

Sex stereotyping in children's toy advertisements

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Abstract:

Forty-eight categories of toys were rated in terms of sex appropriateness by 48 students. A sample of 392 pictures of children with toys in 12 toy catalogs and 538 pictures of children with toys on toy packages in four retail stores was coded according to toy type and sex(es) of children shown. The rated sex stereotype of the toy category proved to be very strongly related to the sex(es) of the children shown with the toy in catalogs ($r=.89$) and on toy packages ($r=.87$). Toys rated as moderately sex typed by raters were just as strongly stereotyped in toy advertisements as those rated as strongly sex typed.

Keywords: Toy advertisements | Children | Sex roles | Gender stereotypes

Article:

Sex-role socialization is a crucial aspect of socialization, with profound effects on a child's expectations, self-image, and behavior. Although there have been changes over the last two decades in opinions about women's roles (for example, Thornton & Friedman, 1979), studies of personality and behavior characteristics expected of men and women (Broverman et al., 1972; Der Karabetian and Smith, 1977) suggest that traditional views of women as expressive and men as instrumental are still common in American society--even among children (Silvern, 1977) and adolescents (Rust & Lloyd, 1982). Similarly, Schein (1973) showed that personality characteristics stereotyped as appropriate for business managers were similar to those stereotyped as male.

Children learn sex roles from a variety of sources. Parents are probably the major source of sex-role socialization in the child's earliest years (Gordon, 1976). However, schools also contribute to the persistence of sex roles (Gordon, 1976; Frazier & Sadker, 1973; Saario et al., 1973), and peers are important influences on sex-role identity, especially for males (Gordon, 1976; Lynn, 1969).

Recently however, attention has been given to the role of the media in reinforcing traditional sex roles. Models of stereotyped sex roles abound in various media. For example, television provides

sex-typed information about roles in program content (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982; Chafetz, 1974; Levinson, 1975) and commercials (Chafetz, 1974; McArthur & Resko, 1975; Walstedt et al., 1980). Children's texts and storybooks (Child et al., 1946; Weitzman et al., 1972; Bern & Bem, 1973; Saario et al., 1973), women's magazines (Lefkowitz, 1972; Ray, 1972), and popular magazines and songs (Chafetz, 1974) also present stereotyped images of men and women. In all the media, male characters greatly outnumber female characters (Chafetz, 1974). Thus, the media early and continuously present children with examples of traditional sex roles.

Sex typing of toys also contributes to sex-role socialization. Chafetz (1974) argues that play and games contribute substantially to sex-role socialization, and Mitchell (1973) noted that girls' toys are strongly oriented to domestic pursuits and do not encourage manipulation and construction as do boys' toys.

Thus, a number of studies have investigated sex typing in the media and of toys. However, there has been little systematic study of how the media present toys. The only previous study--a content analysis of a few toy catalogs (Chafetz, 1974)--reported strong evidence of sex-role stereotyping in the presentation of toys. The present study provides a more systematic and comprehensive analysis of the extent of sex typing in toy advertising than has been reported to date. Specifically, we attempt to determine the extent of sex typing in the presentation of toys in toy catalogs and on toy packages by comparing the sexes of children pictured with various toys with the sex stereotypes of the toys.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Both the major theories of socialization suggest that the advertising of toys may be important for the sex typing of toy preferences and the acquisition of sex roles. Social learning theory (Mischel, 1966, 1970) holds that sex roles and identity are learned through modeling and rewards and punishments. Children tend to imitate those around them, and there is evidence that children more often imitate same-sex models when they perceive such models as behaving in ways representative of their sex (Perry & Bussey, 1979; but see also Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Of course, parents and schools (Chafetz, 1974; McCandless, 1969) also provide sex-role models. However, printed media for children, such as texts and storybooks (Child et al., 1946; Weitzman et al., 1972; Bern & Bem, 1973; Saario et al., 1973; Chafetz, 1974), television (National Institute of Mental Health, 1982; McArthur & Resko, 1975), and other media--including toy advertisements (Chafetz, 1974)--are also important sources of sex-stereotyped models. Parents and other generally reward the imitation of sex-appropriate behaviors (Chafetz, 1974). Thus, social learning theory suggests that children learn to adopt sex-appropriate behavior by being rewarded for modeling the behavior of same-sex models, including those they see in toy advertisements.

