Toys, Advertisements, and Gender Roles: a Research on three Italian Television Channels for Children

Giocattoli, pubblicità e ruoli di genere: una ricerca su tre canali televisivi italiani per bambini

Claudia Baiata[a], Elena Pacetti[b,1]

[a] *Università di Bologna,* **claudia.baiata@unibo.it**
[b] *Università di Bologna,* **elena.pacetti@unibo.it**

Abstract

Throughout history, toys have always represented an essential means to portray societies' values and cultural identities, passing on morals, expectations, and traditions to the next generations. Gender stereotypes are present even in today's toys, depicting fixed gender roles and conditioning children's preferences in playing. The present study investigated three Italian television channels for children, to analyse to what extent gender stereotypes are conveyed through children's toy advertisements. The findings indicate that gender biases are present in a large number of tv commercials, although a new trend of inclusive toys is gaining momentum, in ways that don't limit children's choices and predilection.

Keywords: gender roles; toys; stereotypes; advertisements; childhood.

Sintesi

Nel corso della storia, i giocattoli hanno sempre rappresentato un mezzo essenziale per rappresentare i valori e le identità culturali delle società, trasmettendo morale, aspettative e tradizioni alle generazioni successive. Gli stereotipi di genere sono presenti anche nei giocattoli di oggi, raffigurando ruoli di genere fissi e condizionando le preferenze dei/lle bambini/e nel gioco. Il presente studio ha indagato tre canali televisivi italiani per bambini/e, per analizzare in che misura gli stereotipi di genere sono trasmessi attraverso le pubblicità dei giocattoli per bambini/e. I risultati indicano che i pregiudizi di genere sono presenti in un gran numero di spot televisivi, anche se una nuova tendenza di giocattoli inclusivi sta acquisendo importanza, in modi che non limitano le scelte e la predilezione dei/lle bambini/e.

Parole chiave: ruoli di genere; giocattoli; stereotipi; pubblicità; infanzia.

1. Introduction

Play is older than culture, Huizinga (1947/1939) reminds us, since it exists even before culture itself; it is not rational, and it occupies a central and instinctive place in the lives of animals and humans. In all societies and at all times, children have used every kind of discarded object for their symbolic play, often imitating the work and activities of the adults in their community. Toys, both ephemeral ones made from waste as well as precious ones forged in valuable material, have always represented persuasive instruments of education and continue to have an important function in shaping the role of children in society, by acknowledging and reminding them of their purpose and destiny. Toys are essential to children's play and serve as cultural symbols, passing on societies' traditions and expectations (Kahlenberg & Hein, 2010). To this end, gender distinctions have historically been made: boys were given their first weapons or small soldiers to mimic the soldier's profession, while girls were given dolls and small pots to prepare for motherhood and care work. Males and females learned their social status very quickly, through the toys they were given (ploughs, warriors, dolls, nuns). Social roles were rigidly distributed and hardly ever questioned, as different educational opportunities and apprenticeships were offered or denied depending on gender (Gianini Belotti, 1973; Ricchiardi & Venera, 2005).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the industry in this field develops, eventually leading to the mass production of toys. In this period, stereotypes come into full play to reach as many consumers as possible. The toy is researched and marketed, it is designed and presented to educate children to learn and behave properly, as expected from their gender, and it is bound to strengthen its role as an instrument of inculturation (Ricchiardi & Venera, 2005).

1.1. Stereotyped toys

Even today in the Western world, the media, toy industries and advertising companies, through their constant and relentless messages, remind adults and children which toys are suitable for girls and which are for boys, although nowadays neither of them is actually denied a profession or place in society because of their gender. Toys considered suitable for boys include those that involve exercise, action, outdoor adventures, fighting, competitions, construction and building, requiring movement, creativity and wit (Colatrella, 2011). Advertisements feature fearless superheroes and brave professionals always ready for adventures or to save the world. Most of these games have educational hints and aim to improve physical and mental skills. Toys for girls, on the other hand, are less prone to boost any particular skills that will be develop abilities or competences. Most girls' toys are designed to be played indoors, dealing with beauty and fashion, grooming, caring for babies, puppies and stuffed animals. They are suitable for raising the perfect housewife, the caring mother and hardly any of them promote educational skills, spark creativity or stimulate competition (Smith, 2015). The distinct presentation for what kind of play is expected from boys and for girls, and the reproduction of these stereotypes is damaging for both genders. The narrative of the male's role model might be even more coercive than the female's one, as boys are not supposed to play with what is considered a girl's activity, and therefore implicitly banned to play with certain kind of toys and the commercials make this point quite evident (Biemmi, 2010).

