

The Presence of Gender Stereotypes in Toy Advertising. Two Decades of Analysis

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Abstract

This section examines the evolution of the results of the analyses conducted by the Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC) on the presence of gender stereotypes in the advertising of toys on television. Although, the volume of advertisements that make up the study universe of the different studies follows a decreasing trend, in recent years there has been an increase in the proportion of representations of stereotypes linked to traditionally feminine roles. The most recent report (2018-19), which incorporates into the analysis framework the new phenomenon of toy promotion channels on video exchange platforms, notes the reproduction of the same gender stereotypes present in traditional television advertising.

Keywords

Gender stereotypes, advertising, toys, television, video distribution platforms

Resum

Aquest article examina l'evolució dels resultats de les anàlisis elaborades pel Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya (CAC) sobre la presència d'estereotips de gènere en la publicitat de joguines a la televisió. Tot i que el volum d'anuncis que conforma l'univers d'estudi dels diferents estudis segueix una tendència decreixent, en els darrers anys es detecta un augment de la proporció de representacions d'estereotips lligades a rols tradicionalment femenins. L'informe més recent (2018-19), que incorpora al marc d'anàlisi el nou fenomen dels canals de promoció de joguines de les plataformes d'intercanvi de vídeos, constata la reproducció dels mateixos estereotips de gènere presents a la publicitat televisiva tradicional.

Paraules clau

Estereotips de gènere, publicitat, joguines, televisió, plataformes de distribució de vídeos

1. Introduction

The Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC) has carried out, since its beginnings, an analysis of the contents and the presentation of the advertising of toys on television.

The CAC's interest in this topic responds to the concern about their effects on children. We must bear in mind that this group is legally subject to special protection, also concerning audiovisual content.

On the other hand, this is not any ordinary interest in *media* research. The literature on the effects of television content on minors has a long history and has been approached from different points of view.

Thus, for example, Gerbner's theory of cultivation establishes a relationship between television consumption and the values

and opinions adopted by each person, especially when it comes to children which are, "more susceptible than adults to adopt a television world view, particularly as it relates to the social construction of gender and gender roles" (Jennings and Pike 2005: 84).

From this point of view, toy advertising would have effects on the construction of children's gender identity and on the propagation of sexist roles amongst others.

Without attempting to critically review the information on the subject, it can be said that there is a certain consensus in considering that advertising (of toys and other products and services aimed at minors) represents girls and boys in a gender-stereotyped manner.

Several studies show the abundance of gender stereotypes in toy advertising in recent decades and in different countries

(Etheridge, 2015) and the allocation of different behaviors and values to girls and boys in toy advertising (Martínez, Pérez-Ugena and Salas 2011; Martínez, Nicolás and Salas 2013). Other studies also demonstrate, “a relationship between exposure to these gendered images and children’s perceptions about gender roles” (Jennings and Pike 2005: 84), in a way that offers “an interpretation of reality full of stereotypes” (Iglesias and Pereira 2008: 10).

The concept behind these studies is, therefore, *gender stereotype* and the analyses conducted by the CAC have aimed to identify its presence in toy advertising.

This section studies the evolution of the presence of gender stereotypes in toy advertising over almost two decades. The CAC has homogeneous and fully comparable data that allow for diachronic analysis and an assessment of the trends that have accompanied the advertisement of these products on television in recent years.

2. Legal Framework

As mentioned in the previous point, minors are part of the population subject to specific legal protection in terms of content and advertising in the audiovisual media.

Moreover, this protection is found both in general rules for the regulation of the audiovisual sector and in the sectoral rules for the protection of children, advertising, women’s rights and the fight against gender-based violence.

Thus, the Catalan and national laws regulating audiovisual communication explicitly refer to the presence of sexist elements in advertising.

Section 92 of Catalan Law 22/2005, of 29 December, on Audiovisual Communication in Catalonia classifies as unlawful advertising and teleshopping any that “discriminates based of birth, race, sex, religion, nationality, opinion or any other personal or social circumstance”.

