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## HOW THE GENDERLESS BECOMES GENDERED? GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE POPULAR CHILDREN’S TV SHOW “PEPPA PIG”

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The current article seeks to answer the question to what extent the characters from the popular children’s TV show “Peppa Pig” are constructed using gender stereotypes. By examining definitions of gender and its inherent social characteristics, the paper sets out to analyze the extent to which this particular children’s series reinforces gender biases and the heteronormative order, and the extent to which it diversifies representation of the nuclear family and the roles within it.

*Keywords:* sex/gender, family, representation, popular culture, children’s TV show, socialization

### КАК БЕЗПОЛОВОТО СТАВА ПОЛОВО? ПОЛОВИ СТЕРЕОТИПИ В ПОПУЛЯРНОТО ДЕТСКО ПРЕДАВАНЕ „ПРАСЕНЦЕТО ПЕПА“

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Текстът търси отговор на въпроса доколко образите на героите от популярното детско предаване „Прасенцето Пепа“ са конструирани, използвайки полови стереотипи. Разглеждайки дефинициите на понятието „пол“ и присъщите му социални характеристики, статията се впуска в анализ доколко този конкретен детски сериал утвърждава полови предразсъдъци и хетеронормативния ред и доколко диверсифицира представата за нуклеарното семейство и ролите в него.

*Ключови думи:* пол, стереотипи, семейство, репрезентация, популярна култура, детско предаване, социализация

## INTRODUCTION

The current article examines the specifics of gender identities and gender representation in popular culture created for children between 2–5 years. Namely, the

object of study becomes a popular and well-liked animated TV show: “Peppa Pig”. I’ll focus my analysis on the series’ main characters. I seek answers to two main questions: on one hand – how is gender (re)presented as a characteristic of the characters? Is it through stereotypical male and female social roles, can one actually speak of socially constructed gender in the context of children’s popular culture, or are the characters presented in the show in a significantly simpler way, unencumbered by social roles and gender expectations? And on the other hand, if it turns out that children’s TV series suitable for 2–5 year olds present precisely the simplified, binary idea of gender, how is this message conveyed without entering into complex narratives of biological or sociocultural determination of gender? In search of answers to these questions, I cannot help but mention the possibility of allowing multiple interpretations (Butler, 2006: 22) of gender: whether what is perceived as *male* and *masculine* is related to the male characters in the series and how *female* and *feminine* are characteristics of the female characters. I’d like to also take into consideration the intended audience for “Peppa Pig”: in the series the main character is Peppa, a 4-year old girl and the plot revolves around her day-to-day in her family life and also at her playgroup.

By analyzing the characters in the TV series – the way they look and talk, their favorite hobbies or their profession and also their specific traits, I hope to discern how traditionally genderless characters (such as a family of pigs, sheep or dogs) can become gendered and also whether or not their gender representation can fit within the binary paradigm in a patriarchal society. What I expect is to discover stereotypical manifestations of male and female in popular culture, i.e. boys are active, assertive, even aggressive, they tend to have more lines and autonomy. Girls, on the other hand are typically represented as static, empathetic, well-behaved, tame and tend to have less lines (and overall screen time) than their male counterparts. These typical traits of TV characters can be spotted in various products of pop culture in accordance with the “formula” uncovered by Berger – “boys act and girls appear” (Berger, 1972).

The criteria in which I decided to analyze “Peppa Pig” are based mainly on accessibility and popularity of this particular TV show. “Peppa” can be accessed in various streaming platforms available in Bulgaria or as part of the TV programme of Nick Jr. TV channel – doubled in Bulgarian. The children can meet the “Peppa” characters not only on TV but also via children’s books, even via educational notebooks and coloring books; “Peppa Pig” characters are also often displayed in the form of toys, jigsaw puzzles, clothes, accessories and personal hygiene products.