Since the 1970s, a strand of research has been highlighting a link between gendered toys and skills development. According to these findings, young children quickly understand that some toys are meant for boys and others are for girls (Francis, 2010), they develop a dogmatic way of thinking about gender roles and start to form assumptions based on

environmental stimuli they receive and absorb (Sullivan & Bers, 2016). Numerous studies continue to demonstrate the extent to which gender stereotypes are prevalent in toys catalogues, advertising, packaging, and shop aisles - enticing customers and young users with alluring gendered pink or blue colours to select and purchase the right product (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Weber & Custer, 2005). There is ample evidence that parents are more inclined to buy personal computers or other digital devices for their sons than for their daughters (Sullivan, 2019), and that they are more likely to encourage their sons to pursue STEM careers, even when both siblings achieve the same level of proficiency in these disciplines at school (OECD, 2019).

From the earliest years of childhood, stereotypical messages conveyed by society, family, and the educational system have a significant impact on self-perception and self-efficacy (Tomasetto, Alparone & Cadinu, 2011), which over time affect interest and motivation to study some subjects at the expense of others (Virtanen, Räikkönen & Ikonen, 2014). Due to the social construction of gender, the wealth of experience that boys and girls bring to classrooms is already strongly gendered: males are familiar with the use of devices and are exposed to technology from an early age, while females are less likely to be socialized in this way and, above all, have much less interest and curiosity in tinkering and making (Bagattini & Miotti, 2022). This circumstance inevitably leads to a lower sense of efficacy among girls when it comes to learning STEM disciplines in school, starting as early as six (Bian, Leslie & Cimpian, 2017). At this age, children have already internalized a large enough set of gender stereotypes. Although the causes may be many, it is plausible that the lack of role models and mentors - starting with one's own family - and years of playing with toys that do not promote spatial skills or problem-solving abilities are among the various explanations for why girls are less motivated in learning these subjects at school. These and other factors mentioned above may lead girls to perceive engineering as a male-dominated world (Antonio and Tuffey, 2014; Harding, 1986; Lie, 1995; OECD, 2019).

While historically gender stereotypes hindered women's performances in Maths (Tomasetto et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2019), presently, the underrepresentation of women in STEM interests mainly the T and E of the acronym, aka technology and engineering, as well as computer science. Generally, educational software is neglected as a potential source of biased influence on children because it is considered more moral, family-oriented, and instructional than other types of computer software (Sheldon, 2004). Nevertheless, research shows the extent to which many videogames and software are biased: lack of representation of women (mainly sidekicks), excessive portrayal of male heroes or main characters of video games, sexualization of female characters, scripts that portray stories that are more likely to interest boys than girls (Cooper, 2006; Dill & Thill, 2007).

Mass media's impact on consumers and advertising becomes a social booster of models and biases already present in society (Lipperini, 2007). Television is still a very present medium in the Western world, heavily deployed by young children, even if the Internet, with its videos and channels aimed at children, is now becoming more and more a children's domain. Every day, children spend hours in front of the television (Cubelli & Vicari, 2016; Gunter & Gunter, 2020; Smith, 2015) and, in the last few years, in front of tablets, watching videos that contain a variety of commercials; the time spent in front of the screen has even increased during these last years of pandemic (Trott, Driscoll, Irlado & Pardhan, 2022). In Italy, more than 5% of 3-5 years old children regularly watch television than those who went to kindergarten in 2000; it is estimated that 91% of Italians over three years old watch television, and the strongest users are children under ten (Da Rold, 2022). This increased exposure to content such as cartoons and children's shows causes an

exponential rise in watching advertising and its enticing messages (Pike & Jennings, 2005). Research indicates that children are attracted to commercials in the same way they are interested in watching the actual programs, if not more, due to the persuasive and alluring images flashing on the screen (Smith, 2015); it also suggests that strong television users, compared to light television viewers, are more likely to share similar beliefs and values to those shown on television (Pike & Jennings, 2005).

