Asian Journal of English Language Teaching, *33,* 37–52
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Gendered Discourses in Grade 3 English eBooks on a Digital Library Platform

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Social justice and gender equality have long been promoted in schools and education sectors in Hong Kong. However, it remains unclear whether these efforts have led to meaningful changes in children's literature popular among Hong Kong readers. In particular, the extent to which recent children's books have moved away from male-dominated narratives and improved female representation warrants further examination. To increase gender awareness in young readers, parents, teachers, and librarians in the local community and beyond, this paper examines the gender representation in seven Grade 3 English e-chapbooks categorized under Reading Recovery (RR) level 22 (for readers aged eight to nine) in Highlights Library, one of the leading digital reading platforms in the world. In terms of the male-to-female ratio in the book titles, book cover illustrations, and central characters of eBooks at RR level 22, the study shows that female characters outnumber male characters in most e-chapbooks catalogued in the digital library. Female characters are no longer underrepresented. In terms of gender discourses, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to observe the gender power relations in the narratives of the seven Grade 3 e-chapbooks. All seven e-chapbooks at RR level 22 exhibit different levels of influence from feminism.

Introduction

The representation of gender in children's literature plays a crucial role in shaping societal norms and values. Walter Lippmann (2023), the American journalist, argues that stereotypes are essential for our understanding of the world, enabling us to process complex realities through simplifications. He believes that since the human capacity for

processing information is limited and the world is too complex for one to fully perceive, we need generalizations and categorizations of some bits of the total picture of an object, place, event, person, or group to make sense of ourselves. These stereotypes not only reflect societal perceptions but also reinforce and perpetuate traditional gender roles. However, while stereotypes reflect the perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes shared by people, they also have the power to influence our way of thinking, fabricate, and perpetuate the social construction of gender. One typical example is Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," (1837) which positioned the mermaid in a state of silence and oppression (Wilson, 2020). The silence contributes to her subjugation by limiting her voice and agency, restricting her ability to assert herself or challenge her circumstances. This lack of expression reinforces her powerless position, as she cannot communicate her desires or resist the control imposed upon her. Consequently, her silence becomes a tool of oppression, perpetuating the dynamics of dominance and submission in her narrative. In the same light, "female figures in most of the Grimm's fairy tales, such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, have rapidly been displayed in silent positions" (Liu, 2020, p. 26). Male and female characters are assigned binary gender roles that shape the minds of children, reinforcing binary, stereotypical sex role identities in society.

In response to these entrenched stereotypes, feminist scholars and critics have actively sought to deconstruct traditional gender roles in children's literature. Influential figures like Marcia Lieberman, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar have highlighted the biases present in children's books, urging readers to recognize and challenge these representations (Zipes, 2014). Feminist writers have also undertaken revisionist projects that reinterpret stories and myths from a female perspective. According to Sharma (2020), the feminist movement, "known as feminist revisionist mythology or feminist rewriting, seeks to challenge traditional narratives by shifting the perspective from male-centered storytelling to female agency" (p. 23). For example, contemporary authors such as Angela Carter and Anne Sexton have created strong, resourceful female characters, either by subverting traditional fairy tales or by crafting new narratives that empower women (Liu, 2020). Given this context, one must wonder if the feminist spirit has spread to the e-chapbooks of children's literature. With the current discourse on gender representation in children's literature, it is essential

to investigate the narratives available to young readers in recent decades. The following literature review will examine the existing body of work on gendered discourses in children's literature, setting the stage for a critical examination of the e-chapbooks under consideration.

