Tough Guys and Trucks:
Early Adolescents' Critical Analysis of Masculinity in a TV Commercial

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Media literacy education (MLE) can advance the capacity to critique gender stereotypes in the media. Yet there is little, if any, existing MLE research pertaining to media and masculinities, in particular. In this study, 54 sixth-grade students (11- and 12-year-olds) participated in an in-school MLE program on gender and media and responded in writing twice to an open-ended prompt that invited their observations of and opinions about a truck commercial. Emerging themes illuminate students' interpretations of depictions of masculinities, lack of women, and formal features used in the commercial. Comparisons suggest that students generally expressed a deeper analysis and stronger critique of the commercial after MLE participation compared with before. Given heightened attention to social cues about gender among adolescents as well as the presence of narrow representations of masculinity in some media texts, the ability of MLE to foster critical analysis on this topic is socially significant.

Keywords: media literacy, media education, gender, masculinity, commercial content, advertising

Adolescents construct their identities by negotiating between the self and the world around them, with the latter changing with political, economic, and social forces (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). The media constitute a primary social institution and play a role in adolescents' socialization, providing cues about

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gender roles and norms and other aspects of social group formation (Iyer & Luke, 2011). Previous research has found that stereotypes or other narrow depictions can be embedded in media representations, which can influence adolescents' gender-related thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors (Ward & Aubrey, 2017).

Media literacy education (MLE) has been used variously as a way to support and understand the ways in which young people make meaning from media and/or as an intervention to reduce the likelihood of undesirable media effects (Scharrer & Zhou, forthcoming). Previous research has found that MLE can help young people identify gender stereotypes in media and can inspire or increase critical attitudes about such depictions (Berman & White, 2013; Iyer & Luke, 2011; Liao, Chang, Lee, & Tsai, 2020; Puchner, Markowitz, & Hedley, 2015; Sekarasih, McDermott, O'Malley, Olson, & Scharrer 2016; Walsh, Sekarasih, & Scharrer, 2014). Yet, there is very little, if any, previous research on MLE and gender that focuses specifically on the ways in which early adolescents understand depictions of men and masculinities.

In the current study, the results from a sample of 11- and 12-year-olds participating in an in-school MLE program on the topic of media and gender are analyzed to study the students' interpretations of a truck commercial featuring only men. Written responses to the commercial were collected before and after the students participated in the MLE, and the qualitative analysis of those responses explores whether students became more proficient at decoding the text and/or applying concepts and techniques learned in the program after participation. Implications for early adolescents' understandings of media, masculinities, and gender are discussed, especially in the context of efforts to help students interrogate media representation.

Literature Review

Learning and Performing Masculinity

Theorists of gender performance argue that it is through what one does in interactions with others that masculinities or femininities are enacted (Butler, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Dominant cultural ideals about gender are dynamic and yet are frequently used to maintain an unequal social and political order (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1987). As dominant cultural ideals are enacted or resisted in gender performance, individuals may internalize gender stereotypes and narrow or restrictive thoughts or beliefs associated with gender (Bussey, 2011).

Gender identities intersect with other aspects of identity and are shaped through dynamic negotiations between the self and the social world (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). The gender identity of adolescents can form outside the male-female binary (Diamond, 2020), yet gender stereotypes may persist in adolescents' conceptions of themselves and others (Bussey, 2011; Jackson, Bussey, & Myers, 2021). Youth may feel pressure from peers, parents and caregivers, and/or the self to conform to or to avoid gender-typed behavior (Cook, Nielson, Martin, & DeLay, 2019).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to socially constructed attributes assigned to those Connell (1995) referred to as "real men," setting such men apart from not only women but also other men who do not fit the description. Hegemonic masculinity is a dynamic phenomenon shaped by social constructs of an "ideal," constructed through interpersonal exchange, interactions with media, and

participation in capitalist structures (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Psychologists have put forward operationalizations of hegemonic or "traditional" masculine attributes, including negative attitudes toward femininity and toward emotional expression that could be considered weak; physical domination in the form of muscular bodies, displays of aggression, and sexual drive; self-reliance; and heteronormativity (Levant, Hall, & Rankin, 2013).

Adolescents are likely to observe and consider dominant expressions of masculinity in their negotiations of their self-concepts and behaviors. For example, within a sample of Australian 12- to 14-year-olds, Jackson and colleagues (2021) found that those identifying as male reported feeling pressure from peers to avoid stereotypically gender nonconforming behaviors as well as pressure from parents and themselves to engage in stereotypically "masculine behaviors." Those identifying as female reported feeling pressure from the self to perform stereotypically gender nonconforming behaviors.