Because constant viewing of commercials' subtle messages can have a strong effect on young children's identities and produce biased self-expectations, it is significant to understand whether gender stereotypes are consistent in TV commercials today, especially considering that these types of studies have been carried out more in Anglo-American and north European contexts, and much less in Italy (Monaci & Sarteur, 2012; Panarese, 2015). Commercials, as a means of disseminating a certain way of thinking about how people should behave in today's society (Lull, 2003), have a predominant role in shaping gender perceptions. Advertisers have always pursued the best strategy to sell as many products as possible, prioritizing the interest of their customers and following society's views. Their goal is to persuade and capture a certain market share, without reflecting on how harmful their stereotypical innuendos can be for children. This is especially true considering that toys that require action, spatial skills, and mathematical skills (construction, tinkering, building blocks, building sets, edutainment in general) are designed mainly for boys to develop their intelligence and creativity; whereas toys that promote caring for others or focus on appearance (baby dolls, stuffed animals, vanity sets for braiding and colouring hair, dressing and making up fashion dolls) are targeted at girls to enhance their empathy, care work, and interest in beauty (Smith, 2015), but do not provide any STEM skill. The consequences are visible from the beginning of primary school, where "girls, by the age of six, already consider boys more likely to show brilliance and more suited to 'really, really smart' activities than their own gender" (Bian, Leslie & Cimpian, 2017). The authors argue that biases that classify men as better than women in male-dominated fields can be detrimental to women's careers. It is also believed that these stereotypes are picked up by girls at a young age and discourage them from pursuing certain fields.

Change of route in the latter years often depicts a marketing strategy to capture younger and more gender-aware costumers (e.g.: Lego, Barbie) and an endeavour to contrast backlash (Sullivan, 2019), while at other times it represents a genuine attempt to keep pace with the times and step up for inclusion.

2. Research objectives and questions

With this research, we aimed to understand if and to what extent gender stereotypes are still present today in toys advertisements, by analysing commercials aired between May and December 2021, on three Italian private television channels dedicated to children's programs.

This exploratory study uses, readapting it, a chart designed and validated by Biemmi (2017) in previous research. The present qualitative research critically analyses different aspects of toys in video advertisements, broadcast on three children's television channels, to detect associations between gender targeted and type of ad, and ultimately to track gender stereotypes in the way toys are presented and who they are aimed for.

The present study intends to answer the following research problems:

1. To what extent do commercials offer non-gendered labels to promote the selling of toys?
2. Is there a correlation between open and closed spaces and the consumer's gender in commercials?
3. Is there a correlation between the male/female voice-over and the consumer's gender in commercials?
4. Is there a correlation between active and static scenes and the consumer's gender in commercials?

2.1. Research hypotheses

Based on the findings of literature regarding the subject, we predict the following hypotheses:

- H_1) the majority of toys commercials will address customers by gender;
- H_2) the choice of colours, characters, male/female voice-over will predict the gender targeted;
- H_3) female characters will be mainly depicted indoors, playing quietly, with soft background music, whereas male characters will be represented mainly outdoor, in dynamic and adventurous activities, with upbeat music.

2.2. Methodology

The study was conducted adopting a content analysis, with a validated tool for coding data (Biemmi, 2017), adjusted for the specific purpose of the topic (males, females and neutral characters, venues, music, etc.).

Data were collected during a six-month period (May - December 2021), all afternoons between five P.M. and seven P.M. (watershed time for children that, in Italy, are usually home from school after 4,30 P.M.), from three TV channels, in a weekly rotation.

In total, 148 toys' video advertisements were coded and analysed on the following free-to-air children's Italian television networks: Frisbee, Cartoonito, and K2[2]. Each of these channels presents different targets in terms of consumers, consequently they portray different kinds of ads.

The kind of toys advertised are mainly cars, racetracks, animals, building bricks, toys weapons, stuffed animals, fashion dolls, dollhouses or doll accessories, board games. For each ad, a detailed description of the video was noted: type of toy, slogan, age, and gender of actors involved, their role, setting (indoor, outdoor), colours of clothes, furniture, background, etc.), presence of characters representing parents or other family members, kind of music (soft or lively) and gender of voice-over, if present.

The gender identification of the toys was made through the coding of the commercials, by analysing the following elements: gender of players, male/female voice-over, colours used for clothes, furniture, setting of the scene (closed or open space), lively or soft background music.

---

[2] These networks are private channels for children aged 4-14.

3. Results

As seen in Figure 1, of the 148 commercials analysed, 60.5% are targeted by gender: 19.6% of the toys are addressed to boys, 40.5% are targeted to females, and the remaining 39.9% to both girls and boys.

TYPE OF TOY	N.	%	Specifically addressed to girls	Specifically addressed to boys	Neutral
Dolls, mermaids...	28	18.9	27	0	1
Board/cards games (Uno, Monopoly, Playmobil)	25	16.9	0	3	22
Engines (cars, trains, races)	18	12.2	0	8	10
Animal discovery (fights)	13	8.9	0	8	5
Barbie (and accessories)	13	8.9	11	0	2
Babies	13	8.8	13	0	0
Stuffed Pets	9	6	8	0	1
Weapons, Gormits, Batman, Pirates	7	4.7	0	5	2
Professions (dentist, policeman, firefighter)	6	4	0	2	4
Play Doh	4	2.7	0	0	4
Lego	4	2.7	0	1	3
Robots	3	2	1	2	0
House chores games (hoover, oven)	3	2	0	0	3
Educational (e.g., Sapientino)	2	1.3	0	0	2
TOTAL	148	100	60 (40.5%)	29 (19.6%)	59 (39.9%)

Figure 1. Number and percentage of the commercials analysed.