Literature Review

Recent studies indicate a gradual improvement in gender representation within children's literature. Research by Casey and colleagues (2021) shows an enhanced female-to-male ratio among central characters in books published from 1960 to 2020. Montague (2021) also notes that young readers' booklists and awards, such as the Stonewall Book Awards, now start to pay attention to gender diversity, equity, and inclusion, highlighting the growing recognition of the importance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other marginalized identities (LGBTQ+) narratives in children's literature. One notable development in children's literature is the rise of gender-inclusive language, especially the use of gender-neutral pronouns. The singular "they/them" has become more common in everyday speech and in books (Maryna, 2024), allowing writers to create characters that reflect non-binary and gender-nonconforming children. A prime example is the picture book *They, She, He Easy as ABC* by Maya and Matthew Gonzalez (2019). This book features non-binary children sharing their hobbies. It uses pronouns like "they" and "ze" for kids exploring their gender, while "she" is used for masculine-looking characters and "he" for feminine-looking ones. This book is available in many libraries and recommended by teachers, promoting inclusivity from a young age. The increase in gender-inclusive books also reflects changes in society. Schools and communities are becoming more aware of the need to create welcoming environments for all children. As a result, parents and educators are looking for resources that teach kindness and respect for diversity, which boosts the demand for books that represent different identities and experiences. In the United Kingdom, a leading educational resource, Pop'n'Olly, targeted to children and teachers focused on sexual orientation and gender diversity, runs the "Pride in Primary" campaign (Leung & Adams-Whittaker, 2022). This initiative donates children's books, videos, and lesson ideas to primary schools. Teachers also join Pop'n'Olly's online training to learn more about gender diversity education.

Nevertheless, despite these advancements, the depiction of adults and children behaving in gender stereotyped manners continues (Tsao, 2020), and mothers engaging in household or caregiving tasks are common in children's literature (Anderson et al., 2023). Children's media continues to reflect gender stereotypes and traditional associations, even as contemporary children's texts strive to move away from harmful narratives. In general, female characters are often depicted as passive, emotional, and supportive, taking on roles such as mothers or helpers, while male characters are portrayed as brave and adventurous leaders. This dichotomy reflects a troubling stagnation in gender representation (Gazda, 2015; Lowther, 2014).

As the landscape of children's literature evolves, particularly with the rise of digital reading platforms, there is both an opportunity and a challenge to reassess and reshape gender discourses. Millions of children now access stories through platforms like Highlights Library, (https://library.highlights.com) one of the world's most popular digital reading platforms, offering over 2,500 stories across 30 reading levels, prompting an examination of whether these modern formats perpetuate traditional gender biases or offer more progressive representations. While these persistent stereotypes continue to shape young readers' perceptions of gender roles, the rapid shift toward digital reading platforms presents both a challenge and an opportunity for change. As millions of children now access stories through digital libraries like Highlights Library, it becomes crucial to examine whether these modern formats replicate traditional gender biases or offer more progressive representations. This study seeks to take advantage of this digital transition as a moment to assess and potentially reshape gender discourses in children's literature. To this end, this paper analyzes Grade 3 English e-chapbooks from Highlights Library. Focusing on seven carefully selected RR level 22 e-chapbooks (for readers aged eight to nine), our investigation proceeds in two key phases: first, a quantitative analysis of male-to-female ratios in titles, cover art, and central characters; second, we will perform a qualitative CDA of narratives, dialogues, and illustrations. It is envisaged that the CDA will illustrate the gender representation in recent e-chapbooks read by child readers, English a second language (ESL), English as a foreign language (EFL), and native English speakers alike. Through this dual approach, we aim to provide concrete data and a good understanding of gender representation. The research results shall be helpful in raising the general public's awareness towards gender bias and

prejudice in children's books. Authors, illustrators, and publishers who aspire to create books that empower women, embrace gender sensitivity, and celebrate gender diversity can see for themselves what aspects of gender representation they need to work on, whether it is in the form of book titles, covers, content, or the illustrations.

The Objective of the Research

To guide the discussion and analysis, this paper has established two research questions based on the seven (n = 7) Grade 3 e-chapbooks selected from Highlights Library. The research question (RQ) is as follows:

> RQ1: With regard to female visibility, what is the gender ratio in the e-chapbooks chosen for inclusion in the study?
>
> RQ2: In terms of gender discourses, how are female characters represented in the e-chapbooks in Highlights Library? These questions will help frame our investigation and deepen our understanding of gender representation within this specific context.

Methodologies

A Quantitative Analysis of Gender Ratios in Titles, Cover Art, and Central Characters

Although female visibility alone does not necessarily mean gender equality, it is an indicator that directly reveals the relative proportion of males and females featured. Shu (1998) defines visibility as the "frequencies and percentages that women and men appeared in book titles, illustrations, and texts" (p. 10). Heikkilä and colleagues (2020) argue that "being visible includes getting attention and often appreciation" (p. 5). With reference to the quantitative models of Gooden A. M. and Gooden M. A. (2001) and Brugeilles and colleagues (2002), this study develops a framework that illustrates the gender ratio found in the e-chapbooks. In the framework, the genders of book characters are classified into four types: (1) female, (2) male, (3) equal, and (4) gender unidentified. On the other hand, the gender implications generated through the book titles, book covers, page illustrations, and central characters are coded as follows in terms of proportion of books:

1. By gender featured in the title.
2. By gender of the characters featured in the illustrations of the book cover.
3. By gender of the characters featured in the page illustrations.
4. By gender of the central characters.