The Spanish State Law of Audiovisual Communication 7/2010, of 31 March, establishes in paragraph 3 of section 7 regarding the rights of minors:

“3. Commercial communications must not cause moral or physical harm to minors. Consequently, they will have the following limitations: [...]

(e) They must not incite behavior that encourages inequality between men and women.”

At European level, Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 on Audiovisual Media Services, which incorporates audiovisual services over the Internet as subject to its jurisdiction, forbids in section 9(c) sex discrimination in audiovisual commercial communications:

“(c) audiovisual commercial communications may not: [...]

(ii) include or promote any discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, nationality, religion or belief, disability, age or

sexual orientation;”.

Regarding sectoral legislation on advertising, section 3 of State Law 29/2009, of 30 December, which modifies the legal regime of unfair competition and advertising to improve consumer and user protection, establishes the unlawfulness of advertising that presents women in a discriminatory manner:

“The following shall be considered illegal:

Advertising that is an affront to personal dignity or that violates constitutionally recognized values and rights [...].

Included in the foregoing are advertisements that portray women in a degrading or discriminatory fashion, either by specifically and directly using their bodies or parts thereof as mere objects unrelated to the product being promoted, or their image associated with stereotyped behaviours which violate the basis of our legal system while contributing to generate the sort of violence referred to in Organic Law 1/2004 of 28 December on Comprehensive Protection Measures against Gender-based Violence”.

Catalan Law 5/2008, of 24 April, on the Right of Women to Eradicate Sexist Violence, contains specific measures aimed at the media. Thus, Article 22 forbids, in the media within the sphere of the Generalitat de Catalunya:

“The creation and the dissemination of content and advertising which, by means of treatment or staging [...], which tacitly or implicitly convey sexist and misogynist messages”

From the point of view of the legal regulation of children’s rights, Article 59 of Catalan Law 14/2010, of 27 May, on Rights and Opportunities in Childhood and Adolescence, relating to advertising aimed at children and adolescents, establishes a series of limits on advertising aimed at this group:

“a) Advertisements, pursuant to the child and adolescent’s knowledge level and to their education, must not incite [...] any type of discrimination, nor project stereotyped images of the aforementioned [...]

d) Messages containing discrimination or differences based on the consumption of the advertised product must be avoided. Particularly, toy advertising aimed at children and adolescents must be intended at promoting non-sexist toys. [...]

e) Advertising or teleshopping aimed at minors must convey an equal, plural and non-stereotypical image of women and men.”

The Catalan Audiovisual Council has also had an impact on the protection of minors regarding advertising content, using its regulatory power. For this purpose, it approved in 2004 the *Instrucció general del Consell de l’Audiovisual de Catalunya sobre protecció de la infància i l’adolescència* (modified in 2007 to adapt it to Catalan Law 22/2005 on Audiovisual Communication in Catalonia). The Instruction includes explicit references in the content of advertising aimed at minors and toy advertising

and incorporates, as an obligation, most of the guidelines of a previous co-regulation document: the *Recomanacions del CAC sobre la publicitat de joguines a la television (Guidelines on Toy Advertisements in Television)* elaborated in 1997 and amended in 2000 by the precedent of the CAC as a regulatory body.

Thus, section 16 of the aforementioned establishes that:

“ [...] television service providers should pay attention to the following measures for the protection of minors with regards to the broadcasting of advertising and teleshopping:

- a) Pursuant to the child and adolescent’s knowledge level and bearing in mind their educational status, advertisements should not incite [...] discrimination based on birth, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, opinion or any other personal or social circumstance. [...]
- c) Advertisements for products aimed at minors may not contain discrimination or differences based on sex in the use of the product advertised. [...]
- e) Advertising or teleshopping aimed at minors must convey an equal, plural and non-stereotypical image of women and men.”

