

Gender in The Simpsons

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how gender is depicted in *The Simpsons* in terms of language, female and male activities and the plot. Four episodes of equal length of the sitcom series were selected. They were released within a limited period of time. Six features were selected for analysis: names, adjectives, occupations, verbs, representation and gender roles. It was found that the female characters are more likely than male characters to have a shortened name and more likely to be described by physical appearance. Male characters tend to have prestigious jobs and be closely connected to their professions. Verbs describing male work are common, whereas no verbs describing female work were found. There are far more men than women represented in *The Simpsons*. Also, the four episodes mainly offer traditional gender roles, where women are pictured as less able than men.

Key words: gender, gender in television, *The Simpsons*, TV sitcoms, occupations, verbs, names, adjectives.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

It is common knowledge that women and men are treated differently due to society's expectations. The masculine tends to be considered better than the feminine; women are seen as subordinated to men. The female inferiority is upheld by the dichotomy between the genders. Whether there are inherent, biological differences between women and men, or culturally produced ones, is a subject of debate. What is not an issue, however, is that media play an important role in the construction of gender. Feminist critics have raised concerns about the relations between gender and media consumption. The concern regards how women and men are portrayed according to stereotype images of sex-roles. Especially female characters are depicted in roles that seem to fit with society's view of what women should and should not do. According to Carlsson "media not only reflect reality, but also contribute to the construction of hegemonic gender definitions that often appear to be self-evident" (2005:5). In that sense, media constantly reproduce and revalidate the difference between the genders.

Television is one of the most powerful media, supplying us with information, advertising, entertaining, and much more. The impact television has on people is difficult to estimate, although some attempts have been made. For example, Hartmann and Husband studied the effects of watching television. Their research showed that the medium plays a role in building up racist attitudes in all-white areas (Hartman and Husband 1983, as cited in Lewis 1990:156). When it comes to gender and television, investigations suggest that the amount of TV use with sexist messages might be related to children's stereotypical view on women and men. And vice versa: children who watch television programs with non-traditional gender roles seem to be more tolerant towards non-traditional roles (Jacobson 2005:33).

1.2 Aim

The purpose of this paper is to portray in what way gender is presented in television. The television show selected for this study is *The Simpsons*, since this animated show is one of the most successful series in the US and so far, the longest running (Internet 1).

1.3 Method and material

In order to find second sources for the study, the computerized library catalogue Lucia at Luleå University Library was used as a searching tool. *Gender*, *gender roles*, *television*, and *media* are examples of nouns searched for in the database.

The DVD *The Simpsons against the World*, released by Twentieth Century Fox in 2004 has been selected as the primary source. *The Simpsons against the World* includes four episodes (*Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment*, *Marge vs. the Monorail*, *Bart vs. Australia*, and *Homer vs. Patty and Selma*) starring the yellow family. Each episode is approximately 20 minutes long, and every member of the Simpson family, except baby Maggie, plays an important, or main, role in at least one of the episodes.

1.4 Disposition

The study is divided into five chapters: introduction, language, female and male activity, the plot and a summary. All chapters are dealt with from a gender perspective. The chapter about language analyzes names and adjectives. In the third chapter, female and male activities such as occupations and verbs are studied. The fourth chapter deals with representation and stereotypical gender-role behavior in the plot. The essay ends with a summary and a conclusion.

2 Language

The language used in the four episodes of *The Simpsons* reveals how women and men are looked upon in the show. This chapter presents the way in which female and male characters are described in terms of names and adjectives.

2.1 Names

Below is a table with all the first names found in my corpus. It shows that there are far more male characters than female ones in the show. Even so, female characters are represented in all the episodes.

Table 1. The first names of the characters in the four episodes of *The Simpsons*

Female first names	Male first names					
Elizabeth	Abe	Bruno	Jerry	Lenny	Moses	Sebastian
Lisa	Adolf	Carl	Jimbo	Leonard	Ned	Seymour
Lurleen	Aide	Clancy	Joe	Lewis	Nelson	Snake
Maggie	Andy	Dash	Julius	Lyle	Nick	Timothy
Marge	Apu	Genghis	Kearney	Mel	Otto	Tobias
Maude	Averil	Gus	Kent	Milhouse	Phil	Troy
Patty	Barney	Hezron	Krusty	Moe	Ralph	Waylon
Selma	Bart	Homer	Kyle	Montgomery	Richard	Willy Zohar
<i>Total: 8</i>	<i>Total: 49</i>					

2.1 Shortened names

When investigating the names in *The Simpsons*, a significant distinction between the genders can be found: A considerable part of the female names are shortened names or pet names. *Lisa* is short for *Elisabeth*; both *Maggie* and *Marge* derive from *Margaret*; *Maude* comes from *Matilda*; and *Patty* is a form of *Patricia* (Cresswell 2000:86, 159-161, 184). This pattern cannot be found to the same extent amongst male names. There are shorter forms of male names as well, such as *Abe*, *Andy*, *Bart* and *Willy*, all of which are forms of *Abraham*, *Andrew*, *Bartholomew* and *William*. However, shorter forms of male names make up approximately a third of the male names, whereas half of the female names are short forms.