Table 1. An Evaluative Framework that Shows the Gender Ratio in E-chapbooks Categorized under Grade 3 and RR level 22 in Highlights Library

Gender of characters / Book proportion (%)	Female	Male	Equal	Gender unidentified
a. Proportion of books by gender featured in the title				
b. Proportion of books by gender of the characters featured in the illustrations of the book cover				
c. Proportion of books by gender of the characters featured in the page illustrations				
d. Proportion of books by gender of the central characters				

For the RQ1, about female visibility, the number of male and female characters is calculated. If more female characters are depicted in the e-chapbook than male, the book will be classified as "female." Conversely, the book will be labeled as "male" if the male characters outnumber the female characters. If there are equal numbers of female and male characters, then it will be classified as "equal." Last but not least, if the gender of the characters is not specified, it will be marked as "gender unidentified."

A Qualitative CDA of Narratives, Dialogues, and Illustrations

Regarding RQ2, conducting a gender discourse analysis shall help to shed light on the gender representation in the e-chapbooks for Grade 3 child readers. With reference to Fairclough's three-dimensional model (2015), this paper looks into language and the power relations in gender in three dimensions, namely: (1) the "formal properties of the text," (2) the "relationship between text and interaction," and (3) the "relationship between interaction and social context" (Fairclough, 2015, pp. 58–59). "[F]ormal properties of the text" (Fairclough, 2015, p. 58) refer to grammatical gender, including but not limited to the use of proper nouns,

gender specific pronouns, honorifics, order of mention of male and female characters, gender biased vocabulary and proverbs, and power relations implied in the expressions should be considered (Tso, 2014). As for interaction in the second dimension, the key concerns include who speaks first, who talks more often, "silence, humor, overlapping talk, [and] interruptions" (Rogers and Villarreal, 2022, p. 320). Last but not least, the context in the third dimension mainly focuses on the characters' professional or family roles (i.e., grandparent, wife, mother, aunt, etc.), places they stay in (i.e., domestic or public spheres), activities they take part in (i.e., indoor or outdoor; sedentary or active), and personality traits they manifest. It is envisaged that the quantitative and qualitative findings from this study will provide a reliable account of the gender representation in e-chapbooks for Grade 3 readers.

Findings

The High Female Visibility in E-chapbooks

The analysis of the gender ratio in the seven Grade 3 e-chapbooks archived in Highlights Library reveals a notable trend: females have significantly higher visibility than males.

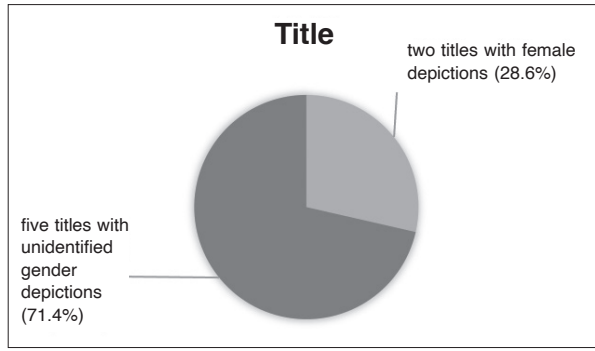
Book Titles

As can be seen in Figure 1, among the seven e-chapbooks, two titles have female depictions, and the remaining book titles show neither male nor female depictions:

1. *Miss Benson's Class* (Helenthal, 2018)
2. *Tanya's Teddy Bears* (Bartles, 2018)
3. *All Aboard* (Bari, 2018)
4. *Beach Blues* (Aboff, 2018)
5. *Good Friends* (Furlong, 2018)
6. *The Birthday Box* (Hanna, 2018)
7. *What Am I?* (Kovatch, 2018)

In other words, females occur in 28.6% of the e-chapbooks titles, whereas males occur in none of the titles.

