

# From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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# Disney XD

## Boyhood and the Racial Politics of Market Segmentation

**Christopher Chávez**

You may already have noticed that girls are quite different from you. By this, we do not mean the physical differences, more the fact that they remain unimpressed by your mastery of a game involving wizards, or your understanding of Morse code. Some will be impressed, of course, but as a general rule, girls do not get quite as excited by the use of urine as a secret ink as boys do.

—*The Dangerous Book for Boys* (2007)

Within popular imagination, there exist many normative assumptions about what constitutes the intrinsic nature of boyhood. On one hand, boys are said to be analytical: good at science, math, and engineering. Yet boys are also said to be creative beings, immersing themselves in the world of fantasy and science fiction. They are predisposed to sports, adventure, and discovery, but are also believed to be less mature than girls, engaging in gross humor and pranks. Boys, it is said, are simply different beings from girls.

Such claims, of course, connect to dominant narratives about gender differences, but they are also based on the presumption that there is indeed a universal boyhood experience, regardless of one's class, ethnicity, religious background, and so forth. It is no surprise, then, that when the Walt Disney Company launched Disney XD in 2009, they purported to have created a media destination that would appeal to all boys. In their annual report to investors (Walt Disney Company 2009) the year the channel launched, the company described the network this way: "Disney XD has a mix of live-action and animated programming for kids ages 6–14, targeting boys and their quest for discovery, accomplishment, sports, adventure and humor." Rich Ross, president of Disney Channels Worldwide, put it more simply: Disney wanted to "create a destination for boys" (Chimielewski 2008). This begs the question: Whose boyhood is Disney capturing? For that matter, how does this construction of boyhood turn on characters, themes, and activities that these boys are presumed to like?

In this chapter I argue that Disney's decision to launch a boy-centric cable channel reflects the overall logic by which the children's television marketplace has begun to organize itself. Here it is important to think of children's television as a maturing market in which a growing number of channels are competing for more narrow slices of the children's audience. Disney's decision to target children based on gender while simultaneously obscuring differences in that boyhood experience—including children's racial identities—provides significant insights into which kinds of cultural differences television industries deem appropriate to acknowledge in children and which they do not.

## **CHILDREN'S TELEVISION AS A MATURING MARKETPLACE**

Like the audience itself, childhood may be considered a construct that reflects the social, cultural, and economic conditions of its time (Ariès 1962; Mintz 2004). However, over the course of the twentieth century, this stage in the lifecycle began to take on new economic exchange values, what Cook (2004) calls the "commodification of childhood." During this time, marketers routinely began to appeal directly to children as individual subjects with consumer desire and, as early as 1917, dedicated media began to emerge targeting children as a matter of business strategy.

The advent of television increased marketers' capacity to reach children on a mass scale. Early on, television networks developed programming designed for children, whether in the form of family-oriented programs or dedicated programming blocks on weekend mornings. However, dedicated networks began to emerge shortly after the advent of cable. In 1977, Nickelodeon launched the first-ever dedicated children television's network and was later acquired by the global media giant Viacom. Disney entered the market shortly after, launching The Disney Channel in 1983. At first, the network utilized its massive catalog of content, but later developed programs exclusively intended for its cable properties. Time Warner's Cartoon Network launched in 1992 too, focusing on animated programming.

Given the limited number of broadcast television channels, early children's television was a shared space, designed to appeal to children in general. Programs were designed to reach an idealized, prototypical audience, what Sammond (2005) describes as "the generic child." According to Sammond, while that "generic child" presupposed a set of universal qualities, it was a construction based firmly in white, middle-class sensibilities, thus erasing significant social differences. In recent years, however, the proliferation of channels in the post-network era has complicated the practice of targeting a single, generic child. With the advent of new technologies, including cable and satellite television as well as streaming services, the amount of dedicated children's programming has increased, compelling media companies to pursue smaller niche markets.

This, in turn, has motivated media companies to engage more fully in the practice of audience segmentation, or dividing the overall market into subsets based on the perception of shared characteristics such as age, gender, income, geographical area, and so forth. While audience segmentation is often described in scientific terms, Sender (2005) argues that the decision to target a particular audience reflects both economic and cultural considerations. Choices about what programs are considered to be relevant

to the targeted consumer, who gets to be included in the target audience, and how resources will be allocated, all reflect preexisting ideological biases about viewers, their identities, and their values. In his discussion of video games, Jenkins (1998) argued that video-game producers reified gender-specific play strategies, essentially adopting the preconceptions of an earlier generation of cultural producers. Children's literature too began as undifferentiated according to gender, but soon evolved to clearly distinguish between "boys' culture" and "girls' culture," in ways that associated boys with adventure, daring, exploration, while relegating girls to the familiar and the domestic (Segal 1986). In similar ways, children's television began as a shared space with the potential for crossover experiences of childhood. However, the separation of male and females into distinct audiences, further encouraged the gender-specific viewing strategies that defined the enterprise of Disney XD.

