Children’s Responses Toward Gender Role Stereotyped Advertisement

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - There has been a great deal of controversy surrounding the use of sex role stereotypes in advertising directed to children. Critics claim that marketers encourage sex role stereotyping by creating gender specific products, such as Mattel's Barbie and Hasbro's G.I. Joe. Toy makers, on the other hand, claim that their products reflect rather than create existing societal conceptions of gender roles. Previous research has utilized content analysis to document the existence of gender stereotyping in advertising (Hoek and Sheppard 1990; Hoek and Laurence 1993), but has not directly examined the effectiveness of sex-role-specific advertising directed toward children.

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There has been a great deal of controversy surrounding the use of sex role stereotypes in advertising directed to children. Critics claim that marketers encourage sex role stereotyping by creating gender specific products, such as Mattel’s Barbie and Hasbro’s G.I. Joe. Toy makers, on the other hand, claim that their products reflect rather than create existing societal conceptions of gender roles. Previous research has utilized content analysis to document the existence of gender stereotyping in advertising (Hoek and Sheppard 1990; Hoek and Laurence 1993), but has not directly examined the effectiveness of sex-role-specific advertising directed toward children.

This study examines the effectiveness of agentic (stereotypically masculine) versus communal (stereotypically feminine) advertising targeted to children between the ages of 5 and 6 and 9 and 10. These age groups represent two different stages of sex role development, rigidity and flexibility, respectively (Trautner 1992), and should differ in their reaction to stereotypically masculine and feminine advertising appeals. Agentic appeals are stereotypically masculine and focus on competition, instrumental control over the environment, and winning. Communal appeals are relationship oriented and focus on cooperation, verbal communication, and nurturance. The effectiveness of these appeals has not been examined in marketing among children, despite a long tradition of gender role research in consumer behavior and a substantial conceptual foundation examining the development of children’s gender role orientations in psychology.

Background

Numerous studies have found differences among boys and girls. These studies indicate that boys generally hold more traditional sex role attitudes than girls (Canter and Ageton 1984). Most studies still indicate that girls are less devoted to same gender activities than boys are (Turner, Gervai, and Hinde 1993). Girls’ preferences for traditionally male sex-type activities, moreover, increased from kindergarten to third grade, and from sixth grade to eighth grade. At the same time, their interest in female sex-type preferences decreased from kindergarten to eighth grade. Although declining sex-type preferences also appeared among boys during this period, these differences were less pronounced (Etaugh and Liss 1992).

Studies generally also show a high level of sex-role stereotyping among young children. As Huston (1983) indicated even very young children can distinguish between genders. Preschool children, for example, associate high power adjectives with boys such as being strong and fast, as well as aggressive and cruel to males, while adjectives such as needs help, cries a lot, affectionate, and nice are attributed to girls.

Developmental studies have generally found a reduction in children’s stereotyping as they mature. Trautner (1992) showed that children’s development of sex roles occurred in sequential order starting with awareness, rigidity, and finally flexibility. Children had high sex-typed preferences by the time they were seven years old. Between the ages of 7 and 10, their sex-typed preferences became more flexible.

Method

This study sampled children in kindergarten (from 5 to 6 years old) and third and fourth grade (from 9 to 10 years old). Storyboards were used as the stimuli in this experiment. The storyboards were drawn and colored by an artist. This was a process, which took several iterations to complete. The final storyboards included two sets for each product (one with an agentic theme and one with a communal theme). A voice-over was used with the storyboards. After pre-testing the recording, one of the male and one of the female participants were selected to record their voice-over to be used for the study. The gender of the voice-over for each storyboard was counterbalanced. A pool of products was selected for the study based on a review of the literature and discussion with various people. The “cracker” was chosen as a product for the main study.

Advertising preferences were measured with children’s attitudes toward the advertisement. Items from MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) and Mitchell and Olson (1981) were modified. All items for this scale were measured with a 5-point scale, where 1=not at all and 5=a lot. In addition to the attitude toward the ad items, children’s attitude toward the brand was also measured.

The experimental procedure was based on a 2 (sex of the child: male vs. female) x 2 (sex role depiction in the commercials: agentic vs. communal) x 2 (age group: kindergarten vs. third and fourth grade) between subjects factorial design.

Findings

The results indicate that children, particularly girls do exhibit greater flexibility in their sex role orientation as they mature. Girls’ attitude toward the communal advertisement decreased from kindergarten to third and fourth grade. A similar directional pattern was found for boys concerning the agentic ad. However, the results were not significant.

Citations


