(Limited) Freedom of Expression

Halloween has been celebrated in one form or another since pre-Christian times. Dr. Adie Nelson, an associate professor of sociology and legal studies at the University of Waterloo, has published several works that center on issues related to gender; in her study “The Pink Dragon Is Female: Halloween Costumes and Gender Markers,” she takes an in-depth look at the interactions between gender and the ancient ritual. In doing so, she argues that while costumes were originally worn to represent the spirits of the dead, contemporary Halloween celebrations in western culture serve as a “socially orchestrated secular event that brings buyers and sellers into the marketplace for the sale and purchase of . . . fanciful costumes” (137). Costumes are a way to express oneself. This is especially true for children because they are still forming their identities, but despite the massive yearly demand for costumes and the plethora of companies that design, manufacture, and produce them, American market culture limits the costume options available to children to those that embody traditional gender roles; as a result, the costume options available to children contribute to their gender socialization.

Boys and girls tend to wear different types of costumes. A study of the costumes worn in a large mid-western town in 1989 “found that girls were more likely to be dressed as a witch, an inanimate object (e.g., a pumpkin), a stereotypical female character (e.g., Snow White), or in a stereotypical female role (e.g., nurse). By contrast, boys were more likely to be dressed as a
superhero (e.g., Superman), a monster (e.g., zombie), a scary animal (e.g., lion), a [stereotypical] male character (e.g., cowboy), or in a stereotypical male role (e.g., sports star)” (Alexander 183). An analysis conducted by Nelson of children’s costumes available in a Halloween catalogue shows that even gender-neutral costumes such as clowns would be altered to be gender specific: “. . . female clowns wore costumes of soft pastel colors and dainty polka dots, but male clowns were garbed in bold primary colors and in material featuring large polka dots or stripes” (140). Nelson’s analysis also found that costumes representing heroic portrayals of girls tended to depict them as princesses or beauty queens, while heroic costumes for boys tended to depict them as warriors or “characters that possessed supernatural powers or skills” (141). These differences emphasize the gender stereotypes present in contemporary American culture of active masculinity and passive femininity (Nelson 142). Under these stereotypes, the “ideal” girl is merely beautiful while the “ideal” boy is powerful.

Children’s costumes that are based heavily on traditional American gender stereotypes are not only widely available; they make up the vast majority of costumes available to children. Nelson’s analysis found that gender neutral costumes were most abundant for newborns and infants, but that “by and large, few costumes for older children were presented as gender neutral” (140). This imbalance forces most children to choose which gender stereotype they would most like to embody. Boys are in a slightly better position here; Nelson’s analysis found that while boys had fewer overall costumes to choose from, the costumes available encompassed a greater diversity of roles while “costumes for girls were clustered in a narrow range of roles that, although distinguished by specific names, were functionally equivalent in the image they [portrayed]” (Nelson 140-141). The boys are not much better off. While they do have more
costumes that represent anti-heroes, superheroes, and traditional positions of power, their options are still greatly limited (Nelson 141).

Contemporary American market culture is the cause of the diminutive scope of costume options available to children. Nelson argues that contemporary Halloween costumes are “the aftermath of a series of decisions made by commercial firms that market ready-made costumes and sewing patterns” (38). In order to make up for the cost of designing and producing costumes, corporations have to be sure that they will sell an adequate number of them. This forces the corporations to mostly produce and market costumes that appeal to a wide range of the American population. The parents are the final decision makers on the purchase of their child’s costume. The parents likely grew up under the influence of traditional American gender stereotypes; as a result, they are more likely to purchase costumes that reinforce those gender stereotypes out of fear of having their child outcast from the social norms of contemporary American society. This increases demand for traditionally gendered children’s costumes, and this demand increases the corporation’s production of said costumes. This system creates a feedback loop that gradually eliminates non-stereotypically gendered costumes from the marketplace.

