**Stereotypical Gender Traits in Children’s Toy Advertisements**

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**Abstract**

Kohlberg (1966) argued that at a certain age all children reach gender constancy, a state where they realize their gender is fixed and unchanging. Bussey and Bandura (1999) theorized that at this point children become proud of their gender identity and seek to behave in manners consistent with their gender identity. Using social learning theory (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961), Bussey and Bandura (1999) suggest that children learn these gender consistent behaviours through imitating models – one of the chief sources being media. In this experiment it was shown that advertisers do utilize gender role stereotypes in depicting males and females in children’s toy commercials. Possible reasons for doing so, effectiveness as an advertising tool, and implications of using gender role stereotypes in advertising are discussed.

**Introduction**

Children are constantly exposed to a wide variety of media outlets and consequently a copious amount of advertising (Hayta, 2008). In fact, the number of advertisements with children for a target audience is steadily increasing in number and frequency (Stewart-Allen, 1999). Although on the surface this may seem innocuous, research has shown that children are much less capable of discerning fact from fiction in media than adults (Temo, 1982). It follows then that children represent a group vulnerable to the subtle and not-so subtle messages put forth in commercial advertising. Therefore, analysis of the effects of media advertising on this vulnerable population represents a highly pertinent topic for study.

**Social Learning Theory**

**Overview.** Albert Bandura championed the idea of social learning theory (SLT) (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961). It is a fundamental theory of learning based on two main concepts: one can learn behaviours by a) imitating other people (models), and b) observing the reinforcing consequences experienced by the model of said behaviours (Rotter, 1982). The idea of learning via the consequences of behaviour is a concept that came from operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953). In operant conditioning, behaviours which elicit favourable consequences are more likely to be repeated and act as a reward; whereas, those behaviours which elicit unfavourable consequences are less likely to be repeated and act as punishers.

What distinguishes SLT is the idea that a person does not necessarily have to perform the behaviour or experience the consequences first hand in order to learn (modify the expression of the behaviour). By attending to and observing a model’s behaviour and consequences to that behaviour, one can learn. If the model is rewarded for their behaviour, and the observer is motivated to perform the same behaviour, then the observer is more likely to imitate this behaviour, expecting similar rewards. The reverse is true for observing a model’s behaviour and the subsequent delivery of punishment, the likelihood of the observer demonstrating this behaviour will decrease (Rotter, 1982).

**Gender role differentiation.** One of the areas where SLT holds a major influence is the socialization of children into “masculine and feminine adults” (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Kohlberg (1966) theorized that at a certain age all children attain “gender constancy”, a realization that their gender is fixed and non-changing. Once this occurs they tend to place high value on their gender identity (masculine/feminine) and attempt to demonstrate behaviours that agree with their gender identity. Essentially, they begin to think, “I am a girl and because of that I want to do girl things because I will be rewarded for ‘girlish’ behaviour” (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Bussey and Bandura (1999) asserted that children acquire these gender-specific behaviours through frequent exposure to “gender-linked information” in various areas of their life including, most relevant for this paper, the media. Children subsequently model this gender-specific behaviour that they have observed in the media and other models (Jacklin & Baker, 1993).

**Advertising and Children**

**Advertisers goals.** A large proportion of the media children are exposed to involves television advertising (Kahlenberg & Hein, 2010). In the United States alone children see upwards of 20,000 television ads each year (Browne, 1998). It is obvious, even to those with very little knowledge of marketing, that it is in the advertisers best interest to sell as much of its product as possible. One of the methods that advertisers typically utilize to better sell to children is that of catering to male and female “gender constancy” (Bakir, Blodgett & Rose, 2008). By employing gender-role stereotypes in advertising, children are encouraged to behave like the models in the commercial (i.e. by purchasing this new football, made for boys, you will be more ‘boyish’). What better way to behave like the model than purchasing the product the model is using in the advertisement? This is one of the reasons that commercials designed to sell toys to girls show more stereotypical female traits (helpful, gentle, submissive, etc.) and those designed to sell toys to boys show more stereotypical male traits (active, competitive, hostile, etc.) (Hurtz & Durkin, 2004).

**Stereotypes in advertising.** Stereotypes are “the tendency of people to think of someone or something in similar terms – that is, as having similar attributes – based on a common feature shared by each” (Nelson, 2006). Essentially the categorization of people according to some feature they share with a group.