3.1. Television channels analysed

We chose to select three main free-to-air television children's channels, among the top five ranking, that are broadcasted at a national level and do not require any Internet connection. Considering that State television channel RAI for children made the ethical decision not to broadcast advertisements and its guidelines[3] uphold the promotion of role models that contrast stereotypes, educating children about gender diversity and gender violence, RAI YOYO was excluded from the study and the choice has fallen on the following channels: K2, Frisbee, and Cartoonito.

K2 is part of Warner Bros. Discovery Italia, whose website reports that the channel's mission strives to offer entertainment, targeting "an audience between 4 and 14 years. The

---

[3] https://www.discovery-italia.it/channel/k2/

comedy element and the action/adventure characterize the cartoons of K2". This tv station claims to respect "the habits of the child and lends itself to the shared vision of the whole family[4]".

Frisbee, also belonging to Discovery Italia, is presented as delivering entertainment for the same audience (4-14 years), indicating particular sensitivity for the little ones and specializing in "adventures in which the moments of discovery and fantasy are enhanced […] according to the different targets and genres, tailor-made according to the time slots and days of the week[5]".

K2 and Frisbee are sister channels, although the first one explicitly promotes the participation of the whole family and the latter one more specifically addresses a younger target. Warner Bros. Discovery's mission statement claims to promote inclusion through broadcasting content that fight every kind of discrimination.

Cartoonito belongs to Boing S.p.A., it is owned by 51% by Mediaset Group and it is designed especially for the pre-school public. It is assumed that adults supervising small children will be in their proximity, due to the young age of the children, even though they may not actually sit and watch the television. Hence, toy companies target parents in their ads based on the co-viewing mechanism. Cartoonito's ethical values[6] reject any form of discrimination based on sex, race, language, personal, social, religious, or political beliefs.

3.2. Female-gendered toys

Toys addressed only to girls are mainly dolls, Barbies, stuffed animals, babies that need to be cared for, and beauty kits. The commercials unmistakably leave boys out of the picture, by using the following kinds of strategies in their campaigns: lack of male characters playing with the toy, use of female voice-over and pink or pastel colours, soft music in the background.

Advertisements that address a female audience present some peculiarities. Girls outnumber boys in many aspects: most characters present in the ad, either main or secondary roles, are females (86%): a considerable percentage of leading actresses, sometimes in the company of girlfriends or a female parent (6%), while fathers are present only in 3.4% of the cases.

Approximately 87% of female main characters and minor characters wear clothes whose colours are directly associable with their gender: different shades of pink, lilac, purple, pastel colours, glitter, and sequins. This mainly happens in advertisements that relate to beauty, such as hair styling.

In these ads, the female voice-over is dominant, the narrator might be an adult, most commonly one young actress playing with the toy is also advising about the toy. The music is predominantly soft, instrumental, or cheerful, in fewer cases upbeat rhythm. Compared to the jingles used for boys, most of the lyrics explain the features of the toys and the ways it is possible to play with them. Rhymes and catchphrases are used to guide the users in the game.

---

[4] https://www.discovery-italia.it/channel/k2/

[5] https://www.discovery-italia.it/channel/frisbee/

[6] https://www.boingtv.it/codice-etico

The footage shot is prevailingly static (87%). The spaces are closed for most of the scenes (66%): usually, the room of the main character, pink of light purple walls, and furniture just like the previously mentioned pastel shades were used for the clothes, to emphasize that a girl is supposed to play with it.

3.3. Male-gendered toys

Toys addressed to boys are mainly engines (cars, trains, races), wild animals fighting, weapons, superheroes, pirates, police cars, firefighters' trucks. They clearly leave girls out of the picture using multiple strategies: lack of female characters playing with the toy, male voice-over and use of blue and dark colours, use of noises, and upbeat music.

Regarding the commercials aimed at male consumers, it is noted that the presence is significantly reduced, compared both to neutral and girls' toys. In these ads, children are prevalent (48%), and remarkably fewer other characters (such as family members).

All the actors are dressed in men's clothing: bright shades of brown, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, etc. These colours, especially if strong or vivid, are never directly associated with the female gender.

