high boots, baby doll t-shirts, and miniskirts. The feel good message to young girls is camouflaged by the sexualized stereotypes portrayed through the characters wardrobe.

### **Background of *Winx Club***

The “Italian Walt Disney,” *Winx Club* animator Iginio Straffi is responsible for the worldwide success of the show as well as the media brand of everything Winx. This “supergroup” has been in existence for four years and airs in more than 130 countries entertaining millions of young tween girls. Straffi is smart because he saw a market gap in girls’ television cartoons, so he hired fashion designers and in 2004 “the Winx, a cross between the Spice Girls and Harry Potter, with an anime vibe,” was born. The show is produced and aired in Italy by Rainbow Studios. In the U.S. the show is aired on *FoxBox*, *Cartoon Network*, and in *The CW’s* Saturday morning lineup.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the show is a franchise, or a global media brand. A media brand is an extension of products based on the show. *Winx Club* has dolls made to look like the characters, dolls so popular they are outselling Barbie in Italy. There is also a magazine to further the adventures, and branded clothing. There is a feature film by CGI titled “*Winx Club: The Secret of the Lost Kingdom*.” The film is showing in twenty territories so far and has raked in millions of dollars

---

<sup>6</sup> Julia Wood, *Gendered Lives* (Belmont, CA.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007), 261-263.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Vivarelli, “Italo Toon Shop Lives a Fairy Tale,” *Variety*, February 23-March 1, 2009, 13; Kaysee Baker and Arthur Raney, “Equally Super?” *Gender-Role Stereotyping of Superheroes in Children’s Animated Programs*, *Mass Communication and Society* (2007): 28.

from ticket sales in Italy, France, and Germany. Fans can make their own avatar, and play games to earn points on the *Winx Club* official Web site. The points then can be used to dress their avatar in the new additions to the dress shop. *Winx Club* is truly a franchise that will not be going anywhere anytime soon. And it's only a matter of time until it hits the U.S. full force.<sup>8</sup>

*Winx Club* explores non-traditional images of socialization and gender role stereotypes in traditional way. As Julia Wood said, "one cannot exist without the other." Unlike other cartoons *Winx Club* has all girl lead characters, "fairies," and male secondary characters, "specialists." The specialists often need the fairies' help or guidance to get anything accomplished when trying to save those in danger. However, since all six of the fairies are dating the six specialists they still illustrate low confidence when it comes to the boy-girl relationship. Since there are only girl lead characters, research has shown that boys will not likely be watching. *Winx Club* is rated Y7 and targeted to a wide demographic of five to twelve year-old girls. The overall theme of the show is to "believe in yourself," but this message is often debunked by how the characters portray body image, fashion, competition with other girls, and nurturing.<sup>9</sup>

### **Body Image**

In the second episode of season three, titled "Beauty is the Beast," the Trix, an evil trio of teenage witch sisters who are enemies of the Winx team up with an evil male character Valtor, who is stealing magic from everyone in each realm to become the most powerful person in the universe. Valtor is the only male character that has control over females in the show, however he

---

<sup>8</sup> Matthew McAllister, "Just How Commercialized Is Children's Culture?," in *20 Questions about Youth and the Media*, ed. Sharon Mazzarella (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 268; Nick Vivarelli, "Italo Toon Shop Lives a Fairy Tale," *Variety*, February 23-March 1, 2009, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Rainbow S.p.A., "Winx Club," Rainbow S.p.A Productions, <http://www.rbw.it/winx.asp>; Teresa L. Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos, "Gender Roles in Animated Cartoons: Has the Picture Changed in 20 Years?," *Sex Roles* (1995): 651-672.

only controls the evil female characters, including the Trix, as well as the stepmother and stepsister of Stella, Winx Club member and princess of the planet Solaria. In return for magic, Valtor turns all the girls he steals from into monsters. One of the Trix applauds his actions by saying, “there is nothing more fun then turning pretty goody-goodies into hideous monsters.”<sup>10</sup>

The first planet on Valtor’s list is Solaria where the Winx are attending the princess ball. He overhears the stepmother, Countess Cassandra, and stepsister, Kimorra talking about sabotaging the princess ball. He puts them into action by giving them the necessary power to rule the entire planet as queen and princess, but in return he wants access to the second sun of Solaria and eternal allegiance. It is so simple for the evil women to be convinced by Valtor that he hardly has to try. This is a traditional image seen in many cartoons, but was a rarity in this cartoon because it is so female dominant.