## **GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT**

Gender is an important part of life in society, including in communal societies. For centuries there have been different ways used by the birthing parent to try and guess the sex of the baby expected. Today, towards the middle of the pregnancy

virtually every obstetrician can share with the parents the sex of the baby displayed on the ultrasound monitor. Or at least – to ask the parents whether or not they wish to know this information. The supposed gender of the baby in utero is in accordance with different beliefs such as what is the favorite food of the expecting mother, what shape is her belly, is she carrying “low” or “high”; what color clothes are suitable for the baby depending on their sex and when the child is old enough this belief transgresses to what kind of toys are suitable for the child, what kind of sports, hobbies, way of talking, types of games etc. Particularly fun part of popular culture gender narrative is the so-called gender reveal party<sup>1</sup> where the parents use every pop culture stereotype known to man in order to share with family and loved ones what is the sex of the baby they’re expecting. Pink balloons or blue cakes, confetti in pink or blue, respectively; unicorn or truck decorations; blue or pink bracelet for mom and baby in the hospital – children are indoctrinated in a binary and gender stereotypical culture from their first breath and sometimes even since before they are born.

However, are all these rituals and “rules” relevant to the biological category of sex? Of course, the pink unicorns or big building trucks are not connected with our biology, which means they’re a social construct. In a society where there are strictly defined male and female roles it can be expected that certain traits, qualities or even professions are considered as traditionally *male* or *female*.

In other words:

Gender roles are a set of behavioral and social norms that are generally understood to be what is appropriate for males and females in a social or interpersonal relationship. These roles vary greatly due to the influence of cultural, social, and psychological factors (Larson, 2013). For this reason, gender roles are never universal. It is important to understand that environmental conditions and socialization between genders and cultures can influence learning how to appropriately behave. Males are generally expected to be masculine, assertive, and competitive while females are expected to be passive, sensitive, and supportive. Each person’s culture encompasses different behavioral expectations (Burgess, 1994). Not all women or men in society entered under the same circumstances. In the United States, our society has become diverse, so socialization will occur in many areas. The social positions assigned such as status, gender, and ethnicity will suggest different expectations of marital, family, and gender roles. (Arnold et al., 2015: 3)

It is precisely this understanding of different qualities attributed to males and females that I’m going to use every time I mention *stereotypical gender roles* in

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<sup>1</sup> *Gender reveal* – a special event during which the sex of the baby is disclosed to the parents and their loved ones. The parents themselves don’t know the sex of their baby, this information is only available to their doctor and the one organizing the party. The information is then placed in a sealed envelope and the party organizer is decorating the party venue in a certain “theme” depending on the sex of the baby – usually in a pink theme for a girl or a blue one for a boy. The parents can also discover their baby’s sex by cutting the cake which is dyed blue/pink on the inside, or by popping blue/pink confetti, etc.

the current article context. Such rigid and stereotypical representation does affect children and the way they perceive their own gender and that of their peers. Studies have indicated that children witnessing female characters on TV who are “*passive, indecisive, and subordinate to men* (...)”, will likely believe that this is the appropriate way for females to behave” (Witt, 2000). By extension, this means that qualities such as leadership, autonomy, initiative – since they’re not considered “feminine” are less likely to be exhibited and even developed in female children. On the other hand, since male protagonists on TV are more likely to be shown in leadership roles and exhibit “*assertive, decisive behavior*”, children learn that such qualities are to be associated primarily with men (Cantor, 1977; Carter, 1991; Seidman, 1999). Other research (by The National Institute of Mental Health) also reaches similar conclusions by determining that on the one hand, men usually dominate male-female interactions and on the other, on television, they’re often portrayed as *rational, ambitious, smart, competitive, powerful, stable, violent, and tolerant*, while women are *sensitive, romantic, attractive, happy, warm, sociable, peaceful, fair, submissive, and timid* (Witt, 2000).

Continuing the analysis of various US based television programs within the same binary framework, researchers conclude that men on TV are shown for their “*strength, performance, and skill*” (Witt, 2000), while for women that’s not the case, since the focus is mainly on “*attractiveness and desirability*” (ibid). Witt then continues her analysis by observing that family and marriage do not seem to be of import to TV men considering that for most male protagonists it was difficult to discern whether or not they have a family of their own. This was not the case for their female counterparts, however, since in their case the women’s family and marital status was known in 89% of the cases (National Institute of Mental Health, as cited in Lauer & Lauer, 1994, p. 73). In accordance with this trend, other researchers indicate that women are frequently defined by their interactions and namely, relationship with men (Beal, 1994). These observations, along with the fact that about two-thirds of the characters on TV are male – a constant figure since the 1950s (Condry, 1989; Huston et al., 1992; Seidman, 1999), reaffirm an extremely unyielding and binary paradigm of gender and its pop culture representations.