The cognitive-developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1966; Kohlberg & Ullian, 1974) also stresses the importance of imitation of same-sex models. Proponents of this view argue that the cognitive

achievement of gender constancy is prerequisite to learning sex-role behaviors. Knowledge that gender is permanent motivates the child to learn how to behave appropriately for his or her sex. Children find sex-appropriate behavior rewarding in part because they view their actions as appropriate for members of their sex. Once a child develops gender constancy, he or she will tend to perform the sex-appropriate behaviors displayed by same-sex models in toy advertising and other media, while avoiding sex-inappropriate behaviors.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

The comprehensive summary of research before 1974 on children's toy preferences by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) concluded that, by the age of 4 years, children have clearly developed sex-typed toy preferences. Recent studies show similar results. Frasher et al. (1980) asked 5- and 6-year-old children to select toys with which they would most like to play. Their preferences were just as rigidly sex stereotyped as in earlier studies, and 75% of the children refused to alter their choices after being informed and shown that each toy was appropriate for both sexes. A subsequent study of children 3 to 6 years old (Eaton et al., 1982) found that toy preferences are not consequences of differences in the activity levels the toys required. When forced to choose between the activity level and the sex typing of the toy, 78% based their preferences on the sex appropriateness of the toy. Blakemore et al. (1979), studying children 2, 4, and 6 years old, found that both sex-appropriate preferences and correct identification of toys as for boys or girls increased with age for girls. Boys' identification ability also improved with age, but their sex-appropriate toy preferences were consistently strong at all ages. Vieria and Miller (1978) found that 10 year olds avoided sex-inappropriate toys more than did 5 year olds, and boys avoided them more than girls. Finally, Fein et al. (1975) analyzed toy preferences of 20-month-old children and concluded that their toy preferences matched adult sex stereotypes in both modeling and free play conditions. In short, the evidence reviewed by Maccoby and Jacklin and in more recent studies suggests that children's preferences in toys are strongly sex typed and learned early, especially among boys.

Children also learn sex roles from their toys. Chafetz (1974) argues that play and games contribute substantially to socializing children into sex roles. To the extent that toys prepare children for adult roles, girls are trained to become mothers or enter one of the few "feminine" occupations. Boys are trained for a variety of occupational roles, though not for the role of father. Girls are encouraged to worry about their appearance, while boys are encouraged to develop bodily strength. Mitchell (1973) noted that girls' toys mainly teach the role of housewife, as girls spend hours modeling the role of mother with baby dolls and toy furniture and appliances. Girls' toys, which are usually not intended to be constructed or manipulated, encourage passivity, not power. Typically, the play activities of girls encourage the stereotypic characteristics of the female role, not exploration or problem solving skills.

There is also evidence that media presentations of toys affect toy preferences and sex-role socialization. Liss (1977) demonstrated that kindergarteners of both sexes tended to imitate

same-sex, televised models in preferences for both sex-typed (e.g., doll and toy truck) and non-sex typed (e.g., cash register) boys. Wolf (1975), in a study of responses to televised sex-inappropriate behavior, manipulated the sex of the televised model and the consequences (positive, negative, or none) for the model. Both sexes played with the inappropriate toy longer after seeing a same-sex model playing with it, and the girls played with the sex-inappropriate toy longer than boys. Furthermore, play with the sex-inappropriate toy lasted longest following exposure to a same-sex model receiving positive or no consequences. Ruble et al. (1981) studied the effects of sex-typed toy commercials on 4 to 6 year olds at high or low gender constancy stages. High-gender constancy children who viewed opposite-sex peers playing with a gender-neutral toy avoided spending time with the toy and stated that the toy was more appropriate for an opposite-sex child.

These studies suggest that media models are important in the development of toy sex typing. However, there has been little study of the extent of sex typing in toy advertising. In content analysis of a few toy catalogs, Chafetz and her students (1974) concluded that boys in toy advertisements were pictured as physically active and mechanical, while girls were shown as more passive. Boys were pictured more than twice as frequently as girls, and catalogs were divided into "girls" and "boys" sections.