Media and Masculinities

Through the framing of characters and narratives, media are one source of cultural information that provide individuals with cues about ways to consider and perform gender (Ward & Aubrey, 2017). Research suggests that gender stereotypes persist in media content targeted toward children and teens. Götz (2008) found that in children's television, male characters were often presented as tough lone protagonists, whereas female characters were shown to be more dependent on others and concerned with romance. Compared with female characters, male characters were more likely to be depicted as aggressive and less likely to be depicted as polite, romantic, and supportive in an additional study of children's television (Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman, 2002). Kirsch and Murnen (2015) found evidence of male characters valuing female characters for their appearance and/or objectifying them in one third of the character interactions coded within seven TV programs popular with children. On network primetime television, Sink and Mastro (2017) found that male characters were more verbally and physically aggressive as well as less likeable and family oriented than female characters.

Researchers have also documented the ways in which representations that deviate from hegemonic masculinity can reconstruct gendered scripts. In *Two and a Half Men* (Lorre & Aronsohn, 2003–2015), for instance, Hatfield (2010) observed that the nonhegemonic performance of masculinity associated with the character Alan often led to mocking and subordination by other characters. Myers (2012) analyzed four television series and found that the programs routinely highlighted nonhegemonic male characters who were sensitive, nonathletic, and "effeminate," and yet often "were not heroic but clowns, serving as foils for hegemonic masculinity" (p. 140).

Commercials are another potential source of narrow gender representations. Merskin (2008) studied commercials in cartoon programming and found that girls were more likely than boys to be shown performing domestic tasks. Commercials aired during prime time and general audience programming in Saudi Arabia and England (Nassif & Gunter, 2008) and in the United States (Scharrer, Kim, Lin, & Liu, 2006) similarly found that men appeared less frequently in domestic roles compared with women. Lewin-Jones and Mitra (2009) studied commercials in children's television in the United Kingdom and found that those targeted to boys had more physical activity and more aggressive words than those targeted to girls. They

also found differences in formal features, with slightly faster-paced cuts and more prominent foreground music in commercials targeted to boys. Within a sample of prime-time commercials, Fowler and Thomas (2015) found that 31% of all male characters appeared in a domestic setting, 26% were depicted in a paternal role, and 86% were coded as having strong and lean bodies.

Characters reflecting attributes of hegemonic masculinity tend to be visible in advertising targeting the male market. Vokey, Tefft, and Tysiaczny (2013) analyzed eight U.S. magazines targeting different ages of male readers and revealed that two "hypermasculine" characteristics were particularly present: danger as exciting and toughness as emotional self-control. In a similar vein, Smith (2005) found that the campaign of a top-selling brand of bourbon targeting the male market reinforced "traditional" masculinity. Embedded hegemonic and/or hypermasculine ideals in male-targeted advertisements reflect what Alexander (2003) termed "branded masculinity" (p. 550), in which men demonstrate masculinity by consuming the "right" products.

Such gendered media depictions appear to make a difference for young people. Interviews with children showed widespread acceptance of differences between boys and girls depicted in commercials, reflected in children's comments that boys tend to like certain activities or actions, like sports, fantasy, or aggression, compared with what girls like, such as dolls, the color pink, and princesses (Lewin-Jones & Mitra, 2009). In an experiment, Pike and Jennings (2005) found that the gender of the model used in toy commercials influenced children's beliefs of who should play with the toy. Among 13- to 18-year-olds, Scharrer and Warren (2021) found heavy users of television, video games, and YouTube outscored lighter users on endorsement of views of masculinity that favor emotional detachment, dominance, toughness, and/or avoidance of femininity. Yet, there is also an indication that the young person's own gender identity may shape responses to or the appeal of gender stereotypical media. For instance, Zimmerman (2017) found that boys were more likely to like commercials targeted toward boys than girls were to like commercials targeted toward girls and were also more likely to classify commercials in a gender-typed manner.

Media Literacy and Gender

MLE can help young people understand the role that media plays in their lives and increase skills in interacting with media using a critical analytical lens. Media literacy has been defined as the "ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create and act on media in all of its forms" (National Association for Media Literacy Education [NAMLE], 2009). Buckingham (2003) suggests that MLE should advance the ability to understand and analyze media languages, representation, industries, and audiences. Media literacy can include developing a sense of the social responsibility of media creators, judgments about media texts and processes, and other ethical considerations (Livingstone, 2004).

In the early 1990s in the United States, a group of scholars and practitioners identified the main principles of media literacy as including: Media messages are socially constructed and can construct reality, different audiences can have different interpretations of media messages, and media messages embed or reflect certain values (Aufderheide, 1993). Based on these principles, NAMLE (2021a) suggested a set of questions that can be used to guide students when examining media: "Who made this? Why was it made?

