

WORKING PAPER SERIES

2016-MKT-08

The societal impact of children genderization in advertisement

Clémence Letranchant
IESEG School of Management

Julie Lauré
IESEG School of Management

Galdric Maureau
IESEG School of Management

Laura Tridoux
IESEG School of Management

Monali Hota
IESEG School of Management (LEM-CNRS - UMR 9221)

The societal impact of children genderization in advertisement

Clémence Letranchant – IÉSEG School of Management (FRANCE)

Julie Lauré – IÉSEG School of Management (FRANCE)

Galdric Maureau – IÉSEG School of Management (FRANCE)

Laura Tridoux - IÉSEG School of Management (FRANCE)

Monali Hota, IESEG School of Management, LEM-CNRS (UMR 9221)

The societal impact of children genderization in advertisement

Abstract

This paper discusses genderization impacts on children, regarding several authors. Moreover, it goes beyond these impacts and suggests the existence of a model, that consequences can lead to societal issues for children, depending on their affiliation to a group or an individualistic mind. Unlike most researchers, this model deals with negative but also positive outcomes on children, who mostly need a framework at early age. A conceptual framework suggesting hypothesis from previous researches and conceptual methodological critic are developed in the paper, before it goes through conclusions and recommendations.

Introduction

During all the precedent century, we have assisted to evolutions concerning education, employment and the role of women in general in societies around the world. Nevertheless, the toys market and marketing around toys did not really changed through the years. Gender stereotypes and negative messages are always, in 2016, a relevant problematic to study and that is why we had chosen this subject.

Boys play with airplane and cars when girls play with kitchen sets and dolls. Children are conditioned to play with some toys and not others, because of the gender differentiation. Big companies such as WalMart and Toys R Us have recently agreed to turn down their gender-specific children's marketing strategies but it is still a difficulty for toys companies in general. Because of that, we assisted to negative impacts in children's behavior regarding their learning and attitude. Modeling, playing and attributing some roles in plays and toys is a way to develop children's minds, behaviors and attitudes. This has an impact on their future lives. In ads, marketers are used to choose some girls to promote dolls and pink toys, and boys for cars or others blue toys. These ads are diffused when children are watching the television, they are targeted by brands and this is the first step of stereotypes. The most evident issue of genderization is the social stigma of girls who are considered as weaker and more sensitive than boys. However, some boys have strong difficulties to assume their interest in toys or products classified as "girls" products. Being seen as weak for a little boy is very hard, since even when they are young they are seen as stronger and less sentimental.

This "gender advertisement" has started after the Second World War, but disappeared in the 1970's. However, since 1995 companies have identified a financial potential by targeting boys or girls in order to segment the market in restricted demographic groups. In northern countries, studies had been done on Christmas catalogues, here are some relevant results: Pink and violet clothes are used on 50% of the girls, but only 1% of the boys. Blue is mostly used for boys (35% of total clothes). Toys regarding weapons, vehicles and science refer to boys with respectively 92%, 78% and 77% of the adverts; while girls are mostly used to represent creativity (60% in musical toys and 73% in artistic ones).

As said previously, recently some companies have decided to change their strategy and propose un-gendered toys. In 2012, Toys'R'us' catalogue wasn't gendered anymore, and some British brands have not specialized the storage of the toys by shelves, which they were used to do before. Boys and girls segmentation has been such noticed that it was criticized. But the removal of gendered toys advertisement has also been questioned. As for Andrea Tantaros, Fox News presenter, it is a way to

deny natural differences between genders. Critics went further, telling that sexism removal could encourage homosexuality at early age.

Finally, some companies have even decided to go one step further by defending gender equality and not just removing gender differentiation. To do so, the brand *Always* created a very famous video which went viral on TV and on the internet, named “#likeagirl”, and with the powerful slogan “*When did something “like a girl” become an insult?*” This video shows how much stereotypes are fixed in the children’s mind; girls are weak, boys are strong. Girls can only play with “girls’ toys” and boys with “boys’ toy”. Girls in pink, boys in blue. All this stereotypes are continually shown in marketing as this video is telling us. But after this interpellation, some brands reacted to this problem. More and more, we can find commercial advertising including children that are against the idea that some toys are created for one kind of gender only. In 2014, Goldie box created an advertising named “*Princess Machine*” showing girls that are rebelling against Barbie. This video ends with the slogan “*toys for future engineers*”. The message of the company is way different from the traditional message sent to the children. Girls can, for one time, be dreaming of construction and huge project for their careers.

