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Selling Gender. The Representation of Boys and Girls in Italian Toy Commercials

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Selling Gender. The Representation of Boys and Girls in Italian Toy Commercials

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Abstract: The article reports the results of a content analysis of 78 Italian toy commercials and 142 characters. The research aims to determine the level of sex typing in Italian television advertising directed to children. The analysis reveals a considerable difference in the portrayals of boys and girls, though more nuanced than in the past. Boys outnumber girls and are depicted in both major and minor roles, involved mostly in competitive group activities, accompanied only by male voice-over. They are dressed in various colours, are mainly in bright outdoor locations and play mostly with action figures, built games, and transportation and construction toys. Girls, instead, are still mostly dressed in pastel coloured clothes, are indoors and play mainly with dolls and animals, in collaborative interactions. They only build things in the presence of boys and are sometimes accompanied by a male voice-over. However, they are also more active, independent and in major roles than the boys. Hence, there are some differences in the representation of girls and boys compared to the findings of earlier studies. As the portrayals of male and female characters in Italian commercials are still quite differentiated and are used to give *gendered* meaning to products, characters and viewers.

Keywords: gender roles, children, toys, advertising

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Introduction

Sociological research on consumption has experienced a fervent period of growth and renewal over the last few decades. Many scholars have increasingly considered purchasing decisions and consumption practices as central for understanding social and cultural change (Appadurai, 1996; Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 2007; Cohen, 2003; Featherstone, 1991; Lash & Lury, 2007; Ritzer, 1996; Zukin, 2004). They have examined the relationship between consumption and various areas of social transformation, such as urban and spatial development, cultural and economic diversities, identity construction and communication, and gender distinction.

As regards gender, research has proved that social and cultural differences between males and females have significant effects on consumption preferences (Ames & Martinez, 1996; Bourdieu, 1979; Dholakia, 1999; Edgell, Hetherington & Warde, 1996; Flrat & Dholakia, 1977, 1982; Kirkham, 1996; Sassatelli, 2005). It is well documented that there are “masculine” and “feminine” objects, different purchasing practices among men and women, and ways to use products that help to express – and to generate – masculinity or femininity (Kirkham, 1996; Ames & Martinez, 1996). Moreover, who consumes what mainly depends on gender roles (Gould & Stern, 1989; Taylor-Gooby, 1985), and these roles are historically and culturally situated and partly shaped by the media. In 1950s Italy, for example, the need to market food, ways of living and new appliances helped to popularize a more independent housewife image (Passerini, 1992). In the same years, advertising showed less virile male images and proposed specific consumer items as necessary to acquire the status of modern man (Bellassai, 2003). Furthermore, over the last three decades, the visual codes of fashion communication have introduced a new male identity (Bovone & Ruggerone, 2006), more feminine in appearance, manners and roles (Capecchi, 2006; Panarese, 2014a; Sassatelli, 2007).

Thus, there is a close relationship between consumption, gender and the media. This connection has significant consequences, considering the media’s role in the socialization process. Together with other sources, such as parents, school, peer groups and religion, the media have broad effects on children’s expectations, self-image and behaviour (Bertolini, Dallari, Frabboni, Gherardi, Manini & Nassau 1976; Esserman, 1981; Metastasio, 2002; Morcellini, 1997; Pacelli, 1987; Trisciuzzi & Ulivieri, 1993). In

particular, television has an important role in the creation of the child's cultural environment. For most children, frequent viewing of (commercial) television begins in their early years and remains so until the age of twelve (Merskin, 2002). Advertising, of course, covers a large proportion of that viewing time (Kunkle & Gantz, 1992; Linn, 2004; Statera, Bentivegna & Morcellini, 1992).

As the cultivation theory has demonstrated, audience perceptions of social reality are influenced by media portrayals, mostly for heavy viewers (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli & Shanahan, 2002). Although it is known that exposure to television contents is not enough – even when prolonged – to generate various effects on its audience (Losito, 1994), and can be explained by the hypothesis of circularity (individuals who have a more stereotypical view of the world are exposed to more media that convey stereotypes, strengthening them further), some research shows that television can shape youth expectations, attitudes and behaviours, especially in developmental age (Kahlenberg & Hein, 2010, Metastasio, 2007; Puggelli, 2002). Indeed, the media construct frames, which viewers use to help them make sense of the world (Goffman, 1974). In particular, advertisers use framing to capture the symbolic nature and importance of shared rituals (Rook, 1985) and to allow consumers to place themselves in recognizable and attractive social roles (Soloman, 1983). The framing techniques also show the position of men and women in relation to a product and can reinforce *stereotyped norms of activity* (Davis, 2003).

As stereotypes are cognitive structures that contain knowledge, beliefs and expectations about social groups (Kunda, 1999), and gender is a social construction that is different from biological sex, gender stereotypes reflect what we are expected to do according to subjective expectations of maleness and femaleness (Basow, 1992). This can lead people to make assumptions about women and men's innate qualities and abilities (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). In providing what looks like a typical situation for the target audience, advertisers take advantage of the audience's framing capacity. In fact, they do not use any gender portrayals, but any simple and easily recognizable image. As Goffman (1976) has shown, commercials display not the way men and women actually behave, but the way in which the target audience thinks they should behave. These conventions are so easily recognizable that they help to build the social representation of gender and allow the creation of a so-called *gendered native* (Bem, 1993). Moreover, children retain the social learning of culturally constructed gender

differences more than adults, as they have little experience to call upon for an explanation.