Leonard, *Montgomery*, and *Richard* are male names which easily could be shortened into *Leo*, *Monty*, and *Dick*, but are not.

The use of a contracted form of a given name often shows endearment and a feeling of closeness to that person. The high rate of female pet names can therefore indicate that women are more often than men connected with personal relations to others. In *The Simpsons*, women are more likely to be found in their home where they care for others, while men are associated with work (see the next chapter about female and male activities). Accordingly, the female characters with pet names are often pictured at home, whereas Elizabeth, who does not have a shortened name, works as a teacher and is mostly seen in the classroom.

2.2 Adjectives

An adjective is a word that describes a person or a thing. Hence, an adjective depicts people's qualities and attributes as comprehended by the narrator. The way in which women and men are talked about and described seems therefore important to look at. Key (1996:17) says that women and men are often alleged to have different mental characteristics and she lists a number of adjectives frequently used in our culture about the two sexes. To mention a few, characteristics such as affectionate, dependent, emotional, illogical, indecisive, passive, submissive, and tender, are traditionally connected with females, whereas characteristics such as aggressive, authoritative, competitive, daring, decisive, domineering, independent, and violent, are typically connected with males (Key 1996:17-18). The listed adjectives above reflect society's willingness to separate the sexes, since many of the supposedly female and male qualities are absolute opposites. Key refers to them as "[t]he principle of opposites" (1996:18). For instance, indecisive as opposed to decisive; submissive as opposed to domineering; and dependent as opposed to independent (Key 1996:17-18). Women and men are described differently, in accordance with society's gender specific expectations of the sexes.

2.2.1 Adjectives in *The Simpsons*

Society's expectations on women and men considering their psychological characteristics can also be found in *The Simpsons*. The table below shows the adjectives used to depict the characters in the four episodes of *The Simpsons*. The figures within parenthesis indicate how many times the adjective occurs, if more than once.

Table 3. Adjectives used to describe the characters in *The Simpsons*

Female adjectives	Male adjectives		Unknown gender
beautiful	(the) best	lusty	adult
clever	accepted	masculine	bald
comely	afraid	masked	beautiful
fabulous	ashamed	moved	good
fair	Australian	nice	loving
fat	braindead	not too good	nerdy
fresh	busy	not very fond of	smart
good (2)	complicated	punk	weak
happy	cool	ready	wee
little (3)	crazy	rude	
loyal	deeply in debt	sexy	
moral	first	sneaky	
proud of sb	good (4)	sorry	
sorry	graceful	spiky-haired	
stupid (3)	greatest	stupid	
sure	honorable	tempted	
sweet	incarcerated	wife-beating	
trusting	interested	worse (than Hitler)	
wrong	lovable		
young	lowly		
Total: 25	Total: 41		Total: 9

There are many more adjectives describing male characters than female, which seems rather reasonable since the male characters outnumber the female characters on the whole. In the four episodes of *The Simpsons*, six out of 18 female adjectives describe the looks of the character: *beautiful*, *comely*, *fabulous*, *fat*, *fresh*, and *little*. The adjectives describing the looks of the male characters are fewer, even though there are more male than female characters in the episodes. The female adjectives are all connected to the prevailing idea of how a woman should look to be attractive, although *fat* is related to lack of attraction. Also the adjective *little* can be associated with a woman's attractiveness, since female overweight is not seen as a pleasant trait. 38 male adjectives were found, of which only four depict the way males look: *graceful*, *masculine*, *sexy*, and *spiky-haired*. *Masculine* and *sexy* are the only adjectives found to describe male characters as attractive.

The adjective *graceful* is perhaps not one connected with men and therefore needs to be further analyzed. The adjective occurs in a scene where Bart, wearing a mask to hide his

identity, performs as a ballet dancer in front of the whole school. One of the hooligan boys in the audience is mesmerized by Bart's captivating act and says: "He is graceful yet masculine. So it is OK for me to like this" (Jimbo in *Homer vs. Patty and Selma*). When Bart removes his mask, however, he is booed by the entire crowd, including the awestruck Jimbo, who earlier enjoyed the performance. After the act, Bart is chased over a field by Jimbo and some other boys until he falls face down in a ditch and injures himself badly. One of the boys pokes Bart with a stick and with the words: "Well, as long as he is hurt" (Nelson in *Homer vs. Patty and Selma*), they leave him lying there.

