Girls, boys, and their gendered toys: Exploring the role of toys in shaping career choices later in life.

Abstract

A gender pay gap of 9.4% (ASHE, 2016) still exists in today’s society, meaning there is still an obvious existence of gender inequality. Previous research has suggested that views of male and female stereotypes begins from a young age, with society enforcing certain expectations for either sex. These stereotypes arguably have an impact later on in life in regards to the career path either boys are girls are more inclined to follow. Research suggests that children’s toys have a large role to play in societal norms of what is acceptable for boys and girls, with certain toys being targeted more towards one sex than the other.

This piece of research focuses on the role of toy shops in creating and enforcing gender stereotypes. By conducting an observation of both a toy shop and an online store, the study will provide an insight into how different toys are marketed towards both young boys and girls. Furthermore, personal experiences of mothers will be explored within a focus group in order to understand if consumer attitudes match with the findings of the observation.

Introduction

Acknowledging the world of children’s toys as an insight into understanding deep routed gender bias is a key aspect of researching gender inequality. As will be discussed, the idea of gender begins to be socially constructed from an early age. The allocation of specific toys to either girls or boys is a clear example of how children are expected to act according to the gender they “belong” to.

Research into gendered toys is important in an attempt to shift the gaze away from interests in specific toys being the norm for young girls and boys, to understanding gender as
something that is learnt through interaction and experiences. The themes of certain
gendered toys can be seen as tools to educate children differently to subjects suited to their
gender. Therefore, toys can indirectly inform young children on the career paths they should
take later in life, leading to a continual cycle of inequality across society.

The aim of this research is to gain a deeper knowledge of how toy stores within the UK
reflect gendered ideologies in relation to toys. This will be achieved through observing the
design, layout and presentation of toys in toy shops in an attempt to understand what
influence this may have on purchasing decisions. In addition, a focus group consisting of
mothers of young children will be conducted to provide a qualitative account of the
existence of gender stereotypes within both toy shops and wider society.

Methodology

The first piece of primary research consisted of the observation of a toy shop from an
international chain (named store A in the observation section), compared to an online
website (store B). I then did a comparative analysis of the two stores. The choice to use this
method of primary research derived from the objective of the study to understand real life
situations faced by people wanting to buy toys. Thus, observing the layout and design of a
shop seemed the most appropriate form of research design. Furthermore, it also was critical
to gain an understanding of how online stores related to gender stereotypes discussed
within the literature review to ensure an in-depth understanding of all types of
consumerism.

Firstly, store A was contacted to gain permission for the observation of the shop. Anonymity
was guaranteed so that the shop would feel more comfortable with the study. Due to this,
the online shop was also anonymised. Permission to observe the toy shop was gained to
ensure ethical research practices. This entailed visiting store A and making notes on the
layout and design of shop, including the positioning of toys and how they were labelled. To
ensure that key points were looked into, a list was created prior to the observation
containing the aims of the study. This list was also used when observing store B, to ensure
that a fair comparison was made between the two shops. This also helped in ensuring that
nothing was forgotten during the write up of the observation, thus making sure that the research was an accurate portrayal of each of the shops in question.

Although a list was made before the observation was undertaken, the implication of researcher bias within observations could not fully be excluded. A concern within using observation as a method of primary research is that the researcher’s own opinion may affect the analysis. To manage this, the outline was sent to a critical reader to make sure that the focus was purely objective. Furthermore, it must be noted that an observation fails to give an insight into the attitudes and opinions of the consumers of the toys in question.

Thus, this led to the second piece of secondary research, the focus group.

To counteract the implications faced with the observation, and to understand how the findings impact on shoppers, it was decided that the experiences of those visiting toy shops should be explored. Therefore, it was decided that the most appropriate way to do this would be to interview parents who have an understanding of shopping for toys. The best way of doing this was to conduct a focus group.

To find a suitable sample, a number of toddler groups were contacted to ask for permission to visit their day group and talk to the parents. Once a toddler group had responded, the details of the study were shared with the organiser to ensure that participants could fully consent to participating in the focus group. In order to make the focus group seem more appealing to the participants, anonymity was offered to both the toddler group and those willing to be involved. Furthermore the focus group was carried out in an informal manner in an attempt to make the parents feel more comfortable with discussing their opinions.