Children [...] are still forming their values and beliefs. They are more vulnerable to many types of images or stereotypes presented to them, particularly those with audio and visual reinforcement. Commercials during children's shows tend to support roles of women and men that are deemed appropriate by popular culture and act as agents of socialization for that generation's children (Davis, 2003, p. 408).

Thus, children's television advertising could sell more than products; it can also sell behavioural models, ambitions, values, consumer role identities (Lull, 2003), images of ethnicity, class and gender (Pecora, Murray & Wartella, 2007; Strasburger, Wilson & Jordan, 2009). Children are cultivated as consumers, being the target of what Jhally (1995) calls *image-based influence* (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994). In particular, according to Signorielli and Lears (1992), Thompson and Zerbinos (1997), sex role stereotypes are transmitted primarily through advertising. As a result, children who watch more commercial television have more sex-typed attitudes (Kimball, 1986; McGhee & Frueh, 1980). In comparing children in towns with and without television, Kimball (1986) revealed that those who lived in towns without television had low perceptions of sex-typed roles in comparison with those who lived in towns with television. Two years after the introduction of television in all the towns analyzed, there was no difference between the children's perceptions of sex roles.

However, the influence of the media and advertising on children is not direct or inevitable. It depends on the age of the child, his cognitive development, the degree of attention, understanding and memorizing a message, on the characteristics of the medium and its content, the context of use and the mediation of parents, teachers and the peer group (Metastasio, 2002, 2007).

Moreover, advertising addressed to children is not a new phenomenon. Children have been considered a means of reaching adults, as autonomous customers and as significant future consumers since the beginning of modern mass marketing (Buckingham, 2007; Cook, 2004; Cross, 1997; Gunter & Furnham, 1998; Hansen, Rasmussen, Martensen & Tufte, 2002; Seiter, 1993). Nevertheless, marketing and advertising for children are now taking place on a different scale and in ways that are more sophisticated.

The children's market segment has grown significantly in importance in the last three decades (Pecora, 1995) with the result that advertisers have started using new strategies aimed at reaching younger children (Ironico, 2009; Linn, 2004, 2008; Macklin & Carlson, 1999; Mayo & Nairn, 2009; Quart, 2003; Schor, 2004; Sutherland & Thompson, 2003). Furthermore, children are being encouraged to spend their own and their parents' money on a vast range of products – mostly on toys, cereals, snacks and fast food (Strasburger, Wilson & Jordan, 2009). These product categories have not changed much over the years, but their quantity and variety have increased (Linn, 2004). Hence, the significant role of advertising in consumer socialization (Alexander & Morrison, 1995) and the need to understand what children watch in the media and what cultural codes are used by advertisers to present products. In particular, we are concerned with those aspects of advertising images and language that give *gendered meaning* to products, characters and viewers (Johnson & Young, 2002).

Since we know that gender identity is learned during childhood, in part through everyday socialization and interaction, including play (Arliss, 1991; Richardson & Simpson, 1982; Scheibe, 2007), we are particularly interested in commercials for toys. It has been demonstrated that toys help children to develop a shared culture with friends (Seiter, 1993), they prepare for adult roles (Cross, 1997), and promote imagination, creativity and intelligence (Kline, 1993). Moreover, toys “are the most expensive commodity for sale on kids' television; they are the product most amenable to gender elaboration and segmentation; and they are the currency of cultural ‘stuff’” (Johnson & Young, 2002, p. 468). In addition, in its quest to increase market share, the toy industry drives children's preference toward same-gender objects and actions and, in turn, market exaggerated and highly stereotyped toys (Bakir, Blodgett & Rose, 2008). “Toymakers exploit the six-year-old quest for gender identity by exaggerating boys' power toys and girls' makeup and fashion playthings” (Cross, 1997, p. 231). Finally, toys “provide an opportunity to inculcate brand loyalty at an early age” (Seiter, 1993, p. 103), as they are often linked to cartoon characters, which are also promotional tools.

Therefore, marketers design, package and promote toys that highlight and reinforce gender differences. Hence, the interest in the representation of boys and girls in Italian toy commercials.

Literature Review

There are several differences in the ways in which women and men are portrayed in the media, particularly on television. Many scholars have shown that the media reinforce traditional sex roles and provide sex-typed information about gender images in program content (Chafetz, 1974; Levinson, 1975), children's books (Child, Potter & Levin, 1946), women's and popular magazines (Lefkowitz, 1972; Ray, 1972), songs (Chafetz, 1974), comics (Brabant & Mooney, 1997), and commercials (Chafetz, 1974; Furnham & Mak, 1999; McArthur & Resko, 1975).

Since the 1970s, various studies have shown the limited roles given to female characters in the media, in comparison to male characters (Barthel, 1988; Belkaoui & Belkaoui, 1976; Chafetz, 1974; Courtney & Whipple, 1974; Gilly, 1988; McArthur & Resko, 1975; O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978; Scheibe, 1979; Schneider & Schneider, 1979). They have noticed, in particular, that men are overrepresented numerically, are used as "expert" voice-overs and are shown at work, but not in the family, while women are depicted in secondary roles, in the family, at home, unemployed or in "pink collar" jobs (Panarese, 2014b). They have also revealed that advertising directed at women have most often focused on appearance, while advertising selling to men have focused on status.

