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GENDER AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN THE CHILD TOYS MARKET (AN ABSTRACT)

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INTRODUCTION

The ability of society to recognize the child as a consumer reveals the importance of culture in its socialization process, the role as a social being and the inherent role of consumption (GUNTER; FURNHAM, 2001). The children's universe is permeated by fantasies and activities that stimulate the creativity and cognitive development of children, in which toys, especially the line of toys called in this study as make-believe, portray daily activities such as cooking, washing, drive and building; assumes a fundamental role in socialization. Thus the toy industry generally chooses to reproduce societal stereotypes and enforce adult standards for children's products (KINCHELOE; STEINBERG, 2001).

It is possible to verify the differences of toys categorized by gender, present in our society. Industries and stores promote a breakdown of toys by gender, reproducing society's stereotypes through packaging, colors, images, and advertisements that leave no doubt about the sex of the child the toy is intended for (BROUGÉRE, 2004; FINCO, 2004). Gender is a constitutive element of social relations based on perceived gender differences, which provides a means of decoding meaning and understanding the complex connections between various forms of human interaction. It is the social construction that a given culture establishes or elects in relation to men and women (SCOTT, 1995). This study aimed to analyze the presentation of gender in children's toys from catalogs of the Brazilian industry, taking into account the perception of parents in the choice of toys in the line makes or make-believe.

BACKGROUND

Playing is considered an act that generates pleasure, has an end in itself, and constitute an opportunity for children to express their inner fantasies (CORDAZZO, 2008), to relate to each other, to know the different and to learn through social relationships (PINTO; LOPES, 2009). Depending on the child's age and context, play has rules that can define more convenient behaviors for boys or girls (CORDAZZO, 2008), thus

building gender relations and sharing them in the children's universe (PINTO; LOPES, 2009). Although there are technically neutral toys, such as games, when it comes to toys composed of perfectly identifiable and structured elements, gender differentiation is clear (BELOTTI, 1975). Children understand the concept of gender identity at an earlier age (one or two years old). At the age of three, most children categorize the activity of driving a truck as male and cooking and cleaning as female (COLLINS, 1984).

For girls there is a range of miniaturized objects that mimic home appliances such as kitchen services, nurse's bags with thermometer, bands, sticking plaster and syringes, outbuildings such as full kitchens with appliances, living rooms, bedrooms, baby cribs, and sewing games; tea services, dolls and more. **For boys**, in general, toys are all types of land, naval and air transport of all sizes: warships, aircraft carriers, nuclear missiles, spaceships, weapons of all kinds, cannons and more (BELOTTI, 1975).

Just as toys intended for girls reproduce femininity, boys' toys reproduce the values of masculinity (CONNELL, 1995). The toy industry reinforces these stereotypes as they deliver messages with well-defined emotional tone and sexual role. Play and toys tend to reflect and teach children what society expects from men and women (RAJECKI et al., 1993). A research conducted by Sweeth (2014) revealed that toys are more divided by gender today than 50 years ago, when discrimination was much more common. The role of the princess, so ubiquitous in girls' toys, was extremely rare before the 1990s and this contributed to the commercialization of toys even more segregated today than when sexism was the norm. At the height of the second feminist wave, industries did not risk their strategies by labeling toys between girls and boys, and in the early 1970s sexism was not explicit in children's advertising. In the 1980s, neutral advertising retreated, and in the 1990s it returned in full force, but using less explicit sexism and more subjectivity through fantasy-based colors and gender roles, oriented toward powerful masculinity and more passive and relational femininity (SWEETH, 2014).

Contrary to advertising imposition, preschool boys and girls do not exhibit many differences in preferences for toys. Only after five years old do girls tend to stick with dolls while boys focus on action characters and high-tech products. Boys tend to be more interested in battles and competitions, while girls are more interested in creativity and relationships. Some experts call it male and female play patterns (SOLOMON, 2002). In this context, there is a vigilance exercised since the early years of life not only by the family, but also by the school, to ensure the maintenance of masculinity and femininity. Any possibility of breaking gender boundaries points to a classification in the field of pathology, of abnormality (LOURO, 1998; FELIPE, 2000).

Studies on gender relations tend to encompass the issue of early childhood education and are quite scarce in Brazil (CRUZ; CARVALHO, 2006). For Finco (2004), it is common to highlight gender stereotypes when analyzing the play of boys and girls, being possible to identify sexist patterns of behavior in children. Studies on childhood do not address gender differences and the construction of prejudices. In their empirical research, the author found that when children participated in playful games, they did not mind handling toys considered feminine or masculine. This differentiation in reality is a reflection of adult behavior that is often unconsciously absorbed by the child.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the proposed objective, an exploratory qualitative methodological approach was used to further analyze the presentation of gender in children's toys. The field research included two steps. Initially, a documentary analysis of the 2017 and 2018 catalogs of the three largest Brazilian toy industries was performed. This stage focused on the analysis of the presentation of the genre in the toy from the perspective of market providers. Afterwards, a focus group was carried out, following the recommendations of Placco (2005), in which nine mothers of children up to 12 years old, boys and girls, participated. The focus group was conducted by one of the authors in the university setting on a Saturday and lasted approximately three hours. This second stage focused on the analysis of parents' perception regarding the gender of the toy. The collected data were treated by discourse analysis, as recommended by Gibbs (2009). The catalog images also included the semiotic analysis by Penn (2002) criteria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the catalogs of the three Brazilian toy industries showed that there is a binary between female and male gender regarding the presentation of toys. Industries tend to associate the use of their products with boys or girls quite clearly. This can be seen through the images shown in catalogs depicting female models to promote girls toys and male models to promote the boys toys. Consumer-related products for girls included kitchens, tea sets, refrigerators, grocery stores, and beauty kits. The toys for boys were trolleys, trucks and toolbox, for example.