What is missing from the message? How might different people interpret this message? Who benefits from this message? Who might be harmed by this message?"

Advertising literacy is an important aspect of media literacy, seeking to foster the capacity to approach commercial content with a critical lens (Austin, Austin, French, & Cohen, 2018). Despite declines in the time that young people devote to broadcast or cable television, Nielsen data suggest many are still exposed to such programming in which commercials are embedded (Harris & Kalnova, 2018). Together with rising exposure to ads on/in YouTube and other Internet content (Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen, & Boyland, 2019), there is a need to help young people apply media literacy skills to commercial content in today's media landscape.

MLE about gender stereotypes can help adolescents develop and/or express critical standpoints on gender inequalities, identities, and relations (Iyer & Luke, 2011). Walsh and colleagues (2014) used a qualitative approach to study the responses of a sample of MLE-participating sixth graders to a prompt in which they were asked to identify stereotypes in the media they consumed across a one-week period. Most readily identified stereotypical roles and behaviors of characters appearing in TV programs, video games, and films, and a few added their own judgment, evaluation, or objection to such content. Sekarasih and colleagues (2016) found similarly that, when prompted for a MLE homework assignment, sixth graders identified roles exhibited by media characters that either conformed with or went against stereotype and some expressed concern about the potential effects of gender stereotypes in the media. Using a quasi-experimental design, Liao and colleagues (2020) found that participating in an MLE program was associated with a change in gender role attitudes both immediately and in a posttest after one month among Taiwanese ninth grade students. In Berman and White's (2013) research with a group of Australian eighth graders, the students took an online media literacy lesson on the topic of gender stereotypes pertaining to beauty depictions in advertising. Mixed methods data showed that they became more confident in their ability to identify the creative techniques used in media production to construct gender stereotypes and better able to understand the potential consequences of such media depictions.

Yet, other studies show that young students' responses to MLE about gender representations can be varied in nature. In a study on gender stereotypes pertaining to occupations in media, Puchner and colleagues (2015) found that seventh grade students who participated in MLE became more likely to identify gender stereotypes represented in media. Yet, many believed that media influences the gender-related attitudes and behavior of others more so than their own. Within a sample of fourth and sixth grade students, Sekarasih, Scharrer, Olson, Onut, and Lanthorn (2019) found that girls but not boys became more likely to agree that advertisements often contain gender stereotypes following participation in MLE. Additional research on media literacy and gender representation among college-aged participants has similarly found stronger outcomes among women than men (Bergstrom, Flynn, & Craig, 2018; Reichert, LaTour, Lambiase, & Adkins, 2007). Finally, in Gladkowski's (2020) study, some students claimed that gender stereotypes in media were merely for entertainment, and thus were not important. However, as they learned more about the topic, they became more vocal about the complex issues at stake in gender representation.

Methods

Sample

The data analyzed in the present study are the result of an ongoing partnership between the first author and the sixth grade teachers at a local public elementary school that serves pre-K through sixth graders in a relatively rural population. The Department of Education website lists the school's population as 84.5% White, 7.8% multiracial non-Hispanic, and 7% Hispanic, and reports that 21.5% of students have been identified as having disabilities, 19.7% as economically disadvantaged, and 2.8% as students whose first language is not English. The teachers involved in the present study provided data that showed that 16% of the sixth graders at the school (11 of 68 students) identified as students of color.

An informed consent letter went to parents and caregivers of every sixth grade student in the school, and students themselves were given an opportunity to provide assent to participate in the MLE and associated research, a protocol approved by the Institutional Review Board. Fifty-four students turned in signed consent forms and assented, a 79% participation rate. Given absences or the occasional decision to decline to fill out worksheets, the number of students who responded to the two writing prompts analyzed in this study varied, as reported in the findings.

The Media Literacy Program

The MLE program was taught across four one-hour visits to the school (reduced from five because of the onset of the COVID crisis) by the authors, all of whom are affiliated with the university nearby the school. The teaching group was divided into pairs, and each pair worked with one of the three participating sixth grade classrooms. The media literacy visits were organized using a slide show presentation that consisted of data and other information, definitions of key terms, discussion questions, and media clips. The curriculum was designed by the authors and the lead teacher at the school, and was titled "Free to Be 2020: A Gender and Media Literacy Program," to echo the 1970s Free to Be . . . You and Me media campaign (television program, book, and album; Thomas, 1972, 1974a, 1974b) designed to promote gender equality and empowerment among children (Rotskoff, 2015).