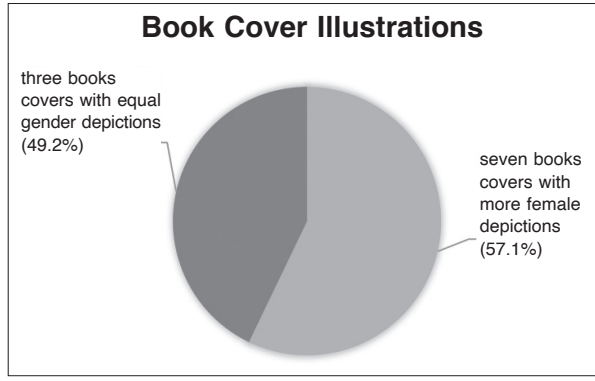
Figure 1. Gender Ratio in the E-chapbooks Titles



Cover Illustrations

High visibility of females is observed in the cover illustrations of the e-chapbooks as well. As Figure 2 shows, 57.1% (n = 4) of the book covers have a higher female visibility, 0% (n = 0) have a higher female visibility, and 42.9% (n = 3) of the books have covers that equally feature male and female characters.

Figure 2. Gender Proportion in the Illustrations of the E-chapbook Covers

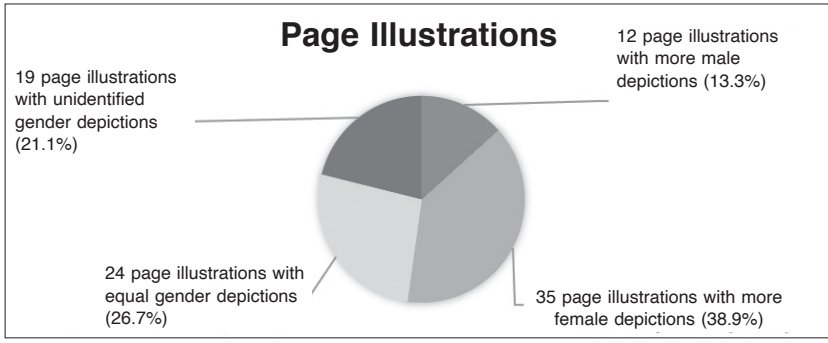


Page Illustrations

In addition, among the 90 page illustrations found inside the seven e-chapbooks in the digital reading platform, the female-to-male ratio is 2.92:1. To present the figures in detail, 38.9% (n = 35) of the page

illustrations contain more female characters than male ones; 26.7% (n = 24) of the page illustrations have an equal amount of male and female characters; 21.1% (n = 19) contain illustrations with characters of unspecified gender, whereas only 13.3% (n = 12) contain more male characters than female ones.

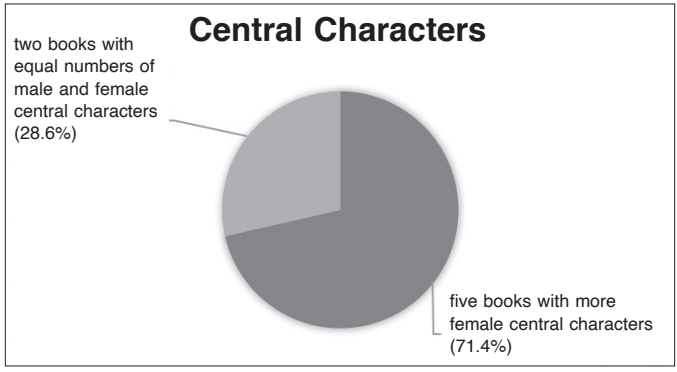
Figure 3. Gender Ratio in the Illustrations Inside the E-chapbooks



Central Characters

Similarly, high female visibility can be observed in the gender ratio of the e-chapbook's central characters. In all seven selections, 71.4% (n = 5) feature more female central characters than males, but none of the books features more male central characters than females. As for the two remaining (28.6%), equal numbers of male and female central characters are found.

Figure 4. Gender Ratio of the Central Book Characters



Gender Discourses in Highlights Library's Grade 3 E-chapbooks

As the text of the seven chapbooks reveals, six of them (85.7%) mention female characters first, and two even mention females only because there are neither major nor minor male characters in the books. Only one book, *The Birthday Box* (2018), introduces the main male character, "Jason," first and calls the female character "Jason and his sister." (p. 9)

Discussion

Use of Pronouns and Honorifics

Gender specific pronouns such as "she" and "her" are used frequently, while all books carefully avoid gender biased expressions. However, the use of honorifics appears to contradict the cautious intention. For example, in *Best Friends* (2018), one of the main characters is referred to as "Mrs. Duff," reminding the reader that there is a Mr. Duff and that Mrs. Duff receives her honorific from her husband. In *Miss Benson's Class* (2018), the main character is always referred to as "Miss Benson," who is not yet married. In fact, the marital status of other female characters, such as "Mrs. Anderson," is also always clearly indicated, whereas that of the male characters is never disclosed through the honorifics.

