

How contemporary toys enforce gender stereotypes in the uk research paper



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The research topic is “ How contemporary toys enforce gender stereotypes in the UK.” The key research question is: Do toys reflect old stereotypes in gender?. The minor research questions include: How do toys represent their subjects in terms of gender?, In what ways are these representations symptomatic of real life?, Do those representations lead to stereotypes in adult life?.

The research methodology implies the use of quantitative methods, particularly cross-sections surveys. For the survey four toys have been chosen - two for boys and two for girls. The surveys contain questions about these toys, their appearances, as well as gender-related questions.

The study premises on the answers of fifteen girls at age 8-11 and fifteen boys at similar age category. The survey is based on questionnaires that were specifically developed for this research. The questionnaires contained predominantly multiple-choice questions, several open-ended questions, and some general questions. The toys represented various functions that are traditionally assigned to women and men in society.

Children’s parents also took in survey to define the degree of gender representation in the toys chosen for the experiment. The toys should be scaled as female oriented (scale from 1-4), gender neutral (5 points), and male oriented (from 6 to 9 points). In this study, 18 couples (9 fathers and 9 mothers) agreed to participate in the research analysis of their choices in buying toys for their children. Children also had to go through interviews were recorded by the research participants. The interviews were conducted in the presence of their parents.

Data collection will involve a three step process in which four toys from Tesco will be selected. Two must account for either of the genders.

Thereafter, the researcher will analyze the items on the basis of dominant signs or representations. Certain patterns on gender will be identified from the signs and these will be structured in accordance with semiotic ideas. Finally, the patterns will be related to the research questions and similarities found.

The research topic is “ How contemporary toys enforce gender stereotypes in the UK.” Scholars have argued that a semiotic relationship exists in toys and this perpetuates gender stereotypes. Girls and boys learn about society’s expectations about their gender from what they interact with, and toys are one such example. Therefore, the key research question is: Do toys reflect old stereotypes in gender? The minor research questions include: How do toys represent their subjects in terms of gender?, In what ways are these representations symptomatic of real life?, Do those representations lead to stereotypes?. The research will employ semiotic content analysis to answer the research questions.

Toys are an important semiotic resource in that they illustrate social identities and social roles. Therefore, an analysis of their representation is critical in determining social relationships. This research is particularly interested in gender representations. Leeuwe explains that dolls create certain roles among their users.

They are interactive in nature; consequently, their kinesthetic designs will determine the role that a child will take on when playing with them. For

instance, a teddy bear has lots of fur in order to encourage the child to cuddle it. Alternatively, a spider man toy may have provisions for sticking on walls. Therefore, the kinesthetic design of a doll will determine how a child will interact with it. With time, children will learn about societal rules and what they can or cannot do with their toys.[1]

A toy has an identity depending on its physical features. The color of the toy, its anatomical features, the build, its skin color, hair length and other features all form part of a toy's identity. These features are unique markers of the child's or manufacturer's culture. For instance, many dolls in western culture have females with blond hair as a measure of what western culture considers conventional.

Finally, toys carry meaning in their design and representation. The traits in a toy will provide clues about what they symbolize. For instance, some toys may possess huge muscles or large breasts depending on the meaning they want to convey. Sometimes, their physical features may have a comic effect or they may represent society's expectations about the toy. Toys are, therefore, useful in engaging in a discourse analysis about their social worlds.[2] Their roles, identities and meanings answer pertinent questions concerning society.

The study was premised on the results from the surveys designed for children and parents. To begin with, parents should label the selected toys in relation to gender functions they performed.

The scale that was designed for this study ranged from 1 to 9 points, where female-related roles were highlighted by points from 1 to 4, gender-neutral
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toys were labeled as 5 and male-related toys were evaluated from 5 to 9 points. The proposed scales helped to classify the toys in accordance with gender stereotypes and parents' attitude to them.

The parents sample included 18 couples with 9 fathers and 9 mothers, who were gathered through mass-mailing and phone calls. The information about electronic mail address and phone numbers were taken from the database from the school in which their children studied.

The average age of parents was about 37.3 years. The scale developed for estimating gender appropriateness sought to define how parents understood the functions that the toys could perform in children's games (See Appendix 2). The toys were designed for children under the age from 8 to 11.

There were 30 children (15 boys and 15 girls) who also participated in the study who should define the roles and function that each toy could perform during the play. The cross-sectional survey implied interviewing each child individually to achieve the accuracy and objectivity of results.

Both parents and children were presented to four toys. Two toys - Baby Annabel Function Doll and Barbie Doggie Water Park - were designed for girls whereas Bob The Builder Construction Tower and Transformers 3 Ultimate Optimus Prime were selected for boys.

Apart from the gender stereotype scale, parents will be presented with the appropriateness scale that can allow them to determine whether these toys are relevant for children to play. This survey relied on the study Campenni

who applied to several characteristics, including appropriateness of toys for girls and for boys in terms of the roles and functions they perform[3].

Before parents and children were chosen for survey analysis, parents were informed about the purpose and scope of research and were proposed to participate in the research studies. The explanation was also provided to parent's children who were interviewed in the presence of their parents.

The questionnaire developed for children aims to learn the way they perceived and understood gender roles and functions each toy performs. The questions were composed of open-ended and general type, which contributed to the credibility and validity of the study. The results of the study were processed to define the main attributes that children assigned to these toys.

The study utilized semiotic principles in order to identify connotations of gender in four types of toys. The researcher selected the toys on the basis of their popularity in Tesco retail chains. For girls' toys, the two items were " Baby Annabel Function Doll" and " Barbie Doggie Water Park". For boys the two items were " Bob The Builder Construction Tower" and " Transformers 3 Ultimate Optimus Prime"[4]. Both genders had a singular toy and a set.

