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The Weight of Words: Gendered Language in  
the Advertising of Children's Toys.

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## **ABSTRACT**

It has been widely demonstrated by various empirical studies that the marketing industry, when advertising toys for children, perpetuates traditional gender roles and stereotypes through the incorporation of certain design features like colour palettes or settings. Despite this correlation between design characteristics and gender stereotypes, there appears to be minimal research on the descriptive language employed in toy commercials.

The present dissertation provides an analysis of four different word classes (personal pronouns, intensifier adverbs, imperative verbs, and adjectives) that have been considered to be gender markers. For this purpose, the narratives of 34 video toy advertisements that were released between 1997 and 2012 were analysed in order to study the utilisation of gendered language by advertising companies when it comes to targeting a specific audience.

**Keywords:** *gendered language, gender stereotypes, toy advertisements, traditional gender roles, gender marker*

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## **1. Introduction**

The present dissertation examines gendered language in commercials of toys; specifically, advertisements of action figures commercialised for boys and dolls commercialised for girls. The commercials selected for the study were released between 1997 and 2012. The main aim of this piece of research is the analysis of various word classes (personal pronouns, adjectives, intensifier adverbs, and imperative verbs) to see if the descriptive language used in video commercials of toys relies on gendered language when it comes to targeting a specific audience (male or female).

From a very young age, children are expected to conform to what is considered traditional gender roles. Over the years, traditional views of femininity have portrayed girls and women as more nurturing, polite, considerate, social, attractive, and submissive than men, who, on the other hand, are taught to embody traditional ideologies of masculinity and are expected to be strong, aggressive, independent, competitive, and powerful (Signorielli, 1990; Owen & Padron, 2016, Wiit, 2000). Additionally, in terms of social behaviour, women have been described traditionally as cooperative and expressive, whereas men are presented as emotionally distant and assertive (Kimmel, 2011). These gender stereotypes are normally internalised and acquired from books, movies, toys, or television, being the latter one of the most influential nowadays (Signorielli, 1990).

As several studies have demonstrated (Blackmore & Centers, 2005; Macklin & Kolbe, 1994; Signorielli, 1990, Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Davis & Hines, 2020), toys and their respective television advertisements also have a significant impact on children's conception of traditional gender roles as those advertisements are typically gender stereotyped. Most of these studies highlight the idea that it is through design characteristics such as colour palettes or settings that many toy advertisements convey

gender stereotypes. Toy advertisements that are directed to a male audience will usually include vehicles, superheroes, and outdoor activities while those toys advertisements that are directed to girls will include fashion dolls, princesses, and role plays attributed to femininity like hairstyling, shopping, or cooking (N. J. Azmi et al, 2021; Blackmore & Centers, 2005). Unlike advertisements targeted to a female audience, which seem to be based on cooperation and passivity, advertisements targeted to a male audience appear to be based on action and construction. In fact, this is reinforced by the choice of words in advertisements' voice-overs (Owen & Padron, 2015). In this case, the research made by Johnson and Young (2002), in which they analysed the use of verbs in voice-overs, demonstrated that verbs used in advertisements with a female audience were related to passivity, nurture, and emotions, while in those that had a male audience, verbs were related to competition, dominance, and destruction.

Although the existence of an association between toys, their respective advertisements' design features, and traditional gender stereotypes has been widely proven, it could be said that there is still a minimal amount of research regarding the descriptive language used in video commercials of toys and its purpose.

Gender differences in language use began to be significant during the 1970s (Pan, 2011) and one of the earliest and most influential works about this field was *Language and Women's Place* by Lakoff (1975). In this study, he was able to identify several linguistic elements that differed between female and male speech like the use of tag questions, hedges, different use of vocabulary, or pitch among others. Since then, gender differences in written and spoken language have been observed and debated by many researchers such as Caskey (2011), Johnson and Young (2002), Newman et al. (2008), Leaper (2014), and Holmes (1997). Furthermore, language use and female and male ways of communicating have been examined from formal to informal

environments, including the advertisement market (Owen and Padron, 2015; Fern, L.J. & Young, K., 2002).

Data from several more recent empirical studies (Newman et al, 2008; Mazidah, 2013; Fisher, 2021) shows, partly coinciding with Lakoff's work and conclusions, that there are differences in pitch, intonation, and discourse markers but also in word use. Although these features cannot be taken as universal, the existence of gender-oriented tendencies in the utilisation of different word classes including adjectives, pronouns, verbs, and adverbs appears to be unquestionable (Newman et al, 2008). If the causes of these differences are biological or social-conditioned falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

As has already been mentioned, there have been a few studies that have demonstrated the existence of a differential use of linguistic elements regarding gender. For this reason, this dissertation analyses the use of pronouns, adverbs, verbs, and adjectives in several online toy advertisements.

As regards pronouns, various empirical studies regarding gender and language have concluded that women seem to employ more personal pronouns than men (Newman et al, 2008; Isbister, Kaati & Cohen, 2017). Moreover, females' language appears to include more first-person personal pronouns (*I, we, us, ours*) than males' language in spoken (conversations) and written (messages or social media posts) contexts (Newman et al, 2008; Owen & Padron, 2015). Yet, the use of second-person personal pronouns (*you, yours*) has been found to be more frequent in males (Newman et al, 2008). Differences in the use of personal pronouns can also be noted in the marketing industry as represented by magazines or advertisements (Owen & Padron, 2015). The distinctive use of personal pronouns reflects how different people interact with each other and, therefore, they can be seen as a gender marker that highlights

gender stereotypes. For instance, the use of second-person personal pronouns in males can be related to stereotypes enhanced by masculinity such as having dominant and more direct attitudes towards people (Owen & Padron, 2015).