## GENDERING CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

Disney has long been criticized for its stark gender politics, but the formation of a dedicated boys' network institutionalizes its presumption of essential distinctions between boys and girls. By pursuing this strategy, Disney XD follows in the tradition of other kinds of cable networks, such as Spike TV for men and Lifetime for women that have deployed gender differences as a means of market differentiation. The fact that Disney can easily pivot in this direction suggests that gender segmentation has become an equally acceptable strategy in children's television.

At face value, the launch of a boys' network is driven by economic motives. Disney XD competes directly with other children's television channels in an increasingly crowded marketplace. While independent players such as Sprout and Qubo have made inroads, much of the growth has come from dominant players that launch additional channel services to expand their product portfolios. A byproduct of this growth has been to further segment the marketplace based on gender. For example, Viacom's Nickelodeon, notable for developing programs that featured strong female leads (Banet-Weiser 2007), launched NickToons in an effort to capture an audience of boys with exclusively animated programming.

In the same way, the launch of Disney XD responds to Disney's prior failure to win over boys in this increasingly gender-specific marketplace. When The Disney Channel first launched in 1983, the vision was to develop programming that would build on Disney's overall success with the generic child. However, due to its reliance on the various Disney "princess" franchises as well as the later success of such properties as *Hannah Montana* and *High School Musical*, the network had skewed decidedly female. As a result, prospective advertisers for video games and action figures did not see Disney Channel as a viable option for marketing products that were themselves gendered. Greg Kahn, senior vice president of strategic insights for media buying firm Optimedia International USA Inc., put it this way:

You're fighting the brand perception, the very, very strong brand equity that's been in the marketplace for many, many years. . . . It would almost require a completely

separate effort to reach tween boys, with a completely different name somehow associated with the Disney property, to reach these tween males.

(Chimielewski 2008)

And that's exactly what Disney did. They took an existing asset, DisneyToons, and recreated it from the ground up. In practice, this launch of an all boys' network involved the ideological to clearly demarcate gender differences and preferences. This kind of "borderwork" (Thorne 1993) is made manifest in the very practical decisions concerning programming and branding. To establish itself as a "boys network," XD's branding includes all the appropriate signifiers of boyhood. The name XD, short for "Extreme Digital," evokes the notion of extreme sports as well as a technological mastery. Furthermore, the XD is stylized with heavy, block letters, which helps to offset the softer, rounded nature of the traditional Disney logo. Finally, the brand's color palette includes black, silver, and neon green, all colors that fall safely within normative standards of masculinity.

While establishing the visual style for the network was a relatively easy task, finding a programming mix that would appeal to their target audience has been an evolving process. Initially, Disney's goal was to move beyond animation and develop programming that would represent a more complex perspective on boyhood. As Disney Channels Worldwide President Rich Ross (Rose 2009) described the new platform's audience appeal:

While they liked animation, they were looking for more. They were looking for live-action series, which exist in a couple of places, but not in plentiful amounts. They wanted them to be in a range of comedies and dramas, which is what we're producing. They loved movies, so the network is going to have a movie block. Sports are very important to them, and we're able to work out a relationship inside of our company with our brother network ESPN.

During an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Ross put it differently:

They want a place, essentially a headquarters for them where their favorite content exists, that has this broad array of shapes and sizes and tenors and complexities, and treats them with the respect that Disney Channel treats all kids.

(Chimielewski 2008)

Ross' comments suggest that the original vision for the network was to present a version of boyhood that would be more inclusive and multifaceted. The execution of this vision, however, was much more narrow. Early XD programming was essentially modeled on the basic format of its sister network Disney Channel, only reimagined for boys. For example, the channel launched with *Aaron Stone*, a live-action series about Charlie Landers, a teenager who leads a double life as a government agent. This storyline is similar to *Hannah Montana*, a show about Miley Stewart, precocious teenager who also leads a double life as Hannah Montana, a famous pop star. Similarly, following

Disney Channel's success with original films, Disney XD launched *Skyrunners*, a made-for-cable film about a boy who acquires supernatural powers after encountering an alien life form.

