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Gender Representation in Advertising of Toys in the Christmas Period (2009-12)

Abstract

This paper analyzes the representation of children's gender in toy advertising on television during three different periods. To achieve our purpose, this study examines seven variables: Toy typologies, Gender, Values, Voiceovers, Period, Actions depicted and Interaction between characters. These variables are taken from previous works that have studied the uses and preferences in toy selection according to gender, and research that studies the ways in which advertising represents children and toys. The sample comprises 595 toy commercials broadcast on the TVE1, TVE2, Telecinco, Antena 3, Cuatro, La Sexta, Boing and Disney Channel television channels. The period of study is October to January 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12. The choice of this period is because most toy commercials are broadcast for Christmas. The most important results are: the percentage of male characters is higher than female characters; the advertising of vehicles and action figures is associated with male characters; the values associated with vehicles and action figures are: competition, individualism, ability, physical development, creativity, power and strength, and the values associated with dolls and accessories are beauty and motherhood.

Keywords

Advertising, gender, children, representation, values, stereotypes, toys, television.
Publicidad, género, infancia, representación, valores, estereotipos, juguetes, televisión.

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1. Introduction

The earliest approaches to toys and play appear in Pedagogy and Psychology theory at the start of the 20th century. Pestalozzi wrote of the educational functionality of toys and stated that children should be given toys as a way of encouraging their first experiments because they act as a stimulus for ingenuity and observation (1928: 156). Vygotski said that the most important part of play was not satisfaction but the objective project, even though the child was not conscious of it (2003: 79). Huizinga defined free play as a cultural activity born out of reality but which adapts to the rules set by the players, and in which the child develops an imaginative action since the game is not everyday life but a sphere in which the child knows what to do as if it were so (2005: 25). Erikson provides another classic approach from the Psychoanalysis perspective in which he reflects on the theoretical development of the stages of youth, and concludes that between the ages of four and five the child is rehearsing future social roles through games, dressing up, stories and toys (2004: 144). A review of the research which is related to our study gives us a state of the question that groups together works according to their objectives. The most important studies on the gender-based uses and preferences in toy selection are Carter & Levy (1988) and Martin, Eisenbud & Rose (1995), whose aims were to measure the influence of social stereotypes in toy selection. They conclude that boys prefer toys that have already been assigned to their gender and reject those that have not. They also noted that boys tended to select toys according to taste in cases where there was no gender stereotyping. Cherney (2005), Martin, Eisenbud & Rose (1995), Bradbard & Parkman (1983), Bradbard (1985), Miller (1987) and Cherney (2005) analyze the selection preferences of a single gender only, while Becky Francis (2010) draws up categories of toys based on their educational value for children aged between 3 and 5. Cugmas (2010) sustains that a preference towards one toy or another relates to the child's imitation of the roles or behaviors they observe in their parents. Cherney & Dempsey (2010) study the features and uses of neutral toys compared to toys classified by gender, and conclude that the perception of the physical characteristics of the toy, its behavior and educational application depends on whether it is aimed specifically at boys or girls.

Important studies of advertising's forms and methods in representing boys and toys include Espinar (2007) and Cherney & London (2006), who identify the differences in the way infant girls and boys are depicted in the media. Other works measure and analyze the degree of regulatory compliance in terms advertising aimed at young children: Pérez-Ugena, Martínez & Salas (2010), Nicolás (2010) and Pérez-Ugena (2008). Bringué & de los Ángeles (2000) review studies of the subject from the Social Psychology and Cognitive Development perspective. Ruble, Balant & Cooper (1981) conclude that television and advertising influence the child's cognitive development. Liebert (1986) considers that children who watch a lot of TV have a greater tendency towards violence and stereotypical opinions of race and gender. Robinson, Saphir & Kraemer (2001) measure the time a group of 8-year-olds spent in front of the TV, watching videos and playing videogames, and determined that those who were less exposed to TV advertising asked for fewer

toy purchases from their parents. Pine & Nash (2003) state that 68% of boys and 78% of girls between 4 and 5 who watched a lot of television were favorably impressed by brand-name toys advertised on TV. Pine, Wilson & Hahs (2007) analyze child cognitive and psychological development in relation to the influence of TV content. Halford, Boyland & Cooper (2008) affirm that obese children tend to watch more TV and consume more of the brand-name products advertised on television than other youth groups. Bakir & Palan (2010) observe children aged between 8 and 9 and note differences in boys and girls in terms of attitude towards advertising, according to the gender and cultural implications of the content. Bakir, Blodgett & Rose (2008) state that the response to advertising stimuli depends not only on gender but also on age. Keller & Kalmus (2009) consider that the evaluation of brands and the degree of consumption in children in Slovenia was directly related to age, the level of education and economic status, not just to the socializing role that the media can play. Chan & McNeal (2004) state that the effects of advertising stimuli on children aged 6 to 14 in China depended on age, for as they get older they show a greater understanding of the economic relation between advertising and the television channel. Pine & Nash (2002) and Buijzen & Valkenburg (2000) measure the effect of advertising on children's lists of toy choices sent to Father Christmas or the Magic Kings. Along similar lines, the theoretical base and results provided by Ward, Walkman & Wartella (1977), Young (1990), Kunkel (1992), Steuter (1996) and Smith (1994), among others, are all worthy of note.