The differential use of adverbs and verbs has also been explained in terms of their association with traditional gender roles and stereotypes; therefore, they can be considered gender markers. Intensifier adverbs are described as words that “strengthen the meaning of other expressions and show emphasis” (English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, 2023). It has been demonstrated by various studies that the use of intensifier adverbs is higher in females’ language than in males’ language (Newman et al, 2008; Mulac et al., 2001). Therefore, adverbs such as *very*, *too*, *so*, *really*, *absolutely*, *at all*, *pretty*, or *totally* seem to be employed by women more than by men in spoken contexts (see, e.g., Sardabi & Afghani, 2015), as well as in written contexts (see, e.g., Newman et al., 2008). The use of intensifier adverbs by women is associated with the fact that they are supposed to be more emotional, so they tend to use adverbs that strengthen the emotional meaning of the immediately following expression or word (Sardabi & Afghani, 2015). Other reasons why intensifiers might be used would be to capture the attention of the audience or to create empathy (Owen & Padron, 2015).

On the other hand, the use of imperative verbs (directives), which are employed to give orders and commands, appears to be more persistent in men than in women (Mulac et al., 2001). In their initial study, Mulac et al. (1988) analysed mixed-gender interactions and their findings concluded that men rated higher in the use of directives (imperatives). Furthermore, other works that support this statement are the ones conducted by Lakoff (1975) and Maltz & Borker (1982), in which they demonstrated that orders and commands were more frequently used by males than females as a “measure of dominance” (Maltz & Borker, 1982).

An adjective is defined as “a word that describes a noun or pronoun” (English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus, 2023) and various empirical studies support the differential use of adjectives by males and females. It was in *Language and Women’s Place* (Lakoff, 1975) that a set of adjectives in “its figurative use” (Lakoff, 1975) appeared to be used more in women’s language. These adjectives were *adorable, charming, sweet, lovely, and divine* (Lakoff, 1975). Additionally, Lakoff (1975) referred to these adjectives as “frivolous, trivial, or unimportant to the world”. These adjectives associated with female language have been also described as emotional, extravagant, exaggerated, focused on appearance (Caskey, 2011; Pan, 2011; Ivy & Backlund, 2004), and “empty” adjectives (Caskey, 2011). The concept of “empty” adjectives has been typically linked in several studies with the notions of admiration, emotion, triviality, and approval (Caskey, 2011; Badari et al., n.d.). In contrast to the emotional, extravagant, exaggerated, and trivial adjectives that have been related to women’s language, the use of adjectives by men is associated with communicating information, aggressiveness, destruction, or action (Newman et al. 2008; Haas, 1979), which at the same time refers to certain behaviours and concepts inside the traditional masculine stereotypes.

Overall, in written and spoken contexts, the use of certain words by women appears to be related to social environments where emotional and social-linked words are very frequent (Haas, 1979). Furthermore, Newman et al. (2008) also stated that female speech makes more references to psychological processes, i.e., words related to self, family, friends, or thoughts. On the other hand, males are more likely to use words in relation to external situations, swearing, objects, possession, quantity, or space than women (Haas, 1979; Newman et al., 2008; Mulac et al, 1988).



The existence of gendered linguistic elements and their connection to traditional gender stereotypes has been provided by many empirical studies over the years. Advertising and marketing enterprises tend to rely on gender association strategies that convey gender stereotypes in order to appeal to a specific audience. The concept known as brand personality plays an important role. Brand personality refers to the association of human characteristics to a certain brand (Forsey, 2021). In this sense, female products are personified as *sweet*, *sensitive*, *fragile*, and *graceful*, whereas male products are personified as *adventurous*, *brave*, *aggressive*, and *dominant* (Grohmann, 2009). Regarding toys and toy advertisements, personality branding reinforces gender stereotypes, and it can be explained by the differential choice of design features like the packaging, colours, or setting (Grohmann, 2009). Despite the existence of various studies that provide evidence in relation to language and gender and how its relation is considered to portray traditional gender attributes, little research has been made around the language used in toy advertising.

For this reason, the present study analysed the narratives of several video commercials of toys based on action figures and targeted at boys and girls. The study takes account of the literature provided above about the existence of gendered language. It was hypothesised that not unlike what happens with design features, those linguistic elements that are considered gender markers and perpetuate gender stereotypes may also create a division in the advertisements' narratives regarding the target audience.

## **2. Methods**

The objective of this project is to analyse the use (frequency, distribution and communicative functions) of various word classes in toy commercials. The advertisements analysed are about human-like figures, normally identified as action

figures and dolls. The advertisements were categorised in terms of their target audience (female-oriented or male-oriented) on the basis of the pronouns used in the advertisements (he, she), the name of the doll or action figure, and the physical appearance of the different toys.