Spaces are for the majority open (72%), and the colours of the surrounding scenes are preferably electric blue or other bold colours, such as red or orange. Almost all cases outline dynamic environments that suggest energy and excitement (94%). The voice-over is unquestionably of a male adult, alternating with cheerful or upbeat music, or relentless rhythms and background noises, highlighting the sense of urgency and commotion of fights and races. Traffic noises, wild animals' sounds, clashing of swords, roars of motors, everything emphasises the whirlwind of the activities happening.

3.4. Neutral-gendered toys

The final category of toy commercials is represented by the so-called neutral toys, the ones that are presented to be sold to the larger public of consumers, regardless of their gender. They are mainly board games, Lego, Play-Doh.

These advertisements are characterized by the choice of both male and female actors representing children, and various family members playing with the toy. Among the cases analysed, there are eight families as central figures, all the other characters are children and teens equally represented by gender.

The setting of gender-neutral toys takes place in closed venues (55%) more than in open venues (36%), while in 9% of cases they display both settings. The two genders are not specifically associated with any of the colours. Usually, board games are depicted indoor, in the kitchen or living room. Scenes are slightly more dynamic (57%) than static (43%). Most voice overs are masculine (70,2%), in fewer cases feminine (22,8%), or a combination of both (7%). Music, on the other hand, is more often upbeat and cheerful, while in other cases is soft and instrumental. Almost all characters wear clothing of a variety of colours, moving away from the traditional girl/pink, and boy/blue kind of shades.

4. Discussion

On Frisbee and Cartoonito channels, there is a slight prevalence of ads for female or neutral toys, while on K2 there is a small prevalence of toys addressed to boys.

As mentioned above, 39.9% of the toys are addressed to both girls and boys, while 40.5% are targeted to females and 19.6% to males. One of the reasons that may explain the prevalence of female-gendered toys could reside at the foundation of the Italian socio-cultural context, with the underlying view that girls are quieter and most commonly play indoors compared to boys, that will play freely outside. Another factor resides in the fact that commercials aimed at boys rarely show other characters apart from the main actor, whereas quite the opposite happens with commercials addressed to girls. This as well might suggest the idea that boys will play mainly outside, far from the protective gaze of the adults. Girls are more often depicted indoors, surrounded by family members. Toys commercials addressed to girls present numerous gender stereotypes that enhance traditional roles and misgendering traps. The main message fosters the idea that girls play mostly in protected spaces, surrounded by toys that convey care work and vanities. They are supposed to motherly tend to cute stuffed animals and tiny baby dolls. Fashion doll toys are targeted to girls as well, though in this case, two Barbie commercials in six don't present female characters only, nor strong pink or glittery features, allowing the toy to be played by everyone. Another positive element is that Barbie can play the role of a working professional as well, distancing itself from the old stereotype of the sexualized blond bimbo in high heels. For a few decades, indeed, a key pillar of Barbie's marketing campaign has been centred on gender equity values, representing the toy as the champion of women's rights, and portraying it as a career woman, accompanied by slogans such as "If you can dream it, you can be it", "You can be anything" and "We girls, can do anything, right Barbie?" The Mattel commercials depict a wide range of professions that young girls can select from and envision themselves in. The program gives young girls more confidence by providing them the chance to network with professionals in fields they hope to pursue as adults (Rahmat & Tambunan, 2020).

Four gender stereotypes characterize the male perspective. The first one concerns cars and racetracks, traditionally assigned to a masculine dimension. Of eight different racetracks commercials, only one shows a girl playing with the toy. The second bias winks at boys' aggressivity, focusing on toys that portray battles, fights, and violence, using background music that emphasizes the agitated clamour of actions, and using animals' noises to add excitement to the scenes. The third stereotype, connected to the previous one, depicts toy guns. The commercial narrative assumes that only boys will engage in battles such as paintball and soft air weapons, because of their more brave and lively nature. In these advertisements, there is no presence of girls whatsoever. The last bias can be spotted in the exploration games theme, which once again excludes girls from the scene. This kind of ads highlights the concept that only boys will play adventurously and boldly, constantly challenging risks and perils.

Gender-neutral toys combine a stereotype connected to parental figures: mothers are often shown as the only adult present, especially in commercials like Hoover Folletto and Dolce Forno (easy-bake oven). The association with house chores expected from women is quite direct. Fathers are unquestionably missing from the picture: they are overall present in just five ads, and among these, only one is shown with two daughters. Regrettably, parenting is still represented as a female responsibility; fathers are almost invariably absent from the scene, and when they are in the picture, they are playing with their sons.

Another bias detected in a commercial aimed at boys and girls is the one presenting multiple games: *Dark Lab*, *Colour Science*, *101 Experiments and Lipsticks and nail polish Lab*. In all the labs both boys and girls are present, apart from the last one, dedicated to girls playing with makeup, to underline the message that if a girl wishes to conduct

scientific research, she will do so for aesthetic reasons.

