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## **How Commercial Advertising Enforces Gender Stereotypes among Children and the Ways This Affects Them Psychologically**

Abigail Frisoli<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract: Some people believe that children of different sexes are born with completely separate preferences and mindsets which are permanent and predetermined. However, children are very influenced by their surroundings, which is often the main deciding factor which is predetermined by parents and caretakers from birth. Separating children by gender puts them into boxes, stunting their ability to make their own decisions and creating stereotypes. This segregation is painfully apparent in commercial advertising and is proven to have affected children psychologically in ways that can be detrimental.*

Key words: Gender, stereotypes, children, commercials, advertising, psychological effects, toys, societal conditioning, product placement, advertisement analysis.

The things that people say about gender and the stereotypes that children are exposed to can affect their mindset and future interactions. Though some people may raise the notion that gender stereotypes are in some instances essential sex differences between genders, no child is born wholly with any prejudice or notion that one gender or race is different than another. These are things that they piece together from the social cues around them, which can be detrimental to their interactions with other people in the future. Difference in gender is something that is instilled in most children from an early age. For instance, with baby gender reveals, pink always means girl and blue always means boy because these are the colors that society has chosen to separate these two genders. As these children learn and grow, parents often make gendered choices about their children they may not even consciously realize that they are making. These choices include, but are not limited to, solely introducing a child to toys marketed towards one gender and referring to their sons as inquisitive while deeming their daughters as sensitive before these traits are even developed.

Small children are therefore learning at a young age that certain toys and behaviors are for certain genders, and they may never get exposure to those designated for the opposite gender. Taking this a step further, the toys that are geared towards boys often promote problem-solving and cognitive skills, while the toys that are marketed for young girls often teach girls the skills that they should learn if they were to be doing work around the house. Most children's commercial advertising is targeted towards specific genders and enforce fixed gender roles, divided between the hackneyed sweet, feminine girls and loud, rowdy

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boys. When children's advertisements enforce the stereotypical separation of the male and female genders, it affects a child's ability to express himself or herself in a way that feels natural and can stunt a child's ability to make his or her own decisions, build relationships within the opposite gender, and to not become conditioned to all-inclusive forms of stereotyping. This division of the sexes at a young age also makes bullying among children an easier playing ground.

### **The Division of Sexes and Enforcement of Stereotypes through Toys**

Instilment of the separation of genders begins at an early age. University of Kentucky professor and author of the book *Parenting Beyond Pink and Blue: How to Raise Your Kids Free of Gender Stereotypes*, Christina Spears Brown confirms that gender consciousness in choosing toys is nonexistent in babies and only presents itself once children begin to pick up social cues about the two genders, which she says happens during the ages of four to five. In fact, studies have found that, in the case of a group of 14-month-old baby boys and girls, the toy in highest demand among the boys was a tea set, which was played with for double the amount of playtime that a truck, train, and motorcycle parking kit received. In the girl babies, these three "boy-gendered" toys got equal to the playing time that dolls did, at 9 percent (Fine and Rush 775). Although at first glance there seems to be a clear divide between what is a toy for boys and what is a toy for girls, Brown explains: "All toys are gender neutral. What is not neutral is the way toys are marketed." This is where the divide begins.

There are clear differences in the appearance and function of toys based on gender. Toys intended for girls are often pink and either are geared to teach girls how to help girls learn how to embrace their role of taking care of others at a young age or are some kind of fantasy toy, such as a fairy princess or a pop star. Meanwhile, the toys marketed to boys often consist of problem-solving and brain stimulation, while some help boys try out various jobs, so that they can get an early idea of what they want to do with their life in the future. "Not surprisingly, the aisles designed for young girls are shockingly pink, focused on beauty, fashion and family role-play, while boys' aisles contain toys that are more centered around destruction, action and building," Jordyn Atkinson observes. "Commercials for stores such as Toys 'R' Us and Walmart depict each gender in different scenes playing separately with their relatively stereotypical toys, such as guns or baby dolls."