The focus group consisted of 6 mothers, with children between the ages 2 to 5. All of the participants had consented to the study after hearing the aims of the focus groups. Furthermore, it was explained that they were permitted to leave the conversation at any time. In addition to ethical considerations, the aim of these procedures attempt to ensure the answers given by participants were honest and a fair representation of their experiences. Therefore, it can be seen that this study was successful in gaining rich, in-depth data whilst keeping in mind the importance of the participants’ experiences.
Literature Review

The difference between sex and gender is vital when exploring the impact of gendered toys on young children. The term sex refers to the biological differences between a male and female, although it is a common mistake to not distinguish this concept from gender. However in reality gender is defined as the distinguishing of cultural traits between men and women, therefore understanding the differences between masculinity and femininity (Connell, 2002). These cultural traits are learnt through everyday interaction, meaning that instead of being innate, gender is actually a social construction. Sex roles that are reinforced in everyday life, for example through children’s toys, are therefore also socially constructed. Therefore when it comes to the gendering of toys, there is no biological reason why certain toys appeal to either boys or girls.

Many articles explore gender bias within children’s toys, and discuss the impact it may have on wider society. Although the development of understanding inequality through toys was developed within the 1970s (Francis, 2010), gender biases in the marketing of toys is still apparent today. In a campaign against gender stereotypes, Christina Spears Brown (The Guardian, 2016) states that all toys are gender neutral, meaning they are not allocated just to one gender, but “it is the marketing of certain toys which is not neutral.” This idea can be reflected in the “pink-ification” of girls’ toys through the way toy shops and toy catalogues are split into pink sections for girls and blue sections for boys, (Pink Stinks, 2008) following the traditional view from the 1940s that a certain colour is directly related to gender (Fulcher, Weisgram and Dinella 2014).

Ulrich and Ezan (2016) state that children start to make gender related decisions on toys from around 18 months, and focus on toys suited to their gender by 3 years old, showing how early the effects of marketing has on the cognitive development of children. The use of the colours pink or blue for certain toys echoes ideas of how young girls or boys should behave, with the effects being apparent in later life. Hudack (2016) discusses how the girl section of many toy shops is filled with doll houses, beauty accessories and fictional princess dolls; compared to the boy section of the shop which consists of construction sets, science
based games and maths related toys. With only 14% of engineers worldwide being women, the lack of engineering related toys targeted at girls from a young age should be noted as an impact to this statistic. Children are constantly asked from an early age “what do you want to be when you grow up?,” thus the socialisation they receive in terms of careers deemed suitable for them through the marketing of toys can heavily influence their desire to take a specific career path (Jones-Bodie, 2016).

It is not only children’s toys that are marketed towards a sex-specific audience. An article from the BBC (2017) discusses how greetings cards for children in supermarkets reinforce stereotypical views of what career path either girls or boys should take, with examples being ballerinas for girls and scientists for boys. Furthermore, expected gender roles are also reflected in children’s clothing, with the Guardian (2016) discussing how the fashion industry follows stereotypical ideas of gender. A women stated that she could only find science-based tops in the boy section of a clothing shop, although her daughter dreamed of becoming an astronaut, which shows that even clothing lines have an idea of what girls can or cannot be in terms of careers. The reinforcement of gender roles within the life of young children is therefore clearly apparent, with the gendered marketing of toys, cards and clothes adding to the problem of stereotyping among young children.

The use of gendered toys to promote certain behaviours throughout life can also be seen in more subtle forms, which Jones (1999) discusses. Even if females do turn towards a science based career later in life, attitudes that could have been taught through 'girls' toys earlier in life arguably contribute to the interests in their career. Jones (1999) found that female scientists were more interested in rainbows and healthy eating compared to males who expressed an interest in cars and technology. Girls had a lack of science experience compared in relation to science related toys, as they could relate more to baking, sewing and planting seeds. This led to females taking more passive roles, wanting to help other people more than males. Therefore, science was seen to be more suited to boys, which was reinforced by the experience boys had with toys earlier in life.