Nevertheless, a change of course is noticeable, particularly in three advertisements, where the explorers are represented by both genders (one girl and two boys) in *Animal Discovery – Rulers of the Mountains and Rulers of the Equator*. In another ad, a toy weapon is presented as an amusement for the whole family, showing both father and mother engaged with their children.

5. Limitations and future research

The present research has taken into consideration a small amount of free-to-air private children's television channels, which are very popular among small children. It wasn't feasible to provide a comparison of all children's television channels streaming in Italy for the same period, so the data are limited to three of the major networks.

Although, internationally, a number of studies have addressed gender equality issues in toys advertising, very few findings are reported in Italian literature regarding this issue. Thus, it felt timely to gain perspective into this particular arena, however, the Internet and social media are progressively replacing television programmes. Even though watching television is still a very common practice among families, in the last few years more and more parents have become accustomed to letting their children use their smartphones to keep them entertained during social gatherings and nights out, thus allowing them full access to the Internet contents. It is furthermore common for children to possess their smartphone with an Internet connection and access to social media, despite the age limits required, being consequently exposed to multiple risks.

Therefore, it might be advisable, for future investigations, to explore the type of advertisements that children might come across on the Web, especially among popular networks like YouTube or YouTube Kids, that are watched every day by children and adolescents, often without parental control. Many App games contain commercials that are not suitable for minors and whose enticing messages may be devious and conceiving, particularly when they depict relationships and gender roles with an ambiguous angle.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The diffusion and commercialisation of toys on a large scale, mainly due to the reduction of production costs, has allowed children to benefit from tools to explore and interpret the world around them: however, the ways of using and accessing these toys are often predetermined and strictly defined by industry, the media, and even family and school.

Children begin to develop gender schema through their interaction with people and the media when they realise that individuals are organized into male and female categories: they construct their schemas to organize information and select which topics, colours, games, clothes, and toys are appropriate for each gender (Bem, 1981). Moreover, these gender schemas influence children's perceptions of the world, their skills, behaviours, self-concepts, and stereotypes (Canevello, 2020). If children's perceptions about gender roles are based on how they are "confronted with media messages about gender stereotypes from a young age" (Crowe, 2015, p. 159), it is fundamental to act to prevent this rigid dichotomy. It is not a matter of denying a difference between male and female, but of diminishing their weight and value, in addition to rigid polarisation, especially by clearly distinguishing

gender roles from sexual identity.

In order to break this chain of constraints, transmitted almost unchanged from one generation to the next, it is necessary to build together a different culture in which all parties are more aware and more responsible and to promote a culture of equal opportunities and valorisation of diversity, based on reciprocity and respect. And since stereotypes and prejudices take root from early childhood, it is essential that all socialisation agencies must play their part: family, school (from nursery to university), associations, and mass media (Luppi & Pacetti, 2019).

Schools can contribute to this deconstruction of gender stereotypes, as long as teachers are prepared: initial and ongoing training is needed to make teachers more aware of the need to educate about differences and a plurality of models (Biemmi, 2015; Brown & Silber, 2000; Lahelma & Tainio, 2019). Even the setting up of school spaces, the choice of toys offered from kindergarten onwards must allow children to choose autonomously and without conditioning, avoiding the distinction between boys' and girls' toys. The role of teachers is also important in supporting parenting, in promoting awareness among parents that there are no boys' and girls' toys, but only toys to develop children's growth and autonomy (MacPhee & Prendergast, 2019).

Concerning marketing, "Businesses have a responsibility to children, and gender equality is valued […] businesses may positively influence other groups who also contribute to this collective problem to participate in what, as for all other complex social problems, must ultimately be a collective solution" (Fine & Rush, 2018, pp. 779-780). Consumers launched several campaigns to promote gender equality and highlight discrimination caused by sexist language. Let toys be toys "is asking the toy and publishing industries to stop limiting children's interests by promoting some toys and books as only suitable for girls, and others only for boys[7]": the campaign, active in the UK, targets both toy manufacturers and sellers (e.g., asking to drop 'girls' and 'boys' signs in store and in website navigation), and children, families, and teachers for conscious and critical toy purchasing. In 2010, the Society of Women Engineers started a campaign to get Mattel to produce a computer engineer Barbie. In fact, Mattel periodically launches a survey to determine what the public wants. In this case, it was asked what job the next Barbie should do, and the Society of Women Engineers invited everyone to request a Barbie to fill that role[8]. Furthermore, thanks to the hashtag #ILookLikeAnEngineer used to spread non-stereotypical models of female engineers through Twitter, it also aimed to provide alternative models for girls. In 2014 in Australia, Play Unlimited promoted the slogan No gender December[9] to combat the stereotyping of toys, divided into male and female, and to promote freedom of opportunity and choice for boys and girls (a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced at Christmas time, with the shopping rush in December). More recently, the European Union launched a new campaign[10] about #EndGenderStereotypes to promote awareness among male and female citizens about their gender stereotypes and the consequences that such stereotyped views have in our lives with respect to choices (of studies, work, career), aspirations, freedom.