Furthermore, girls' toys are often sexualized in a way that boys' toys are not, and boys' toys often exude dominance in a way that girls' toys do not. Take girls' "dolls" and boys' "action figures," which are, in essence, the same type of product: figures that are meant to look like people and be played with as though the figures were people. In a study affiliated with Kenyon College, popular dolls and action figures were analyzed—in particular, the body proportions of these toys in reference to how they were gendered and

the degree to which these proportions were supplementary to what they referred to as “heterosexual success.” In the study, a total of 72 popular dolls and 71 popular action figures were examined. It was found that 62 percent of dolls were given what was referred to as a “noticeably thin body,” while 42.3 percent of action figures had what was classified as “noticeably muscular bodies.” Additionally, it was found:

more thin dolls were portrayed with more sex object features than less thin dolls, including revealing, tight clothing and high-heeled shoes; bodies positioned with a curved spine, bent knee, and head cant; and with a sexually appealing facial expression. More muscular male action figures were more likely than less muscular ones to be shown with hands in fists and with an angry, emotional expression, suggesting male dominance. (Boyd and Murnen 1)

Although dolls and action figures are the same type of toy, the bodies of dolls are built completely different than the bodies of the action figures, tailoring the dolls to fit what companies think that boys and girls should want to play with. Seemingly absent is the availability of toys to girls who are more dominant than submissive and the availability of toys to boys that are not in perfect shape and who are gentler in personality. Ken dolls do fit the gentler personality card, even though he is in perfect shape, giving unrealistic body expectations. These dolls are marketed strictly towards girls, however, so it is not common, or even likely, for a girl to ask for or receive a Ken. Additionally, Ken is designed for the sole purpose of being Barbie’s boyfriend (Weaver 1), which would create the same issue in boys that we find in girls, who are being marketed toys that teach them to be the perfect future wife and mother.

It is true that for the most part, children gravitate to the toys of their specific gender, but this is all due to “societal conditioning” (Atkinson). It was found that parents who have sets of twins with one girl and one boy often described their children as thinking differently than one another even in infancy. These assumed differences are partially what encourage parents to choose specific toys for the two different genders. One parent described his twin girl and boy, saying: “He’s just a different type of thinker, he likes puzzles and putting things together and taking things apart and she likes imaginary worlds. I think it is the natural gender specific tendency that girls are more creative and the boys are more on the logic, science” (Cabbage 45). While there are certainly differences in the way that male and female sex hormones affect brain development in infants it is nurture, much more than nature, that truly helps a child grow into his or her own during these most formative years. Additionally, if the chemical reactions were truly so different between girls and boys, then these children should still be exposed to all types of toys in order to grow the skills that they possess and build what they are lacking in order to develop into well-rounded individuals.

It is not as though children do not notice that certain toys, they think they might have fun playing with are only marketed as gender-specific. For instance, there was a viral video

that came out in 2011 where a young girl was going on a rant about how girls want to play with superheroes just as much as boys do and how boys can like princesses just as much as girls can, asking “Why does all the girls have to buy pink stuff and all the boys have to buy different color stuff?” (Fine and Rush 769).

### **The Power of Product Placement and Advertisements**

Although there is no rule that states that girls cannot purchase a boy’s toy and vice versa, it is very hard for them to get exposure to these toys. Boys’ and girls’ toys are often in separate aisles altogether, and it is easy for a child to tell which aisle is theirs because they are already picking up on social cues, such as the gendered colors of blue and pink, which define these segregated aisles. As Paechter observes, “a major UK supermarket chain has shelves labeled ‘boys’ toys’ and ‘girls’ toys,’ with the former holding a wide variety of playthings, particularly those that involve physical activity, including frisbees, water guns, waveboards, cycling helmets, bats, balls and other outdoor equipment, and the latter mainly displaying dolls, soft toys and craft sets” (66). Even parents who try to keep gender conformity to a minimum for their child may not even realize that their child does not have any exposure to the learning characteristics of the toys of the other gender because they are not aware that toys labeled for boys and girls teach such different things. These children also may not even realize that they may have an inkling for something out of the socially constructed realm of their gender because they have no exposure to these toys and therefore have no idea that they are even there. On the website of the organization Let Toys Be Toys, it reads: “Other buyers may simply be unaware of the restricted choices they are offered. They may not notice that science kits and construction toys are missing from the ‘girls’ section, or art & crafts and kitchen toys from the ‘boys.’ If they’re never offered the chance, a child may never find out if they enjoy a certain toy or style of play.” This site discusses also how children are looking for social clues as they learn about the world and are absorbing these messages on what society believes that girls and boys should prefer. It also again states how this could “turn children away from their true preferences,” as these children have no idea what they are missing, or they do but ignore the toys that they truly want to play with because they feel as though it is the wrong choice, so they ignore the feeling. As a solution, Let Toys Be Toys tosses around the idea of retailers stocking toys by “theme and function” as opposed to by gender.