RESEARCH METHODS

Since there is evidently no standard list of types of toys, we compiled a list of 48 categories of toys based primarily on the list used in the *Census of Manufactures* (Bureau of the Census, 1977). Only categories in the *Census of Manufactures* list which were primarily children's toys were included. We excluded categories, such as snow skis, athletic protective equipment, and swimming pools, which could be used by adults or teenagers, and infant toys, such as crib toys and bathtub toys. The first 36 categories in Table I were derived from the census list.

Unfortunately, a number of common toys were not listed separately by the census. Thus, we added the last 12 items in Table 1, which frequently appear in retail toy catalogs and stores but could not be readily classified using the census categories.

Sex Typing of Toys. The list of 48 types of toys was presented to 48 students in three college classes in a questionnaire format. One class was a traditional, undergraduate, introductory class. Another class, an introductory course offered at night, included mainly students in their 20s and 30s. The third class was a doctoral seminar, with students in their 30s and 40s. Respondents were asked to rate the categories of toys along a seven-point anchored continuum, with 1 indicating that the toy is appropriate only for boys, 4 indicating equal appropriateness for either boys or girls, and 7 indicating that the toy is appropriate only for girls. Oral and written instructions emphasized that the respondents were to indicate how appropriate *most people* think the toy is for girls and boys, not necessarily their own opinions.

Sex-Role Models in Toy Catalogs. To determine the extent of sex typing in advertising in toy catalogs, a sample of free, direct-mail, retail catalogs was drawn. Thirty-nine catalogs were requested from companies selling toys listed in the *Directory of Mail Order Catalogs* (Gottlieb, 1981) and the *Catalog of American Catalogs* (De La Iglesia, 1973); 24 were received. Catalogs from the three major department stores included among the top 25 general merchandisers (Haugh, 1981) were also included. Only 12 of the 27 catalogs pictured children with toys on the list in Table I. The 392 pictures of children with toys in these catalogs constitute our sample. The type of toy and the sex(es) of the children shown with it (male only, female only, or both) were recorded. Three pictures in which the sex of the child could not be distinguished were omitted.

Table 1. Sex-Stereotype of Toys as Rated by the Respondents and as Represented in Toy Catalogs and on Toy Packages

Category	Respondent rating		Catalog representation (%)			Summary catalog score	Package representation (%)			Summary package score
	\bar{X}	SD	Female	Both	Male		Female	Both	Male	
1. Fashion dolls	6.66	0.60	(0)	(0)	(0)	—	83	—	16	.67
2. Action figure dolls	4.06	1.62	(0)	(0)	(0)	—	16	16	66	-.50
3. Mechanical/electrical dolls	4.34	1.35	(0)	(0)	(0)	—	66	—	33	.33
4. Stuffed dolls	5.81	0.89	100	(2)	(0)	1.00	88	(8)	(0)	.77
5. Other dolls (including ordinary baby dolls)	6.21	0.82	(3)	(0)	(0)	1.00	85	7	7	.78
6. Fashion doll clothes, accessories, and playsets	6.70	0.46	(0)	(0)	(0)	—	92	7	—	.92
7. Action figure doll clothes, accessories, and playsets	4.54	1.69	(0)	(0)	(0)	—	16	—	83	-.66
8. Other doll clothes and accessories	5.76	1.04	100	(3)	(0)	1.00	100	—	—	1.00
9. Stuffed toy animals	4.22	0.55	57	21	21	.45	75	25	—	.75
10. Other stuffed toys (excluding stuffed animals and dolls)	4.27	0.54	(0)	(0)	(0)	—	57	14	28	.28
11. Puppets	3.98	0.25	(7)	(0)	(4)	.27	(3)	(3)	(1)	.28
12. Puzzles	4.00	0.00	(2)	(0)	(0)	1.00	33	22	44	-.11
13. Children's board games for younger children	4.04	0.20	(0)	(0)	(0)	—	46	38	15	.30
14. Board games for older children and adults	4.00	0.21	(0)	(0)	(0)	—	27	54	18	.09