Other works directly related to this theme include Browne (1998), who compared advertising in the USA and Australia, concluding that males are projected as wiser, more active, aggressive and instrumental than females, and also that non-verbal conduct in males implied greater control and dominance than in females. Johnson & Young (2002) find that the language used in advertising has a bearing on gender differences and social stereotype representation, while Kahlenberg & Hein (2010) take a sample of 455 spot commercials to investigate the representation of gender stereotypes in minors in advertising on the «Nickelodeon» channel in 2004. This study analyzed stereotypes through gender representation, sexual orientation, age and the color of the surroundings in the advert settings to conclude that there were differences in the representation of children based on gender, in the use of the toys and in the environment of their use and socialization. Indoor contexts were most widely used in adverts for toys aimed at girls and outdoor contexts for boys. Recent research such as the «Study on boys, toys and the Internet» in 2012 looked at the process of toy purchases online.

Following this presentation of the state of the question, our study now analyzes the differences in gender representation in TV advertising for toys aimed at infants during three time periods (Christmas 2009, 2010 & 2011).

2. Material and methods

The opening hypotheses are: Hypothesis 1: there are gender differences in the advertising of children's toys broadcast over Christmas, as seen in the increase in adverts for dolls aimed at girls and for scale-model vehicles and war toys aimed at

boys. Hypothesis 2: TV advertising aimed at children foments the differences between boys and girls via stereotyping and the values already associated to each gender. Our sample consists of TV commercials for toys broadcast on TVE1, TVE2, Telecinco, Antena 3, Cuatro, La Sexta, Boing and Disney Channel between October and January 2009, 2010 and 2011. The channels selected are of the general interest type that broadcast nationwide and which transmit programming content aimed at children. Christmas was chosen as it is the period when most toy advertising is broadcast. We eliminated duplications from the sample as well as commercials for videogames since they are governed by specific self-regulatory codes. The final sample consisted of 595 adverts chosen at random over the three-year period analyzed. We developed a content analysis sheet based on Kahlenberg & Hein (2010), Blakemore & Centers (2005), Moreno (2003), Ferrer (2007), the Audiovisual Council of Andalusia, the 2008 CEACCU report, the Self-Regulatory Code for the Advertising of Children's Toys (1993 and 2011), the Self-Regulatory Code for Television Content and Children and the findings of the Monitoring Commission on Advertising for Children (2003). We took into account the General Law on Audiovisual Communication (7/2010) and the General Law on Advertising (34/1988), and also used these sources to produce a datasheet based on variables such as product type, the gender represented, messages-values, voiceovers, time period, actions represented and interaction between characters. We set up a control group of 10% of the spots, which were analyzed by each codifier. Afterwards, we analyzed all the results in order to avoid codification discrepancies (Kahlenberg & Hein, 2010).

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Toy types

The results show that 77.5% of the adverts focus on just five of toy types: dolls and accessories; action figures; table games; films and scale-model vehicles. The toy type most advertised across the three-year period was dolls and accessories. Advertising for scale-model vehicles and other figures fell in the third year while adverts for action figures, table games and films increased considerably (See table 1).

Toy typology	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Large vehicles	0.00	0.00	2.5
Scale-model vehicles	10.03	10.71	7.5
Building	4.75	8.93	1.25
Action figures	8.44	4.46	18.75
Educational	1.85	0.89	1.25
Electronic	0.53	8.04	0
Scene-based	0.53	0.89	0
Board games	9.50	2.68	16.25
Dolls and accessories	28.76	30.36	23.75

Film	2.37	1.79	11.25
Animals	6.07	4.46	5
Home imitation	1.58	2.68	0
Musical instruments	1.85	0.89	1.25
Sports	0.79	0.89	2.5
Manual	5.01	4.46	0
Other figures and accessories	10.03	8.93	0
Distributors	0.00	0.00	3.75
Other	7.92	8.93	5

Table 1. Toy typology and presence per time period.