In conclusion, Toys sold have very specific attributes designed to create a gap between girls and boys. However, some companies are trying to reduce the gap by offering no-gender differentiation advertising or even by promoting equality. Remodeling the framework of gender means modifying children position in a group. It has a strong impact on how a child feels in today’s society. For that reason, we will investigate on: **How genderization impact children’s position in the society?** To do so, our first objective is to identify which are the different sources of genderization in toys. We want to understand which factors of the product will really permit to classify the toy as designed for girls or for boys. This first objective will permit us to understand which factors create genderization, and how company could work on them to reduce or on the contrary create gender differentiation. Finally, our second objective is to understand what is the potential impact of genderization in the children’s position. Using or not gender differentiation in a company’s strategy will help the child to either position himself as belonging to a group or either be a unique individual. Each of the strategy could have positive or negative impact on the child perception of himself. For that reason, we want to identify what are the potential consequences of genderization and how it impacts the child perception.

Conceptual framework

Toys attribute

The function of the toy and especially the attributes permit to classify the toy as for girls or boys. Cynthia L. Miller (1987) has revealed in her study that toys included in the categories of competition and aggressiveness were related to boys. On the contrary, attractiveness is more related to girls’ toys. Further, toys for girls are higher ranked on manipulability, creativity, and nurturance. On the contrary, toys for boys are higher ranked on symbolic play, constructiveness, handling, and sociability.

That shows that the attributes of the toys, and how each toy performs on each characteristic, will be linked to the gender of the kid playing with it. For that reason, it seems that the toys’ attributes are a source of genderization (H1).

Gender differentiation and age

“Research also indicates that children's gender-role stereotypes vary by gender. Due to developmental differences, boys and girls—of the same age group—hold somewhat different views of gender-appropriate behavior. In general, girls have been shown to hold more flexible views regarding gender-roles. Compared to boys, younger females are more accepting of both genders' participation in household tasks (Hageman and Gladding, 1983). Accordingly, the type of appeals that might be effective in targeting girls might not be as effective when targeting boys. »

This research is also based on the fact that boys are more “agentic”, in others words, focused on themselves, and girls more “communal”, more focused on the group harmony. The perception of ads is different between boys and girls, at the same age, some marketers have to define different strategies when they are targeting boys or girls.

Secondly, concerning ages of children too, we have seen that through the years, boys and girls became less sensitive to the gender differentiation. Younger they are, more attentive they will be about boys' games and girls' game.

“Early on, as children become aware of gender-role differences, their preference for same-gender activities and objects increases (Edelbrock and Sugawara, 1978; Fagot, 1985), and they become somewhat rigid in their views. However, at later ages they become more flexible and acknowledge a wider range of gender-appropriate activities and occupations. »

Genderization fostered by Advertisement Complexity

The foreground of our research is based on the hypothesis of what has created genderization. Actually one of the main factors in TV advertisement that enhanced the segmentation was the duration of ads which were reduced from 60 to 30 seconds (according to Alexander et al. 1998). Therefore companies have started to make ads more complex, they have used “several different strategies to win children's attention, such as endorsements, visual effects, verbal and visual disclaimers and prizes” (Barcus, 1971). This clearly shows the tendency to attract the attention so that the child can project himself using the product.

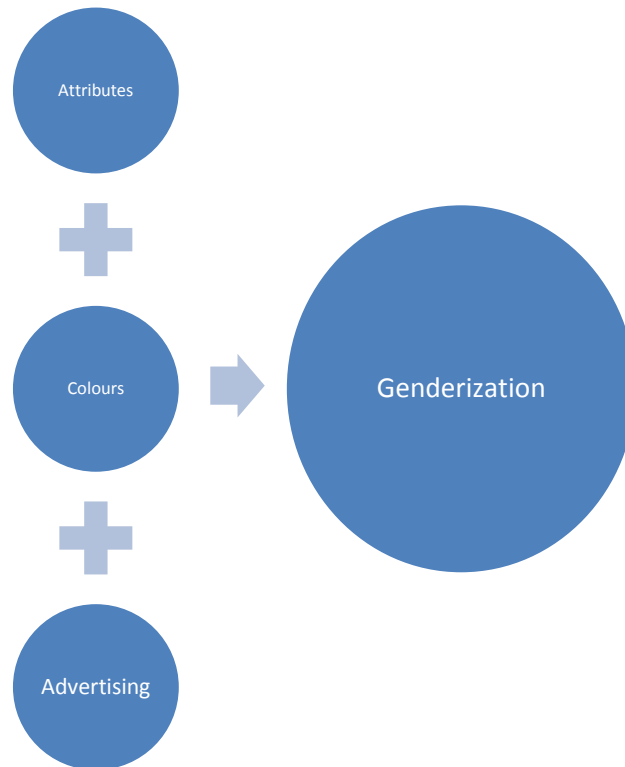
Our hypothesis here is more focused on the Type of toy in advertisement. For instance, as said in the introduction, weapons better fits with boys; they will easier be envisaging playing with it than girls. Browne (1998) has reinforced that argument by identifying how advertisement assign boys or girls different personality traits; which encourage stereotypes with active, aggressive, and knowledgeable boys while girls seem more creative and instrumental.