Kimorra and Countess Cassandra successfully ruin Stella’s princess ball by casting a spell on her. “As pretty as you are, is how hideous you will become,” said Kimorra as she casted the spell. Stella morphs into a fat olive green monster with small peg-like teeth, and webbed hands and feet. Cassandra manipulates the King, her soon to be husband, to believe that the awful creature is not his daughter. The guards try to seize her but the Winx, with the help of the theme song, transform into their fairy selves and begin fighting back the guards, in an effort to help Stella escape. Bloom tries to ward off the guards by explaining to them that the monster is their princess. One of the guards replies, “our princess would never be that hideous.”

This particular incident shows that the “hideous” ogre-like characters are not favorable to the other characters, even if they are close friends. “I’m so ugly even my friends are scared of me,” said Stella. This scene reminds me of Princess Fiona from *Shrek* and how she is a beauty by

---

<sup>10</sup> Winx Club: Season Three: The Princess Ball, “Beauty is the Beast,” prod. Rainbow S.p.A., dir. Iginio Straffi, 20 min, 2003-2008, digital video disc.

day but a green ugly ogre by night. The non-traditional portrayal of body image in *Shrek* contrasts with the traditional model in this episode of *Winx Club*. In *Shrek*, Princess Fiona is accepted because there is another person in her world who looks like her, which makes her accept her own body image. But in this episode of *Winx Club*, Stella is the outcast, the one who does not look like the norm. Therefore, she is attacked for not suiting the “normal” pretty image of the princess of Solaria.<sup>11</sup>

This scene with its constant references to how ugly, hideous or monster-like Stella became gives the girls watching the impression that it is not acceptable to be different from the norm. As a result many young girls are trying to diet so they don't become fat or as Stella put it “bloated,” tanning so they don't become pale, and dressing like everyone else, because they will not objectify themselves to potential teasing or bullying. In a book titled All Made Up, the author quotes young girls directly about body image. Sixteen year old, Stacy feels pressured to live up to societies standards. “I've always wanted to model even if it meant risking my health,” she said. “When I turn 18, I'm probably going to try modeling again and starve myself because it means that much to me.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Fashion**

In general, the *Winx Club* characters do not dress like the teens they are portrayed to be. They dress in brightly colored outfits that coincide with their image and association with particular mystical elements such as the sun and moon, water tides, nature, fire, technology, and music. They are clad in various combinations of crop tops, tight pants, mini skirts, thigh high

---

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Packaging Girlhood* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2006), 71.

<sup>12</sup> Audrey Brashich, *All Made Up* (New York: Walker and Company, 2006).

socks, platform boots, long flowing hair, and glitter. Again, their positive slogan, “believe in yourself,” contrasts with their physical image. “They are brave, kind, magical fairies dressed like 1970s pole dancers in thigh high boots, hot pants, and tube tops—again linking ideal femininity with hypersexual body display.” This display of hypersexual images is done through their wardrobe alone, which is frequently a focus of many episodes from season three.<sup>13</sup>

In the first episode of season three, “The Princess Ball,” Stella finds out that her father is hosting a princess ball in her honor. So of course the first thing to do is visit the mall to not only show off her designer, “Dolce and Galina” outfit (not to be confused with Dolce and Gabbana), but to pick out a “couture” dress for her party. Stella is using virtual dresses, a system that allows people to try on couture from all of the realms. As Stella is trying different styled outfits, from rock star to super model, a song is playing in the background. “Make it shorter, just shorter, take it to the boarder, make it clingy, make it fly, no need to be shy.” First reviewing the episode on a surface level I did not notice the jingle playing in the background, so I can imagine that it may also be unconscionable to the young demographic it’s aimed toward during the first few viewings.<sup>14</sup>

The original dress Stella chooses to wear for her princess ball is red that was a loincloth in the front and a long train in the back with minimal coverage from the breasts to the navel. This dress is at the center of the first major conflict between two girls of different social cliques.

### **Competition with Other Girls**

The biggest conflict is between the Alfea (Winx) fairies and the Beta fairies, which quickly escalates into a conflict between Stella and Kimorra a member of the Betas. Kimorra

---

<sup>13</sup> M. Gigi Durham, *The Lolita Effect* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2008), 74.