Given the broad concern about the sensitivity of children to media messages, some studies have concentrated specifically on the nature of gender role portrayals in children's television (Browne, 1998). In a study on cartoons during the 1970s, it was found that male characters had all the major roles while female characters held minor or no roles (Busby, 1974). Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) discovered that male and female characters portrayed in children's television programming had stereotypical gender roles. Men leads significantly outnumbered women leads (99% versus 55%). Females were mostly depicted as weak, emotional, dependent, sensitive, affectionate, delicate, domestic, passive and romantic; males were portrayed as intelligent, athletic, strong, independent, assertive, competent, responsible, active and confident. O'Kelly (1974) observed that a few characters were shown doing cross-gender activities. Smith (1994) found that boys were depicted engaging in individual activities while the girls were portrayed as group members participating in an activity.

As regards commercials, various scholars found that advertising aimed at children were sex-role stereotyped and included more males than females

(Doolittle & Pepper, 1975; Furnham, Abramsky, & Gunter, 1997; Smith, 1994). Furnham, Abramsky and Gunter (1997) confirmed that gender stereotyping “remains the dominant advertising form” (p. 97) in the United States and in British advertising to children. According to Davis (2003), “all characters shown as active participants had a high probability of being male, regardless of whether they were playing a major or minor role or were in a group or individual activity” (p. 420).

Johnson and Young (2002) saw that advertising showed girls (and women) depicted in constrained positions and boys (and men) in action-oriented positions, *turning out sweet girls and wild boys*. In particular, boy-oriented advertising contained more elements emphasizing competition, action and control, while girl-oriented advertising contained more verb elements emphasizing passivity, emotionality and care activities.

Larson (2001) found that most commercials which showed only girls featured cooperative interactions and most commercials showing only boys featured competitive interactions. Moreover, girls-only commercials showed passive activities, whereas the play in boys-only ones was more diversified, physical and dynamic (Smith, 1994).

Welch, Huston-Stein, Wright and Plehal (1979) found that girls talked less than boys in commercials addressed to both girls and boys, but they talked very much in commercials targeted only to girls. In addition, voices in mixed audience and boys’ commercials were mostly male, while female voices were limited to female commercials.

Some British studies reported a higher frequency of male voice-overs in commercials (Livingstone & Green, 1986; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981), and Verna (1975) discovered that 100% of male-oriented and neutral advertising had a male audio track and that even 55% of female-oriented advertising had male audio. Even as the percentage of female voice-overs increased in the 1970s and 1980s, 80% of voice-overs in commercials were male (Fowles, 1996; Bretl & Cantor, 1988). Welch, Huston-Stein, Wright and Plehal (1979) also showed that male-oriented commercials contained more cuts, loud music and energetic activity, whereas female-oriented commercials included more fades and dissolves, soft music and quiet play. Thus, they concluded that “the messages about masculine and feminine behaviour conveyed by the features measured [...] may be more influential than the blatant stereotypes presented in the content” (p. 208).

Even the products advertised contribute to sex-role socialization (Campanni, 1999; Chafetz, 1974; Chandler & Griffiths, 2000; Gentry,

Doery, O'Brien, 1978; Griffith, 2002). Mitchell (1973) noted that girls' toys were strongly oriented to domestic pursuits and did not encourage manipulation and construction as boys' toys did. Linn (2008) found that "the toys packaged in blue are for boys and seem to be dominated by toys promoting some kind of violence. The girls' toys are packaged in pink and are dominated by sexualized brands like Bratz, Barbie or the Disney Princesses, or makeup and hairstyle" (p. 36).

While much of the research on gender stereotyping has been conducted in the United States, many of the observations present in American studies have been replicated in other countries, such as Australia (Mazzella, Darkin, Cerini & Buralli, 1992), Britain (Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Furnham & Schofield, 1986; Livingstone & Green, 1986), Canada (Rak & McMullen, 1987), and Italy (Furnham & Voli, 1989). Although some national peculiarities have emerged, there is a common international pattern of gender portrayals in television advertising, based on traditional, gendered expectations of female and male characters (Durkin, 1985).

Since there has been little systematic research on gender representation in children's commercials in Italy, studying this kind of advertising could be useful to see whether it confirms the findings of previous studies. Moreover, something could be changed compared to past research, for many reasons. Firstly, over the last few decades there has been an increase in public awareness and critical consciousness of gender stereotyping in the media (Baehr & Dyer, 1987). Secondly, the conservative world of advertising has slightly changed gender representation (Fowles, 1996). Thirdly, in Italy a timid transgression of gender boundaries in men and women's portrayals in advertising has been found recently (Panarese, 2014a). Finally, the social roles of Italian men and women are quite different today than in the past (Istat, 2004, 2007).

On this basis, the present study aimed to provide an analysis of gender representation in Italian advertising for children. Specifically, we attempted to determine the level of sex typing in commercials promoting toys, starting from the main analysis on the topic, conducted in other times and other places. We aimed to update past studies, verify their results in the Italian context, and provide a basis for future more detailed investigations with regard the evaluation of audience reading.