It is important to note that “female” and “male” are here used as binary constructs in accordance with the gender division traditionally used in the toy marketing industry. For instance, the study made by Auster and Mansbach, (2012) about toy catalogues concluded that firms like Disney tend to categorise toys as toys “for boys” and “for girls”. So, with the purpose of seeking parity, a total of 34 advertisements were examined, 17 of which are male-oriented and 17 are female-oriented. The action figures and dolls that have been chosen for the study are the ones given in Table 1.

<b>Advertisements for girls</b>	<b>Advertisements for boys</b>
Barbie	Batman
Bratz	Spiderman
MyScene	Iron Man
Disney Princesses	X-Men
Cinderella	Power Rangers
Rapunzel	Fantastic 4
Winx Club	Star Wars
	G.I. Joe Sigma
	Max Steel
	Hercules

**Table 1** – Distribution of toy advertisements

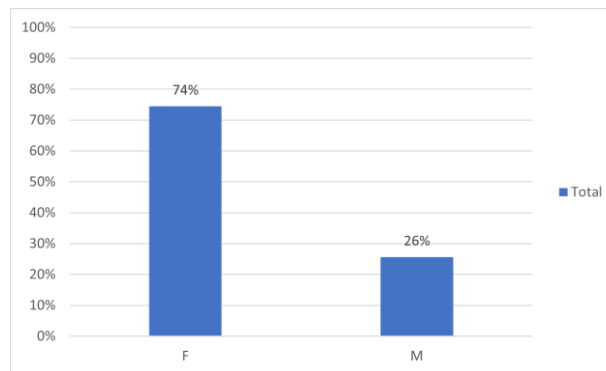
The selected advertisements were all released during the same years. The years in which these toys came out ranged from 1997 to 2012; i.e., the period of the ‘Z Generation’. The reason why this period of time was chosen is because people from this generation, also known as ‘digital natives’, are considered to be the public most influenced by online advertisements (Argintaru, 2019). Furthermore, in relation to the toy industry, it was at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the market underwent a significant economic increase, reaching in 2001 the amount of \$24 billion compared with the \$8.3 million reached at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (AdAge, 2003). The narratives in the advertisements were transcribed from beginning to end in order to ensure that there was enough material for the subsequent analysis.

As I have mentioned before, various word classes were analysed in this study (adjectives, pronouns, verbs, and adverbs). Concerning adjectives, the main purpose was to assign each adjective to one specific category. First, a list of the adjectives that appeared in the corpus was compiled (see Appendix 1). Then, I reviewed the taxonomy offered by Patricia R. Owen and Monica Padron (2016, Table 2) and decided to add two more categories to the classification (‘Derogation/Disdain’ and ‘Appreciation’) because, during the discourse analysis, I realized that there were a significant number of appreciative adjectives that referred to objects like complements or clothes and not to the physical appearance of the figure itself, and there were also a high number of adjectives that were used in a pejorative way like *evil* or *bad*. Overall, there was a total of seven generic categories: ‘Power’, ‘Technology/Science’, ‘Action’, ‘Derogation/Disdain’, ‘Physical appearance’, ‘Fantasy’, and ‘Appreciation’.

### 3. Results

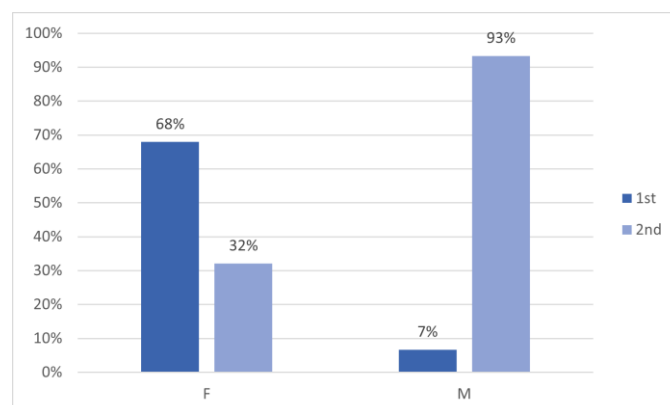
The results provided in this section are based on the analysis of the corpus of toy commercials described above. In the next section of the study ('Discussion'), the data collected will be discussed and interpreted according to these results.

As shown in Figure. 1, advertisements targeted to a female audience seem to use more personal pronouns than those for a male one. According to the data gathered, 74% of the personal pronouns were found in female-oriented narratives whereas only 26% were from commercials for a male target audience.



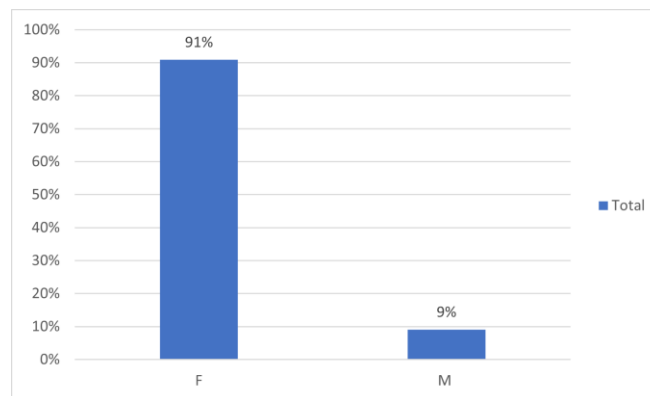
**Figure 1** – The use of personal pronouns regarding the target audience

As seen in Figure. 2, almost 70 per cent of the first-person personal pronouns were found in female-oriented commercials. In this sense, the presence of first-person pronouns (I, we, us, ours) appears to be higher in advertisements for a female audience, whereas the use of second-person pronouns (you, yours) appears to be higher in advertisements for a male audience, with a percentage of 93%.