Before beginning the MLE program, students watched the truck commercial that is at the center of the current analysis and wrote their reflections on worksheet one. The researchers then began the MLE facilitation by defining and discussing the keywords: media, gender, and media literacy. Students were informed that media literacy calls for media users to do a close reading to analyze media texts, to think about what messages are present or absent, why they are present/absent, and what people might learn from those messages. The NAMLE key questions to guide media literacy (as listed in the preceding section) were shared with students. Students were informed of the goals of the program—to inspire them to think critically about media—and the researchers/MLE facilitators suggested that one way to do that is to apply these questions to media texts that they see in their daily lives. Additional goals of encouraging students to be open and inclusive about gender were also communicated.

Students were asked to do an in-class writing assignment, writing down why they think media and gender is an important topic. Next, they watched the music video for "William Wants a Doll," from the 1972 *Free to Be . . . You and Me* album (Thomas, 1974a, 1974b, 17:47), and the facilitators led a discussion of students' responses to the song and whether people would respond differently to a boy who wants to play with a doll today. A visual was shown of biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation occurring on a continuum, and each of these terms was defined. Students were asked to respond to data showing underrepresentation of women in elected office and in leadership positions at businesses as well as data showing that young people, on the whole, have more fluid views of gender compared with older people.

Stereotypes were defined, with students providing input into how stereotypes take shape, why they persist, and how they can be harmful. Counterstereotypes were also defined as attributes, roles, actions, and so on, that go against stereotypes, and students provided examples of media characters whom they believed went counter to stereotype. The MLE program was then organized according to media type, covering commercials, music videos and TikTok, YouTube, and video games. First, students discussed their use of and favorite texts within each type. Then, statistics were shared about widespread use of the media type among young people from survey data in the United States. Examples of stereotypes, counterstereotypes, and texts that blend stereotypes and counterstereotypes were provided both by students and by the media literacy facilitators and analyzed in class using the key questions for media literacy (NAMLE, 2021a) in a group discussion format. Data were shared with the students, as well, on the number of media creators who identify as women in the advertising, music, and video game industries.

To conclude the MLE program, students wrote a letter to the creator of a media text of their choosing about how gender was depicted in the text. The last exercise that the students engaged in was to reflect in writing once again on the same truck commercial they had seen just before the MLE facilitation began. The facilitators ended by encouraging students to continue to be critical thinkers about media depictions of any kind, especially about gender, and encouraged them to be open and inclusive about gender and identity in their daily lives, as well.

Data Collection and Analysis

MLE seeks to facilitate the ability to apply a critical lens to media content, the processes that produce it, and the ways that audiences interpret and respond to media content (Aufderheide, 1993; Buckingham, 2003). Therefore, in the current study, to investigate the extent to which the MLE program advanced participants' media literacy skills, particularly their critical perspective on gender representation, the sixth graders' responses to a commercial were studied. The commercial was shown at the outset of the MLE program before any instruction occurred and then again at the close of the program, after the four one-hour in-school visits of MLE instruction.

For both the pre-MLE and the post-MLE data collection phase, students were asked to write on a worksheet their responses to the same prompt: "We just showed you a commercial for Toyota Tacoma trucks. Please use the space below to write down anything you think is important or interesting to note about the commercial." The design of the prompt was informed by previous MLE research that showed sixth

graders tend to produce rich thinking in response to open-ended prompts (Sekarasih et al., 2016), and was intended to inspire students to voice their own thoughts rather than leading them toward any critique predetermined by the MLE facilitators.

The commercial, titled "All Terrain or Mall Terrain," was for Toyota Tacoma trucks (Toyota, 2018). Although it does not explicitly reveal that it targets a gender-specific audience, much of the commercial reflects the attributes of hegemonic masculinity as identified in prior research (Alexander, 2003; Smith, 2005; Vokey et al., 2013). The commercial contrasts two expressions of masculinity by depicting two groups of men, one that conforms to hegemonic masculinity and one that does not. In the scenes with characters in the former group, three men are racing on rough terrain in a Toyota truck. They are muscular, lean, conventionally handsome, and are shown enjoying the wild trail. Background rock music supplements the "tough guy" images. In the scenes with characters in the latter group, three men who are less lean than those in the other group are driving a truck from a rival brand (Chevrolet) in a mall parking lot with smooth asphalt. They are afraid of approaching a small speed bump and are visibly relieved when they succeed in passing over it. Soft classical music plays in the background of their scenes.

The size of the data corpus varied depending on the number of sixth graders that responded to each of the two prompts (pre- and post-MLE participation), with 38 words, on average, per question. Specifically, responses to worksheet one averaged 30 words (range: 1–86) and responses to worksheet two averaged 46 words (range: 3–165).