Children' perception of toys with TV adds

Today's children have a better access to information than before. Which mean that they have a constant access to advertisement. So we ask ourselves what was their reaction seeing such commercials, what kind of link are they making in their heads? In the paper of Klinger (2001), this impact of toys commercials on children is studied. The authors are trying to highlight the perception of little boys and girls by rating four main points of the advertisement: the aggressiveness, stereotypes sex-role behavior, gender-based appropriateness and the imagined play with the toy. The main results that came out of the paper are that *“Both girls and boys rated all the commercials as sex-role stereotyped. The children also indicated they would rather play with boys-toys than girls-*

toys” or also that “Male-focused commercials and imagined play with these depicted toys were rated more aggressive than neutral and female-focused commercials and their respective toys”.

To conclude, we can make the hypothesis that children have the perception that TV add reinforce the genderization in the society.



List of Hypothesis:

- H1: Toys’ attributes are a source of genderization
- H2: TV Advertising is an important source of genderization
- H3: Boys will be more sensitive to ads which provide agentic attributes
- H4: Girls will be more sensitive to ads which provide communal attributes
- H5: Girls and boys at the same age have not the same preoccupations and behaviors so ads have to be well defined to attract boys and girl.

Conceptual and methodological critique

As we have seen before, some criteria seem to be factors of genderization. Toys’ attributes, ads with agentic attributes or communal attributes, and behaviors of boys and girls at the same age. To resume, attributes, colors and advertising are, in our hypothesis, some channels of diffusion for genderization.

Aysen Bakir, Jeffrey G. Blodgett, Gregory M. Rose stipulate in their study that *“though many of the agentic/ instrumental and communal/expressive gender-role attributes are positive, others describe the focal gender in a more negative manner.”*

In this report, genderization has some negatives effects on children. The association of males with leadership, independence and strength can be a weakness for girls or women, who could feel lower concerning these capabilities than males. Moreover, males are associated to aggressiveness, domination and self-centeredness. Little boys could be affected by this feeling in ads, and could become more aggressive or dominant, just to reach some “social standards”. Girls are associated to indecisiveness, dependence and empathy. One time more, this could affect characters of children at school, and in society in general.

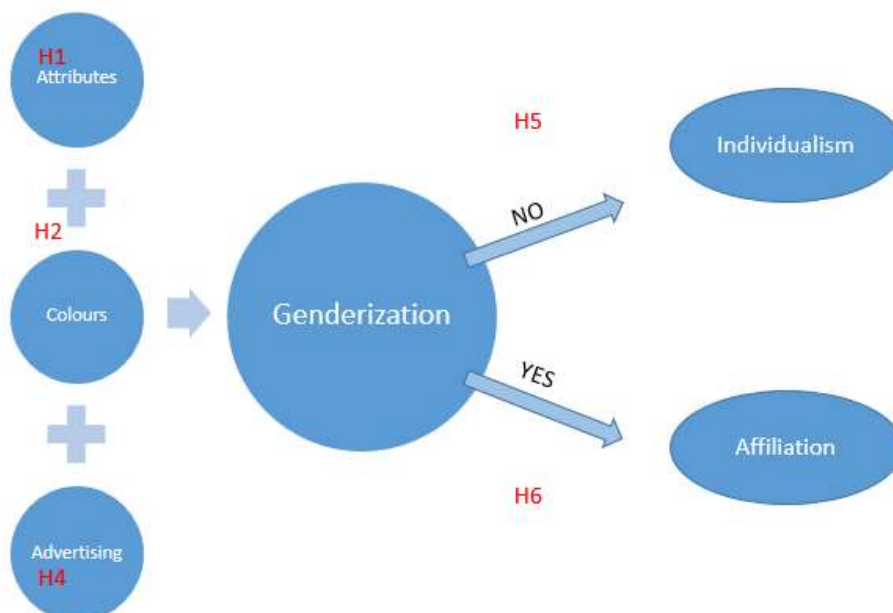
“The third frame consisted of a collage showing children engaged in different activities—swimming in a pool, running, and playing soccer—in which the goal was to win, thus depicting competitiveness and aggressiveness. The final frame depicted four children running, with one child passing the finish line and winning the race. In contrast to the agentic storyboard, the communal storyboard depicted children in noncompetitive group activities. »

The genderization of children and adolescents seems to be an area where significant gaps exist. Prior research has placed a lot of emphasis on the negative impacts of genderization. However there is a clear lack of research and attention to positive aspects, this missing part needs to be pointed out in order to have a complete view of genderization.