Costume branding and licensing serve to similarly reduce the scope of costume options available. Some corporations license characters from major corporations such as The Walt Disney Company. This is advantageous to the corporations because it makes marketing their product much easier and often leads to bigger profits. Ben Cooper, Inc. licensed characters from The Walt Disney Company in 1937 and “became one of the largest and most prominent Halloween costume manufacturers in the United States” by 1940 (Alexander 185). These costumes sell so well because they are recognizable; they are already branded. This reduces the corporations’ marketing costs greatly; as a result, these costumes often out compete those that
were not licensed from reputable media companies. Likely due to the need for mass appeal of the characters that they embody, costumes licensed from media companies are often heavily stereotyped on a gendered basis. The Walt Disney Company, for example, is famous for telling stories of brave princes and beautiful princesses. As a result, the licensing of character based costumes often serves to further saturate the market with gender stereotypes. Corporations stand to benefit from the branding of these gender stereotypes. Princess costumes don’t sell well because princesses are well respected in America; they sell well because princesses are idealized as beautiful. In this way, the corporations are able to represent the ideals of contemporary American society through a label and thus profit from it. These corporations achieve the same end by branding masculinity (Alexander 191). The benefits of these practices are evidenced by the number of idealistically similar costumes present in Nelson’s analysis, which showed that costumes depicting princesses and beauty queens made up 27.5 percent of the costumes marketed towards girls (140).

The over-balance of stereotypically gendered costumes that results from contemporary American market culture serves to contribute to the gender socialization of children in a number of ways. Children may not fully grasp the concept of gender until they reach five and one-half to six years of age (Ogletree et al. 634). Dr. Ogletree has a Ph.D. in developmental psychology and is a professor of Psychology at Texas State University; she and her colleagues argue that until then, “[o]bservation may also contribute to a child’s gender-related knowledge and behavior” (633). Due to this, seeing the costumes of other children and the costumes that they themselves wear can influence a young child’s perception of gender norms. Nelson supports this by stating “The symbolic representations of gender contained within Halloween costumes may . . . refurbish stereotypical notions of what [women/girls] and men/boys are capable of doing even within the
realm of their imaginations” (143). The way in which costumes are marketed to children can also influence these perceptions. Ogletree et al. argue that “[g]ender labeling alone may stimulate children to begin the gender-typing process. Gender labeling or categorization may lead to the salience of gender-related preferences and a temporary increase in gender role rigidity” (636). Nelson’s analysis revealed that costumes intended for girls were often modeled by girls and costumes intended for boys were often modeled by boys. The intended gender for more ambiguous costumes was often indicated by stereotypically gendered dress such as ribbons and patent leather shoes for girls or sneakers for boys (139). Nelson also notes that many costume names include exclusive gendered terms that “reference masculine costumes by occupational roles or titles but describe feminine costumes via appearance and/or relationships” and emphasize “the importance of participation in the paid-work world and financial success for men and of physical attractiveness and marriage for women” (142). It is possible that marketing in this fashion also influences children’s ideas of gender norms through observation.

Dr. Clark, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago who specializes in working with children and their perspectives, argues that Halloween does not involve “unidirectional socialization of children by adults” (180) and that “inversions of meaning are prominent in Halloween through . . . adult support for inverted, anti-normative themes” (180). The lack of gender neutral costumes found by Nelson’s analysis (only 8.7 percent of the costumes analyzed were marketed as gender neutral [140]) refutes Clark’s claim that “inversions of meaning are prominent in Halloween” (Clark 180). Nelson counters Clark’s refutation of “unidirectional socialization of children by adults” (Clark 180) by stating that “the impact of language and other symbolic representations must be considered [consequential]” (143) with respect to Halloween costumes.
The supply-and-demand and profit-incentive imperatives of the contemporary American market culture leads corporations to produce far more stereotypically gendered children’s costumes than gender neutral costumes. As a result, many children - especially very young children - wear costumes that adhere to cultural gender norms (Alexander 183). Due to the fact that children have an incomplete understanding of their own gender (Ogletree et al. 634) and that the prevalence and marketing of gender normative costumes can influence their perceptions of social norms (Ogletree et al. 633), the restrictions the market places on the diversity of Halloween costumes serves to contribute to the gender socialization of children.
Works Cited