In this context it is impossible for a young boy like Bart to be associated with ballet, since ballet is for girls and women. When Bart tries to step outside his gender role and do something that is not connected with masculinity, he is punished. Bart's actions are so challenging that his schoolmates feel the need to put him back in his place. *Graceful* is associated with females, not males. On the contrary to what Jimbo said earlier, it is not accepted for a boy to combine traditionally feminine and masculine traits or interests.

Besides adjectives describing looks, several attributes depicting positive mental properties of the characters are found in my material. Women are described as *clever, good, happy, loyal, moral, sweet* and *trusting*. Men are depicted as *cool, good, (the) greatest, honorable, lovable*, and *nice*. It seems as if the adjectives describing women are more likely than male adjectives to reveal something about that character's relationship to others. Marge is loyal and sweet to her husband and she is also a trusting wife, that is, she trusts *him*. The male adjectives, on the other hand, do not describe men's relationship to others to the same extent. *Lovable* and *nice* are the only adjectives that clearly describe how a male character interacts with people around him. A man's relationship to other people is not as important as a woman's in *The Simpsons*.

The way in which the characters in the show are described in negative terms, also differs according to gender. Men are called *brain-dead, crazy, incarcerated, lowly, not too good, punk, rude, sneaky, stupid, wife-beating*, and *worse (than Hitler)*. Women are depicted as *fat, stupid* and *wrong*. None of the negative terms describing women are connected with rudeness and aggressiveness, like the male ones are. Neither is men's looks used as a means to put them down.

3 Female and male activity

The following chapter focuses on and investigates whether there are gender differences between female and male activities in the four episodes of *The Simpsons*, and if so, in what way these differences are presented.

3.1 Occupations

The table below shows female and male occupations. The number within parenthesis indicates the number of characters with a specific profession. Some of the male occupations are marked *numerous*. The same character can have many jobs, just as one type of profession can be presented on several occasions. Some of the listed professions might not be considered ordinary jobs: being an adulterer, a thief or a tormentor is hardly known as a career choice. Even so, these “professions” are included in the table, since some characters carry out those tasks on a daily basis in the show; it is simply their job. Moreover, being a housewife is sometimes not looked upon as a profession, but since housewives appear in *The Simpsons* as professional stay-at-home mums, they are included in this table.

Table 4. Female and male occupations in *The Simpsons*

Female occupations	Male occupations		
café worker	actor (4)	executive assistant (2)	prime minister
country singer	adulterer	farmer (2)	principal
DMV employee (2)	agent (3)	grand marshal	pugilist (2)
DMV manager	ambassador	guard	referee
investigative reporter	bar owner	investigative reporter (2)	religious leader
housewife (2)	bar worker (2)	journalist (2)	reverend
teacher (3)	bodyguard (2)	judge (2)	salesman
telephone operator	building worker	marine (3)	scientist (3)
TV hostess (2)	bus driver	mayor	sea captain
	business manager	member of parliament	shop employee
	cable guy	member of the court (<i>numerous</i>)	shop manager (2)
	carver of graven images	military leader	soldiers (<i>numerous</i>)
	cashier	monorail conductor	sports manager
	chauffeur	music director	stand-up comedian
	chief of police	nuclear plant owner	stock broker
	clown	nuclear plant worker (<i>numerous</i>)	teller
	control officer (2)	pilot	thief (4)
	dictator	policeman (2)	tormentor
	doctor (2)	president	TV host (2)

		undersecretary at the U.S. State Department
Total: 14		Total: 101

* *The Department of Motor Vehicles*

3.1.1 Common occupations for women and men

To begin with, there are far more male occupations than female ones. More male characters also make the range of male occupations more varied than the female occupations. Perhaps that has to do with the fact that there are many more male characters than female in *The Simpsons*. The most common job for women is to work as a teacher. There are no male teachers in my study. Nevertheless, the principal is male. Teaching used to be a profession of rather high status in many Western countries, but with an increasing number of female teachers, it has become associated with lower status. In the US, teaching is rated in the middle on an occupational prestige scale. It is less prestigious than engineering, law or medicine, but it is more prestigious than blue and pink collar work (Ballantine and Spade 2008:115).

Numerous men work as soldiers, court members or nuclear plant employees in my material. Neither being a soldier nor a nuclear plant worker is regarded as a prestigious job. In fact, Mr. Burns, who owns the nuclear plant, refers to his employees as “the drones”, suggesting that they are lazy workers. Working as a member of the court is associated with higher status and that could be a reason why there are no women working in the court room.