<sup>14</sup> Winx Club: Season Three: The Princess Ball, “The Princess Ball,” prod. Rainbow S.p.A., dir. Iginio Straffi, 20 min, 2003-2008, digital video disc.



plays the “mean girl.” She uses direct socially aggressive behaviors. These behaviors consist of “indirect aggression to damage another’s status or self-esteem spreading rumors, silent treatment, note passing, backstabbing, public of private humiliation.”

In the first episode the conflict starts with a fight over a pizza at the mall’s pizza shop. Once they found out they were both shopping for a princess ball gown, the competition ensues to find the best dress. When Stella saw her dream dress on Kimorra in the virtual dress shop, a physical chase for the one-of-a-kind dress begins in the mall. Kimorra distracts Stella by playing the childhood card, “your shoe is untied.” The conflict only heights further once the two girls realize they are going to be stepsisters. Kimorra wants to do anything and everything in her power to sabotage Stella’s princess ball, in hopes that she will take the crown. Her hatred is very direct. “It’s that Stella girl, she’s so pretty, and royal and happy, I would do anything to bring her down, to see her miserable and suffering.”<sup>15</sup>

Though it is non-traditional to give female characters significant speaking roles in cartoons, how they are communication with other characters are traditional. This type of conflict exists in the reality of girl world and perhaps is why it is in this cartoon. All of the competition between the girls is verbal and hardly any physical. Most cartoons, since they have male characters dominating the screen focus purely on physical competition; who can fly higher or be stronger, not who can talk the talk, as females characters demonstrate well.

### **Nurturing**

The Winx prove to be of the nurturing type of heroines, a traditional model, but are masked by their strength and ability to sense danger. Disguised as powerful young fairies they

---

<sup>15</sup> E. Behm-Morawitz and D. E. Mastro, “Mean girls? The Influence of Gender Portrayals in Teen Movies on Emerging-adults Gender-based Attitudes and Beliefs,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, (2008): 131-146.

never seem to be saving anything that takes tremendous strength. Instead they are always saving beings of innocent value like two puppies plummeting from an eighth story balcony, or a young girl trapped in her inner tube in the middle of a tidal wave. Never would the viewer see them slaying a fire breathing dragon or shooting down a robber on the loose.<sup>16</sup>

Not only are the teen girls' fairy powers helpful within their community, but they are also helpful among their fellow Winx Club member, Stella, who as mentioned earlier is now an ugly monster. However, what they "save" her from is hardly life threatening. They save her reputation. The Winx save Stella from being embarrassed by the way she looks in front of her boyfriend, Brandon. She later thanked her fellow Winx for covering for her because if he saw her as a monster he would be gone "faster than a Solarian sun beam." Flora, who believes in the good of people and nature, said that it isn't true because "Brandon isn't like that." Another Winx disagrees and said, "it's true, all guys are like that, they can't help it, it's in their nature." This shows the traditional image of nurturing and concern about the opposite sex however, what makes the situation non-traditional is that fact that they are indeed superheroes, just superheroes with feelings.

These teen fairies do their fair share of nurturing but aren't portrayed as nurturers like most female characters are in cartoons. This may make viewers more aware that they don't have to turn off emotion and the nature of womanhood/girlhood to be a character of independence and strength.

## **Conclusion**

---

<sup>16</sup> Teresa L. Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos, "Gender Roles in Animated Cartoons: Has the Picture Changed in 20 Years?," *Sex Roles* (1995): 668.

*Winx Club* debunks the traditional formula of cartoons. On the surface, the characters are strong females in control of their surroundings and the men in their lives, something that is not seen in most cartoons. But after analyzing the episodes further, I found traditional images surface. “They have the power to make things happen, see the future, and kill off bad guys, but they rarely have the super strength of Superman, which would make them unfeminine.” The characters are strong yet nurturing to their friends and family. They care a great deal about their appearance. Dressing in mature outfits shows that the characters are eager to grow up and become adults. All of these elements work together to develop a new cartoon formula, which has yet to be tagged. *Winx Club* influences young girl viewers to not only be strong individuals, but to also care about how they look and the way they behave as they grow up in this accelerating culture filled with “hypercommercialized” messaging.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Packaging Girlhood* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2006), 96; Matthew McAllister, “Just How Commercialized Is Children’s Culture?,” in *20 Questions about Youth and the Media*, ed. Sharon Mazzarella (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 268.