Such “prisons of images”, as referred to by Alice Walker (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 198) are a constant in children’s popular culture, including popular children’s picture books. One example of stereotypical gender portrayal in children’s literature is the fact that female characters are described as “*passive*, while *males have been found to be active* (Weitzman et al., 1972, p. 1131; Kortenhaus and Demarest, 1993, p. 230; Crisp and Hiller, 2011, p. 203). Researcher Isabella Steyer continues to provide numerous examples from children’s popular culture citing that females have often been depicted as needing the help of males (Weitzman et al., 1972, p. 1136; Kortenhaus and Demarest, 1993, p. 230)”, while “occupational stereotyping” (Steyer, 2014) is also apparent, with women still being found in a much smaller number of different jobs than men (Hamilton et al., 2006, p. 764).

Further research has shown that women’s underrepresentation is a trend in different TV series and movies for children, not only in picture books (Steyer, 2014). Preceding studies also indicate a similar trend (Sternglanz and Serbin, 1974; Thompson and Zerbinos, 1995; Faherty, 2001). The female/male character ratio remains relatively constant in the 15 year period that was examined (Smith et al., 2010, pp. 783-784) along with the gendered light in terms of family and familial life the characters are depicted in. For example, women/girls are often portrayed as mothers in relationships, while men/boys are depicted primarily as bachelors and singles or with no information regarding their familial status. A fact, certain researchers find alarming (Steyer, 2014) considering that in such case boys are not presented with a positive pop culture role model(s) in terms of relationship or fatherhood – or caregiving in general (Smith et al., 2010, p. 783).

All these examples from different sources, analyzing the male/female characters in children’s popular culture and the issue of gender, reach, it seems to me, very similar conclusions. On one hand, women are underrepresented continuously, even if there is a noticeable improvement in recent 20 years, however the male/female ratio remains almost the same. On the other, the qualities attributed to the characters are intrinsically connected with their gender; the sex of a certain character often goes hand in hand with a particular gender(ed) role. For example, males are active, while females – passive, males are assertive and decisive, taking on leadership roles, powerful, competitive and the plot focuses on their skill and competences. While females are depicted as timid, often subordinate to men, they’re more sensitive and romantic, warm, sociable, peaceful and the focus is on outward factors such as beauty (ie attractiveness) and desirability. Not to mention that the role of the caregiver is predominantly associated with female characters; they’re most likely to be represented in a domestic and/or familial atmosphere, while the opposite is valid for the male counterparts. Based on these consistent characteristics, I was able to discern a sample binary characteristic table of the male and female gender – as represented in popular culture (including children’s pop culture), which is as follows:

<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>
assertive	sensitive
competent	attractive
aggressive	warm
confident	timid
public-facing	domestic
rational	emotional
active	passive

In the following article I will attempt to look for these binary characteristics – and others presented in similar sense, in the form of children’s popular culture I’m examining – which in this case is primarily the popular British TV show “Peppa