3.1.2 Prestigious professions

It is quite clear that the high-status jobs are reserved for men in *The Simpsons*. The president, the prime minister, the Member of Parliament, the mayor and the military and religious leaders, including the reverend, are all male. The legislative assembly is also embodied by male characters only: the two judges are men, and so are the members of the court. The undersecretary and the ambassador representing the U.S. State Department are also male. This means that the head of the state and the matters of state are represented by men. Hence, the people who have the power to make, change and implement laws are all male. A state consists of certain institutions, which control the executive, legislative, and administrative power (Buzan 1991:82). Without these institutions the state cannot operate nor protect the security of its citizens. Traditionally, only men had access to these institutions and worked in professions

where they represented the state. The executive and legislative power has been male-dominated just as the military force. To rule a country, decide on important issues such as taxes within that country, implement laws, and secure the borders of the state have traditionally been male tasks. It is no wonder then, that the people who are supposed to make sure the laws are obeyed, that is the police force, have been male. There are two policemen and one chief of police found in my corpus and they are both male characters.

Women have been excluded from these kinds of prestigious jobs for a long time. Even though these professions are open for women today, there are still more men than women who work as presidents, members of parliament, judges and officers in the military and police force around the world. This pattern is seen in reality as well as in *The Simpsons*. Furthermore, other prominent occupations such as being a doctor, a scientist or a pilot also seem to be reserved for men in the show. The pilot is male and there are two doctors and three scientists in these episodes of *The Simpsons*, but none of them are female.

3.1.3 Work and housework

Two of the female characters, Marge Simpson and Maude Flanders, are housewives or stay-at-home mums. They do all the housework, such as cooking, cleaning and looking after the children and husbands. Since there are few female figures in the show, these two constitute a large part of the female characters, and therefore consolidate the thought of women as destined to the home. No male character works in his home, at least not as a “house-husband”. Where Azron the Adulterer works is unclear, but he is never seen committing adultery in his own home. Snake, who makes a living from stealing, apparently works away from home. The rest of the male characters have more or less ordinary paid jobs and none of them work in their home.

Traditionally, women have been excluded from the labor market and assigned to the home. The man of the household was entitled to a lifetime of paid work, whereas women have been destined to do unpaid domestic chores. This way of dividing labor according to gender was seen as something natural and stemmed from the idea that female and male activities belonged to separate spheres (Crompton 1999:105-109). Women were therefore dependent on a provider and were unable to lead independent lives. At the same time, men were guaranteed to have someone to do the unpaid housework and could concentrate on their careers.

Nowadays, the formal barriers which kept women from participating in the labor force are gone. Still, the dichotomy between female and male work remains. Women's work in the household is not considered "real" work, since it is unpaid. Work performed by men is usually paid and therefore counted in the gross national product, hence it is real work. Romaine says that society's view on what counts as work and what does not, adds up to the discrimination against women. The separation between female and male work is even linguistically strengthened by the fact that there are different names for it: work and housework (1999:13).

The findings in *The Simpsons* are in line with Crompton and Romaine's ideas since the division of work and housework remains. Even though women are formally "allowed" to work outside the home and take almost whatever job they like, a woman is much more likely than a man to be a housewife in the show. Also, the women who do work in *The Simpsons* are not necessarily pictured as professionals. Elizabeth Hoover is Lisa's class teacher, even so, she is never referred to as anything else than "Miss". Principal Skinner, on the other hand, who works at the same school, is known as the principal. Other male characters in the show are titled by profession in the same way, for instance Doctor Hibbert, Doctor Riviera and Reverend Lovejoy. According to Romaine, it is not unusual to refer to a woman's marital status; "[T]his system of marking females with nubility titles is still used at all levels of society" (1999:124). Females are marked by family status, even though their role is not dependant on a family member. Miss Hoover is depicted as a teacher at work and never as a mother, girlfriend or other. Still, she earns her title by her marital status, not by her profession. A man, on the other hand, is regarded more as a professional than a woman is, even though they both have a job. This suggests that the male identity is more connected with having a profession.

3.2 Verbs

The following analysis deals with the verbs found in my corpus in order to find out whether there are differences between what women and men do, and if so, how these differences are shown. Verbs in negations and if-clauses have been excluded in this material, since the focus is on what the characters do, not what they do not do. Auxiliary verbs have been left out in case they do not reveal anything about the actual activity. The verbs listed are presented in the infinitive, even though they appear in other forms in *The Simpsons*. All four episodes contain

both women and men and are therefore expected to have female and male verbs represented. The total number of verbs is 491. 126 of these are female and 365 are male. The number within parenthesis illustrates the number of occurrences of verbs in the episodes. Unfortunately, the large number of verbs makes it impossible to present the material in one figure.