3.2. Gender representation

The results confirm a tendency to equality in representing each gender because in the last of the three years analyzed the percentage of adverts featuring characters of both sexes increased. In 2009-2010, females represented 36.41% of appearances in adverts to 28.5% for males, with both appearing together in 28.5%. In 2010-2011, the percentage of adverts with females only and those with both sexes were the same (30.36%). In 2011-2012, the percentage of adverts including both sexes increased to 40% while those featuring either boys or girls were less than in the previous two years. There was a significant increase in adverts without actors from 2009-2010 (13.04%) to 19.64% in 2010-2011, although with a slight dip a year later (18.75%) which can be interpreted as a tendency towards neutrality in toy representation. The overlap of variables such as Gender Representation, Period and Toy Types shows that the female presence is concentrated on dolls and accessories, which increased in each period to reach 85.71%. Representation of both genders is found most frequently in board games and dolls and accessories, which rose over the three-year period. Male representation is mainly in adverts for action figures and scale-model vehicles, a fact which yielded an interesting result in our investigation, since the final period (2011-2012) saw a fall to 18.8% in the presence of male doll characters when accompanied by female doll characters. The representation of females in advertisements in Spain is clearly linked to the values, meanings and roles that advertising associates with the characters represented in this toy typology, along with those of toy animals and musical instruments. The presence of female characters alone, without male characters, is non-existent in all other typologies. This contrasts with the representation of male characters whose presence is spread across the spectrum of toy typologies, which we can assume to mean that the values, meanings and roles associated to male characters are more numerous and varied.

3.3. Voiceovers

The value with the greatest presence over the three-year period is the male voice-

over. In 2009-2010, it was 51.9% male to 46.7% female; in 2010-11, 49.11% to 42.85% and in 2011-12, 56.25% to 30%. The relation between the gender of the voiceover and the gender of the characters represented shows a tendency toward the use of voices of both genders combined: 0% in 2009-10, 4.55% in 2010-11 and 15.79% in 2011-12. The same pattern emerges for the female gender, since in 2011-12, 14.29% of adverts which featured only female characters used male and female off-screen voices whereas previously this option had never been used. What particularly stands out is the disappearance of the male voiceover in adverts which exclusively feature females. Although the male voiceover is the most widely used in commercials that feature characters of both sexes, its use fell slightly in the final period in favor of combined voiceovers, which increased: 1.85% in 2009-2010 against 15.63% in 2012.

In toy typology the data on scale-model vehicles particularly stand out. This typology uses the adult male off-screen voice on an average of 79.83% of adverts for this toy. This contrasts with an average of 66.09% of commercials for dolls and accessories which use a female voiceover. The use of male and female voiceovers is similar in proportion for home imitation toys, electronic toys and manual games and animals.

3.4. Values represented

In the analysis of the Values Represented, Interaction between Characters and Actions Represented variables, the data overlapped only for dolls and accessories, scale-model vehicles and action figures, which were the toy typologies that figured most prominently for each gender. The results contrast with the assumptions proposed following the analysis of gender representation. It was assumed that the variety of values and meanings associated with the male gender ought to be greater than the variety of meanings associated with the female gender due to the fact that the male is represented in more toy typologies than the female, yet the data show this assumption to be inaccurate since quantitatively there is more variety in the meanings associated to girls than to boys. The value that figures most prominently in the dolls and accessories and scale-model vehicles typologies is fun (44.5% and 60.7%). In dolls and accessories, the other significant values are beauty, motherhood and friendship, with a limited presence for the values of power, strength, ability and physical development. Power and strength is the value most present in the action figures toy type, with competition in second place; friendship, beauty and eternity do not figure in this typology. For scale-model vehicles, fun is the most prominent value followed by competition and power and strength. We found similar data for action figures, since the friendship value is only present in 7.14% of adverts and beauty and motherhood in only 1.79%.

These three typologies scored low, less than 5%, for values such as individualism (1.2% in dolls and accessories, 0% for scale-model vehicles and 3.9% for action figures), ability and physical development (0.6%, 3.6% and 2% respectively) and integration (5% for dolls and accessories and absent in the other two types).

3.5. Actions represented

The actions most widely represented in the dolls and accessories toy type are: affection-nutrition (35.8%), domestic actions and embellishment (both 28.4%), actions which are barely visible or non-existent in adverts that feature male characters. The actions most widely used in adverts for scale-model vehicles and action figures are: competition (32.1%), risk-taking (30.4%) and shows of strength (16.1%). Competition is present in 53% of adverts for action figures followed by strength (51%), with risk-taking actions appearing in 35.3% of cases. Actions that represent specific professions account for less than 10% across all toy typologies.

