

Toy adverts still send out a sexist message

December 23 2013



In many adverts of dolls and their complements the female is linked to beauty.
Credit: Lil wiz

A study by researchers in Spain which analysed 595 toy advertisements broadcast on television at Christmas 2009, 2010 and 2011 showed that they promoted values that associate beauty with girls and strength and power with boys.

"What is a woman? The engine driving a broom." This joke can be read in "Little jokes about [girls](#) (for [boys](#) only)" [Pequechistes sobre chicas (solo para chicos)], a children's book that the Women's Institute is considering taking to court. Although the role of women in today's society is not one of housewife, sexist roles are still seen in [adverts](#) aimed at children, according to Spanish researchers who have analysed television commercials for toys.

Their study, recently published in the journal *Comunicar*, includes 595 advertisements seen over the Christmas campaigns, between October and January, when most toy adverts go out, for the years 2009, 2010 and 2011.

As Esther Martínez, researcher at the Rey Juan Carlos University and one of the authors of the study, in which the San Antonio de Murcia Catholic University also took part, tells SINC, "They have been recorded from channels for general viewing and some with specific content for children and young people."

The advertising came from eight channels: TVE1, TVE2, Telecinco, Antena 3, Cuatro, la Sexta, Boing and Disney Channel.

The analysis of the adverts shows that, although many of them have messages that apply to both sexes, such as fun, education, solidarity and individualism, it was more frequent to see very separate values.

Sexist messages

In most of the publicity, cars and action heroes were associated with males, together with competitive values, individualism, power and strength. However, the female role was linked to beauty and motherhood as seen in adverts for dolls and accessories.

The content of the videos was analysed using a test designed by the writers. "The file contains the main variables: type of products, gender shown, messages, values, voiceover, length, actions and interaction between the characters.

The method was based on previous work, some codes of practice for broadcasting, such as the Self-regulatory code for Advertising Toys to Children and the Self-regulatory Code for Television Content and Children, and the General Laws on Audiovisual Communication and Publicity.

"These rules state that sexism must be avoided and one gender must not be valued above another, or show a toy linked to one in particular," states Martínez.

In the adverts studied, boys were offered more toys encouraging spatial skills, while girls were shown dolls and educational games.

The researcher also said that there was evident gender segregation in the voiceovers. "Female voices predominated in adverts where girls appear, and male voices where only boys appear and also when both genders are shown."

In addition, any adult figures in adverts "only appear for board games and electronic toys, representing the father's role. However, a father is rarely shown playing action games."

Pink crossbows

The authors conclude that, despite legal provisions, there are still toys that are very different for girls and boys.

However, they say that "a change is under way." Martínez said that in the

advert for a well-known make of girls' dolls, some boys now appear in the background; and there is a brand of toy weapons selling a pink crossbow and bow for girls.

Goldiebox, a United States company, has designed a line of [toys](#) for girls who are 'future engineers.' On its web page, the company states that in a world where male scientists outnumber females, and girls lose interest in the subject at 8 years old, Goldiebox aims to change the equation.

In spite of these examples, Martínez admits that there are still too few that integrate both sexes. The researcher reminds us that advertising in a mirror of society and popular culture. "Just because a boy is seen in a doll advert will not make the boys watching identify with it."

More information: Esther Martínez, M. Ángel Nicolás y Álvaro Salas. "La representación de género en las campañas de publicidad de juguetes en Navidades (2009-12)". *Comunicar*, November 2013. [dx.doi.org/10.3916/C41-2013-18](https://doi.org/10.3916/C41-2013-18)

Provided by Plataforma SINC, Spain

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