Data were analyzed using the constant comparison method and a grounded theory approach (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) by two coders, both authors. First, each coder transcribed all responses collected from worksheets one and two and imported them into NVivo software. Second, the two coders conducted multiple rounds of coding on worksheet one. In the initial coding stage, each coder separately conducted line-by-line coding and generated as many categories as possible. In this process, units of analysis were sentences and/or phrases. The coders then compared the categories each coder created and finalized the preliminary coding scheme by adding and merging some categories. Referencing the generated coding scheme from worksheet one, the two coders also conducted multiple rounds of coding for worksheet two. Because the main purpose in the analysis was to compare the students' responses before and after the MLE instruction, careful attention was paid to identify newly emerging responses and to compare the preliminary coding scheme in the round of coding from worksheet two. This process enabled the generation of new categories not identified in the previous coding scheme. Through this interpretive and comparative coding process, four themes were generated: recognizing formal features of the commercial, an absence of women, identifying a range of masculinities, and conflating gender and sexual identity.

Fifty-four students returned worksheet one after the first time watching the Toyota truck commercial, and 48 students returned worksheet two after they watched the commercial for the second time. In worksheet one, in response to an open-ended question asking for students' gender identity, 22 students identified as female, 29 as male, and three students did not identify with the gender binary system. In worksheet two, 23 students identified as female, 21 as male, two students did not report their gender, and two students did not identify with the gender binary system.

Results

Recognizing Formal Features of the Commercial

Buckingham (2003) has suggested that an understanding of media languages—which refers to the technical or formal features of media such as cinematography, sound design, art direction, narratives, and genres—should be pursued in MLE. Relatedly, one of the key questions developed by the NAMLE (2021b) that guides media literacy is: "What techniques are used and why?" In the current study, students were able to demonstrate a more in-depth understanding of the creative techniques used in the construction of the truck commercial after the MLE program, although relatively few students noted such formal features in their responses overall. In worksheet one, 4 of 54 students (7%) mentioned formal features used to construct the commercial; in worksheet two, 11 of 48 students (23%) did so. In both worksheets, the most salient comments about formal features addressed the background music. Many students noticed that rock music was used for the scenes with the Toyota-driving men, whereas soft music was used for the scenes with the Chevy-driving men. They described the background music for the former as "intense, loud, tough, manly," and "crazy," and for the latter as "soft, boring, slow, [and] relaxing," "peaceful," and "girly."

In worksheet one, only four students commented on formal features, and all of them wrote about the background music. Responses from worksheet one tended to be purely descriptive, whereas some students in worksheet two associated the background music with stereotypical assumptions behind male-targeted ads. For example, one student commented that "the background music seemed stereotypically targeted toward men" on worksheet two. In worksheet two, students also provided more diverse comments on various formal features including voice narration, fonts, items the male characters possessed, and settings (i.e., dirt road and mall parking lot). In worksheet two, students often linked these different formal features used in the commercial with descriptions of the men as "nerdy, girly," or "gay." For example, one student wrote, "The people in the mall-terrain were acting kinda gay with what they were wearing, and they had Starbucks . . ."

Figure 1. Toyota all-terrain.   *Figure 2. Chevy mall-terrain.*

One worksheet two comment that addressed formal features identified the calligraphy used in "mall-terrain." In the commercial, as some of the characters are driving at the mall, the voice narration asks, "Are you the type who buys a truck for all-terrain . . . or mall-terrain?" (Toyota, 2018, 0:01). The commercial emphasizes the distinction between "all-terrain" and "mall-terrain" by using a cursive font for

the "m" within a small shopping bag image (see Figures 1 and 2). Many responses among the sixth graders in worksheet two who commented on formal features considered this cursive letter as "girly" and noted that the men in these scenes did not fit into heteronormative gender norms. Some responses included: "The M in mall-terrain is swirly and 'girly' but all-terrain is a 'boy font' (quotation marks in original). The way they say mall-terrain it sounds like they are disappointed in the diversity of masculinity"; "Girly letters and shopping bags. The voices and music [say] a lot about the way you are. Mall-terrain tells you you're gay if you buy a Chevy"; and "The m that drops down is 'girly' (. . .), it compares all-terrain to mall-terrain saying that 'weak' guys are 'gay' and it's very sexist" (quotation marks in original).

The techniques used to depict the Chevy-driving men led the students to think that they were "weak" and "gay," although as is clear in the use of quotation marks in some of the quotes above, some students contested these characterizations. Indeed, some students specifically recognized the contrasting formal features as problematic by saying that this commercial was stereotypical and sexist (as seen in the first quote above). The conflation of gender and sexual identity that is also apparent in some of these responses is an additional theme discussed in a subsequent section.