Conclusion

We found in the paper what factors reinforce genderization and how, but what is coming after the genderization? What are the real impacts of this for children? Is it a positive impact, a negative impact or both?

We observe that there is a missing part on the framework graph. It corresponds to the possible impact that using genderization or not in a company’s strategy can have on children. This corresponds to two different relationships that a child could have regarding others.



The first one is the Individualism. We refuse that children belong to a group. Each one of them need to grow up by himself, to think by himself, to make his own choices, and not to do it within a group. This behavior is a good way to protect a child from all the stereotypes that can be transmitted in our everyday life. By reading the previous papers, we could think that this is a good idea because, as we said before, authors highlight the negative impact of advertisement on children. But is Individualism a very good idea? Indeed, it can be good for a child to grow up without following a group, to have no pressure of not being like the others; but isn't the fact of belonging to a group very important for all humans? The feeling of belonging to nothing may also have a very negative impact on a child.

The second one is on the contrary, the Affiliation to a group. It's the opposite of what we have said in the previous paragraph. It is the fact to separate gender, to put each child in one specific group that he needs to follow all the time (i.e Girls love the pink, boys the blue, girls are weaker than boys, etc..) Once again, is it a positive or negative proposition for children? Each person can be complying with the feeling of not being alone, of belonging to an important group. There is definitely a positive aspect to affiliation. Belonging to a group can help a child to identify himself to other individuals. Every person needs references in her life to follow and get inspired by their way of doing things. But is not the negative affect of stereotypes way too hard to handle than being by his own?

To conclude, it is very important for companies to understand how genderization impacts children. Choosing or not to differentiate kids by their gender is a real strategic position taken by the company. For that reason, it is important for them to identify all the pros and cons. Nowadays, there is a strong debate going around on the genderization. Some companies insist on the fact that it is impossible to change years of doing so, and the consequences of that change could be very disruptive for children. However, some others think that it is important to change mentalities. And by comforting kids at early age that there is no difference between girls and boys that will permit them to spread the word and create a more equal society.

Recommendations for future research

For that reason, this study is a good opportunity for companies to identify which strategy might be more interesting and which one will have less negative impact, or on the contrary, more positive impact, on children. In other words, it will help the company creating a strategy around gender differentiation or not in order to position its marketing campaign.

Future research on the genderization of advertisement should be done to understand well how negative or positive can be the impact of genderization, of TV ads for example, on children. This new research should manage to ask children how positive and negative they feel about being part of a group or evolving by themselves. It should combine both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to confirm the hypothesis from one part and to analyze the results from another. Finally, if marketing directors change their way of thinking and remove all the stereotypes between boys and girl, would it be better for the children? What impact can it generate? This could be the subject of future paper, to understand the link between this two categories and children.

Bibliography

- “How gender-specific toys can negatively impact a child’s development” by Alice Robb, 2015, <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/08/12/how-gender-specific-toys-can-negatively-impact-a-childs-development/>
- “Toys for Kids, some figures to measure sexism” by Pascal Riché, December 2013, <http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2013/12/14/jouets-enfants-quelques-chiffres-mesurer-sexisme-248340>
- Cynthia L. Miller (1987), Qualitative differences among gender-stereotyped toys: implications for cognitive and social development in girls and boys
- *Genderization in Brazilian toy advertisements* Authors: ANDRES VELOSO - UNIVERSITY OF SAO PAULO Advertising, Promotion and Marketing Communications Co-author(s): Vitor Nogami (UNIVERSITY OF SAO PAULO) / Sofia Ferraz (UNIVERSITY OF SAO PAULO) / Gabriela Gebara (UNIVERSITY OF SAO PAULO)
- *Children’s perceptions of aggressive and gender-specific content in toy commercials*. Authors: Lori J.Klinger, James A.Hamilton, and Peggy J.Cantrell; East Tennessee State University, USA.
- *Children’s Responses to Gender-Role Stereotyped Advertisements*. Authors: Aysen Bakir, Jeffrey G. Blodgett, Gregory M. Rose