3. Purpose and Methodological Aspects

However, the existence of standards and regulations aimed at avoiding gender discrimination fails in eliminating the presence of stereotypes in audiovisual content in general terms and more specifically in advertising, given that stereotypes are constructed from the generalization and normalization of the preconceived designation of gender roles and values in specific social and cultural contexts.

Normalization is precisely the tendency to reverse in order to avoid the propagation of gender stereotypes. Showing the presence of gender stereotypes, making them visible and identifying them is an essential step for critical reflection on their existence and dissemination and, consequently, for their elimination.

It is in this context that we must frame the analysis of the Catalan Audiovisual Council on the presence of gender stereotypes in toy advertising.

The purpose of these studies is to identify and describe the presence of discursive patterns in the representation of gender stereotypes in toy advertising.

The CAC, established as the regulatory body for the audiovisual sector in Catalonia, has issued a total of 12 reports on toy advertising since 2001.

A precedent of these analyses lies in the task that the Catalan Audiovisual Council carried out as an advisory body, created by Law 8/1996, of 5 July, on the regulation of audiovisual programming distributed by cable, and which was in operation until the constitution of the CAC as an independent regulatory authority in 2000. Between 1997 and 1999, that advisory body also produced reports on toy advertising that provide comparable data to the historical series of CAC analyses.

Although the methodology of the reports has evolved, it is possible to establish comparable data series in relation to the study sphere and unit of analysis; the presence and type of representations of gender stereotypes in advertising; and the typology of toys.

The studio sphere consists of commercials broadcasted on linear television channels during the Christmas campaign. The unit of analysis is the *commercial*.

Therefore, the presence or absence of gender stereotypes in toy spots is analyzed, considering various aspects of the story of the advertising message (the audio of the message, the activity developed by the protagonist and the context of the action).

These indicators identify the presence or absence of representations of the following gender stereotypes, although *a priori* it is not a closed relationship:

a. Female Stereotypes:

- A girl that plays with a doll
- A girl who only plays with other girls and/or does not interact with boys equally.
- A girl who takes on the role of the mother while playing.
- A girl who is worried about her physical appearance.
- A girl who does household chores while playing.
- A girl who appears accompanied only by her mother.
- Girl who plays shopping.
- Girl in a primary symbolic game: Other stereotyped gender roles in which girls are associated with a reproductive sphere or private sphere (home and family).
- An anthropomorphic female toy that develops an activity associated with a stereotyped female role.

b. Male Stereotypes:

- A boy who only plays with other boys and/or does not interact with girls equally.
- A boy who plays with toy cars.
- A boy who competes.
- A boy who plays with war toys.
- A boy who appears accompanied only by his father.
- Boy in a secondary symbolic play: other stereotyped gender roles in which boys are associated from a social point of view, developing activities that take place outside the home.
- An anthropomorphic male toy that develops an activity associated with a stereotyped male role.

With regard to the typologies of toys, between 2001-02 and 2017-18 the same classification was used, which in the last report (2018-19) has been slightly modified, mainly in relation to the naming of each category.

The last report shows a greater number of variables that provide more depth to the analysis. It also studies formal elements (voice over and predominant color) and narrative elements (space, actions, language used) of each commercial as well as the characteristics of the parties who appear in the commercial (sex and age) and the interaction between them.

The voice over, predominant color and language variables used

allow a comparison with the report carried out during the 1998-99 campaign and, consequently, the analysis of its evolution over a prolonged period.

On the other hand, in the report for the 2018-19 advertising campaign, the analysis framework is extended to audiovisual content on video distribution platforms.

4. Results of the Analyses Elaborated by the CAC

In all the reports on the representation of gender stereotypes in the advertising of toys produced by the CAC, their presence is noted. However, throughout the series quantitative (number of commercials with some representation of stereotypes) and qualitative (gender and specific representation of stereotype; typology of toys with representation of stereotypes) variations have been observed.