Table 5. Female verbs in *The Simpsons*

Female verbs						
agree	count on	have (4)	leave (3)	promise	smell	try (2)
apologize	cut sb a check	have an idea	live by	protest	smoke	turn on TV
ask	destroy	have faith	look (4)	punish	spend (3)	understand
be fair	do (3)	hear (2)	lose	read	stare	use
be proud of (2)	eat	hire	love	remember (2)	stay	wait (2)
bring	feed	hold	make coffee	run	steal	wake up
call attention	feel good	honour	meet (3)	save sb's soul	stop by	want (2)
call off a debt	fix	introduce	miss	say (5)	take	watch
care	get	judge	nag	see	take care of	watch TV
carry	giggle	kiss	need	send	talk (2)	win (2)
charge	give	know (4)	notice	set an example	teach	wish
choose	go to heaven	laugh	obey	shiver	tell (3)	wonder
come on	growl	learn (2)	pay (2)	sleep	think (4)	write
Number of female verbs: 126						

Table 6. Male verbs in *The Simpsons*

Male verbs					
accept (2)	cut	have (3)	make sb edgy	run	swear
agitate	cut corners	have fun	make the money back	run the show	swear (<i>promise</i>)
amuse	dance	head down to	manage	rush	swing
answer	decide	hear (9)	mean	save	take (8)
apologize (2)	dedicate (2)	hide (2)	meet (3)	savour	take a chance
argue	defile	hire	miss	say (4)	take ballet (2)
ask	demand	hold	move on	seal	talk
bash sb's head in	deplore	hold on	need (5)	see (10)	tease (2)
be moved	disparage	hone	offer	sell (4)	tell (6)
beat (2)	do (7)	hook up	owe (3)	send	test (2)
become	dump	hope	pass	serve time	think (9)
beg	eat (3)	hug	pick	settle down	threaten
believe (2)	embarrass	install	pick up	shake hands	throw up (hand)
bend (over)	explain	invent	picture	show (2)	tilt a chair
blow savings	fail (2)	invest (2)	play (3)	shut off the power	translate
boot (<i>kick</i>)	fertilize the lawn	jump	pretend	sigh	trick
borrow (2)	fight (2)	keep	promise (4)	sign up	trust
box	figure	kick	prove	sing (4)	try (2)
break sb's legs	find	kill (2)	provide	singe money	turn on TV
break rules	flee	kiss (2)	pull	sit (3)	understand (6)
bring (5)	flunk	know (3)	pull off	sleep	use (2)
buckle sb's belt	forget (2)	laugh (3)	push	slink by	wait (2)

call (2)	get along	leap	put (2)	slumber	wake up
cart	get arrested	learn	raise (voice)	smell	wander
cash in	get by	leave	read (2)	smoke	want (6)
catch a plane	get drunk	lend	receive	solve	watch (4)
celebrate	get off sb's property	let	reel	speak (3)	win
check (4)	give (6)	lick	release	spend	wish
choose	go (6)	listen	remember	stand by	wonder
combat	go for it	loan	remind	stand clear	work (3)
come (5)	gobble up danger	lock	repeat	start	work hard
come on	grab	look (at) (7)	report (3)	stay	work harder
commit fraud	graze (<i>touch</i>)	love (3)	request	steal (2)	work overtime
concentrate	hand	make a call	resent	stop (4)	write (2)
cover	handle	make a choice	return	stumble	
crawl	hate	make money	rip	subscribe	
Number of male verbs: 365					

To begin with, there are many more verbs that describe male actions than female ones. The large number of male verbs suggests that men are more active than women. My material also shows that many of the verbs are used to describe the actions of both women and men. Even so, there are certain verbs that are gender specific. For instance, men work a lot: they *work*, they *work hard*, *harder* and *overtime*. Women do not work at all. This supports the findings in chapter 3.2.1 about work and housework. What women do in their home is not considered to be real work, and therefore no one talks about it. Only paid jobs outside the home are looked upon as work and men are more likely than women to be associated with a paid job in *The Simpsons*.

Both women and men *apologize* and *ask*, but as only men *answer* and *explain*, it seems like they know the ways of the world and women do not. Men's actions are on several occasions linked to the idea that men are capable and able to solve problems and make things happen. They *decide* on issues and they *explain* things to others. Men can *handle* the situation, *manage* and *pull off*, in the sense that they manage to do something difficult. Almost needless to say, they also *run the show*. In contrast, women's actions do not indicate that they are able to accomplish things to the same extent. *Fix* is the only verb in my corpus that illustrates a woman's capability to take care of the situation.

Women are more often than men found in situations where they care for others. Women and men *eat*, but women also *feed*. To feed someone is a generous gesture that ensures that someone else eats. Women *kiss*, *love* and *have faith*. Perhaps it is women's faith that makes them *go to heaven* and *save souls*. Stereotypically, women are more associated with

sensitivity and emotions than men are. In *The Simpsons*, men kiss and love too, but *have fun* instead of *faith*. *Have fun* can be associated with an indolent and easy-going nature of the character and more verbs confirm that men do not have to take responsibility as much as women. Men *break the rules*, *take a chance* and *tilt chairs*. These actions show that men are risk-takers and allowed to push the limits. They can behave rather recklessly without thinking about the consequences. Women are not associated with that kind of thoughtless behavior.

