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***“But... I don’t dress him with ruffles”*: a qualitative research on mothers’
cross-gender consumption for their son(s)**

Isabelle VIDALI *

PhD student

Institut de Recherche en Gestion (IRG)
Université Paris-Est

Abdelmajid AMINE**

Professor

Institut de Recherche en Gestion (IRG)
Université Paris-Est

Short abstract:

In a context of strong oppositions regarding gender issues in France and, for the last few years, a greater public attention to the issue of gendered marketing to children, this research aims at adding more understanding on the effects on mothers’ consumption of gender norms conveyed in children’s retail. Drawing from interviews conducted with mothers who self identify as “resistant to gender stereotypes”, this research tries to capture how these mothers go (or do not go) against gendered marketing for their sons.

Contact information:

* E-Mail: vidalimail@gmail.com

Phone : +33 6 52 71 18 03

Mail: IAE Gustave Eiffel, IRG, 4 route de Choisy, 94010 Créteil, France

** E-mail : amine@u-pec.fr

Mail: IAE Gustave Eiffel, IRG, 4 route de Choisy, 94010 Créteil, France

“But... I don’t dress him with ruffles”: a qualitative research on mothers’ cross-gender consumption for their son(s)

INTRODUCTION

« When they come to a store [kids] see right away that all “boy” toys are put away together, with lots of blue, and that “girl” toys and pink stuff are put away together, so they have a choice to make! “Where do I go?!” ... And then, they’re stuck in it! » [Marie-Anne, 40]

For the last few years, criticisms against gendered marketing of toys seem to have gained greater public attention in many occidental countries. Many feminist organisations advocate against gender segregation in retail stores, leaning on numerous scholar research that showed how gender-stereotyped toys limit children’s choices and stimulate different cognitive, physical and emotional development (see for example “Mix-Cité¹” in France, “PinkStinks²” in Germany, “Let Toys be toys³” in the UK or “Play unlimited⁴” in Australia). This recent public attention even led to Senate inquiries (Jouanno and Courteau 2014) and merchandising changes from big retailers as Toys’R’Us who decided in 2013 to go gender-neutral in its UK stores following intense public pressure. In France these movements toward more inclusive toy marketing strategies do not seem to move on the same way, however. With few exceptions, most gender-neutral retailers are small players whereas big companies as Toys’R’Us or La Grande Récré still use “boys” and “girls” in-store signage. For the last five years, the French context regarding gender-related issues is particularly complex. The controversy that started in 2011 with the inclusion of the term “gender” in biology textbooks to understand sex differences as a social construct shed light on strong oppositions between traditionalists (mobilised against the “theory of gender”) and liberals with many issues reinforcing those oppositions (e.g. gay marriage from 2012 to 2014, Hyper-U toys catalogues in 2013) engendering demonstrations, active mobilisation on social media and great media attention (for more details on the chronology of events see (Carnac 2014; Fillod 2014 ; Dayer and Collet 2014).

In this context, gender-neutral toy retailing does not seem to make great moves in France among key players on the market in comparison to other western countries. Consumer resistances are found on both sides (for and against gender neutral marketing) and both are very active. But, besides economic issues or opportunities (like under-served markets), social and cultural stakes are high (particularly gender equality), especially as trade play a key role in our consumer culture. The aim of this research is to understand how parents who self identify as resistant against gender-stereotypes do consume for their child. After a short literature review focusing on children gender socialisation and leading to our research question, we will present our methodology and results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 70’s, the large development of gender studies enables to understand more and more accurately how gender differences are constructed in occidental societies. Very early, researchers focused their work on infancy and childhood in order to understand gender development. Despite different approaches (for a review of major theories from developmental psychology see Martin, Ruble, and Szkrybalo (2002), all acknowledge gender

¹ <http://mixcite.rennes.free.fr/spip.php?rubrique13>

² <https://pinkstinks.de>

³ <http://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/>

⁴ <http://www.playunlimited.org.au/>

development as complex, historical and multidimensional, with key agents “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) in everyday interactions: family, peers, the media and school (for analysis of these different agents see Dafflon Novelle (2006)). Among these interactions, physical environment serve as a key medium to distinguish sociocultural features in boys and girls, especially emphasized since the consumer culture.