4.1 Presence Gender Stereotypes Representations

The presence of stereotypes representations in toy advertising tends to decrease during the period studied, although it does not do so consistently. Thus, during the first advertising campaign analyzed (2001-2002), 4 out of 10 toy advertisements were found to contain representations of gender stereotypes; during the 2018-19 campaign, the proportion decreased to 3 out of 10.

Throughout the 12 reports conducted by the CAC on television advertising for toys in Christmas campaigns, the volume of advertisements with representations of gender stereotypes varies between 31.2% (percentage of the 2018-2019 campaign) and 50.4% (2004-2005 campaign) of the total sample analyzed (see figure 1).

Likewise, another constant throughout the series of reports is the asymmetric distribution of representations of male and female stereotypes: representations of **female stereotypes are always more** than male ones.

In this sense, the representations of stereotypes referring to women have been, in all the advertising campaigns analyzed, higher than those referring to men, with percentages ranging from a minimum of 55.4% (2013-14) to a maximum of 87.5% in the last reports. It is also worth noting the growing trend in the proportion of representations linked to traditional female roles in the last four reports (see figure 2).

4.2 Representations of Stereotypes According to their Associated Gender

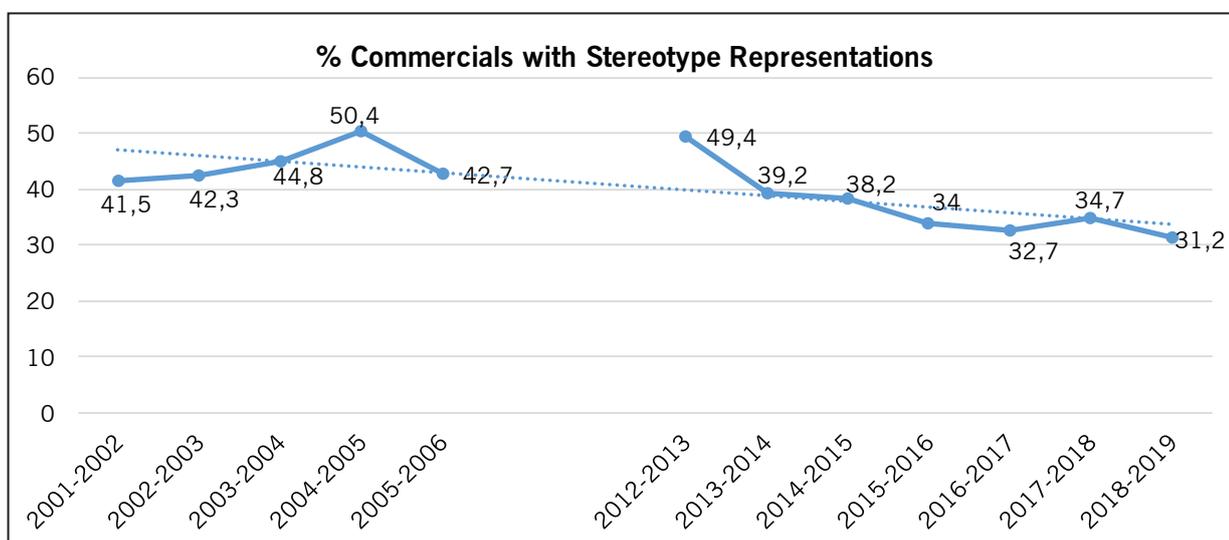
Another element of continuity in toy advertising has to do with the most repeated representations of stereotypes.

Thus, in 9 of the 12 advertising campaigns analyzed, the two main stereotypes appearing are the same and are also associated with women: those showing a girl playing with a doll and another showing girls playing exclusively with other girls, without any interaction with boys. In the other remaining 3 advertising campaigns (between 2013 and 2016), the stereotype that appears the most shows boys only playing with other boys.

Concerning female stereotypes, in addition to the two mentioned, in the 2014-15 and 2016-17 advertising campaigns there is also an important presence of the staging, through female anthropomorphic figures of roles traditionally intended for women (see section 3).