Methods

To find out more about what children might be learning on gender from televised commercials, we collected commercials broadcast on different Italian television channels. The sample was a part of a larger collection of commercials coming from a wider research on the representation of women's images on Italian television (Buonanno, 2014)¹.

The study recorded all the commercials aired on the six main Italian television networks (RAI 1, RAI 2, RAI 3, Rete 4, Canale 5 and Italia 1), between 8 a.m. and 2 a.m. at night, Monday to Sunday. To gather a greater variety of commercials, we selected the Monday of the first week, the Tuesday of the second, the Wednesday of the third, and so on, from February to April 2011. In the total sample, composed of all the single commercials broadcast (815) in a universe of 9,979 commercials, we selected the commercials of toys (all the products for children's play) and games (all the products intended for some competition, including card games, computer games and board games). Each toy commercial was included in the analysis only once, regardless of the number of times it was aired. The commercials aired at least once were 78 and included 142 characters.

To codify and quantify the significant data, we used content analysis, intended as a mix between the "classical" Berelson's approach (1952) and the analysis as investigation. For the content analysis, we built a search tool containing an ordered sequence of questions with which the television commercials were assessed. Each survey item corresponded to a variable constituting the operational definition of a property. Despite the limitations of this method, the decision to use content analysis was made with a view to comparing new and old findings, and to providing general results from which to draw more precise assumptions for further research in the future.

As in Signorielli and Bacue (1999), we hypothesized that the positive treatment of females can be detected through the *recognition* and *respect* that they receive on the television screen. Specifically, recognition refers to the frequency and quantity of appearances; respect refers to the type of role

¹ The study was conducted by the GEMMA Observatory of La Sapienza University of Rome. The workgroup was composed of Giovanni Ciofalo, Franca Faccioli, Mihaela Gavrilă, Silvia Leonzi, Anna Lucia Natale, Paola Panarese and Claudia Polo, and directed by Milly Buonanno.

portrayals. Moreover, recognition relates to the distribution of toys and figures by gender within commercials, and respect indicates the types of activity, interactions, settings and colours, in relation to the gender of the characters and toys.

Thus, for each character we recorded the major or minor role, the individual or group activity, the active or passive activity, and the interaction with other characters. As in Davis (2003), the characters' role was defined according to the length of time of their presence in the commercial relative to the length of the commercial. If the characters were shown for less than one-half of the time span of the commercial, they were coded as *minor* characters. Otherwise, they were coded as *major*.

The activity of the characters was categorized as *individual* or *group*, and *active* or *passive*. An action was considered individual or group depending on the number of actors involved. An action was considered passive if the character was in a seated position with slow gestures, or if vertically positioned with no movement (reading a book, playing with a doll, and playing a computer game) and active if it showed more movement than in the passive one (Davis, 2003).

With regard to interaction, we used categories based on Larson's research (2001), coding it as *cooperative*, *competitive*, *parallel* or *independent*. Commercials were coded as cooperative when their characters worked and played together; competitive when characters were focused on winning; independent when there was only one character in the commercial; parallel when there were two or more characters in the scene, but not interacting with one another. Commercials that included more than one type of interaction were coded as *no dominant interaction*.

For each commercial, we recorded the number of boys and girls, the target audience, the main setting, the advertised toy, the colours of the background, the toys and the characters' clothes, and the gender of the voice-over.

The target audience was coded as *girl-oriented*, *boy-oriented* and *oriented to boys and girls*. As main criterion, this classification used the gender of the children portrayed in the commercials (*girls-only*, *boys-only*, or *boys-and-girls*, and not the nature of the toy. For example, a commercial for the Nintendo Wii console featuring only girls was coded as girl-oriented because of the presence of feminine characters in the commercial, even though the product itself is not explicitly addressed to girls.

The setting was determined with some modifications to Larson's category (2001), such as *home indoors*, *home outdoors*, *other indoors*, *other outdoors*, and *pretend*. Other indoors included places such as school or the mall.

Other outdoors included places such as a playground or a soccer field. Pretend settings included indoor and outdoor imaginary locations. *No dominant setting* was used when there was more than one central setting within the commercial. *Cannot code* was used when the setting was not recognizable.

As in Kahlenberg and Hein (2010), we used the following classification of toys: *posable figures*, *action figures*, *games and building*, *arts and crafts*, *make believe*, *transportation and construction*, *videogames* and *sports*.

As regards main colours, we used the following scheme from Kahlenberg and Hein (2010): *pastels* (lights), *brights and neons* (such as yellow, green, orange and red), *neutrals* (browns, khakis and greys), *no colour* (black and white), and *mixed*.

Finally, on the basis of the previous research, we assumed that the number of boys and girls, their relation and activity, the colours of the setting, toys and clothes, the voice-overs, the location, and the relation between the characters, would differ according to sex, but their distinction would be more nuanced than in the past.

Results

This study is a partial replication of previous studies. Consequently, content analysis provided interesting results, partly new for the Italian context, though not unexpected.

In the sample, consisting of 78 toy and game commercials, we found 142 total characters, 99 males and 43 females.

Table 1 provides the distribution of some variables related to the characters, such as role, activity number and movement. We found more characters involved in major roles, in group activities and in passive positions. More than two-thirds were male and less than one-third were female.