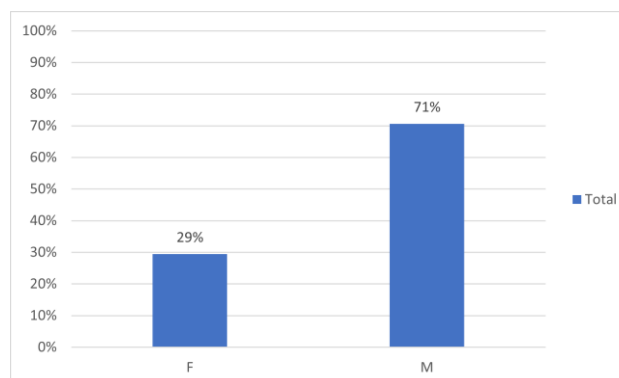
**Figure 2** – The use of first and second-person pronouns regarding the target audience

As indicated in Figure 3, in regard to the use of intensifier adverbs such as ‘too’, ‘totally’, ‘really’, and ‘so’, most of them were found in toy advertisements with a female target audience. 91% of the intensifier adverbs were identified in the set of female-oriented toy advertisements whereas only 9% were found in the set of male-oriented ones.



**Figure 3** – The use of intensifier adverbs regarding the target audience

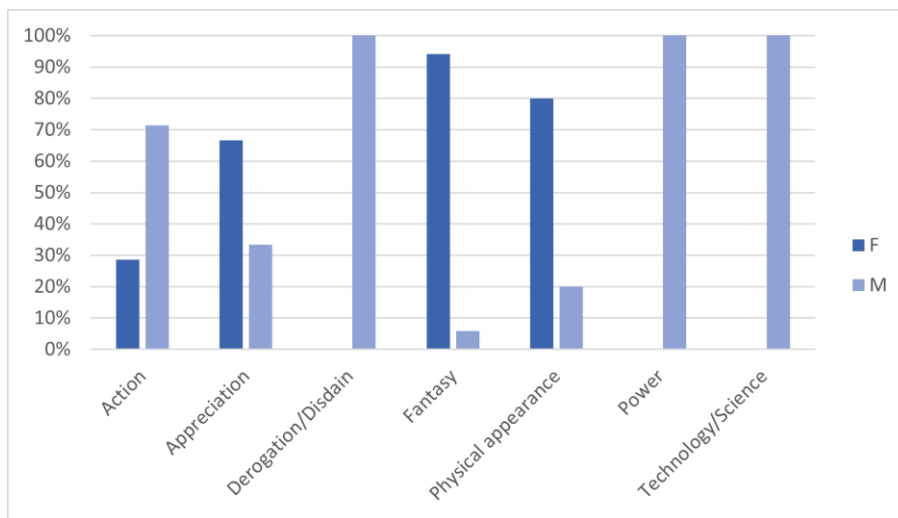
As can be seen in Figure. 4, the use of verbs in the imperative tense seems more prominent in male-oriented advertisements (71%) than in female-oriented advertisements (29%). The list of imperative verbs that were found during the analysis is shown in ‘Appendix 2’.



**Figure 4** – Frequency of use of imperative verbs regarding target audience

As shown in Figure. 5, the results regarding the use of adjectives suggests that adjectives related with ‘Power’, ‘Technology/Science’, ‘Action’ and

‘Denigration/Disdain’ are much higher in advertisements with a male target audience. Adjectives related to the categories of ‘Power’, ‘Technology/Science’, and ‘Denigration/Disdain’ have been found only in narratives of commercials targeted to men. On the other hand, adjectives related to ‘Physical appearance’, ‘Fantasy’, and ‘Appreciation’ seem to have a higher frequency of use in advertisements with a female target audience (see also Table. 2)



**Figure 5** – Classification of adjectives and their frequency of use regarding target audience.

	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b>Action</b>	71%	29%
<b>Appreciation</b>	33%	67%
<b>Denigration/Disdain</b>	100%	-
<b>Fantasy</b>	6%	94%
<b>Physical appearance</b>	20%	80%
<b>Power</b>	100%	-
<b>Technology/Science</b>	100%	-

**Table 2** – Percentages of the use of adjectives regarding each category

#### 4. Discussion

The findings from this corpus-based study about the narratives of various doll and action figures' commercials from 1997 to 2012 suggest that the linguistic elements used to commercialise these toys vary depending on the target audience (female and male).

Overall, the results reproduce what has already been demonstrated regarding gendered language over the last few years. In this sense, female-oriented advertisements include more intensifier adverbs and personal pronouns than male-oriented ones. Furthermore, in comparison with the narrative of advertisements for boys, the narrative of those for girls employed more emotional and social lexis, thus reinforcing stereotypes of femininity such as being more emotionally open, nurturing, or social. Hence, this seems to indicate that language in the advertising industry reflects and perpetuates traditional gender roles.