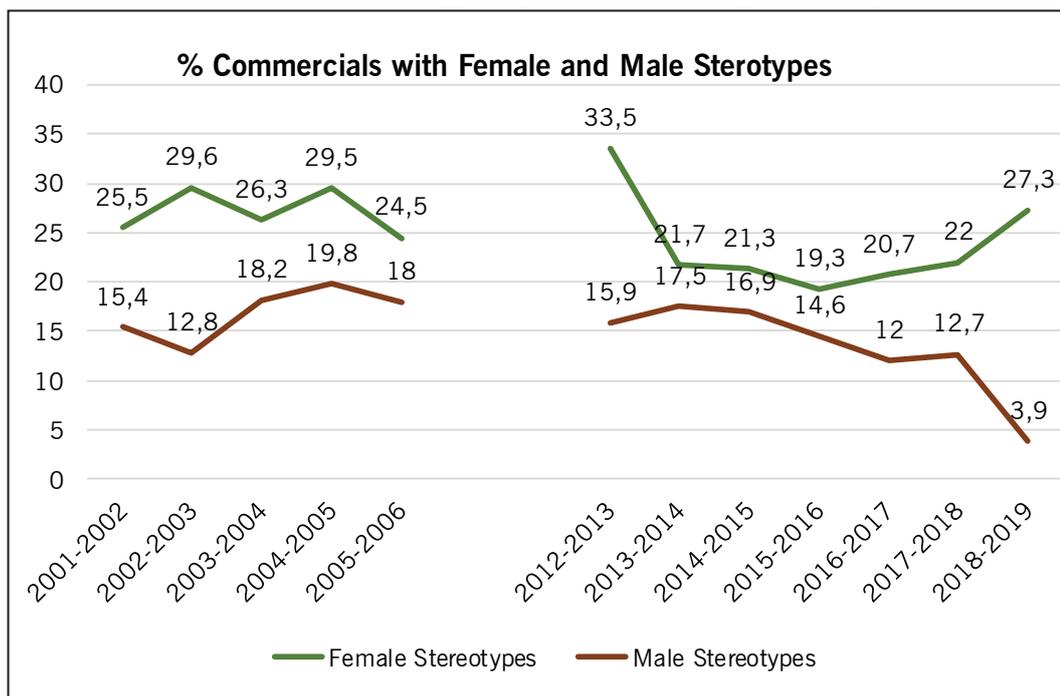
The presence of representations of gender stereotypes has not changed over the past 17 years. Moreover, in all but one campaign, the two main stereotypes depicted are those showing

Figure 1. Evolution of Gender Stereotype Representations in Toy Advertising



Source: By the authors.

Figure 2. Evolution of Gender Stereotype Representations in Toy Advertising



Source: By the authors

boys playing only with other boys as well as with cars. In 2018-19 campaigns, boys were also shown playing war games.

Therefore, the stereotypes most represented in toy advertising during the analysis period coincide in recommending a segregation of play between girls and boys: They do not play together and play different games.

4.3 Types of Toys & Representation of Stereotypes

Studies have also shown that advertising associates certain toys with girls and others with boys by assigning gender stereotypes.

In this sense, the types of toys that concentrate the most representations of female stereotypes are mainly dolls, which always concentrate more than half (between 61.5% of the 2017-18 advertising campaign and 88.2% in 2013-14). The second category of toys most stereotyped are games that mimic reality.

The doll commercial usually presents a girl playing with them, often accompanied by other girls (without playing with boys on an equal level) and carrying out actions that mimic the role of a mother. Toy commercials that mimic reality, containing female stereotypes, are usually products that emulate professions related to beauty (hairdressers, make-up artists, kits for making braids and nail decoration, etc.) where a girl is shown playing only with girls and is worried about her physical appearance.