Table 1. Frequency Distributions of Characters Variables (N = 142)

| Variable | | Values |
|--------------------|------------|--------|
| Sex | Male | 99 |
| | Female | 43 |
| Role in commercial | Major | 87 |
| | Minor | 55 |
| Activity number | Individual | 64 |
| | Group | 78 |
| Activity movement | Active | 65 |
| | Passive | 77 |

A cross tabulation of the characters' features by sex revealed that both boys and girls were more depicted in a major role (See Table 2).

Table 2. Roles, Activity number, Activity movement and Sex of the Characters (N = 142)

| | Male | Female | Tot |
|---------------------|------|--------|-----|
| Major role | 55 | 32 | 87 |
| Minor role | 44 | 11 | 55 |
| Individual activity | 36 | 28 | 64 |
| Group activity | 63 | 15 | 78 |
| Active | 40 | 25 | 65 |
| Passive | 59 | 18 | 77 |

However, considering the sex of the characters, we noticed that the girls were more active than the boys: only a quarter of the females were represented in minor roles compared to almost half of the males (See Figure 1).

This finding was consistent with the participation of females and males in individual or group activities. In this regard, the data showed that boys were represented more often in group activities, while girls were shown mostly in individual actions (See Figure 2). This probably explains the greater number of male characters and the larger share of boys involved in minor actions. Considering the degree of activism in relation to the sex of the characters, we noticed that the girls were the most active (See Figure 3). Indeed, females in passive roles were a minority, while males were a majority.

Figure 1. Minor or Major Roles for Male and Female Characters²

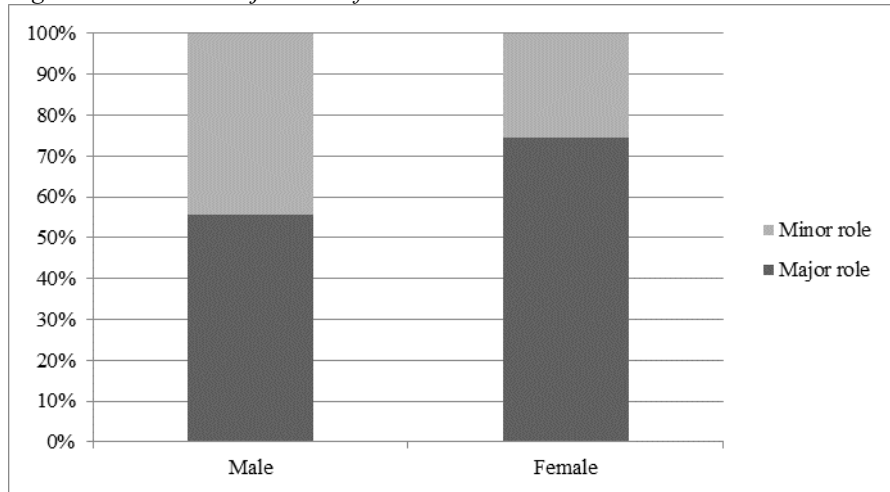
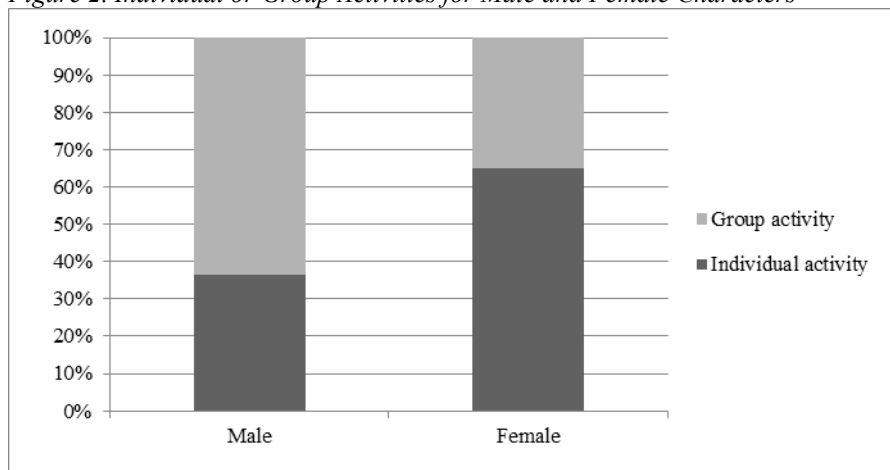
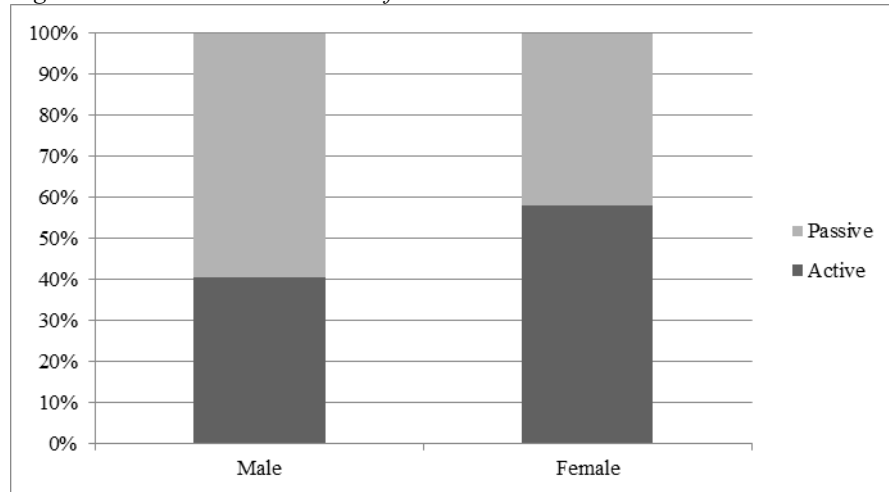


Figure 2. Individual or Group Activities for Male and Female Characters



² Although the number of male and female characters is less than 100, in Figures 1-5, we have chosen to represent percentages by gender fixing on 100 the total number of characters by each sex, to allow a clearer picture of the results.