15. Sports-oriented action and skill games (board games or mechanical/electrical)	2.63	0.82	— (0)	20 (1)	80 (4)	— .80	26 (4)	13 (2)	60 (9)	— .33
16. Non-sports-oriented action and skill games (board games or mechanical/electrical)	3.87	0.88	38 (15)	15 (6)	46 (18)	— .08	31 (6)	26 (5)	42 (8)	— .10
17. Children's pedal-driven auto mobiles and tractors	3.04	0.83	— (0)	— (0)	— (0)	—	25 (2)	12 (1)	62 (5)	— .38
18. Plastic tricycles	3.98	0.60	14 (1)	14 (1)	71 (5)	— .57	40 (2)	— (0)	60 (3)	— .20
19. Metal tricycles	3.77	0.47	— (0)	— (0)	— (0)	—	— (0)	— (0)	100 (1)	— 1.00
20. Other children's vehicles (e.g., sleds, scooters, wagons)	3.52	0.71	12 (3)	4 (1)	83 (20)	— .71	20 (4)	15 (3)	65 (13)	— .45
21. Doll carriages and strollers	6.73	0.54	100 (4)	— (0)	— (0)	1.00	100 (8)	— (0)	— (0)	1.00
22. Doll houses and furniture	6.73	0.54	100 (10)	— (0)	— (0)	1.00	94 (16)	5 (1)	— (0)	.94
23. Road racing sets	1.90	0.91	— (0)	— (0)	100 (5)	— 1.00	— (0)	25 (3)	75 (9)	— .75
24. Toy trains and equipment (mechanical and electrical)	1.98	0.84	30 (3)	10 (1)	60 (6)	— .30	11 (1)	22 (2)	66 (6)	— .56
25. Other mechanically powered toys (wind-up or battery-powered)	3.21	0.80	20 (1)	20 (1)	60 (3)	— .40	20 (3)	33 (5)	46 (7)	— .27
26. Nonpowered, nonriding, transportation toys (e.g., toy trucks, boats, etc.)	2.60	0.84	13 (2)	13 (2)	73 (11)	— .60	15 (3)	10 (2)	73 (14)	— .58
27. Musical toys and toy musical instruments	4.02	0.33	41 (9)	4 (1)	54 (12)	— .14	33 (8)	12 (3)	54 (13)	— .21
28. Toys guns, gun sets, rifles	1.83	0.95	— (0)	— (0)	100 (6)	— 1.00	12 (1)	12 (1)	75 (6)	— .63
29. Children's books (including coloring books)	4.04	0.55	80 (4)	— (0)	20 (1)	— .60	— (0)	— (0)	— (0)	—

Table I. Continued

Category	Respondent rating		Catalog representation (%)			Summary catalog score	Package representation (%)			Summary package score
	\bar{X}	SD	Female	Both	Male		Female	Both	Male	
30. Housekeeping and cooking toys	6.11	0.94	79 (30)	10 (4)	10 (4)	.68	74 (26)	14 (5)	11 (4)	.63
31. Scientific equipment in kit or set form	3.00	1.14	33 (2)	— (0)	66 (4)	— .33	20 (2)	20 (2)	60 (6)	— .40
32. Operating cars, boats, and planes (mechanical or electrical)	2.23	0.86	— (0)	— (0)	100 (1)	— 1.00	12 (1)	12 (1)	75 (6)	— .63
33. Models for assembly (plastic and nonplastic)	2.29	0.74	— (0)	— (0)	100 (3)	— 1.00	— (0)	— (0)	100 (3)	— 1.00
34. Arts and crafts kits	4.29	0.99	61 (11)	11 (2)	27 (5)	.33	62 (22)	14 (5)	22 (8)	.40
35. Natural science kits and sets	3.40	0.77	33 (2)	— (0)	66 (4)	— .33	12 (1)	12 (1)	75 (6)	— .63
36. Juvenile-scale (toy) sporting goods	2.78	0.96	4 (1)	— (0)	95 (20)	— .90	9 (2)	9 (2)	80 (17)	— .71
37. Rocking horse	4.00	0.51	45 (5)	— (0)	54 (6)	— .09	33 (11)	— (0)	66 (2)	— .33
38. Toy office equipment	4.16	1.10	66 (2)	— (0)	33 (1)	.33	42 (3)	42 (3)	14 (1)	.29
39. Toy telephones	4.38	0.77	50 (3)	— (0)	50 (3)	0.00	57 (4)	28 (2)	14 (1)	.43
40. Children's record players	4.06	0.32	— (0)	— (0)	— (0)	—	50 (1)	50 (1)	— (0)	0.00
41. Building sets (e.g., building blocks, Erectors sets, logs)	3.06	0.95	18 (7)	2 (1)	78 (30)	— .61	10 (3)	20 (6)	70 (21)	— .60
42. Magic kits and equipment	3.36	0.76	— (0)	— (0)	100 (4)	— 1.00	— (0)	25 (1)	75 (3)	— .75
43. Ventriloquist dummies	3.80	0.51	25 (1)	— (0)	75 (3)	— .50	25 (1)	25 (1)	50 (2)	— .25
44. Toy beauty sets (e.g., vanity sets, manicure, makeup, and hair styling kits)	6.60	0.64	100 (10)	— (0)	— (0)	1.00	90 (19)	— (0)	9 (2)	.81
45. Toy sewing machines and accessories	6.50	0.66	100 (1)	— (0)	— (0)	1.00	100 (2)	— (0)	— (0)	1.00
46. Walkie talkies	2.77	0.98	— (0)	— (0)	100 (7)	— 1.00	— (0)	25 (2)	75 (6)	— .75
47. Easels and chalk boards	4.21	0.51	50 (7)	14 (2)	35 (5)	.14	40 (2)	40 (2)	20 (1)	.20
48. Workbenches and tools	2.02	0.82	— (0)	— (0)	100 (6)	— 1.00	12 (1)	12 (1)	75 (6)	— .63