On the other hand, advertisements representing cars or trucks (miniature vehicles and circuits or motorways) are the products advertised that include the most male stereotypes throughout all of the campaigns analyzed. In this sense, however, the concentration of stereotypes in these typologies

has decreased. Therefore, in terms of advertising for motorways and accessories, while in the period 2001-2006 these toys accounted for between 70 and 80% of stereotypes. Instead, between 2012 and the last of the reports, it stood at around 35%.

Both the circuit and car commercials, when stereotyped, show boys interacting only with other boys (without the presence of girls in the game on an equal level), playing with cars and often competing. Moreover, on more than one occasion, the figure of the father appears.

On the contrary, there are a number of toys types that contain male and female stereotypes in similar proportions. This is especially the case for dolls, figures and accessories, but also for constructions and kits, and electronic games.

In these cases, further analyses show that toys classified in these categories also segregate according to whether they are, for example, figures suggesting a game that mimics everyday life situations or whether they are warrior or hero figures. Moreover, they are also classified as to what can be built with the toy, either shopping centers or princesses' houses, combat vehicle or a train circuit. In the first examples, the commercial includes female stereotypes, whilst in the second it includes male stereotypes.

Finally, there are some toy types that recurrently throughout a series of analysis are advertised by commercials that do not include stereotypes: Above all, this is the case of board games, but also of consoles and video games, aiming and skill-required games, in which girls and boys share the games and paternal or maternal figures appear indistinctly.

Even so, the report for the 2018-19 advertising campaign introduces a more detailed analysis of the interrelationship between girls and boys in the commercials in which they share the spotlight. Hence, different and unequal roles and attitudes are detected between girls and boys when they interact in board games or skill-requires games.

In this sense, in games that involve competition, the boy wins many times more than the girl. In board games, for example, 70% of the times the boy is shown as the winner, while in the case of aiming and skill-required games, even though the majority share achieving the objective, boys appear as winners 4 times more than girls.

4.4 Comparison between Elements of Toy Advertising between 1998 and 2018

As mentioned above, el Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya, created in 1996 as a governmental advisory body and before its constitution as an independent regulating authority, conducted several analyses on toy advertising.

The existence of these reports, which share some methodological elements with those carried out by the CAC as a regulator, makes it possible to evaluate, in those common variables, the evolution over two decades of toy advertising in aspects related to gender stereotypes. Specifically, they compare the following elements: who has the leading role in the commercial, whether the voice-over is male or female, the predominant color and the language implemented.

In terms of the people starring the commercial, in 1998 girls and boys participated similarly. In 35,6 % of the commercials, the girls play the lead; 31 % of the commercial have boys starring in them and 33,5 % include both. Twenty years later, girls play the leading roles in toy spots in half of the samples analyzed (48.3%) - with a figure slightly higher than the combined presence of girls and boys (44.4%). The most notable

difference lies in the decrease in the presence of boys (7.3%) as main actors.

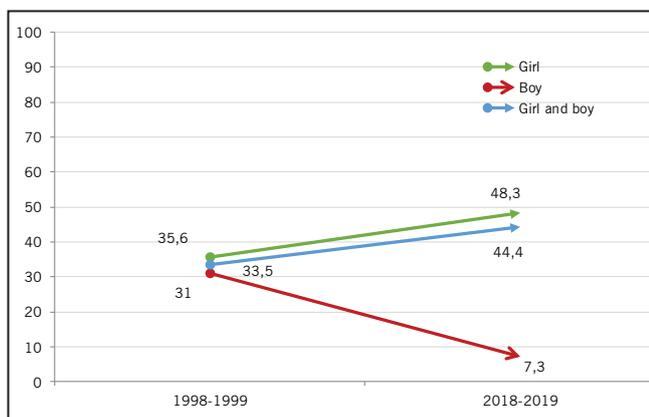
What hasn't changed in 20 years is what girls promote: In 1998, they starred 86.6% of doll commercials and in 2018 they are still the same in almost identical percentages (87%). On the other hand, 20 years ago boys almost exclusively starred motorway and miniature car commercials (100% and 77.8% respectively). During the 2018-2019 campaign, half of these toys are advertised both by boys and girls.