Figure 3. Active or Passive Roles of the Male and Female Characters



Moreover, we analyzed the commercials in relation to the sex of their characters (and their main target). In this regard, we found that 36 commercials portrayed only boys, 23 only girls, and 19 both boys and girls. We then investigated the main interactions, settings and advertised toys of these commercials. As regards interactions, we found three commercials with *no dominant* relation. Overall, most of the characters were engaged in competitive play, rather than collaborative, independent or parallel (See Fig. 4). In the boys-only commercials, the interactions were mainly competitive; in the girls-only ones, they were largely cooperative; in the boys-and-girls commercials, they were both cooperative and competitive.

Concerning the main setting of commercials, we found that more than half of the commercials had outdoor backgrounds. The others were set indoors or in a pretend environment (See Figure 5).

In over half of the boys-only commercials, we found outdoor environments. Instead, the girls-only commercials were set mainly in domestic interiors or in pretend environments, and the boys-and-girls commercials in other outdoor and home indoor settings.

Figure 4. Relation between Interactions and Sex of the Characters

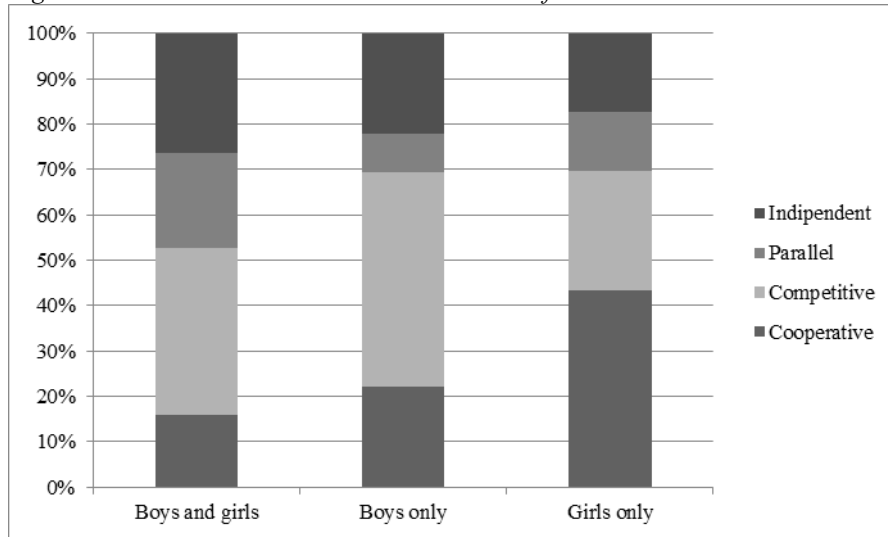
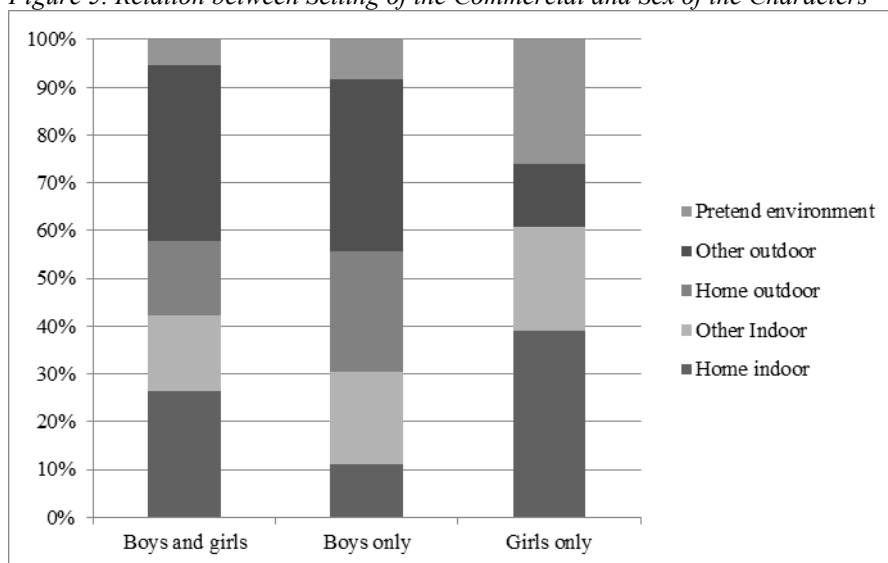