With children being subtly directed to a career path through exposure to gendered roles in everyday life it must be questioned whether marketing companies acknowledge the impact this may have in later life, and how willing they are to distance themselves from
stereotypical gender norms. This will be explored in the next section of this study, achieved through an observation of two toy stores.

**Primary research 1: Observation**

A large toy chain store in Cardiff, founded in America and consisting of more than 1500 stores worldwide was observed within this study (Store A). The findings were then compared with an online website of a British store with around 100 stores within the UK (Store B). The aim was to explore if, and how, each type of shop differed in marketing gendered toys. The choice to observe an online shop came from the idea that many parents may choose not to go into a shop, as in a digital society it is now easier to shop from the comfort of your home. Therefore, it would be interesting to see if the relatively modern concept of online shopping has followed in the footsteps of in-store shops in regards to the marketing of toys, or instead has taken a different approach to displaying ‘gendered’ toys.

Shop A consisted of 9 aisles, with there being no explicit division for specific types of toys. Instead, toy brand names were present above the aisles to show what was being displayed, with adverts appearing alongside the name. When first entering shop A, there were no apparent sections for either boys or girls. Instead, the signs for the first section of toys used primary colours, such as red, blue and yellow, for the font. Throughout the years there has been the labelling of certain colours to certain genders. It is now a common belief that the colour pink represents the female gender, whilst the colour blue is recognised as a male colour. Although there is no legitimate reason as to why these colours are used express a gender, the division between pink and blue has been used as a marketing tool within society.

The models on the wall adverts consisted of both a boy and a girl, which thus appeared to be a gender neutral section, seemingly marketing toys for both boys and girls. Positioned in this part of shop A was hobby based toys, such as arts and crafts and musical instruments, which arguably cannot easily be linked to gender roles. The lack of apparent ‘direct’ gendering of toys within the shop was mirrored in the layout of shop B. Once again, primary
colours were used on the welcome page of the website with both images of girls and boys playing together.

Although way toys in shop A were displayed had no obvious gender preference regarding the intending audience, the actual toys on display told a different story. An example can be found in terms of the section dedicated to musical instruments for young children. Whilst there was a choice for a ‘classic’ brown wooden guitar, next to these were pink guitars with a girl modelling it on the packaging. It seemed to be that having a plain wooden guitar as an option was not deemed as enough choice. Therefore, even a musical instrument has not escaped the ‘pinkification’ of toys (Pink Stinks, 2008) to make it more appealing to girls. Thus, although there was little evidence to suggest the section of the shop aimed at targeting a male or female audience, there were still elements of gender stereotyping from the toys on display. The noticeable difference in marketing in regards to toy guitars exemplifies Brown’s (2016) statement that although all toys are gender neutral, the marketing of them is not.

This argument is supported by the ‘categories’ section of shop B, which had no obvious signs of gender specific categories. However on the ‘school and education’ page it became clear that gender stereotypical marketing of toys also exists online. An example can be found in an interactive board aimed at helping young children with their education before they reach 5 years old. The original board uses the colours; blue, red and yellow for decoration, with a boy and girl both posing next to the toy on the website. If this were to be the only model of the toy, it could be argued that this educational toy was gender neutral. However it must be noted that there is an option to choose a pink version of this toy, with only a girl used to model it. Therefore, the observation that there was a choice between a ‘neutral’ toy and a pink toy suggests that the sellers may assume girls may not be interested in certain toys unless they look ‘girly’. Hence, there seems to be a need to make the toy more ‘girly’ to appeal to a specific audience. This brings into question whether toy retailers or manufacturers believe that changing the colour of a product to ones linked to stereotypical ideas of gender increases sales.

A main finding within this observation was that when it came to displaying the same toy in different colours to suit a gender, it was common to have a gender ‘neutral’ model,
decorated with primary colours, and then a pink model. Therefore, although the two toys were identical, with one using gender neutral colours and a boy and girl to model, there appeared to be a need to create another toy for females but not a ‘gendered’ blue toy for boys.