Regarding the voice-over of toy advertising, there is a clear decrease in the male voice as the main one. While in 1998, 63% of the commercials were narrated by male voices (they were the majority in all types of toys except dolls and games mimicking reality), 2018 is reduced by exactly half (31%). This latest report states that the female voice is the main voice of all the toys advertised. However, the male voice is predominant in the advertising of miniature vehicles and circuits (80%), board games (92%) and skill-required and aiming games (66.7%).

The color that predominates in the advertising of each type of toy also has stereotypical connotations. Thus, pink and pastels that are traditionally associated with girls, continue to colorbe part of 6 out of 10 doll advertisements, both during the 2018/19 campaign like in the one from 20 years ago. On the other hand, blue and dark colors, usually related to boys, no longer predominate in advertisements where they previously did (miniature vehicles, motorways and electronic toys). Therefore, while the association of a girl with pink and pastel colors is still present nowadays, boy have experienced how the advertisements aimed at them have diversified the color palette.

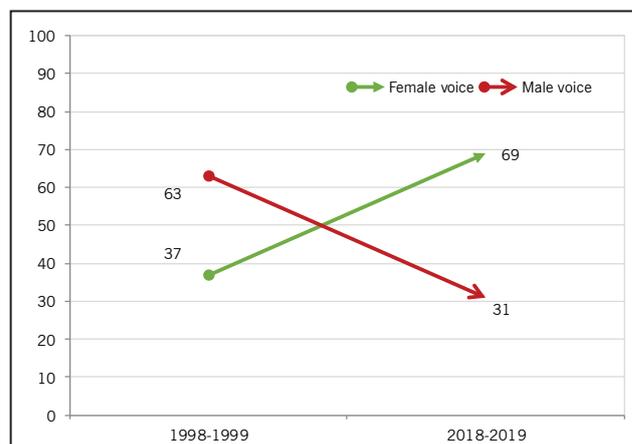
In relation to the language used in advertising, in 1998 the use of diminutives was detected repeatedly in the presentation of dolls (72% of commercials contained diminutive forms). Twenty years later, there has been a clear decline in this type of toy to 47.2%.

Figure 3. Protagonists of Toy Commercials Broadcast during the Christmas Advertising Campaigns of 1998/99 and 2018/19



Source: By the authors.

Figure 4. Voice over of Toy Commercials Broadcast during the Christmas Advertising Campaigns of 1998/99 and 2018/19



Source: By the authors.

boys and 3 by girls– and with a high number of subscribers. Thus, the six analyzed totaled more than 18 million subscribers and 151 toy videos published in the analysis period totaled 351 million views. **Therefore, audiovisual content has a very large audience.**

These videos show how the protagonists receive a new toy, unpack it (*unboxing*) and play either challenges or simulate real-life situations in which they interact with one or more toys.

5.1 The Segmentation of the Videos between Female and Male Youtubers.

In the analyzed channels, *youtubers* interact mainly with children of the same sex and, when one of the two parents appear in the videos (either regularly or at any given time); boys are usually play with their father while girls play with their mother.

Thus, these channels reproduce one of the features present in television advertising: the segregation by sex of the content offered.

5.2 Type of Toys and Gender of the Protagonist of Advertisements

As in the case of television commercials, the videos reflect the relationship between gender and type of toys promoted.

Thus, in the three channels led by girls, the toys that appear most frequently are dolls and accessories, representations of animals or pets and games that copy activities linked to the care of personal appearance. *Youtubers* are boys, toys are dolls, figures and accessories, often action items, vehicles and riding gear, miniature vehicles and circuits, and also video games.

Moreover, it has been observed that when a channel featuring a boy incorporates the participation of a girl (or vice versa) it aims to include the presence of toys traditionally associated with the other gender.