How stores are laid out is not the only problem. Commercial advertising on television is another big culprit when it comes to the gendering of toys. One study conducted by Saatçlier (1997) found that 40 percent of boys watch television for more than 3 hours, while 40 percent of girls watch television for only 2-3 hours (Şener, Güven, and Boylu 22). In the 1970s, research showed that children under age eight could not distinguish between commercials and non-commercial TV programming. Children younger than four could not

distinguish between commercial advertising and reality. Nonetheless, children have far better brand recognition than adults, and children younger than three tend to have simple yet powerful responses to advertisements; there's a correlation between these children seeing other children enjoying their use of a toy and this leads to their want for the toy.

Children are a hugely marketable population. In 1995, children spent \$15 billion dollars of their own money, \$11 billion of which went to toys, games, clothes, candy, and snacks. When marketing their products, companies are aware that children are relentless and intense in bothering their parents to make a purchase and consider children to be "Trojan Horses" to sell their merchandise to families. According to a study carried out in England, a child watches around 140,000 advertisements until he turns into 18" (Şener, Güven, and Boylu 22). This translates to a lot of products and media for children to ask for.

### **Advertisement Analysis**

Although there are clearly some commercials out there that feature both genders and promote a toy as marketable to boys and girls, most commercials are separated among genders and have different traits depending on which gender it is appealing to. For example, boys' toy commercials use some of the same rhetoric. This includes words like power, hero, stealth, powerful, vehicle, blasting, and beat (Smith 1). These words have a lot of power and assertion behind them. Some of these words are also things that are more available to boys, such as the word "vehicle." It also includes language of what a young boy is expected to acquire as he becomes a man, such as the words "power" and "stealth." The rhetoric behind commercials geared towards girls are clearly very different. They feature words such as love, magic, babies, mommy, dress, friendship, style, glitter, and delicious (Smith 1). It is apparent that these words are more passive than the ones that appear in commercials geared towards the male gender. They suggest that girls play with things that involve activity inside of the home rather than outside, are more centered towards romance and learning compassionate skills, and are more bubbly and fantastical in comparison to the action-packed vocabulary one might find to describe a boy's toy (Smith 1). Although these descriptions may be accurate for the toy that they are promoting, it should not be used to choose the audience. According to *Children and Advertising: What Do They Think About Advertisements, How Are They Affected by Advertisements?* "Among girls, the most watched advertisement type is 'personal care advertisements' with a ration of 72.2%, whereas this ration is found to be 18.8% for boys. The majority of the boys (82.9%) stated 'car advertisements' as the most watched advertisement type" (Şener, Güven, and Boylu 25). Young girls should also be allowed to have adventures and learn the rowdy skills that are encouraged in boys, and, in turn, boys should be allowed to show their compassionate and artistic side and not be discouraged from using toys such as EZ Bake Ovens and kitchen sets.