Pig”. As to why these repetitive gendered characteristics are important, one of possible reasons could be that such binary view of gender along with connecting a specific gender with a certain gender role, taking into account the consistent underrepresentation of females is problematic. Several of the stereotypical portrayals of females in children’s TV shows and picture books such as the infant, the shrew and the frump are inherently negative (Green, 1997). These portrayal types are based on the stereotypical roles GL Green has found to be frequently used as templates for different female characters. These “stereotypic representations are: the infant, the shrew, the eccentric, the maternal, the vamp, the frump, and the twin” (Green, 1997). The inherent negative connotation of being a female and in extension – femininity, along with the underrepresentation of females in popular culture coupled with the very limited active and competent roles they take present an extremely rigid picture reaffirming to children of all genders that what it is to be male/female is binary, rigid and basically non-negotiable. Thus, if I am to simplify, little girls see as role models only beautified versions of motherhood and are to embrace their role as caregiver and subordinate to men, while little boys are to be the active ones, always trying to “save” someone, in dominant position to their female counterparts and with no discernable examples of fatherhood and even the possibility of being a caregiver. I’ll have to say that family style TV shows – such as “Peppa Pig” – do try to overcome that over simplistic and extremely binary representation of masculinity and femininity however they still use more of the same repetitive portrayals, especially when it comes to the domestic/public dichotomy and by extension – the breadwinner/caregiver roles which are closely linked to the characters’ gender.

## **GENDER IDENTITY AND SOCIALIZATION**

Without a doubt, one of the ways in which children become aware of their own gender identity is within their own family. Not only by hearing what the primary caregiver explains on the subject of gender, but also how they behave, what example are they setting for the child. Is the child a part of a heteronormative family consisting of two parents (male and female) that have a marriage? Or perhaps the child lives in a family with one parent or perhaps with two same sex parents? How are the domestic tasks divided between the parents? What hobbies are they practicing in their free time? Is daddy wearing dresses and mommy fixing cars or is it the other way around?

Thus, on one hand, the family is among the major socializing factors for the developing child brain – both the birth parents and the wider family circle and loved ones. Next, the environment – nursery, kindergarten, school, camps, friendship circle, etc. – plays a role in the formation of perceptions of the world, including gender perceptions. How do teachers, other parents and the child’s peers talk about different genders? Do they remark on the boy who wears a pink t-shirt to school, or the girl whose favorite toy is a fire truck? A third aspect contributing to the formation of the understanding of gender from a very early age can be noted, namely the socio-cultur-

al factor. What I mean here, primarily are the cultural products that young children consume – what picture books they look at, what kind of TV they watch (if they are allowed screen time), what toys they have access to and, last but not least, what type of clothes predominate in their wardrobe. The media provides ‘appropriate’ models for masculine and feminine behavior, which in turn further shapes children’s perception of what it is to be a man/woman in society (Arnold et al., 2015: 4). Thus, by combining the example set by family, environment and the various media and pop culture products consumed, children slowly begin to internalize an understanding of how *it is appropriate* to behave, according to their sex at birth. However, media and pop culture products do not exist on their own. They interact with other important socializing factors such as family, peers, school or even religious institutions (Comstock and Scharrer, 2007: 241). Each of these *socializers* provides children with the kind of information that is considered ‘correct’, i.e. socio-cultural values that are considered ‘successful’ in society if one conforms to the prevailing norms (ibid: 287).

In this respect, George Gerbner’s cultivation theory takes center stage. According to cultivation theory, the messages we receive through media influence our worldview, consequently shaping our attitudes, behavior and values (ibid: 253)<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, access to pop culture and media products among children at an impressionable age, helps them absorb much of the media message without question, and thus no doubt shapes a good deal of their own gender identity. This leads to perceived expectations, as well as a set of “rules” for behavior even peers should follow depending on their gender. Last, but not least, media representation of gender also influences the ability of children to identify and *label* the gender of their peers and/or of the adults around them. Therefore, if the media surrounding children is based on gender stereotypes and prejudices, this will inevitably lead to gender stereotyping and prejudices among the children themselves. According to a study by Schau and Scott (1984), gender prejudices have a negative effect on children. The study indicates that the more sexist the product they have access to is, the better the solidification of prejudice is among them (Hamilton et al., 2006: 764). This rigid understanding of gender could subsequently have an impact on children’s interests, their attitudes towards others, and what goals (professional and personal) they set for themselves. Given that in most books, TV shows and media in general, the predominant characters are male, while the girl characters have fewer scenes, fewer speaking lines and generally less screen time, this could ultimately lead to low self-esteem among girls and unusually high self-esteem among boys (ibid: 758). Hence, media products that reinforce gender stereotypes and prejudice, inevitably perpetuate a heteronormative and patriarchal model of both family and society.