It was found that the stereotype of women as being “disconnected” from what are considered to be daily and real-world endeavours like science or business was strongly emphasised by the differential use of adjectives. Adjectives found in girl-oriented narratives were mostly related to physical appearance, appreciation, and fantasy (see Table 2), whereas the choice of adjectives in boy-oriented narratives was related to power, action, disdain, and technology or science. In the 34 commercials that were analysed, the narrative of power and science does not seem to exist at all in female-oriented advertisements since there were no examples of adjectives associated with these categories. Some examples of these adjectives are, among others, *high-tech*, *strong*, *tough*, or *electronic*. It should also be noted that in the advertisements for boys, traditional attributes concerning masculinity such as being dominant, independent, or competitive were present and perpetuated by the use of linguistic elements such as the higher use of second-person personal pronouns or the use of imperative verbs.

In this sense, during the analysis, it was especially surprising the extent to which this use of adjectives in the narratives relied on and reinforced gender stereotypes. For instance, the stereotype of women being more concerned about physical appearance and emotions and always seeking approval appears to be emphasised by the presence of adjectives such as *lovely*, *pretty*, *cool*, *perfect*, *awesome*, or *beautiful*. This is the reason why these adjectives have been included in the categories of physical appearance and appreciation. Some examples of their use include:

- (a) She's so soft and **pretty** (from *Barbie and Me*, 2005)
- (b) All so **beautiful** (from *Disney Princess Sparkling Princess Dolls*, 2008)
- (c) **lovely** princess' gowns (from *Disney Princess Sparkling Princess Dolls*, 2008)

An equally significant aspect regarding the use of these adjectives is that women have been found to laud each other more than men (Holmes, 1988). Recurrent use of these kinds of adjectives reinforces the focus placed upon female beauty and consequently reinforces this gender stereotype. Additionally, in relation to what Lakoff (1975) categorised and defined as “empty” adjectives (i.e., adjectives that were related to “unimportant things of the world”), adjectives associated with fantasy could be included inside this concept. As seen in Table 2, the presence of these ‘fantasy’ adjectives is higher in girl-oriented advertisements. Some of these adjectives are, among others, *sparkling*, *magical*, *cosmic*, or *enchanted*. These “fantasy” adjectives appear in sentences such as:

- (a) an **enchanted** night (from *Cinderella Swirling Doll and Transforming Pumpkin Carriage*, 2012)
- (b) **magical** music (from *Disney's Dancing Princess Dancing Collection*, 1997)

Similarly, adjectives found in male advertisements have also been associated with traditional ideologies of masculinity; for instance:



- (a) the **unstoppable** power (from *X-Men Origins Wolverine*, 2009)
- (b) He's the world's **strongest** (from *Max Steel Psycho Secret Agent*, 2000)
- (c) They're just too **powerful** (from *Power Rangers Time Force*, 2001)

These adjectives could be related to the fact that, traditionally, males are expected to be strong, powerful, dominant, and competitive (Signorielli, 1990), and, therefore, their use encapsulates all these masculine attributes. Adjectives associated with strength, control, authority, or force such as *strongest*, *invincible*, and *tough*, were added to the category of 'power', while adjectives related to activities, creations, or physical movement such as *unstoppable*, *fast*, or *battling* were included inside the category of 'action'. Moreover, men are also stereotyped as people that tend to communicate important information about daily life matters, like science, sports, or money (Newman et al. 2008). This is reinforced by the consistent presence of adjectives related to scientific and technological argot in advertisements for boys; for instance, the use of *high-tech (or tech)*, *ultimate*, *mechanized*, *magnetic*, or *electronic*, among others. Another striking finding was the use of adjectives that could be associated with an aggressive or pejorative attitude. The identification of adjectives such as *bad*, *savage*, and *evil* in commercials for a male audience might be related to the fact that men are also expected to be partly aggressive and constantly show their dominance over the rest even if that means making someone feel inferior (Haas, 1979).

As proved by Mulac et al. (2001), the utilization of personal pronouns based on gender has been described as a gender marker, its use thus indicating the perpetuation of traditional gender roles. The choice of personal pronouns in language provides insights into how people interact with each other, and it might also be an indicator of the strength of a relationship (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). Female-oriented advertisements make use of more personal pronouns than male-oriented ones, thus

creating a more personified narrative. The results gathered about personal pronouns seem to correspond with the findings provided by various empirical studies in which women were found to use more personal pronouns than men (Newman et al, 2008; Isbister, Kaati & Cohen, 2017). In fact, the high frequency of use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ in the advertising of female-oriented action figures emphasises the homogeneity of women/feminine groups; that is, it reinforces group identity, as opposed to a masculine dominant language and a traditional culture built on competition (Newman et al. 2008; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). The use of inclusive ‘we’ can be seen in sentences such as:

- (a) How do **we** look? (from *Cool Clips Barbie & Friends*, 1999)
- (b) Styling fashion wherever **we** go (from *BRATZ “Tokyo a GoGo/Jade”*, 2004)
- (c) What do **we** wear? (from *My Scene Masquerade Madness Dolls Commercial*, 2004)

The present study has also shown that the use of second-person personal pronouns coincides with the results provided by previous studies that demonstrated that men typically use these personal pronouns at a higher rate than women (Newman et al., 2008). When second-person personal pronouns are used in the advertisements they tend to refer to the person who is watching the toy advertisement or, sometimes, it might be the actors/narrative voice talking to the children in the advertisement. It has been claimed in several studies such as those by Mulac et al. (1988) and Bozic Lenard (2016) that the utilisation of the pronoun ‘you’ somehow appears to create subordination and enhances the speaker’s authoritative attitude, leaving the audience in an inferior position. It is for this reason, the constant use of second-person personal pronouns, that they could be considered a gender marker as their use seems to be related to traditional masculine attributes like men’s direct and dominant behaviours. Moreover, as can be

seen in the examples below, sometimes this pronoun appears following modal verbs that express possibility (*can*).