In a “Barbie Folding Pretty House” commercial from the 1990s, features of the house are shown off that stereotypically it was assumed most girls should like—for instance, the kitchen and the bathroom. The word family is mentioned in this commercial, and it can be assumed that the reason a girl would receive this dollhouse is so that she can learn the skills to take care of her future family and to get her excited about this role. The house consists of only two colors: pink and white, Barbie’s signature. The color pink is something that is most often associated with girls. It has a delicate connotation and is representative of love. This color is also associated with the notion of being sweet and cute, or charming and romantic. Pink items that are often associated with these terms are candy, gum, and roses (Bourn Creative Project). The color white is representative of purity and innocence, something that is not only expected of young girls, but oftentimes carries over as an expectation for women all the way up through young adulthood. This color also represents cleanliness (Bourn Creative Project). This concept of cleanliness draws a parallel with the multitude of boys’ toys that encourage going out and getting dirty. There are only girls featured within the commercial until the very end. Only Barbie and her sisters are shown inside of the house, only girls are playing with the house and the dolls, and only girls are singing the song that plays throughout the commercial, describing the house in detail. The only time that consumers get a glimpse of a man throughout the entire commercial is when a Ken doll is shown at the very end, grilling outside. This is one of the few household activities that, stereotypically, men are supposed to be involved in and excited about. Ken is wearing the color blue, which is most commonly used to represent the male gender as opposed to the girls’ pink (Bourn Creative Project). Blue is something that symbolizes freedom, imagination, intelligence, and confidence, all of which most parents stereotypically, as previously discussed, would expect their young sons to have, and would expect to find in their daughter’s choice of spouse because these are traits that are assumed to not be present within the daughter herself.

In comparison, one could look at a Hot Wheels commercial from the 1990s. There is one boy playing with the cars in this commercial. He is dressed in black, which blends him in with the background, and his body is completely covered besides his eyes, as he is even wearing a mask. This shows how with boys there is much less of a focus on their appearance than with girls, and that their appearance is not needed to sell a product like so often is the way with females. The color black symbolizes power, strength, authority, rebellion, and aggression (Bourn Creative Project), all of which are traits that, stereotypically, are absolutely expected to exist within young boys. The script of the commercial includes many of the common and expected terminology we have discussed. For instance, the product being sold is Hot Wheels Top Speed Ultra Pipe Fight, and the word fight is recurring throughout the commercial, stressing the fact that it is more exciting

if the cars were to smash together, even though in real life this would be extremely dangerous.

### **Psychological Effects**

The concept of making children conform to specific stereotypes also can provide ammunition for bullying among children as well because they eventually may learn that girls and boys have specific guidelines to follow. According to Jo Paoletti, the author of *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys and Girls of America*: “What marketing does is create symbols that people can use to bully people. It’s almost like having a recipe and saying these are the ingredients for masculinity and femininity, and if you vary from the recipe, you can get bullied” (Let Toys Be Toys) When children observe other children not conforming to what everyone else is, it can make them appear as outcasts. Because this is so frowned upon among adults, children take these social cues, as they use the adults that they look up to in order to figure out how they should function within society. It is due to these notions that children learn that if someone is not conforming there is something wrong with them, and this is one of the reasons that brings children to getting bullied. Additionally, as these children grow older, it is not that they grow wiser and more accepting. What starts out as a small difference that is noted by a not yet fully educated child begins to turn into adult prejudice. As Carrie Goldman, the author of the award-winning book *Bullied: What Every Parent, Teacher, and Kid Needs to Know About Ending the Cycle of Fear* puts it: “Bullying behaviors occur on a continuum, and as children grow older, they move along to more serious aggressions. What starts as a color—pink, in this case—singles a child out as a target, and the aggression is based in both misogyny and homophobia, which go hand-in-hand” (cited in Let Toys Be Toys).

This bullying does not only have to occur specifically among children. Adults, such as older siblings, family members, and even teachers may join in this bullying because these are the people who teach children the social norms and they expect people to conform to these often even more than children do. Paechter, the author of *Being Boys, Being Girls: Learning Masculinities and Femininities*, writes that “Adults in early years settings also contribute to children’s constructions of masculinity and femininity though their implicit and explicit understandings of what is ‘natural’ behavior in young children” (65). This can cause some internal struggles when children begin to learn their romantic preferences, as romantic and sexual attraction is something that is socially tied to masculinity and femininity. Paetcher takes note that, between the teachers that fellow author Woodward worked with, there were multiple different “approaches to expressions of sexual and romantic attachment between boys and girls: ‘Staff distinctly discouraged amorous relationships between pairs of boys, less so between girls and boys, and hardly at all between girls, revealing here, possibly unconsciously, a public homophobic attitude

towards the boys while perhaps seeing the girls' behavior in a non-sexual or sexually passive way'" (Paechter). There are deeply rooted stereotypes that can affect how adults view the way in which children should be interacting with one another. Girls and boys are expected to be flirtatious with one another, so a close relationship between genders is to be anticipated. It is not considered against the path, however, for girls to be extremely close with one another because that is simply considered to be how girls interact within their friendships. When it comes to boys being extremely close with one another, however, the stereotype is that this is too feminine for them to be behaving in such a way and that for boys to be close with one another means that they may develop a romantic relationship with one another and is something that is, even subconsciously, often frowned upon.