Sex-Role Models on Toy Packages. Since it was not possible to examine the sexes of children on the packages of every toy produced, we examined the packages displayed in four diverse types of retail stores. The first three were the local outlets of the largest national department store chain, the largest national discount chain, and the largest national "dime store" chain. We also examined toys displayed at the local outlet of a regional toy store chain. Only toys which could be categorized using the list in Table I and which had pictures of children on the package were included. A total of 538 pictures was coded from the toy packages, using the same procedures as for the catalogs. Two pictures in which the sex of the child could not be distinguished were omitted. If the same toy (i.e., same brand and toy) was displayed in more than one store, it was coded only once. Data were gathered just before Christmas, since presumably the most toys are displayed then.

RESULTS

The left column in Table I shows the mean and standard deviations of the student ratings for the 48 categories of toys. The low standard deviations indicate considerable consensus about the ratings of most of the toys. Twenty of the 48 toy types appeared to be strongly or moderately sex typed. The three rated as strongly male sex typed (mean ratings below 2.0) were road racing sets, trains and equipment, and toy guns and gun sets. The seven rated as moderately male sex typed (mean ratings 2.0 to 3.0) were sports-oriented action and skill games, nonpowered, nonriding transportation toys, operating cars, boats, and planes, models, toy sporting goods, walkie talkies, and workbenches and tools. Eight toys were strongly female sex typed (mean ratings over 6.0)- fashion dolls, other dolls, fashion doll accessories, doll carriages and strollers, doll houses and furniture, housekeeping and cooking toys, toy beauty kits, and toy sewing machines. The two toys rated as moderately sex typed for girls (mean ratings 5.0 to 6.0) were stuffed dolls and other doll accessories.

Males were pictured in 52%, females in 41%, and both sexes in 7% of the catalog pictures. This only partially supports results obtained by Chafetz and her students (Chafetz, 1974), which showed boys pictured more than twice as frequently as girls. Males were shown on 40%, females and 43%, and both sexes on 17% of the toy packages in stores.

The catalog and package columns in Table I show the percentage and number of toys in each category that were pictured with boys, girls, and both sexes. The summary scores for catalogs and packages range from + 1 (exclusively girls pictured) to -1 (only males shown), with 0 indicating perfectly neutral. The summary scores were computed by dividing the difference between the number of pictures showing males and females by the total number of pictures in the category. The correlation between these summary scores ($r = .92$) indicates that the two forms of advertising sex type toys in almost exactly the same ways.