While Disney XD found additional success with animated programs such as *Phineas and Ferb*, the channel initially failed to attract a loyal following. In response, Disney executives made two key adjustments. First, instead of targeting tweens, Disney narrowed their target to younger boys ages six to eight. Second, they embraced animation, reversing their original programming strategy of providing more live-action and drama. XD's change in programming strategy coincided with two major purchases on behalf of the company. In 2009, the company purchased comic book giant Marvel for \$4.2 billion and in 2012, they purchased *Star Wars* for \$4 billion. Today, both assets account for a majority of Disney XD's current programming. Marvel delivers *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Ultimate Spiderman*, and *Marvel Avengers Assemble* while the *Star Wars* franchise delivers *Star Wars Rebels*, *LEGO Star Wars*, and *The Freemaker Adventures*.

These properties have also helped Disney cultivate business partnerships with desired advertisers—especially in the realm of digital games. With *LEGO*, Disney has produced *LEGO Star Wars*, which is both a television and video game series set in the *Star Wars* universe, but in which the main characters are animated in the form of the distinct minifigures from the *LEGO* toy sets. Similarly, Disney has cultivated a partnership with Electronic Arts. In 2009, the video game publisher boosted its advertising spending with Disney by close to 30% (Norman 2009) and in 2013, it signed an exclusive ten-year deal with Disney to design its own games based on the *Star Wars* universe (Cai and Fritz 2013). In 2015, Disney XD produced *Clash of Karts: Mario Kart 8*, in collaboration with Nintendo, a show that featured a battle between four two-person teams who were coached by YouTube stars. Nintendo and Disney XD also teamed up for a one-hour special based on the Nintendo World Championships 2015. This focus on video games defines much of Disney XD's programming, representing the significance of digital play to contemporary constructions of boyhood (Jenkins 1998) compared to previous iterations based in athletic play. In their original positioning of the network, Disney executives had signaled an interest in making greater use of ESPN, the company's lucrative cable asset, but this strategy has never fully been realized. During its lifetime, XD has only developed a handful of programs with ESPN including *Sports Center Kids* (2009), *Disney XD ESPN Sports Science* (2016), and *Becoming* (2016), produced by NBA star LeBron James.

## THE COLORBLIND BOY

While Disney has actively segmented the children's audience based on gender, the network has on the other hand avoided segmentation based on racial difference. Many other cable channels, including ASPIRE, BET, El Rey, and MTV Tr3s all utilize race and ethnicity as their primary form of segmentation; meanwhile Disney-owned Freeform builds explicitly multiculturalist themes into its attempts to target Millennial cable viewers. By contrast, Disney XD adopts a colorblind approach, in which children are presumed to operate in a world in which racial difference simply does not exist.

Disney's strategy of showcasing video game culture, for example, is often embodied in the figure of the white gamer, a recurring trope within XD's programming. Disney XD launched with *Aaron Stone*, a series featuring a white protagonist who assumes the role of his online avatar. Yet in her analysis of The Disney Channel, Turner (2014) found that even nonwhite characters are often written in ways in which their race and racialized experiences are negligible. In a similar way, Disney XD *The Gamer's Guide to Pretty Much Everything* depicts a boyhood that while not always white is nevertheless colorblind. In the role of Conner, who is attempting to balance life as a normal teenager with that of a professional video game player, lead actor Cameron Boyce is African American but phenotypically white. His casting in this role illustrates Warner's (2015) point that, in a colorblind world, actors who have the capacity operate in multiple cultural registers are at an advantage because they can invoke race without isolating a white, mainstream audience. In the show, Boyce's character sits comfortably within white, middle class America, but Disney has also utilized Boyce's blackness in a 2016 public service announcement celebrating Black History Month, in which he acknowledged his grandmother's role in school integration. Disney's PSA is effective at placing racial discrimination comfortably in the past, however. Boyce's role as an exemplar of progressive colorblindness is remarkable because, in the present, gaming has often become a racially charged cultural space (Gray 2012).

Therein lies the problem with a colorblind approach on television. It depicts race without the racial politics. This dynamic can also be seen in *Lab Rats*, a live-action series about a family that includes three bionic teenagers. The show's protagonist is Leo Dooley, an African American boy whose mother Tasha has recently married the wealthy, high-tech genius Donald Davenport, who is white. Unbeknownst to Leo and Tasha, Donald has been secretly training three bionic siblings: Adam, Bree, and Chase. Once Leo discovers the trio, they become the siblings he never had and he helps them to integrate into the social world of high school. The fact that Tasha, a black woman, is mother to three visibly white teenagers, goes undiscussed in the series. Furthermore, outsider status belongs neither to Leo and Tasha, but rather to Adam, Bree, and Chase, who have difficulty with social life because of their bionic abilities.