Who is Represented? An Absence of Women

In addition to understanding media languages, the understanding of representation, misrepresentation, and/or absence of representation is also crucial in MLE (Buckingham, 2003). By analyzing media representation, one can get a better understanding of how media texts are constructed and also construct reality for different audiences (NAMLE, 2009). The topic of media underrepresentation of social groups is important since it can play a role in young people's beliefs about social groups and in their own identity construction (Ward & Aubrey, 2017).

In the current study, many students were able to recognize the absence of women in the truck commercial. In worksheet one, more than one third of students (19 of 54) pointed this out. Among these students, around half (10 of 19) tended to describe this aspect of the commercial without further analysis about its implications: "They were only men driving the trucks"; "I also notice there are 0 women in the ad"; "I noticed that they made Chevy look like a bad truck and they are all men"; and "The 'fit' men were off road and the thick beautiful men were on road and no women. They seem to only have all male in the commercial."

Some also expressed their feelings about the absence of women: "They are all boys. I think it is boring"; and "There were no girls in the whole thing, which made me feel uncomfortable." Another student questioned the process that would result in no women appearing: "Only men were in it . . . why weren't women in it?"

The other half of students in worksheet one (9 of 19) were able to explicitly identify the absence of women as a gender stereotype (only men like trucks) and/or they included critique of the implied message: "All male, stereotypical"; "It only showed men in the commercial and it's supporting an infamous stereotype, that only men should drive trucks." Another student wrote:

One thing I noticed was that all the actors were male, none were female. It makes me think how I have never really seen a female in a commercial for trucks . . . There were only men with trucks is a very stereotypical thing.

There was an increase in the number of students who pointed out the lack of representation of women in the commercial pre- compared with post-MLE: In worksheet one, 19 of 54 students (35%) did so, whereas 25 of 48 (52%) in worksheet two did so. Some worksheet two responses indicated deeper levels of analysis by pointing out gender stereotypes in the commercial and the messages that those stereotypes send: "There are only men in the commercial. The all-terrain men are driving on dirt roads and having fun with being tough. The music is exciting. All-terrain guys are smiling/having fun. These are stereotypes of men being tough"; "I saw that there were no girls involved in this ad. It was saying how tough boys are but again no girls"; "I think they are focusing it on boys driving trucks even though girls can drive trucks too. I think that is an important stereotype to think about"; and "I feel like it's supporting the stereotype that women don't like trucks, because there were no women in the commercial."

Identifying a Range of Masculinities

Beyond observing the absence of women, which quite a few students did both before the MLE program as well as after, students were more able to recognize implicit dimensions of gender stereotypes embedded in the commercial after the MLE program in worksheet two responses. Such understandings of media representation require close readings of texts and are an important element of media literacy (Buckingham, 2003; NAMLE, 2009).

The nuances of characters performing masculinity against dominant norms include the potential to have those characters function as a comedic tool to subordinate alternative masculinities (Hatfield, 2010; Myers, 2012). Indeed, in the commercial chosen for this study, the characterization of the men driving the Chevy can be read as emphasizing the superiority of the Toyota truck driven by men performing masculinity in a manner reflecting dominant or hegemonic norms through humor. In the current study, a few students wrote about the use of humor in the commercial. In worksheet one, five students of 54 mentioned that the commercial was funny or "cringy" (interpreted as trying to be funny but failing), but none provided any accompanying critical perspectives about how different performances of masculinity were represented. There was only one student in worksheet two who said the commercial was funny by stating, "I noticed there were only guys in the all-terrain, the guys were more fit but the mall-terrain guys were shown as less fit and buff. It was still funny though." The fewer sixth graders who found the commercial to be funny in worksheet two can be interpreted as evidence that, generally, the students became more critical of the reliance on stereotypes associated with masculinity as a humor device following participation in the MLE program.

Figure 3. All-terrain men driving in the wild and having a good time.

Figure 4. Mall-terrain men nervously approaching speedbump in parking lot.

Overall, across both worksheets, many students described the two different performances of masculinities by identifying contrasting physical appearances and characteristics of the characters. Students described the Toyota-driving group of men as "masculine, muscly, big," and "in good shape," and described the Chevy-driving group of men as "weak, nervous, girly, swirly, nerdy, chubby," and "gay" (see Figures 3 and 4). Example responses include: "It shows very masculine-typed men riding the all-terrain who are very muscly and big"; "However, on the mall-terrain those are chubby men who are very skittish"; "Boys in the Tacoma are masculine; the boys in the Chevy are girly"; and "It showed once again the big tough men in their truck riding on all-terrain and the white chubbier men in the mall-terrain scared by a small speed bump."