5.3 Actions and Roles Carried Out

The actions and roles carried out in the game by the video protagonists also differ radically by gender.

On Youtube channels featuring girls, they appear carrying out activities related to the role of mother through the advertised dolls (which are fed, bathed, taken in the stroller, etc.), as well as taking care of the house, with activities such as sweeping, cooking or tidying up the house.

When playing games, girls also appear regularly in roles linked to taking care of their physical appearance: they put make-up on, comb their hair and have fun using the different toys presented, such as a dressing table or a make-up case. This concern is also reflected in the girls' comments while playing.

As for the symbolic representation of professional roles, girls appear to be developing traditionally feminized professions, such as those linked to physical appearance (hairstylist, make-up artist), customer service (saleswoman) and childcare (worker in a baby adoption center).

On the other hand, YouTube videos starring boys focus on action situations and are characterized by showing children

in competitive or simulated fighting games. For example, when they play a video game based on combat, they race the promoted car circuit, or they develop sporting challenges.

As for the professional roles represented by boy *youtubers*, they correspond mostly with professions traditionally attributed to men, whether real or fiction (mechanic, firefighter, archaeologist, explorer, pirate...).

Conclusions

The diachronic analysis of toy advertising highlights the persistence of the representation of gender stereotypes of the 18 years between the first and the last report in the series. In this way, toy advertising on television would continue to reinforce a stereotyped approach towards children.

Nevertheless, the number of commercials that include some representation of stereotyped roles experienced a decrease of 10 points between the first studies (2001-2002) and the last one (2018-19), and a decrease in 6 of the last 7 campaigns analyzed.

However, qualitatively speaking, the overall reduction of stereotyped commercials has not been uniform: in recent studies, females represent an increasing share of total stereotypes.

Likewise, over the years the establishment of a relationship between the promoted toy and the gender of the person who appears as the protagonist of the advertising story survives, in such a way that a segregation of the game and the toys according to sex is suggested –a phenomenon that is also seen on toy advertising YouTube channels.

Especially constant is the stereotyped story of boy and girls playing only with other children of their same sex who, when dealing with girls, play with a doll, and when they are boys, play with cars. Throughout the findings, without any significant changes seen, these four stereotypes account for the vast majority of the representations detected.

Accordingly, doll advertisements and miniature car advertisements among others are the typologies that always appear with the most representations of stereotypes, feminine and masculine, respectively.

Moreover, the videos of the YouTube channels analyzed in the last of the reports (2018-19) also reflect this association between gender and typology of the toys promoted.

In this way, toy advertising proposes, through the symbolic function of play, a different interpretation of reality for girls and boys. Girls are offered a world related to the primary sphere: roles of motherhood and caring for people. In contrast, boys almost never appear to be related to this sphere. The language used, which is analyzed in the last report, reinforces this unequal perception: usage of idyllic worlds related to dolls and plush toys in the advertisements starring girls and action vocabulary in those featuring boys.

To sum up, the studies shows trends that evolve in different directions.

On the one hand, the presence of representations of gender stereotypes continues to be present in toy advertising, although to a lesser extent than that detected at the beginning of the analysis series. On the other hand, several elements could indicate the increasing concentration of gender stereotypes in visions that discriminate against women.

However, the decrease in the presence of gender stereotypes in toy advertising and the increase in advertisements in which girls and boys share the game must be positively assessed.

Despite this positive assessment, we must redirect our attention towards the new forms of diffusion of audiovisual content aimed at children and, very especially, at the diffusion of advertising content. In the latest CAC report on the presence of gender stereotypes in toy advertising, it was found that audiovisual content promoting toys through video exchange platforms reproduces the gender stereotypes of traditional advertising. Given the characteristics of this diffusion framework (multiplicity of agents such as content generators, professionally unsupervised elaboration, possibility of virilization, among others) it could mean a new difficulty on the way towards the elimination of these stereotypes.

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