Although there were no explicit sections for boys or girls signposted, when walking further into shop A there was a clear use of blue and dark colours for the decorations on the walls and adverts promoting the toys. Instead of labelling the section as a ‘boys’ area, the names of the toy brands were used. However the posters on the walls changed from consisting of girls and boys to just boys, which was also reflected in the packaging of the toys on display. Compared the section before, it appeared that this area was targeted more towards a specific audience, although it was not explicitly stated anywhere. There were no images of girls anywhere in this section, which demonstrates a form of indirect gender stereotyping. In terms of impacting on a child’s career choices later in life, half of an aisle in this area of the shop was dedicated to construction style toys, ranging from tool boxes to work benches. Once again, young boys playing with the toy were used on the packaging, with dark green colours being used on the box. This observation reinforces Hudack’s (2016) claim that toy shops are likely to reinforce ideas of what career path each gender should take later in life. It must be considered that if a little girl were to walk through this part of the shop, she would find it hard to identify with any of these toys as there is no one similar to her promoting them.

Following the area seemingly focused on a male customers, the decoration dramatically changed within shop A. Once again, the concept of pink-ification was apparent, as the aisles of toys within this area used pink as their main colour for their display. Additionally, there was an obvious change in direction in regards to the choice of toys displayed in comparison to those previously noted. An example can be found in the observation that one aisle was dedicated to dolls. Within this area, young girls shown playing with the dolls were used on the packaging to advertise them. Words such as “caring” and “mummy” were used to market the dolls, reinforcing an idea that young girls should learn how to be a mother before learning anything relating to a career. With Haager (2000) stating that the gender pay gap continues to exist in the UK due to women taking time out of the labour market to
care for children, it appears young girls are being taught from a young age that ‘female duties,’ such as caring roles and being a mother, are a higher priority than finding a career.

In contrast to shop A, the layout and presentation of shop B consisted of more subtle forms of gender stereotyping. For example, instead of using certain colours such as pink and blue for areas of the site, primary colours were used throughout. However when observing the choice of categories, subtle ideas around ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ toys can be detected. For example, there was one category for dolls and fashion and another for action figures and playsets. Although both categories consisted of toy figures, they were split in relation to how they suited a ‘gender’. Wrestling toy figures were located in the ‘action figure’ section of the website, whilst princess figures were in the ‘dolls and fashion’ area. The choice of language within these categories show indirect forms of gender stereotyping. The choice to create separate categories for dolls and action figures suggests that shop B may not find it appropriate to place wrestling toys in a category targeted at female customers. Furthermore, it reinforces gendered assumptions that boys enjoy action based activities whilst girls prefer fashion activities.

Similarly to the marketing of toys within shop A, shop B used male or female children to model the toys they deemed appropriate to their gender. Therefore, although the website was not as explicit in reflecting gender stereotypes into the display through using ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ colours, which was found in the retail store, it was observed that there are still indirect forms of marketing toys towards a specific gender. However it must be acknowledged that this observation only consists of two stores, therefore is not representative of all toy shops. However as they are both popular shops, selling a large proportion of toys within the UK, this research gives an insight to the gender stereotypes within the toy industry.

Therefore, although it has been recognised that many major UK Toy stores (The Telegraph, 2015), along with the stores observed, have stopped displaying boy and girl sections, it does not mean that this segregation does not still exist. Instead of using explicit signs to direct children to the area targeted to their gender, more subtle forms of marketing strategies have been noticed, which use gender stereotypes to appeal to young boys or girls. It appears that the colour pink is used to decorate certain areas of shop A which used to be
labelled the girl section, with young girls being used as models to promote this area. When comparing shop A to shop B, it can be argued that the latter is taking the same approach. Although there is no gender filter on shop B, the choices of categories reflects underlying gender stereotypes on what types of toys appeal to each gender.