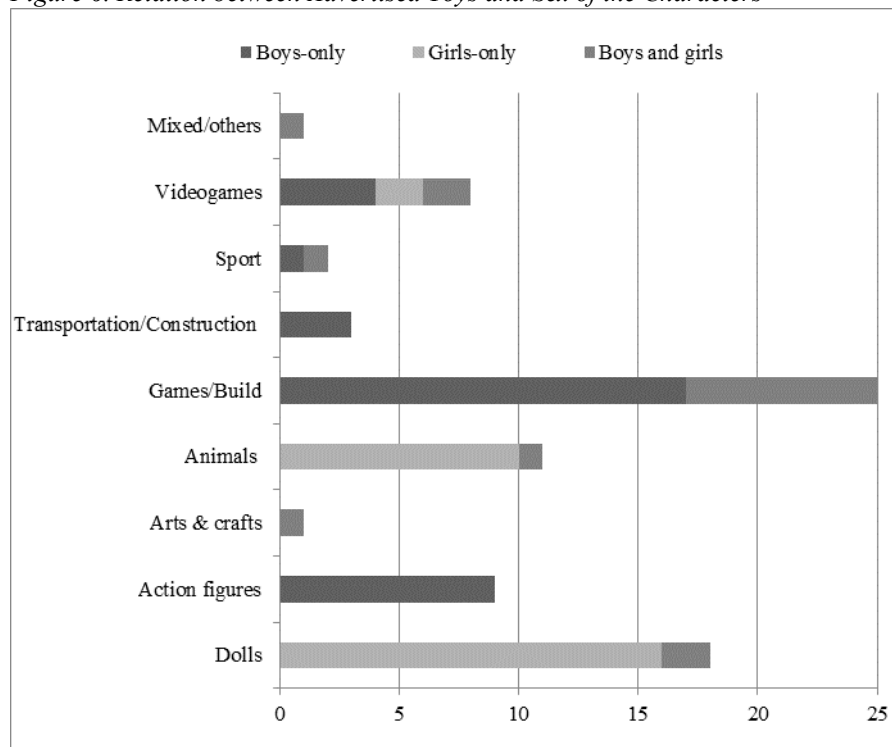
Figure 5. Relation between Setting of the Commercial and Sex of the Characters



With regard to the advertised toys, the commercials of games (including board games such as Cluedo or Monopoly) and building items, like Lego, were almost one-third of the sample (25). One-fourth of the commercials featured dolls (18), including fashion dolls such as Winx, Barbie and Disney Princess, or baby dolls like Amore mio, Baby amore, Polly Pocket. Animals (like Zhu Zhu Pets) appeared in 11 commercials, action figures (eg. the Gormiti) in 9, and videogames (consoles like Nintendo Wii, Nintendo DS or XBOX) in 8. The rest of the sample was composed of commercials for transportation and construction vehicles (3), sports (2), arts and crafts (1), and mixed/other (1).

A cross tabulation of toys by sex of the characters showed that dolls and animals were limited to girls-only commercials (See Figure 6).

Figure 6. Relation between Advertised Toys and Sex of the Characters



Indeed, there were no dolls shown in the boys-only advertising, and few in boys-and-girls commercials. In the same way, action figures and transportation/construction toy commercials had no female characters. Nevertheless, games/building toys were featured in both boys-only and boys-and-girls commercials, indicating that, in our sample, girls could play and build, but only in the presence of boys. With respect to the main colours used in backgrounds, we found that 33 commercials were mixed. The others colours were: bright hues (25), neons (9), pastels (7), and neutrals (4). Considering the colour of the characters' clothes, only girls were dressed in pastel colours, while mixed colours prevailed among boys. Moreover, boys-and-girls and boys-only were portrayed mainly in bright and mixed settings, and girls-only in bright, pastel or neon backgrounds.

As regards the colour of the advertised toys, pastels were used especially in doll commercials; neutral colours were most widespread in animal and transportation/construction ones; bright hues and neons were used for dolls, games and building; and mixed colours were mainly associated with action figures, dolls and videogames.

As a final point, we found that all the commercials in the sample included a voice-over. Two-thirds of the voice-overs in girl-only commercials were female, while one third were male. Furthermore, all the boys-only and boys-and-girls commercials had a male voice-over. Thus, the gender of the voice-over matched the sex of the target audience of the commercial, but the male voice-over was also used in commercials targeted to girls or boys-and-girls.

In general, the study revealed that boys and girls were depicted in different ways in Italian toy commercials, but the difference of their portrayals was more nuanced than in earlier international studies.

Boys outnumbered girls and were depicted in both major and minor roles, involved mostly in competitive group activities, accompanied only by male voice-overs. They dressed in mixed colours, were mainly in bright outdoor locations, playing mostly with action figures, built games, and transportation and construction toys.

On the other hand, in the girls-only commercials we found that they dressed in pastel clothes, played mainly with dolls and animals, in collaborative interactions, and in bright and pastel indoor backgrounds. Moreover, they built something only in the presence of boys, and sometimes they were accompanied by a male voice over. However, they

were more active, independent and in major roles than the male characters, suggesting a sort of empowerment of the young female figures.

Therefore, we found some interesting differences in the representation of girls and boys even though the portrayal of male and female characters is still quite differentiated and connoted in terms of gender.

Conclusion

These results partly confirmed the findings of previous research, but they also went further. The elements of differentiation were in the activism, independence, and leading roles of some female characters. Moreover, we found a limited number of male voice-overs in the girls-only commercials, a greater variety of colours for clothing and settings, some cases in which the girls played with boys toys (even if only in the presence of males).

