



GENDER-BASED MARKETING OF TOYS - AN ALTERNATIVE FOR ASIA AND INDIA

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Abstract: Gender-based marketing of toys, books, media, and clothing has gained much attention in the West in recent years. This paper looks at the effects of this phenomenon on Indian and Asian societies and offers an alternative that can be used by educators and policy makers.

Key words: Marketing, gender based marketing.

Introduction

Gender segregation, prejudices, and stereotyping in society takes place in a variety of forms. In the modern, urban context, nowhere is this more evident than in the demarcation of toys, books, and media as 'pink and blue'. In toy stores and bookshops, it is now common practice to see separate aisles demarcated for boys and girls - with the girls' section comprising dolls, fashion toys, and princess-themed merchandise in pink, purple, and pastel shades, while the boys' section is usually stacked with action figures, building sets, superhero merchandise, and miniature vehicles. The colour palette consists of blues, reds, browns, and greys. Even supposedly gender-neutral toys such as puzzles and board games tend to veer towards colour palettes popularly associated with boys.

The extent to which such explicitly gender-coded toys affect the perceptions of children regarding activities, behaviours, and values appropriate to their gender has been a much-researched topic. Yeung and Wang (2017) studied the effect of gender-based colour coding of toys on children's preferences. This study was conducted with special reference to Asian societies where the issues of a traditionally male-dominated culture could be compounded by corporate-induced gender stereotyping. Specific franchises such as the highly profitable Disney Princess franchise have also been studied extensively. Orenstein's (2011) much-read

book sought to catch the attention of parents and children who were caught in the 'deluge of pink-princess marketing from the moment they were born'. Auster and Mansbach (2012) provided a detailed analysis of the gender labelling and gender marketing of toys on the internet with special reference to the Disney webstore. They found that the marketing of gender-marked toys for children was quite prevalent, with nearly all the toys on the website being marked as "for boys only" or "for girls only". The authors suggest that this could be overcome by marketing toys that are traditionally 'gendered', such as cooking sets and action figures, for "both boys and girls". This could involve making changes in the specific characteristics of individual toys, like colour, to make them appealing to both boys and girls, but the authors express concern that this could promote 'the continued impact of certain colours and other characteristics as gender markers.' Coyne et al. (2016) studied the effects of engagement with Disney Princesses on gender-stereotyped behaviour, body esteem, and prosocial behaviour. While it was observed that stereotypical behaviour and expectations were enhanced in children who engaged more with the characters, this could provide significant benefits to boys who are otherwise exposed to the hypermasculine 'superhero' characters.

Gender-based marketing of toys: history

Before World War I, clothing and toys for children was quite gender neutral, with white being the universally preferred colour for infants. Boys and girls alike wore long white gowns. Before the last five decades, toys too were largely gender neutral. It may come as a surprise that pink, with its proximity to the vibrant red in the colour spectrum, was seen as more apt for boys while blue was associated with calmness and passivity and seen as more acceptable for girls.

Gender-based sales of toys began right after World War – II with the advent of the famous GI Joe action figure for boys and Barbie for girls. In the 1950s and 60s, toys for girls sought to promote caring, homemaker-type toys, dolls etc. that gave importance to domestic nurturing skills and co-operation. On the other hand, playthings for boys stressed competition, exploration, and to a large extent, aggression. However, the rise of 'second-wave feminism' in the 1970s led to the obscuring of this dichotomy to a certain extent and gender-neutral toys and clothing were in favour. By the 1980s, corporates were convinced about the advantages of drawing these gender lines more and more firmly – dividing the market ultimately led to more revenue since parents with sons and daughters were led to buy more than a single set of toys. Another important turn that this toy story took in the eighties is that the 'nurturing' trait that hitherto characterized toys for girls gave way to an obsessive focus on appearance. By the end of the century, extensive marketing led to the rise of massive franchises based on fantasy figures like princesses and superheroes that were sharply divided based on gender.

Effects on children and parents

It is well-known that play has an important role in shaping the personalities and perceptions of children. Based on previous studies, the effects of gender-based marketing of toys is quite significant. Toys are the first windows through which children access the adult world and realistic toys help them 'try out' and explore various roles. However, when available playthings are based on stories and experiences that have little or no similarities to real

life, children are denied this opportunity to mimic the adult world and learn from their play. A key disadvantage of the 'blue-pink divide' is that children find themselves required to conform rigidly to stereotypes at increasingly young ages. Growing children find themselves unable to consider the other gender as equal playmates and the idea that boys and girls are starkly different creatures are sown deep into their minds. Such toys also promote the feeling that the interests and activities preferred by boys and girls are, or rather should be, different.

It has been noted that toys expressly demarcated for girls do not often include science or mathematics-based ones. This has been noted to play a role in girls not seeing themselves as possible candidates for taking up careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). The themes on which girls' toys are based include appearance, fashion, shopping, and glamour – which encourage a need to conform to a westernized and often hyper-sexualized body image regardless of their own ethnicity.

Contrary to popular notions that girls are most disadvantaged due to this divide, it might be the personalities of boys that are more affected. Toys marked for boys, as observed earlier, focus on competition and aggression, marking these as macho traits. Thus, mellower attributes such as caring, nurturing, empathizing, and even communicating sympathetically are considered less macho or even effeminate.

Marketing also affects parents' perceptions of what is appropriate for children. Even if parents consciously try to avoid this phenomenon, there is often an indirect social pressure on what is appropriate and going against this often comes at a social cost for the children.

The Indian and Asian context

The opening-up of populous Asian economies like India and China to foreign companies increased the market size of Western corporates many fold. While Western nations have taken conscious steps to curb the gender-based marketing of toys by urging large companies like Disney and

Target to change their labelling, not much has been done in this respect in Asia. The debate about gender sensitivity is not quite vehement here since these countries typically have more serious and basic issues to face up to. Thus, schools and institutions of early education often have this ingrained gender-bias in toys and books permeating their systems. Parents too, newly exposed to the plethora of consumer goods suddenly available for their children, fall easily into the ruts created by targeted marketing. This divide is also in keeping with the rigid gender-role norms that characterize most Asian cultures. Thus, gender-based marketing of toys, books, and media has been especially effective in these nations. However, these toys also contribute to a gradual erosion of the traditional values and beliefs that most of these cultures hold owing to their obviously Western themes, placing a strain on children and parents to conform to an almost alien culture, appearance, and norms.

An alternative for India and Asia

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that there is a need to counter the gender-segregation

of toys, books, and media to ensure the growth of a healthy, inclusive, and respectful mindset in children. However, in the absence of widespread awareness, it is not easy to mobilize public opinion to pressurize large corporates to reverse this attitude. But there are several steps that can be taken by educators and policy makers in this regard.

1. Discourage the use of gender-coded toys, books, and media in kindergartens, schools, and libraries.
2. Promote traditional games and toys in an age appropriate manner. Toys created from locally available material are helpful in building a culture of sustainability as well as pride in one's origins. Chennapattana toys, age-old games such as Pallankuzhi, Pachisi etc can be revitalized through the education system and schools.
3. Exposing children to stories, books, and media based on our own pluralistic tradition and using technology to ensure that they remain relevant to the techno-savvy generation of today will go a long way in countering the ill-effects of corporate driven marketing.

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