However throughout this study it has been noted that many of the gender stereotypes apparent within the shops appeared from the packaging of the toys. The models used on the boxes and the decorative colours seem to suggest that toy manufacturers are highly influential in the gender marketing of toys. As it has been noted, instead of dividing aisles into gender, shop A distinguished aisles by toy brand whilst shop B had categories for toys. Therefore, it could be argued that the shops only reflected the ideas of the toy manufactures by using similar decoration techniques.

**Primary research 2: Focus group**

The focus group consisted of six mothers, all with children between the ages of 3-4. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of toy shopping for young children in regards to their gender. Due to time constraints and convenience, the focus groups took place in a mother and toddler play group, with all parents being asked if they were willing to participate. A number of semi-structured questions were asked to the mothers in an attempt to encourage in-depth answers.

The focus group opened with a broad question, asking what parents look for when buying children’s toys. The aim of this question was to help the mothers feel comfortable in discussing their opinions, as jumping straight into a question about their views on gendered toys seemed too abrupt. The main themes found from this question was the focus on looking for toys that were a good value for money whilst also being safe and educational. These ideas were reflected through most of the parents, with there being no difference between parents of boys or girls.

An interesting find is that there was little mention of any ‘gendered’ ideas of what the mothers looked for when it came to shopping for their children. Therefore it would appear that toys to ‘suit’ their child’s gender was not a main factor for mothers when toy shopping.
When relating this concept back to the observation of toy shops, it could be argued that instead of focusing on gender stereotypes of young boys and girls, the marketing attention should be targeted towards these factors. However the one key difference in answers came from a mother of a boy, who stated that she was drawn towards toys that were engineer based, as her son wanted toys that mimicked his father’s job as a mechanic. Although this was the only comment that mirrored ideas that toys have an impact on employment choices later on in life, it is a clear example of support towards this claim. Therefore it can be argued as a result from these themes, that although some parents may take into consideration toys matching their children’s gender, other factors regarding the toy are prioritised.

Following on from this topic, the question “are there certain toys you’re more likely to get for your little boy or girl?” was asked. The responses link closely with the previous themes, as a number of mothers stated they wouldn’t be inclined to get certain toys for either boys or girls. Once again, the idea of educational toys was discussed, with mothers commenting on how they would buy these toys for both their sons and daughters. This idea can be used to explain a finding within the observational research of toy shops.

As it has been stated, mothers felt that educational toys were suited for both boys and girls. Therefore, this could be a reason as to why toy manufactures decide to sell two models of an interactive board. It was noted in previous research that the only shop observed sold a model of the toy which used the colours blue, red and yellow. However another option was also available, which was a pink version of the model. Therefore, although the mothers stated that they would choose this form of toy for both boys and girls, there is a chance they might choose the model targeted towards the gender of their child.

Underlying ideas of gender stereotypes were more explicit in other answers presented by some mothers, with one participant stating her and her son usually ‘gravitate towards the boy section of the shop” so are more likely to buy toys from this section. When asked why this was the case, the response was “because he is a boy.” Therefore, to gain more information the mother was asked if she could elaborate on what she sees as a boy toy that might be found in this section of the shop. Once again, the idea of buying toolkits was discussed in the conversation, with the mother stating that many of the toys in the boys
section set boys up for their careers. In contrast, a couple of mothers with daughters stated that they felt more inclined to get babies and prams for their daughters. This shows an obvious example of gender stereotyping when it comes to buying certain toys for young children, with beliefs of gender roles being reflected in the different types of toys bought for either boys or girls.

The next topic within the focus group involved using the colour pink to market toys towards girls. Firstly, mothers were asked if they would buy a pink toy for a boy. Although gender stereotypes regarding toys were evident in the previous topic, when it came to other gendered assumptions of using pink for girls, the views of the mothers were very different. The main response from the mothers was that if the boy liked the toy they would be willing to buy, however it appeared they would make no conscious effort to buy it as their own choice. Therefore, although if a young boy wanted a pink toy mothers would be willing to buy it, it would not be a toy they personally would choose for their son. However the mothers’ willingness to buy pink toys for their son rejects traditional views that pink is a ‘girls’ colour, and instead suggests that in recent years it is deemed more acceptable for boys to enjoy the colour.