The respondent ratings in column 1 were strongly correlated with the summary scores for catalog ($r = .89$) and toy package ($r = .87$) advertising. The three toys our respondents rated as strongly

male sex typed were also quite stereotyped in their presentation in catalogs and on packages, with mean summary scores of $-.77$ and $-.65$, respectively. Surprisingly, the seven toys rated by respondents as moderately male sex typed were slightly more sex typed in their advertising (mean summary scores of $-.90$ and $-.66$). The eight toys rated as strongly sex typed for girls were also strongly stereotyped in their advertising in catalogs and on toy packages (mean summary scores of $.95$ and $.84$). And following the same pattern as for the male toys, the two categories rated as moderately female were slightly more stereotyped in their advertising (means of 1.0 and $.89$). Thus advertisers strongly stereotype toys that our respondents view as both strongly and moderately sex typed, suggesting that they are just as unwilling to violate moderate as strong cultural stereotypes.

The mean summary scores for the remaining toys were $-.09$ and $-.13$ for catalogs and packages, respectively. There were only a few instances in which toys our respondents rated as neutral were sex typed in advertising. The summary scores for building sets, rated on the questionnaire as only a little more appropriate for boys, were $-.61$ and $-.60$. Magic kits and other children's vehicles showed a similar pattern. Both categories were rated as only slightly more appropriate for boys, but magic kits received summary scores of -1.0 and $-.75$ and other vehicles $-.71$ and $-.45$.

The results in Table I indicate that sex stereotyping in advertising is strong, but they do not reflect all the subtleties of the observational data. For example, all four toy stores and some of the catalogs tended to place the toys our respondents rated as appropriate for boys and girls in separate sections. Even when the entire store or catalog was not divided into boys' and girls' sections, there were almost always some sections which contained only toys our raters viewed as appropriate for girls and for boys. Girls' sections were characterized by dolls and accessories, doll houses, arts and crafts kits (bead stringing, weaving, and jewelry making), toy beauty kits, and housekeeping and cooking toys. Building sets (erector sets and building blocks), sports-related toys, transportation toys (pedal-driven, nonriding, and riding models), and workbenches and tools were featured in the boys sections.

Even where entire categories are not sex typed in advertising, individual toys within a category may be shown with children of only one sex. For instance, musical instruments such as drum sets, trumpets, and guitars were generally shown with boys, while tambourines, pianos, and flutes were shown with girls. Plastic tricycles were also strongly divided according to gender. Girls were shown with tricycles which were pink and blue, with flowers and cute-sounding names. The boys versions had heavy-duty tires, were typically dark colors, and had rugged-sounding names. One of the most striking gender-related divisions within a category appeared in costumes. Costumes in which girls were shown included wedding dresses, majorette/cheerleader uniforms, nurses uniforms, and ballerina costumes. Boys were shown in uniforms for soldiers, policemen, astronauts, and doctors.

Even when a child was pictured with a sex-inappropriate toy, the child's activity was sometimes sex typed] A boy shown in a juvenile-scale kitchen was being served by a girl. A girl pictured with a magic kit was the boy magician's assistant. A girl shown with a road racing set was watching two boys play with the set. A boy was shown with a fashion doll (i.e., a female fashion doll's male counterpart), but the doll was surrounded by athletic equipment including barbells. A girl was shown riding a train being driven by a boy conductor.

Of course, there were also some instances of children engaging in nonstereotyped activity with a sex-inappropriate toy. For example, a girl was shown hammering pegs into a wooden block, and a boy was pictured washing dishes in a play kitchen. In many of these instances, children of both sexes were shown.

Finally, there was evidence of differing manufacturer policies. Some brands rather consistently pictured children of both sexes on all packages. Others brands were almost exclusively sex typed in their advertising.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Our results indicate that, when toy advertisers present pictures of children with toys, they generally show toys that are strongly or moderately sex typed with a child of the "appropriate" sex. It is especially interesting that toys rated by our respondents as moderately sex typed were just as strongly stereotyped in advertising as those which were rated as strongly sex typed. Evidently, advertisers tend to follow existing cultural definitions of the toys, regardless of their strength. Whether such practices result in higher sales is unknown, but the existence of some nationally known, successful brands that evidently consciously avoid stereotyping suggests that an absence of sex stereotyping in advertising probably does not preclude a successful sales record.

Our data do not demonstrate that children (or adults) are influenced by such advertising, but the theory and research evidence reviewed strongly suggests that modeling of media presentations of sex roles and toy preferences is a factor in socialization. Further, playing with sex-typed toys probably affects sex-role learning. Hence, in toy advertising--as in most other media studies--we find strong reinforcement of conventional sex-role definitions.

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