---

[7] https://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/

[8] See, in this regard, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_Engineer_Barbie

[9] http://www.nogenderdecember.com/ (the website is not active anymore).

[10] https://end-gender-stereotypes.campaign.europa.eu/index_en

These are a few examples of how it is possible to start a revolution in our culture and how we can have an impact on this transformation. Deconstructing gender stereotypes does not mean convincing or forcing in one direction rather than another, nor replacing a culturally imposed role with another one: it means dismantling stereotypes and predefined roles, understanding their origin and weight in everyday life, in order to make room for new forms of knowledge and relationships beyond the classical dichotomies of femininity and masculinity. It means offering critical and subversive tools, promoting knowledge of other and plural models of masculinity and femininity, grasping their partiality, unfairness and relativity. And thus, offering children toys to play with, together, without stereotypes.

Reference list

Antonio, A., & Tuffey, D. (2014). The gender digital divide in developing countries. *Future Internet*, Vol. 6/4, 673-687. http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/fi6040673 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Auster, C., & Mansbach, C. (2012). The Gender Marketing of Toys: An Analysis of Color and Type of Toy on the Disney Store Website. *Sex Roles*, 67, 375–388.

Bagattini, D., & Miotti, B. (2022). *Lavorare sul genere a scuola con coding e robotica educativa*. Roma: Carocci.

Bem, S. L. (1981). Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing. *Psychological Review*, *88*(4), 354–364.

Bian, L., Leslie, S. J., & Cimpian, A. (2017). Gender stereotypes about intellectual ability emerge early and influence children's interests. *American Association for the Advancement of Science*. Vol. 355, I 6323, 389–391. http://dx.doi.org/10.1126/science.aah6524 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Biemmi, I. (2010). La costruzione di un modello attuale. In F. Cambi (Ed.), *Media Education tra formazione e scuola. Principi, modelli, esperienze* (pp. 45-79). Pisa: ETS.

Biemmi, I. (2015). Gender in schools and culture: taking stock of education in Italy. *Gender and Education*, *27*(7), 812–827.

Biemmi, I. (2017). *Educazione sessista. Stereotipi di genere nei libri delle elementari*. Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier.

Brown, S. P., & Silber, E. S. (2000). Teaching our teachers: Gender in the foreground. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *28*(3/4), 154-163.

Canevello, A. (2020). Gender schema theory. *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, 1741-1743.

Colatrella, C. (2011). *Toys and tools in pink: cultural narratives of gender, science, and technology*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Cooper, J. (2006). The digital divide: The special case of gender. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, *22*(5), 320–334.

Crowe, C. (2015). How do family background and self-esteem affect an individual's perception of gender-role portrayal in online advertising? *Summer Research Experience Poster Presentations*. 1. https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/mcnair_sre/1/ (ver. 15.11.2023).

Cubelli, R., & Vicari, S. (Eds.). (2016). Video, tablet e smartphone nei bambini molto piccoli: un ostacolo o una risorsa per lo sviluppo cognitivo e linguistico? Una discussione per condividere raccomandazioni e interventi. *Psicologia clinica dello sviluppo*, Rivista quadrimestrale. 257-274.

Da Rold, C. (29/09/2022). Il Sole 24 Ore. *I bambini guardano più tv di 20 anni fa, e la metà di loro non legge mai.* https://www.infodata.ilsole24ore.com/2022/09/29/i-bambini-guardano-piu-tv-di-20-anni-fa-e-la-meta-di-loro-non-legge-mai/ (ver. 20.06.2023).

Dill, K. E., & Thill, K. P. (2007). Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions. *Sex Roles*, *57*(11–12), 851–864.

Fine, C., Rush, E. (2018). "Why Does all the Girls have to Buy Pink Stuff?" The Ethics and Science of the Gendered Toy Marketing Debate. *J Bus Ethics* 149, 769–784.

Francis, B. (2010). Gender, toys and learning. *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 36(3), pp. 325-344. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2569958 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Gianini Belotti, E. (1973). *Dalla parte delle bambine.* Milano: Feltrinelli.