Children defined some of the physical attributes of the toys. " Baby Annabell Function Doll" is a likeness of a baby in that it has the size and physical features of a baby. The doll's mouth allows one to insert a pacifier or a feeding bottle. Additionally, the doll is battery-powered, so it makes noises similar to that of a real baby when it wakes up.

This works whenever the doll opens its eyes after closing them. Some parts of the doll are made of soft material especially on the torso while the hands, and head are plastic. The doll wears colorful material and clothes that are similar to those of a real child. The colors of choice are white and pink.

Conversely, “ Barbie Doggie Water Park” is a collection of a Barbie doll walking her dog at a park. The set has three puppies, a picnic basket and blanket, bones, a dog, a handbag for Barbie as well as some scenes from the park. Barbie looks straight at the buyer and firmly holds the dog’s string as she moves along.

She is wearing a colorful pink and purple blouse and a short orange skirt. The doll also has roller skates and knee pads to protect her in case she falls. Barbie also has long blond hair, and blue eyes. Children can comb her hair with a comb from her bag.

Bob the Builder Construction Tower is a series of parts that allow children to create a water tower. The parts consist of a series of staircases, walls, pulleys, wheelbarrows and floors. The child is supposed to use a pictorial depiction of the completed tower to create the whole item. It is made up of bold colors like yellow and red.

Transformers 3 Ultimate Optimus Prime is a black and red robot from the Transformers series. ‘ Transformers’ is a successful film trilogy that many boys love and enjoy. Children have the option of reassembling the robot into a vehicle so they can decide how to play with it. The toy makes missile and battle sounds. It also has flowing weapons that are intended on scaring away

enemies. The transformer looks like an alien owing to its weird antennas, wing-like creatures and its numerous extensions.

Baby Annabel Function Doll represents women as nurturers. A baby naturally requires nurturing; therefore, if a manufacturer is selling such a toy, then he or she intends on perpetuating that stereotype. Considerable interactions with such types of dolls will prepare children for their future roles as mothers.[5]

Unlike Transformer 3, Baby Annabel cannot be deconstructed. The child playing with this doll cannot exercise her duty as a creator. Instead, she must accept that she is a consumer.

Annabel's set comes with a series of pacifiers, baby bottles and other items. Such a depiction has an adverse implication on what society expects from women as adults. Most manufacturers make their products for women. Cosmetics, household items, and clothes are largely intended for the female consumer. Therefore, this doll is preparing the girl for her role as a consumer in adult life.

Conversely, Transformers 3 is a stand-alone toy. It does not come with several other items like pacifiers. Instead, the toy repeats certain noises that mirror the battlefield. Nothing about the toy signifies care; the boy who plays can take on the role of an action figure in a battle. He has the capacity to defeat his enemies and become a winner.

The toy reflects an outgoing person who does not have to confine himself to domestic situations. This is reflective of what society expects from boys as

they grow older. Additionally, the movements of the toys indicate that the child can explore and learn about new things.[6]

Bob the Builder Construction Tower allows the child to pretend to be an engineer or architect. The fact that it is called 'Bob' indicates that it is meant for boys. Clearly, the construction site is a very versatile place for the boy to aspire. The toy proves that manufacturers are offering boys more options than girls. They can think about their future professions and relate to them. Bob the Builder is conditioning boys to become direct participants in the economy when they become older.

On the flipside, Barbie Doggie Water Park has no such professional roles. Barbie is walking her dog on roller skates. Her physical attributes accentuate her femininity; such as a curvy body and long legs. One cannot help but notice her physical attractiveness.

The fact that the manufacturers placed a comb in her bag indicates that Barbie must be preoccupied with her appearance. Such a factor will condition Barbie to become conscious about her looks. In the future, it is likely that she will seek approval from others because of this preoccupation with physical attributes.[7]

Boys have more options than girls in the world of toys. This conditions them for their future adult roles in which the same distinctions exist. The kinesthetic design of the toys is a sign that signifies power relations among the gender. Annabel the doll is seated while Transformer 3 is standing with its legs part. Additionally Barbie is preoccupied with her appearance while

Bob the Builder is not even on the set. These positions indicate that girls
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must care about appeasing others. The stand-alone nature of Transformer 3 shows that boys should be independent. It is standing with its legs apart to demonstrate confidence.[8] These are all qualities that society expects from men in adulthood. Additionally, the baby who is seating down has less control than the Transformer 3 who is ready for attack. Power relations of control in the male gender are evident through this kinesthetic design. Boys can change the transformer into a car or they can construct “ Bob the Builder’ into something tangible. A lot of rigidity is present in girl’s toys as they can barely move their toys. Girls thus learn that exploration is not a welcome trait. In adult life, it is not surprising that many of them will seek assistance when performing physical tasks like changing tires. Such toys stifle their creative tendencies.[9]

The identity of the toys also has a lot to show about what society expects from women. The aesthetics of the toys are symptomatic of gender stereotypes. Baby Annabel is dressed in pink and white. It has big eyes and chubby cheeks designed to elicit nurturing and caring reactions. Conversely, Transformers 3 or Bob the builder have daring and bold colors designed to encourage the child to do something with it. Girls toys tend to cause them to become more relational while boys toys emphasize practical aspects of things or aggression.

The four research items have proved that contemporary toys still enforce gender stereotypes. Girls’ toys teach them how to become consumers, submissive nurturers and affirmation seekers. On the other hand, boys’ toys condition them for independence, assertiveness, confidence and production in their adult life.

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Figure 1: Gender Appropriateness