Parents often form part of their identity from their children and expect these children to live up to their expectations of what they would want either themselves or their ideal child to be. Therefore, oftentimes parents can get frustrated when their children do not live up to everything that they would expect from them. For example, a dad who dreamed of being a professional football player may get frustrated if he son does not share the same passion for the sport, and may get even more frustrated when he realizes that his son is more interested into something more "feminine," such as gymnastics. Similarly, mothers might expect their daughters to only help around the house and not want to form any kind of future for themselves, when the daughter may actually have a passion for engineering. These expectations begin at infancy. For example, parents reported that they were worried that their baby boys were underweight and not their baby girls, even when body mass index was the same for both genders (Cubbage 38). It is interesting to see how even as children grow older, they are still expected to grow into these roles. It is because of influential factors such as these that adults should be advised not to get too involved in children's self-discovery. "A central tenet of early childhood education is that young children learn best through self-directed experimental free play, with minimal adult intervention," Gray writes. "The dominant developmental discourses in early childhood education consequently suggest that practitioners should not interfere in children's free play" (22). If someone is behind a child at all times with his or her already formed and developed opinions and upbringings, then it will be near impossible for children to learn and make decisions and judgments on their own that are purely based on what they feel and not on what they believe other people think that they should feel.

## **Conclusion**

Commercial advertising is a huge culprit in enforcing gender stereotypes among children. In order to fit into society, it is often expected of girls and boys to act in specific ways that are completely separate from the other gender. This prevents children from being able to form and express his or her own opinions and encourages stereotyping and bullying.

Promoting equal playing fields among both genders does not mean that if a girl likes princesses and the color pink that they should not be allowed to embrace their inner frills, just as it similarly means that if a boy is really into trucks that he is not allowed to get dirty. As Carrie Goldman, the author of the award-winning book *Bullied: What Every Parent, Teacher, and Kid Needs to Know About Ending the Cycle of Fear* put it: "Gender equality does not mean stripping the girliness from frilly girls or the masculinity from rough-and-tumble boys. A better tactic would be to encourage our girls and boys to do more cross-gender play without putting down their girly or masculine learnings" (Let Toys Be Toys). What gender equality is actually about is the banishing of stereotypes. To tell a girl that she is too feminine and that she should try to become more cross-gendered and well-rounded is still feeding into the problem. The point of educating people on giving children more gender equal childhoods is simply so that they can experience all that life has to offer them and so that they can make their own decisions about who they are rather than having their preferences predetermined before they are even born.

One brand that successfully pulls off a multi-gender commercial for children is Hess. Although Hess makes toy trucks, the brand's products are advertised towards children of both the male and female gender, defying the construct that only boys should and would want to play with toy trucks. In Hess's 2015 Christmas commercial, the Hess truck comes out, and a scene with Santa and a firefighter is shown. The commercial next cuts to two children, a boy and a girl, inside of the living room of a home, a very gender-neutral room. Bedrooms often can be portrayed as gendered, for instance a boy's room might have blue tones while a girl's room may be painted pink. By having the children in the commercial play in the living room, a room where all people of all genders and all ages find themselves utilizing, it shows that Hess trucks can be enjoyed by virtually anyone. The living room has very neutral tones and a simple Christmas tree. The boy is wearing a green shirt, probably to match the Hess theme, with a gray sweater over it; the girl is wearing a Christmas sweater dress with many Christmas colors such as blue, red and white.

There is no defining factor that specifically targets one gender over another in this commercial. At the end of the advertisement, the Hess truck choir that sings Hess's theme song is featured, with an even amount of girls and boys, all in green and white firefighter uniforms holding the Hess fire truck that the commercial is for. Since there is no gender bias in this commercial, no girl child has to feel weird for wanting a toy truck for Christmas and no boy has to feel weird if he wants to play trucks with a girl. It evens the playing field, which is exactly what children need in order to form their own preferences.

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