This distinction not only highlights gender imbalance but also reinforces traditional patriarchal norms, suggesting that a woman's identity is often defined in relation to her marital status. Such practices can perpetuate the idea that women are primarily defined by their relationships to men, thereby undermining their individuality and autonomy. The consistent use of honorifics tied to marital status may also convey implicit messages about expectations and worth, further entrenching unfair biases against women. By failing to provide equal recognition of male characters' statuses, these texts inadvertently uphold a gendered hierarchy that could influence young readers' perceptions of gender roles and relationships.

Interactions and Power Dynamics

Besides the text in the first dimension of Fairclough's CDA model (2015), interactions in the second dimension also reveal the characters' gender

power relations. In all seven selections, female characters always get to speak first. They talk way more often than the male characters. For instance, in *Beach Blues* (2018), there are only two main characters, Grandma and David. Grandma dominates in all conversations. She starts the story by saying, "It's a perfect beach day!" (Aboff, 2018, p.2). When David makes a short request, "Can we go to Sea View Beach?" (p. 3), Grandma does not entertain David. Rather, she convinces David to visit Jones Beach, her favorite beach. Upon listening to her reminiscence of her early days in Jones Beach, "David didn't say anything" (p. 3) and kept his mind to himself. Even in *All Aboard* (2018), a book with equal numbers of male and female characters, Susie Wu, the little girl, does most of the narration in the form of a letter. Her female pen pal also gains her voice through replying to Susie's letters. In contrast, the male characters, including Susie's father and brother, are largely silenced. Male characters are typically portrayed as more humorous and funny than female characters. In *What Am I?* (Kovatch, 2018), when Peggy, the little girl, discovers that she has two races, her mother tells her the fact, whereas her dad makes fun of her:

> Her mother said, "Sweet pea, you're a little bit of me and a little bit of Daddy."
> Then she asked her father. "Peggy, you're a little bit of me and a little bit of Mom. And a little bit of pancake!" he teased. (p. 9)

This juxtaposition raises critical questions about the representation of gender dynamics. While female characters are given a platform to express themselves, the humor assigned to male characters can reinforce stereotypes that associate masculinity with wit and authority. This could suggest that, despite the apparent empowerment of female voices, the underlying narrative still perpetuates certain gendered expectations. Thus, while these selections reflect some progress in amplifying female voices, they also highlight the need for a more nuanced portrayal of gender relations that equally values all characters, regardless of gender. This balance is essential for fostering a more equitable understanding of gender roles in children's literature.

Family Roles and Context

In addition to the text and interaction, the context is equally revealing, in particular in terms of the female characters' family roles (i.e.,

grandparent, wife, mother, aunt, etc.). For instance, in *Beach Blues* (2018) and *Tanya's Teddy Bears* (2018), some of the main female characters are never called by their names. They are presented to the reader as "David's grandma," (Aboff, 2018) "Tanya's grandmother," "Mom," and "Tanya and her mom." (Bartles, 2018) This reflects that quite a number of female characters are defined by their family roles. As a matter of fact, besides the primary school teacher Miss Benson, the profession or occupation of the female characters in the e-chapbooks is never mentioned. The female grown-ups are either housewives, mothers, grandmothers, or neighbors next door. The young females are agreeable children and good students. While these female characters are not necessarily confined to the domestic space, adult female characters in six out of seven of the e-chapbooks (85.7%) are portrayed to be either doing relaxing activities, such as gardening, going on a vacation, visiting the beach, accompanying children, or simply preparing breakfast for the family. More significantly, the influence, authority, and supremacy of males are presented through the males' absent presence. While the leading characters are females in six out of the seven e-chapbooks, four of them indicate male power in the patriarchal society. In *Miss Benson's Class* (2018), Miss Benson requires Mr. Sanchez, the school headmaster, to authorize a field trip for second graders to Silver Pines Nursing Home. In *Beach Blues* (Aboff, 2018), Grandma, David, and the citizens go to the town hall to present their plea to the mayor, who is a male in a formal suit. Also, though Grandma seems to be taking charge in the family, the late Grandpa's absent presence has a strong influence on the old lady:

> David saw that Grandma had that faraway look in her eyes again. She always had that look when she talked about Grandpa. David's grandpa died when David was just a baby. David didn't remember him at all. But Grandma had lots of pictures of him. (p. 4)

In *All Abroad* (2018), Susie Wu visits Washington and tours the White House with her family. She wonders "if the President and his family ever feel lonely in such a big place." (Bari, 2018, p. 6) And it is obvious the president of the United States (U.S.) is male. In *The Birthday Box* (2018), the start of the inspiring game of mailing the surprising birthday box to family members is the fun-loving Cousin Ed, who is male. Although the U.S. president, the mayor, the school headmaster, the late grandpa, and the funny cousin are not the leading

characters in the e-chapbooks, their absent presence implies male supremacy and significance in the context.

By framing female characters primarily through their family roles, these narratives risk the aspirations and identities of young readers. When girls see themselves predominantly as mothers, grandmothers, or supportive figures, it may discourage them from envisioning broader possibilities for their futures. Furthermore, the emphasis on male authority figures, even in absentia, can instill the notion that leadership and decision-making are inherently masculine traits. This reinforces a cycle where gender stereotypes persist, affecting not only how children perceive themselves but also how they relate to others.

To foster a more equitable worldview, it is crucial for children's literature to present diverse representations of gender roles that challenge these traditional boundaries. By showcasing female characters in varied and empowered roles, authors can help cultivate a generation of readers who understand and value equality, encouraging them to break free from limiting stereotypes and embrace a more inclusive understanding of gender identity and expression.

Conclusion

To conclude, both the quantitative findings and qualitative analysis of the seven Grade 3 e-chapbooks archived in Highlights Library show that the gender representation has become relatively less biased. The selected e-chapbooks on the digital reading platform have adequately represented females, aligning with the aspiration of feminists. In terms of gender ratio, female visibility is high in the book title, the book cover, and page illustrations. There are more female characters than male ones, and the females often take the initiative to speak first and talk more often. Nevertheless, it is found that female characters are often assigned family roles. In the selections, they are either someone's wife, mother, grandmother, or aunt when being introduced. Many of them are also given the nurturer's role to raise children, teach students, take care of the garden, visit patients in the hospital, and look after the elderly in the nursing home. In this regard, the perpetuation of gender norms in children's books is still apparent.

While providing valuable insights into gender representation in digital children's literature, this study has several limitations that warrant

consideration. The relatively small sample size of seven e-chapbooks from a single digital platform, Highlights Library, may limit the generalizability of findings, and future research would benefit from examining a larger corpus across multiple platforms to enhance external validity. Additionally, the exclusive focus on English-language materials means the findings may not reflect gender representations in other linguistic or cultural contexts where different gender norms may prevail. The study also did not account for intersectional factors such as how race, class, or disability might interact with gender portrayals, representing an important avenue for future investigation.

Despite these limitations, the findings carry significant implications for various stakeholders in children's education and publishing. For educators, the results highlight both progress in female representation and persistent stereotypes, providing concrete examples to facilitate critical discussions with students about gender roles in media. Teachers can use these findings to develop pedagogical strategies that help children recognize and question traditional gender norms while celebrating more progressive representations. For publishers and content creators, the demonstrated reader engagement with female-led stories (evidenced by their prevalence in this sample) suggests a market demand for more diverse and nuanced portrayals of female characters that extend beyond domestic roles.

The findings also imply that digital platforms could play a more proactive role in promoting gender equity through curation algorithms and publishing guidelines. For parents, the study offers evidence-based guidance for selecting children's literature and framing family discussions about gender equality. Importantly, the research underscores that while quantitative representation of female characters has improved, qualitative aspects of gender portrayal—such as character agency, occupational roles, and narrative power dynamics—require ongoing attention and improvement. These findings contribute to broader conversations about media literacy and gender socialization, suggesting that achieving meaningful equality in children's literature requires moving beyond simple visibility metrics to address deeper structural and narrative biases. Future research should build on these findings by exploring how child readers interpret these representations and investigating effective interventions to counteract persistent stereotypes in digital reading materials.

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