Just as women can show that they care for others, men can show a sensitive side in *The Simpsons* too. For instance, men *hold on* and *hug*. Even so, many other male verbs are associated with aggression and violence. *Bash somebody's head in*, *beat*, *boot*, *box*, *combat*, *defile*, *fight*, *hate*, *kick*, *kill* and *threaten* are examples of verbs describing male actions in my corpus. Neither of these verbs can be found amongst the female characters. Another interesting distinction between the genders is the use of the verb *make*. *Make* is frequently used to describe men's activities in expressions such as *make a choice*, *make money* and *make somebody edgy*. The only thing women make is coffee.

Many of the female and male verbs are each other's opposites. Women *obey* and men *break the rules*. Women *honour* and men *disparage* or do even worse things like *break somebody's legs* and *defile*. The female and male verbs in *The Simpsons* are clearly gender specific and confirm society's view on stereotypical female and male actions.

4 The Plot

Each of the four episodes of *The Simpsons* has a plot, where one member or more of the yellow family plays an important role. In these plots, the relationships between different characters are shown, just as their persona and actions in different situations. This chapter describes the plots and examines how gender is depicted in the stories of *The Simpsons*. It is almost impossible to depict gender in an essay without looking at the differences between women and men in terms of how much face time each gender gets. That is why this chapter starts with a presentation of gender representation.

4.1 Representation

The vast majority of the characters in the four different episodes of *The Simpsons* are male. Out of the 55 characters known by name 47 are male. This means that 8 first names belong to female characters including three of the members of the Simpson family: Marge, Lisa and Maggie. When looking at all the characters, known with or without a name (people passing by in a scene, for instance), we end up with a total of 159 individuals. 135 of these individuals are male and 24 are female. Thus, the male characters clearly outnumber the female ones. The figure below shows the distribution of female and male characters found in four episodes of *The Simpsons*. The numbers within parenthesis indicate the number of characters.

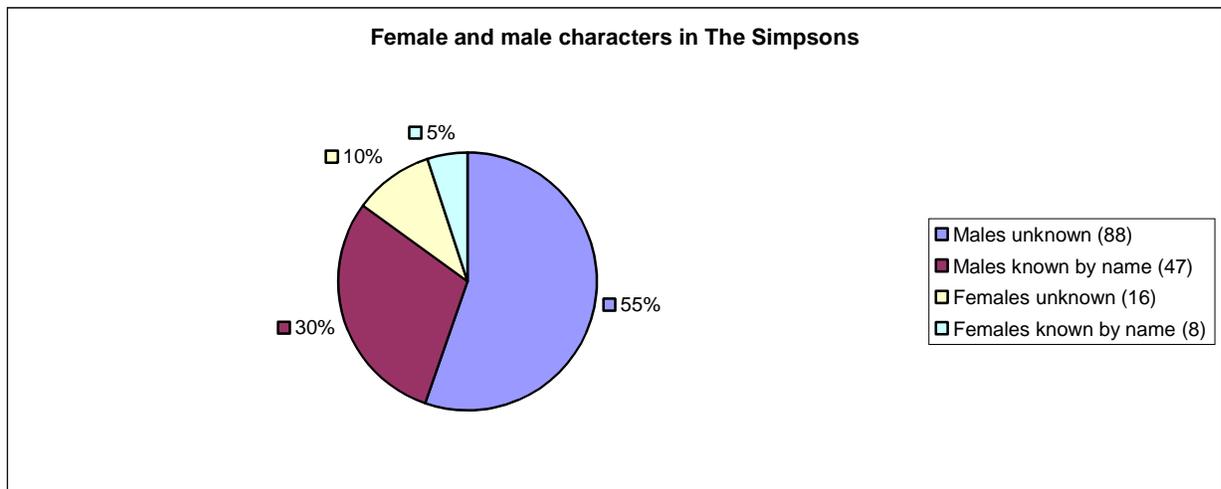


Figure 1. Number of female and male characters in *The Simpsons*

The figure shows that 85 percent of the characters in these episodes are male. Women make up 15 percent of the characters. A majority of the characters are men without a name. Ten percent are women who are nameless to the audience. Nearly a third of the male characters have a name, compared to 5 percent of the female characters. Having a name represents the identity of the character and can also signify the importance of the character. A character who has never been introduced to the audience is obviously not in a leading role. The viewer might get the impression that a nameless character does not contribute to the show in any specific way. Men known by name outnumber women with a name by six to one, suggesting that there are more interesting male characters than female. Due to the great majority of male characters, young viewers obviously lack female role models.