Some products were presented with children of both genders in the images, suggesting that the toy could be used by boys and girls, such as a kitchen, stove, refrigerator and car repair shop. This strategy, however, was observed in only one of the three industries surveyed. The segmentation between female and male toys was also visible through the colors used. The pink color was found exclusively in toys associated with consumption by girls, such as kitchens and doll strollers. One of the industries surveyed seems to be more open to the integration of games between genders and presented images with boys and girls using pink toys. However, only male models playing with pink products were not found. There was also the disclosure of products with neutral colors such as red, green and orange, which are not directly associated with a gender. These actions came closest to a suggestion of boys and girls joining in the games.

The focus group conducted with the children's mothers revealed results consistent with the findings obtained through the analysis of the catalogs. Overall, mothers have been shown to be influenced by socially accepted stereotypes and behavior patterns and educate their children based on these values. All participants stated that they interfered and directed the child's consumption according to their own beliefs, according to the following reports.

- 1) My daughter wanted a ball, chose a soccer ball. I went there and switched to volleyball and said girl plays ball with her hands. These are things we do unconsciously.

- 2) My godson comes home to play, when he is there, he plays quietly with Julia's pink kitchen, because I directed pink, because I put the pink in her life, understood, I directed. I would never give him a pink kitchen, even though I knew he would like to win. I would then direct to another color.
- 3) If my daughter walks into a toy store and chooses a Super Man costume, I will ask her to choose another one, one with a skirt. I won't like her to choose this type of product.

Through these statements, it was possible to realize how much mothers have a concern and care with the products that their children consume and assume the role of guiding them in their choices aiming to provide the best for them. These values are culturally constituted. Rajecki et al. (1993) already stated that children tend to reflect in their attitudes and games cultural aspects of the society where they are inserted, this also explains the different games and toys around the world. One of the mothers mentioned this aspect in her speech:

I think it's very cultural in the country, because here in Brazil is very strong the issue of women having their place and men their place in society. If we go to other countries, we will already notice many differences. I believe at least. Glad it's changing.

Consistent with Connel's (1995), mothers reported that they perceive masculinity and femininity values in toys by stating that they would not want their children to choose a product suggested for the opposite sex. The following account demonstrates this.

On the toy day in school, Julia took a pink microphone. I asked who played with your daughter toy? She always answers girls, and she also never told me that she played with boys' dolls. She even says, the guy took this or that, but I don't like it because this is a boy right mom? But I don't know the teacher's reaction, because I'm not with her the time, I don't know if they stimulate this exchange or not.

The toy industries intensify these stereotypes as they expose these gender concepts through well-defined commercials with emotional tone and sexual role. Play and toys tend to reflect and teach children what society expects from men and women (RAJECKI et al., 1993). Although mothers are open and supportive of their children's new discoveries with all kinds of toys, there is a lot of resistance about how society will interpret this child's actions and what kind of treatment will receive from the circle of life by preferring products that do not fit with your gender. Color is explicitly a mother's discomfort about products.

On the other hand, the participants also acknowledged that the focus of the game is not to establish gender relations and mentioned the importance of creativity, pleasure, inspiration, development and learning, which meets Marcuse's (1997). The child is not a miniature adult who embodies the culture transmitted to him. It has an active role in shaping the relationships in which engages (COHN, 2005; CERTEAU, 1998). Through the focus group, it was evident the importance that mothers gives to play in the development of children's skills and how play can contribute in a healthy way to the discovery of areas of greater affinity of this child, regardless of colors and gender, toys should be thought to provide fun.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The children's world must be magical, creative and free of prejudice. It transports children to a distant place where reason and adult beliefs make no sense. It is during playing that the child arouses curiosity, believes that anything is possible, transforms various objects into toys, and creates meanings and characters. Toys, specifically those of the make-believe line, tend to be used by children in everyday life as icons, through which children experience daily activities in children's imagery.

Mothers see these games as conducive to their children's development and believe that the industry could broaden product choices and especially color in this specific line, so as not to inhibit or limit children's discoveries. With a relatively new market, studies in the area of child consumption still need more investment. The shift from the mere supporting child to the main actor in the consumer process, especially in the toy market, deserves attention. The discovery and appreciation of children's consumption potential has expanded and is a global trend set off by large multinational corporations.

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