A heavy reliance on animated programming only exacerbates this issue. Unlike The Disney Channel, in which animated girls adhere to a strict body type (small and thin with large, wide-set eyes, high foreheads and small, button noses), boys' bodies on XD can assume many more forms. In the *Star Wars* and Marvel franchises male bodies tend to be hypermasculine with well-defined musculature, but in other instances like *Phineas and Ferb*, boys' bodies assume more geometric shapes. Animation may also abstract bodies altogether. *Pickle and Peanut*, is an animated series about two friends and their misadventures, in which case boys are literally embodied as a peanut and a pickle. Disney's heavy rotation of Marvel and *Star Wars* properties amplifies these issues by presenting worlds in which typical human signifiers of race and ethnicity such as surname, skin color, and linguistic style are less recognizable, and identities are hidden behind masks, cowls, and full-bodied costumes. In science fiction, characters may take on both human and non-human forms. Phenotypically, they can be green, red, or blue.



Despite efforts to ignore race, however, racial politics inevitably manifest themselves. At its worst, Disney XD animated characters reify stereotypical treatments of race. This can be found in the character of Soos (short for Jesús), a buffoonish handyman on the network's widely popular *Gravity Falls*, or in the character of Baljeet Tjinder on *Phineas and Ferb*, a side character who speaks English with a vague South Asian accent and perpetuates the stereotype of the intellectually gifted but socially awkward Asian. In most cases, however, race and ethnicity are simply rendered invisible. Most of Disney XD programming is a sort of post-racial fantasy, in which nonwhite characters are included, but unencumbered by their outsider status, including class and linguistic differences. In the animated show, *Star vs. Forces of Evil*, for example, the Princess Star Butterfly arrives in our universe and befriends Marco Diaz. While Marco's surname designates him as Spanish or Latino, there are no other signifiers of race. Voiced by Anglo actor Adam MacArthur, Diaz speaks English with no trace of a Latino accent. Race is both present and obscured through these creative practices.

## FRAGMENTING THE "GENERIC CHILD"

As television has become more and more fragmented, cable channels have explored infinite ways of categorizing the audience, including segments based on gender (Oxygen), race (Black Entertainment Television), linguistic preference (Univision), Lifestyle (Food Network), and so forth. When it comes to children's television, however, age and gender have become the dominant forms of segmentation while segmentation based on children's race and ethnicity has been conspicuously absent. The conspicuous absence of racial acknowledgement may be grounded in what Mintz (2004) calls a romantic view of childhood, in which it is believed that children must be shielded from the realities of adult life, including sexuality, and, of course, racial politics. However, the categorization of the children's television market only serves to reify gender and racial hierarchies, only in different ways. Both strategies ensure the privileged status of a heteronormative, white boyhood.

While these practices are not enacted by Disney alone, the network does seem particularly conservative relative to other children's networks. For example, Banet-Weiser's (2007) research on Nickelodeon suggests that, while problematic in its own ways, the network has found some success creating a shared space for both boys and girls. Furthermore, Nickelodeon is more apt to acknowledge the racial identities of children. What truly makes Disney unique from its competitors, however, is the scale in which it can enact ideologies around race and gender. Disney's business is not limited to television, but extends to radio and film, as well as a range of auxiliary products such as video games, children's apparel, toys, and theme parks. In short, Disney is one of the most prolific producers of childhood culture and has the unique capacity to shape childhood itself in profound ways.

Compelled by the logic of capitalism, Disney will continue to expand its television portfolio. In the process, it has begun to abandon historical strategies for pursuing the generic child while beginning a new process of cultivating different kinds of children (markets) with different viewing strategies. Fragmenting the generic child

into more divisible segments, however, does not necessarily equate to a more nuanced understanding of the childhood experience. Market segmentation is still based on the assumption of order and uniformity and does not allow for diverse, complex range of lived experience.

By contrast, we know that identities intersect in meaningful ways. We know, for example, that black boys are stigmatized in a different way than black girls, and experience oppression unknown to white boys. Yet Disney's stubborn insistence on representing children of color without any of the politics surrounding their bodies can seem drastically out of touch with the actual lives that many boys live. After all, the same year that *Lab Rats* debuted with Leo living an upscale existence with a white father, Trayvon Martin was killed, sparking a sobering, nationwide discussion regarding the way in which society deals with black boys. Disney XD does not account for this reality, but in order for the channel to achieve its mandate of delivering younger boys to advertisers, the construction of boyhood must not be complicated with the messy, racialized realities of everyday life.

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