In such a rigid and traditional society, there is no room for people of different sexual orientations or who identify as a gender different than the one assigned at

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<sup>2</sup> Cultivation theory by George Gerbner is described in more detail in Gerbner et al., 2002 [1994].

birth. There's no room for single-parent families or same sex parents; no room for sensitive boys or assertive girls, for female truck drivers or male make-up artists; for career-oriented mothers or fathers judged by the same harsh standards as mothers are... Or so it seems to the majority of children between the ages of 2–5 who have access to such media products and information.

Therefore, the subject of children's TV shows and pop culture products in general carries significant societal importance and relevance, since its target audience is among the most receptive and sensitive of viewers. By analyzing some of the most popular and well-liked children's series, it is possible to trace the extent to which the series incorporates gender stereotypes, as well as how they're constructed.

## **“PEPPA PIG” AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OF GENDER**

At a first glance, it seems that implicit information about gender as a social construct is not easily embedded in a TV episode or a children's book. One of the potential reasons for this may be linked to the fact that characters of “Peppa Pig” are actually animals with anthropomorphic characteristics. Each character represents a different animal species. For example, the main characters driving the plot are a family of pigs; Peppa's best friend is a sheep; some of the other side characters are ponies, rabbits, foxes, dogs, etc.

“Peppa Pig” is a children's TV show where each episode is around 20 minutes long, divided into several chapters representing an aspect of Peppa's (the protagonist) life. The plot focuses mainly on Peppa – a 4-year old female piglet, her family and experiences, the new lessons she learns through the important adults in her life, her school, and her peers. Peppa's family consists of Daddy Pig, Mummy Pig<sup>3</sup>, and her younger brother George, who is about 18 months old, given that he's a toddler with limited vocabulary and ability to verbalize as a whole. The aesthetic of the animation itself is slightly different from mainstream animation at the time, as it's considerably simpler – as if a child had drawn the characters. Perhaps that's why a lot of kids like Peppa so much, they manage to identify with her and understand her. The fact that each episode is divided into separate smaller stories also aids comprehension, as it would be difficult for the very young viewers to follow and make sense of several related events in a span of twenty minutes.

But what is most impressive about the way the characters look, besides the specific way they are drawn and the fact that they are all animals? Although the plot focuses on a girl main character, which already makes “Peppa Pig” an innovative and unique children's series, it uses the same gender stereotypes and prejudices that were mentioned above to convey the unambiguous message of what gender the characters on screen are.

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<sup>3</sup> In Peppa's world “mummy” and “daddy” are used as given names, while the animal species is the family name of the character.

The mothers and grandmothers in the show all wear dresses and have makeup around their eyes, while the grandfathers and fathers are dressed in shirts and pants and have some facial hair – it may be a very slight mustache or a beard like Santa’s, but this mark of masculinity is present among the adult male characters without exception. The voice actors are also unmistakably male or female. Even if a child is too young to visually distinguish the gender of the characters – as they are painted in a fairly similar aesthetic when they are of the same animal species, they would be able to tell which character is Mummy Pig and which is Daddy Pig by voice alone.



Image 1. From left to right: Daddy Pig, Peppa, George, Mummy Pig. Image source: <https://fictionhorizon.com/peppa-pig-characters-names-height-age-birthday/> (last available on 15.11.2022)

There are a few ways the viewer can visually distinguish the male from the female characters in the family of piglets – the mother and daughter are wearing dresses, the father and son are not; Daddy Pig has a beard and glasses, and Mummy Pig wears eyeliner and has long eyelashes. Diving deeper into the characters, the viewer understands that Daddy Pig works in an office and is gone all day. Mummy Pig on the other hand is in charge of shopping, making dinner, and the primary caregiver to their children. There are episodes where she is working from home but often her desire to work is thwarted by some trouble that Peppa and her brother get into. Peppa has been known to love jumping in muddy puddles – not very stereotypical *girl* behavior, but at the same time she loves playing “castle” or pretending to be a ballerina. Her younger brother George, on the other hand, adores dinosaurs; it’s also the only word he can say correctly. He likes jumping in muddy puddles, like his sister, but he doesn’t like “*girly*” things like flowers, ballet, or playing “castle”. In more than one episode, conflict arises between Peppa and her younger brother because she wants to play in a more orderly manner at a castle or perhaps a hospital, while George prefers to play jungle or ball, thus “spoiling” her arrangement. At a first glance the character Peppa surprises with how unhinged she is and for a moment the viewer might think this is a children’s show escaping the patriarchal family model. We see a vibrant,