Comparisons between worksheet one and worksheet two responses showed that more students were able to identify the different performances of masculinities after the MLE program. In worksheet one, 17 of 54 (34%) students identified different types of masculinities expressed in the commercial. Among these students, 11 of 17 described and compared specific characteristics that differentiated the characters into two different types of men. The other six students among the 17 explicitly pointed out that this contrast was stereotypical and that it made fun of the mall-driving group. Examples include: "People that were at a mall were kind of made fun of, and made them look bad"; "This commercial is very sexist because it shows muscular burly men in the all-terrain part and kind of chubby, skittish men who are very 'scared' to be in the truck. This is a very stereotypical commercial" (quotation remarks in original); and:

> The boys in the all-terrain car were acting wild and crazy. And the boys at the mall were acting calm and non-crazy. This made me feel uncomfortable because they are making it seem like boys aspired to be loud and crazy.

In worksheet two, 28 students of 48 (58%) identified the two different expressions of masculinities and compared them, 24% more students than in worksheet one. Among the 28 students, six explicitly pointed out that the commercial showed stereotypical content, as seen in the following examples: "The all-terrain men are driving on dirt roads and having fun and tough. The music is exciting. All-terrain guys are smiling/having fun. These are stereotypes of men being tough"; and:

I think that this commercial should not be still in the program because it shows very masculine-typed men riding the all-terrain who are very muscled and big. However, on the mall-terrain those are chubby men, who are very skittish. I think this commercial is stereotypical.

After the MLE program, more students were able to identify and describe the characters who showed alternative masculinities. In the first worksheet, only one student wrote about counterstereotypes, whereas in the second worksheet, nine students discussed this in detail. These nine students considered the presence of alternative masculinities as a positive sign without mentioning, as some students did, how the Chevy driving characters were mocked. One student commented, "I think it has counterstereotypes because women normally shop at the mall." Another student also commented on the cautious personalities of the Chevy-driving characters by saying that "boys are not always reckless because when he went over the speed bump, he was careful." These findings suggest that the MLE program helped students think about different expressions of masculinity, and some students believed that seeing traits that departed from more hegemonic masculinity was a positive sign in that they ran counter to stereotypes.

Conflating Gender and Sexual Identity

Another theme that emerged was describing nondominant gender depictions in the commercial as "gay." In worksheet one, there were no responses mentioning the word "gay" of 54 students who provided responses. In worksheet two, 10 of 48 students mentioned the word "gay" in relation to the Chevy drivers. As previously described, after the MLE program, there was an increase in critical responses saying that this commercial includes "girly" men depicted in contrast to "manly" men. In addition to occasionally using the feminine word "girly" to describe this performance of masculinity, some worksheet-two responses assumed "girly" characteristics to be a marker of gay identity rather than showing students' expanded understanding of an alternative type of heterosexual masculinity. For example, students' responses include: "Another interesting thing is boys are not always strong: they are calling the boys in the chevy gay"; "They are saying 'if you drive a chevy, you are gay'"; "The hidden message could be if you aren't getting a Toyota you're gay"; "Only men drive trucks; man narrator voice; mall men buy Chevys (they're gay)."

As can be seen in the examples, some conflated the nonhegemonic depiction of gender with sexual identity, assuming the Chevy-driving characters were "gay." One can interpret this pattern as evidence that the students became more comfortable with expressing observations about sexuality at the close of the program, which could be a sign of their increasing comfort. However, this pattern could also reflect students' internalization of the (stereo)typical two-gender system entrenched in society (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985), which media representations often reinforce. This worksheet two pattern echoes Hatfield's (2010) observation that increasing media representation of alternative masculinities can fail to separate nonhegemonic heterosexuality from stereotyped gay identity.

However, a few student responses criticized this representation as stereotypical in worksheet two responses. For example, one student mentioned, "They are saying that 'weak' guys are 'gay' and it's very sexist" (quotation marks in original). Compared with some student responses that simply identified the