However, the similarities were more than the differences. Like Thompson and Zerbinos (1995), we found a large majority of male characters. Like Allan & Coltrane (1996) and Larson (2001), we detected a strong relation between gender and characters' activity and interactions. Like Smith (1994) and Craig (1992), we noticed an evident difference in the setting of the boys-only and girls-only commercials. Similarly to Courtney and Whipple (1974), Lovdal (1989), O'Donnell & O'Donnell (1978), and Smith (1994), we found a correlation between the type of advertised toy and the gender of the characters.

Therefore, our analysis showed the persistence of traditional gender distinctions in Italian toy commercials: little women are depicted especially at home, while caring for dolls or animals, and interacting in a collaborative way; the little men, instead, were portrayed especially in open spaces, in competitive relationships, and engaged in action games or buildings.

Thus, despite some new elements traceable in less stereotypical images, the prevailing gender portrayals of TV advertising are still highly traditional and simplified.

At this point, one wonders what the reasons for the persistence of these traditional gender portrayals and the impact on children are.

Regarding the reasons for the simplified gender images, we should consider that we analyzed television advertising, primarily used in Italy to promote mass products to a mass target audience. Thus, advertisers create commercials that follow children's general tastes and inclinations.

Valkenburg & Janssen (1999), for example, found that boys preferred programs with action and violence, and girls contents with romantic stories. These interests might be used as a guide for designing a successful advertising campaign for children. Consistently, one of the analyzed commercial showed the competition between two children riding a Gormiti car each, accompanied by a male voice-over saying: "All the power of the Gormiti cars is in your hands. With the brand new radio controller, you have commanded". And the final claim was "Gormiti at maximum power".

Concepts such as power, control, and competition were quite frequent in commercials aimed at boys. This could be both the effect of the interest of males for some games (Williams & Pleil, 2008), and the result of a certain image of masculinity.

Furthermore, advertisers have limited time to communicate a message on television. Consequently, they rely on cognitive shortcuts necessary to understand new situations (Glick & Fiske, 1999). If they present a product in an environment rich in stereotypes, the person watching the commercial will not have to work hard to understand the situation. Thus, the possible (intentional or unintentional) consequence of sex-typed representations is selling not only products, but also gendered roles. If children are exposed to clear gender identity models spread by a powerful media like television, they will probably want the gender appropriate products and will interact in the appropriate (gendered) manner depicted in the commercials.

Consequently, all the baby doll commercials in our sample (such as *Amore mio cresce* or *Baby amore*) showing little girls in the role of mothers, could help to convey the idea that dolls are only for girls and parenting primarily (if not exclusively) a female matter. Moreover, fashion doll commercials (such as *Barbie* or the *Winx*), in which the characters were made up, dressed as little women, and sometimes in sensual poses, could bring girls to think about themselves as sexualized objects whose power is equated with dressing provocatively.

Of course, mere exposure to stereotypical representations does not necessarily involve the assimilation of these stereotypes. Pioneering studies conducted in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Himmelweit, Oppenheim & Vince, 1958; Schramm, Lyle & Parker, 1961), in Britain and in the United States, showed that children have an active role in the use of television. Other subsequent investigations confirmed the activism of the audience, including children, in the process of understanding and construction of television contents (Metastasio, 2002). In particular, psychosocial and

sociological research has shown the power of the social context and shared representations in understanding media messages (Hall, 1973; Moscovici, 1976; Tajfel & Fraser, 1978). According to Katz (1959), in this approach “the message of even the most potent of the media cannot ordinarily influence an individual who has no ‘use’ for it in the social and psychological context in which he lives” (p. 2).

However, studies on the consequences of stereotyping in television demonstrated that, though parents can modify effects (Ward, Wackman & Wartella, 1977), televised images influence children's values, self-esteem, and product preferences. Williams and Best (1990) discovered that five-year-old children thought men were strong while women were weak and sentimental. Durkin (1984) found that even four-year-olds could isolate and describe sex typed behaviours in advertisements and that six-year-olds were reluctant to say that Superwoman could do the things Superman could do. Huston, Greer, Wright, Welch and Ross (1984) found that elementary school children expected more activity and louder sound effects in a commercial promoting a product designed for a boy, than they expected with a product designed for a girl. Studies, also suggest that four-year-old children are more likely to prefer gender-typed toys when they have seen them modeled on television by same-sex children (Ruble, Balaban, & Cooper, 1981). Hence, children tend to agree to sex stereotypes, to identify with the stereotypical role of their gender, and to punish other children, in particular boys, that exhibit cross-gender attitudes and behaviours (Durkin, 1985b; Frueh & McGhee, 1975).

These findings mean more research effort should be focused on the causes and consequences of sex-role stereotyping in television advertisements aimed especially at children.

Although our study is a useful first step in a longer path for recovering an important issue that the Italian scientific literature has quite neglected, we should go beyond the detection of the media representation of gender roles, to comprehend the main reasons for the gendered portrayals of boys and girls and their possible consequences. As content analysis is a classic descriptive tool, limited to frequency counts of role portrayals and returning somewhat self-evident findings, we need to deepen the analysis. In particular, we should go beyond the mere recording of the prevailing images, by carrying out a qualitative analysis and studying the audience readings, because, as Paul Ricoeur (1985), we think that a text without a

reader “est comme une partition musicale, susceptible d’exécutions différentes” (p. 305).

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