curious girl who asks questions, isn't afraid to participate in a variety of games or sports, jumps in muddy puddles and is generally very active and assertive. In the "Peppa Pig" show, she too, like the typical male characters we're used to seeing, *acts*. She's not static, passive, or presented as overly emotional. On the contrary, she experiences a range of emotions that could not be defined as inherent to one gender or the other, but rather are meant to show the viewer (even the youngest ones) a different palette of human emotions and provide ideas on how they could be managed. However, a deeper look into Peppa's family environment, as well as that of her peers, reveals that such an interpretation is overly optimistic.

## THE BINARY FAMILY ENVIRONMENT IN THE "PEPPA PIG" TV SHOW

Indeed, comparing Peppa Pig to 20<sup>th</sup> century Disney classics such as "Cinderella" or "Snow White", Peppa's character has agency. She is definitely not a voiceless and passive victim waiting for her prince or any other male character to save her or help her when she's in trouble.

Yet, this detachment and perceived liberation from gender stereotypes proves to be illusory since Peppa's parents represent the nuclear heteronormative family down to the smallest detail. The image of the working dad who struggles with the simplest of domestic chores and has to be "rescued" by his wife is an everyday occurrence in-show universe. On the other hand, Mummy Pig is mainly responsible for raising the children, for dropping them off and picking them up from various activities, classes and birthday parties. Often she has to juggle domestic and work duties simultaneously within the home, while many times the domestic ones take precedence. Although Peppa's brother has quite a few scenes in which he cries and gets upset about various childhood issues<sup>4</sup>, he is also a stereotypical boy. He likes trucks, cars and dinosaurs, and also teases his older sister. Turning to Peppa's peers, we see that this applies to them as well. Susie Sheep, Peppa's best friend, is often her playmate. There are more than a few scenes in which the two play chase, ride bikes or scooters, or learn some new skill. But among their favorite games are pretend plays of castles and princesses, hospitals, shops and the like.

Again, comparing Peppa Pig with some of the older children's classics of the 20th century (especially Disney's, being among the most popular of its time), it has to be said that the female characters there have more freedom and autonomy. Mummy Pig, like the other mothers, is often seen behind the wheel – even in instances when the whole family is driving somewhere, i.e. the father isn't the default driver just because he's a man.

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<sup>4</sup> I should say, however, that there's not one character on the "Peppa Pig" show to ever say to George that he shouldn't cry because he's a boy.



Image 2. Mummy Pig is driving while Daddy Pig is riding next to her, the children are in the back. Image source: [https://peppafanon.fandom.com/wiki/Sow\\_Castle](https://peppafanon.fandom.com/wiki/Sow_Castle) (last available on 15.11.2022).

Yet, both the male and female characters possess a significant amount of some of the binary characteristics listed above. Mummy Pig (similar to the other mothers in the series) has a soft and non-confrontational approach to the children and other family members. On the other hand, we won't see them practicing individual or group sports – that territory is reserved for the “dads”: there are episodes where they play soccer or even run a marathon. Even if Daddy Pig is comically tired and flushed after a relatively short run, the show makes it clear that physical exertion and perseverance is an activity fit only for men.

## THE SINGLE WOMAN VS. THE MARRIED WOMAN

There is one particularly colorful character, Miss Rabbit, who has no family or partner of her own and works several jobs simultaneously. She works as a cashier at the supermarket or zoo, as a nurse, a school bus driver, even as a firefighter.



Image 3. Miss Rabbit in a firefighter uniform takes an emergency call. Source: <https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/the-perplexing-mysteries-of-peppa-pig/> (last available on 15.11.2022).