Chevy-driving characters as gay, this response used quotation marks to connote that the implication that the characters are gay was contested and also directly stated that this was objectionable.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand how young adolescents interpret a commercial that positions different expressions of masculinity as ideal and not ideal and examine the implications of MLE for developing and applying critical media literacy skills. Programming (Götz, 2008; Kirsch & Murnen, 2015; Leaper et al., 2002; Sink & Mastro, 2017) and commercials (Fowler & Thomas, 2015; Lewin-Jones & Mitra, 2009; Merskin, 2008; Nassif & Gunter, 2008; Scharrer et al., 2006) that young people may encounter through media use can contain stereotypes and/or narrow representations associated with masculinity. Indeed, commercials, especially, may advance a form of "branded masculinity" (Alexander, 2003) that reflects dominant or hegemonic expressions (Smith, 2005; Vokey et al., 2013), and even nonhegemonic masculinity depicted in media texts can reinforce rather than challenge dominant norms (Hatfield, 2010; Myers, 2012). Given that older children and adolescents still encounter commercials in their use of contemporary media forms (Coates et al., 2019; Harris & Kalnova, 2018), encouraging young people's critical analysis of representations of various depictions of masculinity via their responses to the truck commercial at the center of the current analysis is an important pursuit.

By analyzing students' responses to the commercial using an open prompt and comparing responses written before and after participating in the MLE program, we found that students generally became more competent in analyzing gendered form and content components of the commercial. Buckingham (2003) suggested that understanding media languages (creative techniques and formal features) is a key aspect of meaning making. In the current study, students became more able to identify formal features that emphasized contrasting characteristics between hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculine depictions in the commercial, a 40% increase from before the MLE program to after.

The notion of representation is also essential in MLE (Buckingham, 2003), and includes examining texts for the ways in which they reflect or fail to reflect "reality," including the presence and absence of stereotypes, to gain a deeper understanding of ideologies underlying media depictions (Iyer & Luke, 2011). In the current findings, the absence of women seemed to be a readily noticeable gendered aspect of the commercial, whereas the differing expressions of masculinity appeared to be a more nuanced reading that seemed to be facilitated by the media literacy instruction. The MLE program appears to have helped some students recognize that the commercial contrasted "manly" and "girly" men. Some students considered the "girly" characters as weak and nerdy; others considered their careful personalities to be positive attributes. Some students also expressed a decidedly critical view of the commercial's treatment of masculinities that identified it as stereotypical and suggested it had the potential to reinforce the dominant gender norm that men should be tough. These diverse viewpoints demonstrated students' independent evaluation of media texts, a key media literacy skill (NAMLE, 2009), and therefore, in this respect, this research joins prior studies in showing change associated with students' participation in MLE designed to interrogate gender stereotypes (Berman & White, 2013; Liao et al., 2020; Sekarasih et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2014).

However, even after the MLE program, the analysis suggested that some of those who recognized nonhegemonic depictions tended to conflate the characters' so-called effeminacy with their sexual identity, identifying those characters as gay. This supports prior observations that even nonhegemonic masculine representation may still operate in a way that reinforces the dominance of hegemonic masculinity (Hatfield, 2010; Myers, 2012). This pattern also echoes prior research that shows students' reception of MLE on the topic of gender can be complex and uneven (Bergstrom et al., 2018; Gladkowski, 2020; Puchner et al., 2015; Reichert et al., 2007; Sekarasih et al., 2019).

The current study has strengths as well as limitations. Strengths include using students' own written responses to give voice to active meaning making associated with their interpretations of the commercial which, in turn, adds depth and dimension to the analysis. Indeed, it is rare to examine young people's critical analysis of a media text that centers masculinity, and therefore, these data add an important perspective to previously existing youth and media research. Prior media literacy studies have tended to focus on stereotypical messages that reinforce the polarization of gender norms between women and men. Yet, hegemonic masculinity is constructed in part by subordinated masculinities (Connell, 1987), a matter taken up in the present analysis. The community-based nature of the research is also a strength, given that the data were derived from a media literacy program offered to local public school students in their classrooms and created in collaboration with a classroom teacher.

In terms of limitations, however, the sixth graders whose responses are examined in this study were primarily White and middle class, which prevents the ability to generalize to wider, more diverse populations. The fact that identities and media representations are intersectional but the MLE program and this research focused primarily on gender is another important limitation. Methodologically, although the students wrote fairly extensively on the worksheets in response to the prompt given to them for analyzing the commercial, because of their young age it is possible that they were not able to fully express their observations and opinions in written form. Finally, despite assurances that their own observations and opinions were most valuable, because the MLE program and research was conducted in the classroom, it is possible that some participants provided what they assumed would be socially desirable responses.

Future MLE research should explore the development of students' critique of gender representations in general and of masculinity in particular. Given that adolescents pay close attention to social and cultural cues about gender in the exploration of their identities (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996; Bussey, 2011; Cook et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2021), further investigation of the ways in which they interpret gender-typed texts is warranted. In a media environment that continues to reproduce restrictive depictions of men and masculinities, researchers should further explore ways to advance students' critical analytical views of representations of alternative masculinities to help them imagine a more diverse and inclusive understanding of gender.

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