Research has shown that advertising in television makes heavy use of gender stereotypes (Hurtz & Durkin, 2004). It has been demonstrated that males in commercial advertising are consistently overrepresented as authority figures and/or professionals, and tend to be shown as active, aggressive, powerful, and dominant (Hurtz & Durkin, 2004; Oppliger, 2007). Women on the other hand are typically shown in the home, depicted in domestic roles, and tend to be shown as passive, nurturing, and disproportionately youthful (Oppliger, 2007).

**Problem with stereotypes.** Stereotypes are neither good nor bad, they just are. Stereotypes can serve as cognitive tools for decision-making and predicting situations in the face of uncertainty (Korten, 1973). They do however become an issue when people overly rely on the stereotypes they hold. Research has shown that children in particular do not have the critical viewing skills that adults rely on when exposed to messages in advertising (Desomond & Carvith, 2004). In other words children are less capable of discriminating fact from fiction in media (Temo, 1982). Couple this with research demonstrating that observational learning (i.e. through SLT) is more important for children (Oppliger, 2007), and it is clear that children are particularly susceptible to the stereotypical depictions of gender in media.

As children have trouble perceiving the gender depictions they are seeing in the media as stereotypical depictions, it becomes problematic in that they may take these stereotyped depictions as reality. Browne (1998) showed that the images children see in television have a large influence on their attitudes and self-esteem. Increased exposure to gender stereotypes has been linked to increases in gender stereotyped behaviour and gender stereotyped attitudes in the observer (Hurtz & Durkin, 2004). This suggests continual exposure to gender stereotyped images may yield explicit behavioural and attitudinal effects in children. It is not a stretch then, to suggest that disproportional depictions of girls in toy commercials as beautiful and nurturing may impart these stereotypical characteristics onto young girls, and stereotype the attitudes of male children towards females (the same going for stereotypical depictions of boys in toy commercials). The biggest problem of course comes when children become strict adherents to these stereotypes; boys thinking they can not exhibit stereotypically feminine traits such as nurturing or beauty, and females thinking they can not exhibit stereotypically male traits such as independence or being active.

**Current Study**

**Overview.** This current study looked at the depiction of six gender stereotyped traits in 10 children’s toy commercials. The traits examined were: beauty, fashion, nurturing behaviours, power, speed, and competition. This study sought to determine the differential depictions of the traits as a function of gender.

**Hypothesis.** It is hypothesized that there will be a powerful dichotomy of traits depending on the gender the toy is marketed towards. Those toys that are advertised with a boy market in mind will likely stress the masculine traits of power, speed and dominance, while simultaneously downplaying the feminine traits of beauty, fashion and nurturing. The opposite should be shown for female marketed toys, in that the feminine traits of beauty, fashion and nurturing will likely be emphasized while simultaneously, the masculine traits of power, speed and competition should be downplayed.

**Methods**

**Coders**

The coders were students attending lecture for a third year social psychology laboratory methods course. All students were enrolled at the University of Toronto Scarborough and had prerequisite introductory courses in psychological research methods and statistical analysis. Each coder was assigned to rate only one gender’s video. Twenty-two coders were used with 10 coding for male focused advertisements and 12 coding for female focused advertisements.

**Advertisements**

All advertisements selected for coding were television advertisements taken from the internet. Two criteria were necessary for a television advertisement to be selected for coding: only one gender could be represented in the advertisement, and the product being advertised had to be a toy. An even numbers of male and female focused ads were selected. All ads selected were aimed specifically towards an audience of children.

**Measures**

Videos were rated for the extent to which they displayed six different traits: beauty, fashion, nurturing behaviour, power, speed and competition. It was agreed by coders that beauty, fashion and nurturing behaviour were stereotypically feminine traits, and power, speed and competition were stereotypically masculine traits. Each trait was scored on a seven point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). See appendix 2 for a copy of the coding sheet used to rate the presence of traits.

**Procedure**

Videos were pre-selected by the instructor of the coders’ social psychology methods course according to the two criteria mentioned above. Coders first watched all ten videos with no instruction. A quick discussion followed, touching on the main observed differences between the male and female focused videos. Coders were then briefly instructed that they were to rate each of their assigned gender’s videos on the extent to which the commercial involved each trait, according to the Likert scale discussed above. Videos were shown, alternating between male and female focused advertisements. All coders viewed all videos, regardless of which gender they had been instructed to rate, such that each coder viewed ten videos and rated five.

**Results**

**Inter-rater Reliability**

A summary of inter-rater reliabilities for each trait scored is presented in Table 1. Coders showed extremely high reliability for every trait scored (α > .97).