In almost every episode of “Peppa Pig”, Miss Rabbit does a different job that requires additional and specific training. In Peppa’s universe, Miss Rabbit is the sister of Mummy Rabbit, a mother of four who raises them at home while her husband, Daddy Rabbit, goes to work. In fact, Miss Rabbit is the only character who is so busy with various work arrangements. The contrast between her and the other female characters, who are also mothers, is significant. This is most evident when comparing her with her sister Mummy Rabbit, who, although is the primary caregiver of four children, does not have to try to juggle work commitments with domestic ones. Miss Rabbit, on the other hand, juggles multiple responsibilities, and it remains a mystery in the show how she manages to do so without overworking herself or having to be in multiple places at once. There’s an episode in season 3 – “Miss Rabbit’s Day Off” where she has a broken leg and cannot perform all of her duties. All of Peppa’s town tries to come to her rescue and cover her workload, but the other residents are unable to effectively handle Miss Rabbit’s tasks while she is gone. In Season 4, however, the Queen rewards Miss Rabbit for her contribution to the industry. However, due to her many commitments, she simply cannot find the time to visit the Queen and receive her award. Therefore, the Queen declares this day a Bank Holiday so that Miss Rabbit can be free from all her work commitments and accept her well-deserved award.

As she juggles many different roles, all of great importance to the town or the children (or both), roles such as doctor, vet, teacher, are filled. The doctor is Doctor Brown Bear (a male character), Daddy Pig is an engineer, the teacher is Madame Gazelle – who is not a mother and has no family, and the veterinarian is Miss Hamster, who is also not a mother. Professions that require higher education are reserved for either fathers or women who are not mothers and are therefore “free” to excel at their careers. Such an interpretation in some ways calls into question how happy Miss Rabbit feels with having to juggle the many responsibilities of a working class person without being able to find a moment of rest and relaxation. A more negative interpretation of her character might lead to the conclusion that if a woman has no family and is not highly educated, a lifetime of low-skilled work is in tow for her, as well as combining several jobs to make ends meet in light of the cost of living nowadays. A message that can hardly be described as progressive or feminist. In this sense, there’s a particularly stark contrast with characters such as Mummy Pig and Mummy Rabbit, who live comfortable lives and care for their family while being financially provided for by their working husbands.

Hence, this is how, without unnecessary pretense to be an educational show, with each episode “Peppa Pig” *de facto* shows the youngest viewers the following “truths”:

- it’s normal for a family to consist of Mom and Dad, with Mom being unmistakably female with makeup and an easily recognizable female voice, and Dad being unmistakably male – working, providing for the family financially, with a beard/mustache and an easily recognizable male voice;
- in order to be dedicated to a career, one must either be a man or have no family of her own;

- mothers are responsible for preparing food, helping children with their homework and their activities; their work is inside the home;
- fathers are “in charge” of games and sports;
- boys are mostly interested in cars and dinosaurs; they do not like playing with dolls or flowers;
- girls have more freedom to indulge in “boyish” activities where there is physical activity, but they like taking care of others, playing with dolls and being princesses.

The apparent simplicity of the characters, in particular their appearance – guided by the idea that they should look as if a child had drawn them for ease of identification – probably appears to be underpinned by a host of messages that reinforce the patriarchal paradigm mentioned at the beginning of the text. The women are presented as deeply connected to the home and their children, while the men are facing ‘outward’ – concerned with the providing for the family. The characters’ gender is represented as binary and easily identifiable while at the same time reinforcing the gender stereotypes and prejudices that were mentioned above.

## AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

Yet, there seems to be light at the end of this gender deterministic tunnel. In one of the episodes of “Peppa Pig ” from Season 7, called “Families,” a family consisting of two mother polar bears and their child appear in town. Both mothers are drawn in the typical style of the female characters in the series, with makeup around their eyes and wearing dresses. It is clear that both are parents, even though they are of the same sex. In the words of their child herself, Penny Polar Bear, one mother goes to work and the other makes spaghetti at home. This episode marks the first appearance of same sex marriage representation in the history of “Peppa Pig”.