When further asked why they believed pink toys were targeted towards girls, all parents acknowledged the role of society in creating these ideas. Although the mothers did not agree with using either pink or blue specifically for girls or boys, they found it hard to stray away from these norms due to the excessive amount these colours are used. An interesting finding within this topic of conversation was one of the mothers stating “If kids see photos of boys with blue and girls with pink they might feel as if they should also have that.” Thus, it is not only the parents’ choice of colours of toys which is affected by society’s gendered assumptions of colours. In addition, the mothers interviewed believe that a large reasoning for this is due to children being socialised into believing these stereotypes, which impacts them wanting to have toys best ‘suited’ to their gender. Hence, it can be argued that toy manufactures and shops using gendered colours reinforces children’s belief that they can only show interest in toys that involve colours relating to their gender. Arguably, this finding occurred due the mothers within this study being of a younger generation in many cases, meaning their views on gender roles take a more ‘modern’ approach, therefore not all parents may feel the same.
This concept can also be applied to the use of boy or girl models to promote the toys, which was discussed in the focus group. One mother stated “If my child sees toys advertised with a little boy on them, he seems a bit more interested.” Therefore, a major theme within this focus group stems from the marketization of toys to appeal to either boys or girls. It appears from this focus group that how toys are packaged and promoted plays a significant role in how interested young children find them, supporting the previous claim that manufactures are highly influential in the continuation of gendered toys within society.

**Conclusions**

The two pieces of primary research conducted within this study have demonstrated that there are still many forms of gender stereotyping within the marketing of young children’s toys. The most notable discovered within the observation of store A was the reflection of the ‘pinkification’ of ‘girls’ toys reflected in both the layout and decoration of the shop. The area containing what was later noted as ‘girls’ toys used pink signs to display the toys, whilst also using girls to model the toys. Thus it was found that both toy shops and manufacturers continue to use gender stereotypes of colours in an attempt to appeal to either boys or girls.

It was noted that although the toy shops examined had no explicit or labelled sections for either gender, the separation existed from the presentation of the shop. An example was noted in how construction toys were placed in one area of the shop, whilst dolls were placed in another. This finding relates directly to previous literature, which discuss how gendered toys play a part in educating children on which occupation best ‘suits’ them later on in life. Therefore, it can be concluded that toy shops continue to operate with gendered ideologies of the workplace within society.

These ideas are reflected within the opinions of the mothers acting as consumers by purchasing these toys. Within the second piece of primary research, the focus group with mothers, it was found that participants did have an idea of what constitutes as a ‘girl’ or ‘boy’ toy, thus would be more inclined to buy toys suited to their child’s gender. A clear example of this was found in the area of the toy shop mothers looked in order to buy toys for their children. This idea reinforces the earlier finding that toy shops continue to segregate certain areas in the shop for either girls or boys.
However it could be argued that there are changing attitudes in what is acceptable to buy for either a boy or a girl, with a focus now being on other factors of the toy other than the suitability of gender. Hence, it was found that although parents may continue to have underlying views of gendered toys, it is not seen as the most relevant factor when purchasing toys. Furthermore, it was noted that the mothers acknowledged the gender stereotypes reflected in in toys, which suggests that in time, gender stereotyping could be tackled through acceptance of the problem. Further research could be used to explore how this developed understanding has occurred, for example the role of media, as this was not explored in the focus group.

Thus, it can be concluded that toy shops, both retailers and online stores, continue to use indirect forms of gender stereotyping to target a certain audience. However, although there were elements of these ideas being reflected in the opinions of the mothers in the focus group, there was a notable understanding of gender stereotypes within toy marketing by the participants. Therefore this piece of research, alongside existing literature, can be used in a positive manner to tackle the existence of gender inequality within the lives of children through the stereotyping of toys. By raising awareness to the problem, perhaps the idea of ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ toys can be fully recognised as an issue within society.

References:


Pink Stinks. 2008. *There’s more than one way to be a girl*. Available: [http://www.pinkstinks.co.uk/about-us.html](http://www.pinkstinks.co.uk/about-us.html)


By Alice McNeill, Work Experience placement, Chwarae Teg, 2017