(a) **You can** take out Sandman (from *Spiderman 3 Action Figures*, 2007)

(b) **you can** take off any enemy. (from *Iron Man Toy Commercial*, 2008)

This combination of you + modal verb (can) expressing possibility can reinforce and lead to aggressive behaviours in children watching the advertisements as these sentences have been found to be followed by verbs such as *take out* or *take off*, which imply connotations of destruction and violence, thus perpetuating traditional masculinity attitudes.

As stated in Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* (1975), women's language is characterised by the continuous use of intensifier adverbs (*so, really, too, or very*), which coincides with the results from the present study as female-oriented narratives were found to have much more intensifier adverbs than those advertisements with a male target audience. Some examples of intensifier adverbs in the set of female-oriented advertisements were:

(a) She has **really** pretty clothes (from *Barbie and Me*, 2005)

(b) The sparkles are **so** bright (from *Disney Princess Sparkling Princess Dolls*, 2008)

(c) Bella dances **too!** (from *Disney's Dancing Princess Dancing Collection*, 1997)

Jespersen (1922: 250) stated that "the fondness of women for hyperbole will very often lead the fashion with regard to adverbs of intensity, and these are very often used with disregard of their proper meaning". What is more, Lakoff (1975) as well as Newman et al. (2008) in their respective empirical studies, suggested that the relation between women's language, and the heavy use of intensifier adverbs was due to their language use being powerless, tentative, and indecisive thus contributing to the

perpetuation of traditional gender roles. Other studies indicate that this category of adverbs might be used to capture the attention of the target audience, and, unconsciously, their use might also provoke certain feelings such as empathy or social cooperation, as they tend to reinforce the meaning of the expression or the word that follows (Sardabi & Afghani, 2015). This could be related to the fact that female language is said to include more emotional and affective matters (Haas, 1979; Mulac et al., 2001; Lakoff, 1975; Tagliamonte, 2005). Indeed, in the 17 male-oriented advertisements, there was only one intensifier adverb present in the set of narratives (“They’re just **too** powerful”). This lack of intensifier adverbs, as happens in the opposite direction in women’s language, also perpetuates features associated with masculinity and men’s language; for instance, directness, being less emotionally open and more objective or instrumental (Mulac et al., 2001).

Finally, another variable that has been demonstrated to be a gender marker is the constant use of imperative verbs or sentences. Specifically, it is a variable frequently found in males (Haas, 1979; Ochs, 1992; Mulac, et al., 2001). The findings regarding the use of imperative verbs suggest that commercials for boys tend to use more imperatives than female-oriented commercials. In the analysis, it was found that 71% of the imperative verbs belonged to the commercials with a male target audience. According to Ochs (1992:341), the use of imperative verbs, which are used to give orders, commands, and sometimes requests is related to males’ way of speaking. In this sense, sentences similar to the ones below would be typically found in male discourse:

- (a) Give Batman the power (from *Batman Total Justice League Action Figure*, 1997)
- (b) Defeat the evilness (from *Disney's Hercules - Action Figure*, 1997)
- (c) Attack (from *Power Rangers Time Force*, 2001)

(d) Unleash a triple launch attack (from *The Batman Ultra Blast figure*, 2006)

As stated in previous studies (Mulac et al., 1988; Haas, 1979; Leaper, C. & Robnett, R.D., 2011), the employment of imperatives (also known as directives) and talking with an imperative tone conveys directness, a characteristic usually associated with men's discourse. Other empirical analyses regarding language, such as the one described by Berko-Gleason (1975) about how parents speak to their children, have indicated that fathers appear to make use of imperatives more than mothers and this was associated with the fact that men are expected to be more controlling and assertive. In this sense, it could be pointed out that talking with an imperative tone and making use of this type of verb contribute to the perpetuation of certain traits typically associated with traditional notions of masculinity like dominance, power, and authority (Mulac et al., 1988, Haas, 1979; Maltz & Borker, 1982). It could be also said that the constant employment of imperative language in men highlights the expectation for emotional resilience and leadership, reinforcing masculine expectations about being always in control, direct, and decisive.

Another important characteristic of imperative verbs is that their use in spoken contexts has been described as "face-threatening" (Aries, 1996). This description could be transferred to the marketing context as a significant number of the imperative sentences and verbs gathered during the analysis of action figures for boys are followed by "threats" or comments that seem to imply some kind of aggressive or harsh action. These comments are normally addressed to the enemy of the action figure. Some examples found were:

(a) Fire each missile (from *The Batman Ultra Blast figure Commercial*, 2006)

(b) Blast the bad guys (from *Spiderman 3 Action Figures*, 2007)

(c) Crush the monsters (from *Disney's Hercules - Action Figure*, 1997)

Taking into account that imperatives have been described as threatening, it could be said that their use somehow conveys aggressiveness, thus preserving and highlighting stereotypical gender attitudes and behaviours.