Jacobson says that discussing gender representation in the media has become more important over the years, since media culture has developed into a contributor in the construction of especially young people's identity. Young people need role models to look up to and often find them in the media images. Lack of representation can make different groups of society feel marginalized, since visibility is an asset. What people cannot see, does not exist. Without social representation on all decision-making levels, it is difficult to maintain democracy, equality and human rights (Jacobson 2005:14).

4.1.2 Female and male space

An analysis of the amount of talk time is yet one way of comparing women with men. The findings in my material clearly show that men talk more than women.

Table 7. Talk time according to gender

Episode	Female talk time	Male talk time
Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment	3.39	12.54
Marge vs. the Monorail	2.28	10.55
Bart vs. Australia	2.54	10.20
Homer vs. Patty and Selma	5.58	10.11
<i>Total amount of time (minutes):</i>	<i>14.59</i>	<i>44.20</i>

The male figures in *The Simpsons* talk more than three times as much as the female ones. One of the episodes stands out from the rest: *Homer vs. Patty and Selma*, which includes more female talk time and less male talk time compared to the other episodes. In *Homer vs. Patty and Selma* men speak approximately twice as much as women. There seems to be a tendency

to match the amount of female talk time with the strength of the female characters. Both Patty and Selma are described as frank, outspoken and independent women. Hence, they speak more. In the other episodes men speak roughly three or four times as much as women. The chapter where women talk the least is *Marge vs. the Monorail*. This episode deals with Marge who tries to rescue the town of Springfield from disaster, but fails to do so. Instead, Springfield is saved by a donut. The inability to solve a problem can be seen as a weakness, which is a possible explanation to the lack of talkative women in that episode.

4.2 Gender roles

As seen previously in my material, women and men are depicted quite differently consistent with the gender they belong to. There are gender specific traits in female and male names, as well as in adjectives describing the characters. Further, the actions of the characters in the show differ according to gender. With this in mind, the gender roles in the story are likely to be consistent with the earlier findings in the essay.

It could be said that certain personal characteristics in *The Simpsons* are illustrated as female or male. Women and men show different personal traits. Women are often described as having a highly developed moral sense. In *Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment*, Homer gets free cable TV for his family. That is, he is illegally hooked up by a dubious cable guy. Lisa refuses to be a part of such immoral behavior and tries to convince her dad to unhook the cable. In Sunday school, Lisa's teacher tells the pupils that people who break the Ten Commandments will eventually go to hell rather than to heaven. Lisa's deepest fear is that her dad will be punished and end up in hell for breaking the eighth commandment, "thou shalt not steal", when stealing cable TV. Her concern for her father is clearly shown in the episode. When Homer finally unhooks the cable, Lisa says: "Dad, we may have saved your soul" (*Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment*). She is relieved on behalf of her father, not on behalf of herself. The moral of women is also confirmed by Marge's support to Lisa's protest.

Men, on the other hand, are pictured as immoral without any notion of how their actions might affect other people. In *Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment*, the male characters in the family, Homer and Bart illegally hook up to the cable TV network. In *Marge vs. the Monorail* the town of Springfield earns an extra \$3 million after nuclear plant owner Mr. Burns is fined for dumping nuclear waste in a park. He chooses the park instead of the playground since "All those bald children are arousing suspicion" (Mr. Burns in *Marge vs. the*

Monorail). In this case, Mr. Burns has to face the consequences of his actions. That is, he is ordered to pay fines. Since Mr. Burns is loaded, it does not affect him. Other episodes demonstrate that men do not have to consider the outcome of what they do.

As a prank, Bart makes several collect calls to Australia, which results in large phone bills for the receiver, Bruno. Bruno is offended by Bart's refusal to pay the bills and goes to the local Member of Parliament. The matter ends up at the Office of the Prime Minister. Lisa advises her brother to talk to their parents in the hope that they will solve the problem. Bart informs his parents in a happy-go-lucky sort of way: "Hey, guys? Just so you don't hear any wild rumors, I'm being indicted for fraud in Australia". His father answers irritably: "That's no reason to block the TV". Later in the same episode, the Australian ambassador makes Bart choose between going to jail and apologizing to Australia. Homer thinks imprisonment seems rather fair for phony calls, but Marge refuses to send her little boy to jail. The family gets a free trip to Australia so that Bart can make his apology. Homer suggests that Bart should trick people in Florida next time so the Simpsons can have a vacation there too. Bart apologizes without meaning it. Soon after, he moons the Prime Minister and the whole family has to escape in a helicopter.

A distinct gender pattern can be seen in this episode. Bart and Homer are reckless and do not care about how their actions and refuse to take things seriously. They are merely having a good time. In contrast, Marge and Lisa are responsible and conscientious. Lisa wants to help her brother solve the problem and Marge is worried that Bart might become locked up. Bart never has to take responsibility for his phony calls. He is off the hook due to an apology he never meant. Further, his actions give the family a free stay in Australia.