Gunter, B., & Gunter, J. (2020). *Children and television*. London: Routledge. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2569958 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Kahlenberg, S. G., & Hein, M. M. (2010). Progression on Nickelodeon? Gender-Role Stereotypes in Toy Commercials. *Sex Roles* Vol. 62, 830–847.

Harding, S. (1986). *The Science Question in Feminism*. New York: Cornell University Press.

Huizinga, J. (1947). *Homo Ludens* (A. Vita, Trans.). Torino: Einaudi (Original work published 1939).

Lahelma, E., & Tainio, L. (2019). The long mission towards gender equality in teacher education: Reflections from a national project in Finland. *Nordic Studies in Education*, *39*(1), 69-84. http://dx.doi.org/10.18261/issn.1891-2019-01-06 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Lie, M. (1995). Technology and Masculinity: The Case of the Computer. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 2 (3), 379–94.

Lipperini, L. (2007). *Ancora dalla parte delle bambine*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Lull, J. (2003). Hegemony. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.). *Gender, race and class in media: A text reader* (2nd ed., 61– 66). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Luppi, E., & Pacetti, E. (2019). L'empowerment femminile nei luoghi di lavoro: metodologie, progetti e social media. In AA.VV. (2019). *A prescindere dal genere: pari opportunità, empowerment e diversità*. Bologna: Bononia University Press, 49-67.

MacPhee, D., & Prendergast, S. (2019). Room for Improvement: Girls' and Boys' Home Environments are Still Gendered. *Sex Roles,* 80, 332–346.

Monaci M. G., & Sarteur, M. (2012). Alle bambine piacciono le bambole, ai bambini le macchinine… o no? Il ruolo dei giocattoli nella differenziazione di genere.

Psicologia Clinica dello Sviluppo, 3, 453-480. http://dx.doi.org/10.1449/38835 (ver. 15.11.2023).

OECD (2019). *The role of education and skills in bridging the digital gender divide*. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://www.oecd.org/sti/education-and-skills-in-bridging-the-digital-gender-divide-evidence-from-apec.pdf (ver. 06.07.2023).

Panarese, P. (2015). Selling Gender. The Representation of Boys and Girls in Italian Toy Commercials. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, *7*(3), 335–361.

Pike, J. J., & Jennings, N. A. (2005). The effects of commercials on children's perceptions of gender appropriate toy use. *Sex roles*, 52, 83-91.

Rahmat, A. M., & Tambunan, S. M. G. (2020). Female Empowerment and Femininity in Barbie's "You Can Be Anything" YouTube Channel Campaign. In International University Symposium on Humanities and Arts (INUSHARTS 2019) (pp. 66-70). Atlantis Press.

Ricchiardi, P., & Venera, A. M. (2005). *Giochi da maschi, da femmine e… da tutti e due. Studi e ricerche sul gioco e le differenze di genere*. Bergamo: Junior.

Sheldon, J. P. (2004). Gender Stereotypes in Educational Software for Young Children. *Sex Roles*, 51, 433–44. http://dx.doi-org.ezproxy.unibo.it/10.1023/B:SERS.0000049232.90715.d9 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Smith, N. L. (2015). Built for Boyhood: a Proposal for Reducing the Amount of Gender Bias in the Advertising of Children's Toys on Television, 17. *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law,* *17*(4), 991–1050. https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/jetlaw/vol17/iss4/4 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Sullivan, A. A. (2019*). Breaking the STEM Stereotype: Reaching Girls in Early Childhood*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

Sullivan, A., & Bers, M. U. (2016). Girls, Boys, and Bots: Gender Differences in Young Children's Performance on Robotics and Programming Tasks. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Innovations in Practice*, 15, 145–165. http://www.informingscience.org/Publications/3547 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Tomasetto, C., Alparone, F. R., & Cadinu, M. (2011). Girls' Math Performance Under Stereotype Threat: The Moderating Role of Mothers' Gender Stereotypes. *Developmental psychology*, *47*(4), 943–949.

Trott, M., Driscoll, R., Irlado, E., & Pardhan, S. (2022). Changes and correlates of screen time in adults and children during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *EClinicalMedicine, 48*. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2022.101452 (ver. 15.11.2023).

Virtanen, S., Räikkönen, E., & Ikonen, P. (2014). Gender-based motivational differences in technology Education. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, *25*(2), 197–211.

Weber, K., & Custer, R. (2005). Gender-based Preferences toward Technology Education Content, Activities, and Instructional Methods. *Journal of Technology Education*, *16*(2), 55–71. http://dx.doi.org/10.21061/jte.v16i2.a.4 (ver. 15.11.2023).