Although the lack of imperatives has been associated with women's speech, which is usually defined as "non-assertive, tentative, and supportive" (Haas, 1979)(see also Holmes, 1997) , some instances have been gathered during the analysis of female-oriented commercials, such as:

(a) Feel like a princess (from *Disney's Dancing Princess Dancing Collection Commercial*, 1997)

(b) Add clips and jewels (from *Cool Clips Barbie & Friends Commercial*, 1999)

Despite this feature being associated with male discourse, in recent research by Owen and Padron (2015) about gendered language, the presence of imperative verbs in female narratives has been associated with the belief that women do not have the same degree of knowledge regarding technologies and that, therefore, they need instruction and indications on how to do things, even on how to play with their dolls. This might also reinforce gender roles as it somehow promotes a traditional view of women as passive and always in need of a man to help them.

Considering the information provided by this analysis regarding gendered language in toy commercials, it should be mentioned that one of the limitations of the analysis is the fact that it is only based on adverbs, verbs, pronouns, and adjectives. Consequently, in the future it would be interesting to cover other word classes such as nouns and determiners, and how their use may vary depending on the audience.

A preliminary study of the employment of first-person (*my*, *our*) and second-person (*your*) determiners in the corpus selected for this dissertation reveals that their utilisation seems to coincide with the use of first-person and second-person personal

pronouns regarding the target audience. Therefore, as is the case with the differential use of personal pronouns, a greater number of second-person determiners might be identified in action figure advertisements with a male-target audience; for instance:

- (a) Their destiny is in **your** hands (from *Star Wars Toy Commercials Part 1: Kenner/Hasbro Action Figures*, 1997)
- (b) adventures of **your** own (from *Spiderman 3 Action Figures*, 2007)

Similarly, the same would happen with first-person determiners. In this case, as is the case with personal pronouns, there would be a higher number of first-person determiners (*my, our*) in commercials targeted to girls; for example:

- (a) **Our** best subject is fashion (from *Bratz – Class Commercial*, 2006)

Another preliminary finding regarding the use of nouns in the set of narratives from the corpus reveals that their use seems to partly coincide with the way in which traditional gender roles are portrayed in the marketing industry. In this connection, a preliminary study of nouns has been carried out having as the main source the *Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English* by Tom McArthur (1981). In this dictionary, words are classified in a variety of semantic fields, from the more general to the more specific. According to Tom McArthur's dictionary (1981), most of the nouns gathered during the preliminary analysis in the advertisements with a male target audience would be associated with the semantic fields of 'The police, security, services, crime, and criminals', with nouns such as *criminal, crime* and *assault*; 'Warfare, defence, and the army/Fighting, war and peace', with nouns such as *battle, combat, attack*, and *action*; 'Weapons', with nouns such as *armor, missile*, and *sword*; and "Equipment, machines, and instruments", with nouns like *gear, light*, and *axe*. In a similar way, in the case of toy commercials for girls, the nouns collected in the preliminary study have been classified in the Logman Lexicon Dictionary (McArthur, 1981) as "Clothes and

personal belongings”, with nouns such as *gown*, *model*, *costume*, and *outfit*; “Furniture and Household Fittings”, with nouns such as *wardrobe*, *clothes*, and *bed*; “People”, with *boy* and *girl*; “Friendship and enmity”, with nouns like *friend*; and “Religion and beliefs”, with nouns related to fantasy like *fairy* and *magic*.

This data appears to indicate, as happens with the word classes analysed in the main study, that both nouns and determiners could be described, too, as gender markers. Their use seems to foster and reinforce traditional gender traits usually identified with femininity and masculinity. As regards determiners, with apparently similar results to those obtained in the analysis of personal pronouns, the employment of first-person determiners in the narratives of female-oriented advertisements would reinforce group identity, as opposed to a masculine dominant language and a traditional culture built on competition, which would in turn be reinforced by the frequent use of second-person determiners. Similarly, the nouns collected from the male narratives also seem to perpetuate stereotypes regarding masculinity such as being aggressive, always trying to be in control, powerful, and destructive because most of them seem to be included in semantic fields that are associated with war, weapons, crime, and different fighting objects. On the other hand, nouns in toy advertisements for girls appear to reinforce traditional feminine traits and stereotypes such as the belief that women are mainly interested in their physical appearance, always trying to be social, and talking about trivial matters in the real world like fantasy or clothes.

As can be seen, language is a powerful tool that, in a conscious or unconscious way, fosters and conveys stereotypes, attitudes, and behaviours. As speakers, the choice of words, manner of speaking, and other aspects of language tend to reflect our expectations, beliefs, and values (Markovic & Alcakovic, 2013). Moreover, how language is used can also depict the position in which people find themselves according



to social matters such as gender equality. Being conscious of the important effect that language has in people's minds, in toy commercials the marketing industry seems to rely on certain lexical tendencies that have been identified as gender markers in other contexts (magazines, conversations, series, or education) such as the employment of intensifier adverbs, imperative verbs, differential use of adjectives, and personal pronouns. When gendered language is employed in toy advertising, it may have a significant impact on children's social development as they learn from what surrounds them (Ward & Grower, 2020). So, if language helps to spread the message that traditional gender roles and attributes concerning masculinity and femininity should be respected, praised, and even found to be convenient, children might also accept that without critical thinking.