Men are frequently pictured as immature and childish in *The Simpsons*. In *Marge vs. the Monorail*, the corrupt mayor argues with the chief of police about who is in charge when the town faces a crisis. During their dispute, many people's lives are at risk. The mayor and the chief of police are aware of the danger, but show no will to end the quarrel and save the citizens.

An analysis of the plot also shows that men do not have to listen to women. When a woman suggests something to a man, she is ridiculed or simply ignored. Homer makes fun of Lisa when she protests against the illegal cable TV in *Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment*.

When Marge (In *Marge vs. the Monorail*) suggests that Mr. Burns' money should be spent to fix the dilapidated Main Street, the chairman of the meeting, Mayor Quimby, amuses himself with pornographic playing cards. His attitude towards women represents the male-chauvinist opinion that men are superior to women and that men easily can reduce women by seeing them barely as sexual entertainment. By objectifying women, Quimby strips them of human status. No woman in the show treats men in the same disrespectful way. The crowd likes Marge's idea, but typically, as women are neither respected nor seen, Abe gets credit for her proposal.

Most of the time, women are depicted as weak and accommodating to men's reckless behavior. However, sometimes men have to ask women for help. In *Homer vs. Patty and Selma*, Homer needs to loan money from his sisters-in-law. He wishes that he did not have to ask Patty and Selma for the loan. He sees himself as the provider for the family and as such, he should be able to bring food to the table without involving anybody else, and especially not Marge's sisters. Patty and Selma are outspoken and not afraid to tell Homer what they think of him. It is hardly a coincidence that Homer and Patty and Selma do not get along. It is never stated in the show, but one reason for Homer's antipathy for his sisters-in-law could be that he is provoked by their independence and lack of femininity. The life they lead is quite different from other female characters' life-situation in the show. Neither Selma nor Patty has a family. They share an apartment and live without male company. Both of them work at the DMV and are not financially dependent on a man, unlike their sister Marge who is provided for by her husband. They are self confident and do not need a man to take care of them. Also, they are illustrated as heavily smokers. None of the above is connected with femininity in *The Simpsons*.

Obviously, there is a greater acceptance for men in the show to behave badly than for women to do the same. The male characters can be rather immature without having to face the consequences of their actions. They are accepted whatever they do. Women, on the other hand, are supposed to behave correctly and if they do not, they are ridiculed and disrespected. Male misbehavior is accepted, whereas female misbehavior is not. Perhaps that has to do with the fact that men commonly set the rules. They have the social, economic, military and political power that makes them superior. Their superiority also gives them higher status than women.

5 Summary and conclusion

This essay has described the portrayal of gender in four episodes of *The Simpsons* in terms of language, female and male activity and plot. The findings in this study illustrate that the portrayal of female and male characters, as well as their actions, are often gender specific.

A large part of the female names are shortened names or pet names, such as *Lisa* and *Maggie*. This pattern is not seen to the same extent amongst the male names: male characters are more often known by their full name. Even longer names such as *Montgomery* and *Sebastian*, which easily could be shortened, are not. The use of pet names to show familiarity is in line with the fact that women are more likely to be found in the domestic sphere than men.

Women and men are also described differently according to gender. There are more adjectives that describe the physical appearance of the female characters than the male ones. Another difference is that women are more often than men described in terms of their relationship to other people. For example, women are described as loyal *to* somebody. Adjectives do not describe men's interactions with others to the same extent. Moreover, a difference in the way that negative attributes are used to describe the characters can be found. The way a woman looks can be used as a means to ridicule her. It is more common to describe a male character as someone who is stupid or lacks intelligence.

Men in *The Simpsons* have more prestigious occupations than women. Only male characters work as political or religious leaders. Other high-status jobs such as working as a judge, a doctor or a scientist are reserved for men. Two of the female characters are housewives, an occupation that cannot be seen among male characters. The most common occupation for a woman is teaching. Even though a woman works outside her home, she is not referred to by her professional status. Men are more likely to be titled by profession and are in that sense more connected with their profession than women. There are several verbs in this study which state that men work, but no verbs that say that women do so. Further, the verbs describing what men do, are more often associated with aggressive and demeaning actions such as *kick* and *defile*. Such verbs cannot be found among female characters.

The study further shows that there is an immense difference between female and male visibility and representation. Male characters clearly outnumber female ones, and men speak

more than women in the episodes. It seems as if strong women talk more than women who lack strength. The gender roles in the plot are in line with the rest of the findings in the essay: characters are often described in accordance with their gender. Women are seen as highly moral with great concern for others. They behave thoughtfully and responsibly. Men, on the other hand, are allowed to be reckless and disrespectful. Despite their shortcomings, the male characters never seem to change. They come back, unchanged and unharmed.

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