**Descriptive Statistics, Correlations and Inferences**

A summary of intercorrelations is shown in Table 2. According to Cohen’s (1992) categorization, all of the scored traits have large correlations. All of the correlations showed statistical significance except for that between fashion and nurturance (*r* = .52, *p* > .05). Only positive correlations were seen between traits associated with the same gender (i.e. between power and speed for males or between beauty and fashion for females). Correlations between traits associated with opposite genders, for example the correlation between power (a male trait) and beauty (a female trait), were exclusively negative.

A summary of the means and standard deviations of coders’ scoring for each trait is presented in Table 3. Two-tailed *t*-test analysis indicated that the traits of beauty

(*t* = 9.73, *p* < .01), fashion (*t* = 3.63, *p* < .05), and nurturance (*t* = 4.37, *p* < .01) are scored as being significantly more prevalent in female focused than male focused commercials. Male focused commercials on the other hand were scored such that the traits of power

(*t* = -7.93, *p* < .01), speed (*t* = -10.25, *p* < .01), and competition (*t* = -7.1, *p* < .01) were significantly more prevalent, than in female focused commercials.

**Discussion**

**Summary of Results**

The results found were, for the most part, as expected. The extremely high inter-rater reliabilities suggest that all coders had a similar operationalization for all of the traits being measured. This is important, as despite an overview and open discussion of the videos between all coders, the traits were never formally operationalized.

The results of the intercorrelations suggested several ideas. That all traits showed very high correlations and, excepting the correlation between fashion and nurturance, all showed statistical significance indicates one of two possibilities. The traits may be so highly intercorrelated simply because, in the case of positive correlations, they always go together (i.e. you don’t see power without speed, you don’t see beauty without fashion; they always come as a package); or it could be that coders conceptualized the traits, in the case of positive correlations, as essentially being the same thing (i.e. speed is power and power is speed). The second option is especially likely considering, as was noted above there was no formal operationalization of each trait.

Of notable importance is the dichotomous nature of the intercorrelations. Correlational values of traits associated with the same gender (i.e. correlation between two masculine or two feminine traits) were consistently and robustly positive. Correlational values of traits associated with opposite genders (i.e. correlation between a masculine and a feminine trait) were consistently and robustly negative. Essentially, whenever a commercial displayed a trait stereotypically associated with one gender, traits stereotypically associated with the other gender were not shown.

The descriptive and inferential data offered by Table 3 agrees with the hypothesis of gender-trait dichotomies. Toy commercials directed towards males depicted significantly more masculine traits (power, speed and competition) and significantly less feminine traits (beauty, fashion and nurturing) than toys commercials directed towards females. The opposite is true for female toy commercials; they depicted significantly more feminine traits and significantly less masculine traits than toy commercials directed towards males. Essentially, the advertisements observed showed either copious amounts of one gender’s stereotyped traits or the other, never both. Figure 1 more clearly demonstrates the nature of this dichotomy. This is expected, as advertisers routinely employ gender-role stereotypes in their advertising to appeal to children’s gender constancy (Bakir, Blodgett & Rose, 2008).

**Limitations**

The most conspicuous limitation of this study is lack of formal operationalization. Although the definitions of traits such as power, speed, competition, beauty, nurturance and fashion may seem straightforward, they are in fact complicated. Following the actual coding of the videos and completion of the experiment, coders discussed the implications of the findings. It was quickly realized that different people had different interpretations of what they were looking for when rating each trait. In future studies better attempts at operationalizing each trait would allow coders to better rate the videos.

Rather than lack of operationalization of the traits, biased operationalization may have impacted the study. As was discussed in the methods section, traits were merely defined as “feminine” or “masculine” prior to the onset of rating. It is quite possible that coders internalized these categorizations of the traits and simply rated what was expected of them. In other words if a coder was assigned to rate the traits in male toy videos they may have rated all masculine traits as high and all feminine traits as low based solely on the virtue of the toy being geared towards males, rather than any actual observation of the traits. In the future it would be appropriate to refrain from classifying traits as “feminine” or “masculine” prior to coding, to prevent biasing the coders’ perceptions of the videos.

The limited sample size of only five male and five female focused videos limits the generalizability of the results. In addition to the limited sample size, the lack of specificity with regards to target age group in the videos raises further issues with generalizability. Children in the videos had apparently wide ranges of ages, some appearing to be less than 10 years old and some appearing in late adolescence. In the future it would be pertinent to expand the sample size of the videos, as well as define a target age group or analyze the effects of age group in the videos.