The fact that gendered language and gendered toy advertisements might affect children's judgments and behaviours has recently been discussed in various empirical studies (see, e.g., Pike & Jennings 2005, Spinner et al. 2018) in which the children were exposed to toy commercials that fostered traditional gender relations and vice versa. The findings showed that children that had been exposed to commercials that portrayed stereotypical gender roles and contained gendered language were likely to embrace traditional gender-linked assumptions and prejudices.

## **5. Conclusion**

In summary, this dissertation breaks new ground by analysing and demonstrating that linguistic elements which have been associated with traditional gender stereotypes (pronouns, intensifiers adverbs, imperative verbs, and adjectives) differentiate the narratives of action figures commercialised for boys and dolls commercialised for girls. The present study has identified that by the employment of certain linguistic elements, which coincide with traditional societal expectations and norms, the marketing industry

could be said to underline the idea that some toys are for girls and others are for boys. This strategy seems to be used deliberately in a way that perpetuates rigid gender roles, which will shape children's attitudes and behaviours.

The findings about gendered language in this dissertation align with results from former empirical studies on gender-based design features such as the differential employment of colour palettes or settings, objects included in the commercials, and characteristics of the toy packaging (Johnson & Young, 2002; Blackmore & Centers, 2005; Macklin & Kolbe, 1994; Signorielli, 1990). These results coincide with the analysis carried out in this study, which shows that women are often presented as excessively focused on their physical appearance, lacking independence, being unimaginative and passive, but also emotionally open. Men, on the other hand, are portrayed as assertive, concerned about important daily-life matters, dominant, aggressive, and in control of what surrounds them.

The consequences of using gendered language may be very important. Firstly, by employing linguistic elements that have been considered to act as gender markers, the toy industry might induce pressure on children to conform to traditional societal expectations or stereotypes. In this sense, these linguistic patterns might cause children to follow narrow definitions of femininity or masculinity. Secondly, gendered language in toy advertisements might have an impact on gender ideologies and dynamics as well as on social hierarchies. In this case, it would reinforce the belief that women and girls' main interests are their physical appearance, being attractive, social, submissive, and nurturing as well as other attributes such as passivity, politeness, and emotional openness. On the other hand, it would depict men and boys as aggressive, leaders, dominant, assertive, more competitive, and wanting to be always in control of what is happening.

In fact, the toy and marketing industries appear to have recently faced public criticism for reinforcing these strong gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles. This can be seen in campaigns such as “Let toys be toys”, which started in 2012 aiming to make children’s brands more inclusive and include interactions with both genders in advertising so as not to foster the idea that children are playing with “girl toys” or “boy toys” (Russell, 2021). This has caused a growing demand for gender-neutral toys in order to promote gender equality in toy commercials that previously were targeted exclusively to one gender (Russell, 2021).

Given the significant presence of gendered language in video commercials for toys and in narratives involving action figures and dolls, it is essential to be aware of the impact and the effect this tendency has on the perpetuation of traditional gender roles. Furthermore, it should be hoped that toy commercials strive for a more inclusive and balanced language in their narratives as well as their design features. It is crucial that girls can see themselves as capable of participating in sports, battles, and constructions; and boys as capable of expressing themselves and grooming dolls. However, this study is limited to a small sample of thirty-four (34) video commercials of toys released between 1997 and 2012. Thus, further research should be done on toy advertisements with a wider sample from a different, more recent time period in order to provide more detailed and up-to-date results and information.

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## Appendices

### Appendix. 1 – List of adjectives from the corpus selected for the analysis

advanced	1
amazing	2
awesome	1
bad	3
battling	1
beautiful	2
best	1
big	4
biggest	1
blazing	1
blonde	1
brave	1
clobbered	1
cool	8
coolest	1
cosmic	1
darkest	1
electronic	2
enchanted	4
evil	2
extraordinary	1
fabulous	2
fairest	2
fairy	1
fancy	3
fantastic	1
fashionable	1
fast	1
fractal	1
giant	1
gorgeous	1

great	3
heavy	1
high-tech	1
humongous	1
invincible	1
legendary	1
long	3
loud	1
lovely	1
magic	1
magic	1
magical	6
magnetic	1
massive	1
mechanised	1
mega	1
mutants	1
mysterious	1
perfect	2
pink	1
powerful	1
pretty	4
purple	1
savage	1
silky	1
small	1
soft	1
sparkling	2
specialised	1
spectacular	1
stronger	2
strongest	1
sweet	1

tech	2
total	6
tough	1
toughest	1
ultimate	2
unstoppable	1
weaponised	1
wild	1
wisecracking	1

**Appendix 2** – List of imperative verbs gathered from the corpus

Add	1
Attack	2
Blast	2
Bring	1
Call	1
Change	1
Choose	1
Crush	1
Defeat	1
Don't get snagged	1
Feel	1
Fire	2
Flip	1
Get	1
Give	1
Go	1
Join	2
Laser	1
Let	1
Listen	2
Prove	1
Save	1

Shine	1
Show	1
Stop	1
Stretch	1
Take	2
Unleash	1