3.6. Interaction between characters

The lack of interaction between characters is notable in the commercials, especially for action figures (51%) and scale-model vehicles (41.1%). In dolls and accessories, the type of interaction most commonly found is friendship (46.9%) followed by non-interaction (27.1%). In action figures, friendly interactions amount to no more than 9.8% of ads while enmity and fighting account for 15.69%. This type of interaction is found in 5.36% of cases for scale-model vehicles but is non-existent in dolls and accessories. We also find maternal-filial interactions in dolls and accessories (7.4% of ads) but which appear in no other top type. Family interactions occur in 7.1% of commercials for scale-model vehicles, in 6.2% for dolls and accessories but they are absent from all action figure commercials.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In Hypothesis 1, the representation of infant genders in advertising for children's toys according to the toy typology advertised varies greatly. Although parity in gender representation increased over the three years, this is restricted mainly to adverts for electronic toys, toys for manual play and toy animals. Female characters predominate in adverts for dolls and accessories although more male characters were starting to appear in supporting roles. Male characters are more often found in commercials for building toys, scale-model vehicles and action figures. These results tie in with works by Blackmore, LaRue & Olejnik (1979), Carter & Levy (1988), Martin, Eisenbud & Rose (1995), Campbell, Shriley, Heywood & Crook (1988) and Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, Colburne, Sen & Eischted (2001), who all concluded that toy selection is determined by gender and age. Young boys prefer toys that involve dexterity and spatial skills while girls look for dolls and educational toys. These conclusions also match those of works on gender in primates such as Alexander & Hines (2002). In terms of other types of studies, such as Freeman (2007), Cugmas (2010) and Blackmore & Centers (2005), which examined the influence of parents and teachers and their roles in children's toy selection, our research reaffirms that the male voiceover is used more than the female, which suggests that the male voice is still considered more socially legitimate. Gender segmentation is apparent in that the female voice predominates in adverts which feature girls and the male voice for boys, while the male voice is

heard in ads in which both boys and girls appear. The presence of adults in toy advertising is virtually non-existent; and then only in ads for board games and for electronic toys in which the father puts in an appearance. Self-regulatory codes and positive legislation insist on parity in gender representation and the avoidance of sexist content in advertising for minors, yet differences in the main toy typologies continue to exist although it is fair to say that gender representation is becoming more equal. Hypothesis 2 states that advertising for toys aimed at children resorts to values and stereotypes that vary according to the gender of the characters represented and the toy type being advertised, as indicated by Johnson & Young (2002) and Blackmore & Centers (2005). The values associated to both genders and disseminated across the toy typology spectrum are: fun, education, solidarity and individualism. However, more common are the values clearly differentiated by gender. Beauty is linked to the dolls and accessories toy type while this value appears in only 1.7% of commercials for scale-model vehicles. Motherhood and seduction appear in equal proportion in commercials for girls. For boys, ability and physical development are associated to scale-model vehicles and the male gender in 3.57% of cases, which is low, yet in 50% of commercials in which this value appears it is associated to this toy type and to this gender. The power and strength value features in 19.64% of commercials for scale-model vehicles and in 72.55% for action figures while it is only apparent in 0.62% of commercials for dolls and accessories. The competition value also shows clear differences in gender representation. In 93.75% of commercials it is linked to male characters. It appears in 25% of ads for scale-model vehicles and action figures but is marginal (1.23%) in dolls and accessories. Our study also shows that physical beauty, domesticity and motherhood are values that are widely represented in ads for girls' toys. Although the motherhood value could be justified on physiological grounds and progenitor imitation, the use of beauty as a value linked exclusively to the female gender could be construed as a social message that inseparably connects beauty and women. Likewise, the use of the power and strength value in commercials aimed at boys contributes to a social discourse that promotes the differences between ability and qualities associated to each gender. The advertisements for children's toys encourage message types that tell girls to nurture their beauty and boys to concentrate on their power and strength. This is reinforced by voiceovers spoken in exaggerated tones, as indicated by Klinnder, Hamilton & Cantrell (2001), Johnson & Young (2002) and Del Moral (1999), and shows that advertising contributes to social representation and gender differentiation, as stated by Belmonte & Guillamón (2008), and influences the responsibility and social function of advertising in terms of culture configuration. The study of gender representation figures constantly in academic research, and from the functionalist perspective of communication studies advertising is also to be understood as an instrument in social education. Teachers and communicators must denounce those practices that encourage social discrimination based on gender. If advertising responds to a shift in social behavior which, thanks to the consumer, benefits the advertiser, shouldn't the advertising industry repay society by promoting social change that leads to greater gender equality? If, as previous works have shown, toys are fundamental instruments in the child's so-

cial and cognitive development then legislation must insist that toy advertisers promote a more equal representation of gender and with greater variety because there are clear differences in gender representation between toy commercials for boys and girls. From the educational viewpoint, toy advertising for children must encourage toy presentation from a more neutral perspective, more centered on the product than on symbolic stimulation via consumer representation/identification. An example of this was in Sweden during Christmas 2012, when a well-known brand of toys produced a unisex catalogue of toys that promoted the toys in their own right rather than from a gender perspective. It showed a girl firing a gun and a boy rocking a baby to sleep (Castillo, 2012). This could be a means of change towards social transformation, and it is a challenge that advertisers ought to take up.

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