As this study focused on videos which portrayed only one gender there is a lack of information on the effects of mixed gender representation in advertisements. If advertisements that depicted both genders to varying proportions were also used, perhaps a gender-trait continuity would be seen rather than the dichotomy that this study demonstrated. In future studies proportionality of different genders presented in advertisements should be investigated as a modifier to the level of stereotypical gender traits seen.

With the increased adoption of digital video recorders (DVR), and the ability for the home television viewer to skip television advertisements, the effects of advertising on children viewers may be changing. With one study showing that up to 80% of those using a DVR skipped advertisements with regularity (Tse & Lee, 2001), it has become clear that viewers have an entirely new level of control over what, if any, advertising they are exposed to. In future studies it would be interesting to see how this shift in power, from advertiser to viewer, has changed the content of gender stereotyped content in television commercials.

**Significance**

When generalized to a wider population of television advertising directed to children one can foresee possible implications. As children are heavily influenced by the media (Browne, 1998), it is possible that repeated exposure to gender stereotypes influences children’s gender attitudes (Hurtz & Durkin, 2004). Taking into consideration the effect that social learning has with regards to learning gender roles (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), and the role media can play as a model in social learning (Jacklin & Baker, 1993), we can infer that the repeated portrayal of gender stereotypes in advertising may only perpetuate negative gender stereotypes.

**Conclusion**

Although some advertisers may argue that it is in their best interest to appeal to children’s susceptibility to gender stereotypes in advertising (Bakir, Blodgett & Rose, 2008) this author believes it unnecessary and counter-productive. Bakir, Blodgett and Rose (2008) demonstrated that advertisements depicting males with communal feminine traits were just as effective as those showing males with stereotypical masculine traits. It may be then, that it is in the public’s best interest to have both traditional-stereotypical and counter-stereotypical portrayals of both genders in advertising. While the advertisements are just as effective (Bakir, Blodgett & Rose, 2008) they do not perpetuate the idea in children that females should behave in a certain way and males in another.

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**Appendix 1**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 1.** Inter-rater Reliability | |  |  |  |  |
| Beauty | Fashion | Nurturance | Power | Speed | Competition |
| .98 | .97 | .98 | .98 | .98 | .99 |

*Note:* Inter-rater reliabilities reported in Chronbach’s α. N = 5 male ads, 5 female ads.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 2.** Intercorrelations | |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Beauty | Fashion | Nurturance | Power | Speed | Competition |
| Beauty | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Fashion | .87\* | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |
| Nurturance | .73\* | .52\*\* | 1.00 |  |  |  |
| Power | -.95\* | -.83\* | -.85\* | 1.00 |  |  |
| Speed | -.95\* | -.79\* | -.84\* | .98\* | 1.00 |  |
| Competition | -.94\* | -.85\* | -.81\* | .82\* | .96\* | 1.00\* |

*Note:* \**p* < .05. \*\**p* > .05.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 3.** Means and standard deviations | | | | | | | |
|  | Girls | | Boys | |  |  |  |
|  | *Mean* | *S.D.* | *Mean* | *S.D.* | *df* | *t-test* | *p-value* |
| Beauty | 5.27 | .76 | 1.52 | .41 | 8 | 9.73 | .00 |
| Fashion | 5.52 | 1.38 | 2.50 | 1.25 | 8 | 3.63 | .01 |
| Nurturance | 4.48 | 1.65 | 1.24 | .17 | 8 | 4.37 | .00 |
| Power | 1.67 | .56 | 5.90 | 1.06 | 8 | -7.93 | .00 |
| Speed | 1.33 | .31 | 5.46 | .84 | 8 | -10.25 | .00 |
| Competition | 1.32 | .35 | 6.10 | 1.46 | 8 | -7.10 | .00 |

*Note:*  N = 5 male videos, 5 female videos

Figure 1 Comparing girls vs. boys. This figure illustrates the differences in mean ratings of gender stereotyped traits in toy commercials

**Appendix 2**

**Commercials for Girls’ Toys**

Please, rate each advert on its emphasis on beauty, fashion, nurturance, power, speed, and competition.

Advert -1 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Advert -2 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Advert -3 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Advert -4 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Advert-5 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

**Commercials for Boys’ Toys**

Please, rate each advert on its emphasis on beauty, fashion, nurturance, power, speed, and competition.

Advert -1 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Advert -2 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Advert -3 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Advert -4 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Advert-5 Not at all Extremely

Beauty 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Fashion 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Nurturance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Power 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Speed 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Competition 1 2 3 4 5 6 7