Alas, this episode has not been broadcast in Bulgaria for the time being, and is only available to its native UK audience. Its original air date is 6.09.2022.



Image 4. Penny Polar Bear is having lunch with her two mothers. Image source: <https://www.today.com/parents/parents/peppa-pig-introduces-sex-couple-rcna46765> (last available on 15.11.2022).

This type of family representation is definitely an innovation in popular children's series, to which "Peppa Pig" belongs. What is especially interesting in this case is that this particular series has long been criticized for its lack of diversity among the characters' families and for its repeated reinforcement of the patriarchal family model. Penny Polar Bear and her two mothers appear in the wake of such continued criticism and primarily due to a petition launched in 2019, aiming to make room in Peppa's world for more diverse families such as same sex parents. The petition's reasoning is that "children watching Peppa Pig are at an impressionable age, and by excluding same-sex families, we teach them that only single-parent families, or families with two parents of different genders, are normal. This means that children with same-sex parents would feel alienated from Peppa and that other children are more likely to bully them due to their ignorance."<sup>5</sup> Concluding that this is a series that not only provides entertainment and recreation, but also inevitably "educates" children, the petition is still active today and anyone who wishes can support it. An important clarification is that it is written in English, apparently targeting the show's audience in its home country, the UK. Of course, anyone in the world can sign and support it, but it is unclear how much those votes would affect the airing of this episode of "Peppa Pig" in other countries. The "Families" episode, as noted above, was not broadcast in Bulgaria. Only seasons 3 and 4 of "Peppa Pig" are available on the streaming platform HBO Max, making a significant number of the show's more recent (and in some ways more progressive) episodes unavailable to Bulgarian audiences. This is yet another case of audiences showing that their voice matters and that they have the ability and power to influence the film industry if they are persistent and demanding enough.

In conclusion, it is definitely evident that one of the most beloved and famous children's characters, Peppa, reinforces the status quo and the heteronormative model. Almost all families represented in *Peppa* (minus two) are a stereotypical representation of the patriarchal nuclear family. In the show one parent, usually the mother, stays home or works from home and/or part time; she is the primary caregiver to the children and takes on the majority of domestic housework and chores while the other parent, in most cases – the father is the primary breadwinner, hence he works outside the home and is comically incompetent when it comes to various household tasks and chores. And although the fathers in *Peppa* are among the few pop culture male characters (re)presented in a more domestic and even gentler light, they still do not perform as much of the child rearing responsibilities as their female partners. In addition, even though the show did provide an example of same sex parents in the face of Penny Polar Bear's family, the two mothers also followed the already established binary model of one parent staying at home and being re-

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<sup>5</sup> Link towards the petition: <https://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/520/622/303/> (last available on 14.10.2022).

sponsible for the majority of domestic tasks and childrearing, while the other works in a highly professionalized field and is the primary breadwinner of the family.

The highly gendered roles of the different mother and father figures on *Peppa* are coded in an audio-visual kind of way, as well as social one. Despite the characters being animated and depicted in a very particular aesthetic (to mimic a children's drawing), the little viewers have no problem discerning the gender of the characters due to the visible makeup the female animals wear along with the female-coded clothes ie dresses, they're depicted in. The voices of the characters are also easy for a preschooler to attribute to either a male or a female characters. Plus, most of the moms on the show are housewives while most of the daddies are breadwinners and have more screen time away from the children and the family while the mommies are depicted in almost all cases in a domestic and/or familial atmosphere.

However, the creators of the show indicate that they're willing to learn and make the changes necessary to ensure that Peppa and the lessons she teaches children remain relevant to her audience and that the show is inclusive to more and more types of people and families. Even if the only family consisting of same sex parents follows the same repetitive and well-known binary model, it is a step in the right direction and indicative of the fact that audiences can (and perhaps should) influence the cultural product they're "consuming". I can only hope that Penny Polar Bear will return often to Peppa's world to normalize same sex parenting for all. She may be just one character who appears relatively late in the show's history, but she's a small step forward, representing and thus popularizing less common and even marginalized family models.

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