Children consumer culture: an early gender differentiation

A great amount of research show that very early in infancy, boys and girls grow up in different physical environments: décor of rooms, type and colour of toys, books, and clothing can by themselves differentiate girls from boys (Dafflon Novelle 2006; Pomerleau *et al.* 1990), showing that parents provide their children with very stereotypical environments. For example, Shakin, Shakin, and Sternglanz (1985) showed from observations in shopping malls, that the sex of infants aged under 13 months was accurately guessed in 87,5% of cases thanks to their clothing and objects carried with them. In the same idea, Sutfin *et al.* (2008), showed that in 91% of the cases, the sex of children aged 4 to 6 was correctly guessed only from pictures of children’s bedrooms and of toys within their room. If families provide children with gendered environments, we can also easily see the link with suppliers and retailers gendered marketing of children goods. But, if nowadays boys and girls distinctions could seem to be self-evident (maybe especially regarding garments⁵), looking back in history actually reveals that these differentiations are a recent turn.

Research on the history of gendering in retailing and marketing is still sparse, but recent researches offer insight on this matter. Rose's (2010) thorough research on the emergence of boy’s clothes market in late XIXth century England shows the key role played by the ready-made clothing industry and advertising in the gendering of children bodies. From the mid-XIXth to the second World War, boys’ clothes move from the feminine sphere and start to be younger and younger clearly differentiated from girls, losing the androgynous white dress for masculine garments (Huun and Kaiser 2001; Paoletti 1987; Rose 2010). The movement toward a binary gender differentiation of children went (with ups and downs) all through the XXth century such as to attain its highest level in the beginning of the XXIth. Sweet's (2011) analysis of toys catalogues in the US and Zegai’s in France show that the turn to strict binary gender norm from retailers really expended in the 1990’s: in Zegai’s sample, the generalisation of linguistic distinction “boys” and “girls” only starts from 1992, in the 1970’s and 80’s toys were categorised by age and type (Zegai 2010).

Normative power: the question of gender nonconformity

Not only gender segregation is a factor of inequalities between girls and boys, especially as toys and books stimulate different cognitive, affective and physical abilities in children, but this segregation also increases pressure for gender conformity. As Carver, Yunger and Perry (2003) show, felt pressure for gender conformity is less having to adopt similar behaviour as one’s gender group than having to avoid typical activities associated with the opposite gender group.

In this regard, parents’ behaviours seem to especially reinforce this type of pressure on boys and, interestingly, less on girls. Parents very rarely provide their children with cross-gender (i.e. objects typical of the other gender, as a princess dress for a boy). Robinson and Morris (1986) show that only 4% of Christmas toys presents from parents of 3 to 5 year olds are

⁵ Which could explain, in our opinion, the lack of research on this topic. Researchers seem to be much more focused on toys for a critique on gender-role and inequalities (maybe especially in France) in a materialism feminism framework, rather than the critique of gender norms (queer and postmodernism feminism).

gender atypical, most of whom were to girls and almost none for boys. Although some studies note an evolution on gender classification of toys, with parents classifying greater type of toys (like dolls, kitchen toys) as neutral rather than feminine (Wood, Desmarais, and Gugula 2002), scholars still give the same conclusion: cross-gender behaviours are more accepted (even encouraged) for girls than for boys (Kane 2006; Martin 1990, 1995; Sutfin *et al.* 2008).

The aim of this research is to study the effects of binary gender norm conveyed in the trade for children on parents' behaviours. In order to reveal its strength, the idea was to start our inquiry from the margins by interviewing "resistant" parents to gender stereotypes in a comprehensive approach to understand their cross-gender consumption for their son(s).

METHOD

Informants were recruited through interpersonal relationship and call for testimonies relayed by feminist organisations (by e-mail) and by a blogger specialized on baby issues (through her facebook page). The call was quite evasive. The message simply said that we were looking for testimonies of parents' reactions to in-store gender-stereotypes for a research on consumption for children boys. Informant selection was based on three criterions: being a parent of at least one boy, being critical against gender-stereotypes in children stores, and having an active role in the purchase or control over products for their child.

At this moment, only heterosexual mothers answered to our call (profiles are presented in appendix). We interviewed eleven mothers from different parts of France (rural towns, middle-sized cities and capital) but did not keep two of the interviews as informants' discourses did not reveal critical discourses of practices from these informants. Four more interviews are also already scheduled with new informants. We should however note that the two interviews not kept were the only ones from lower-social category. In the end, the nine interviews kept are from upper and middle-class informants and the discussions were focused on their consumption for their male children aged between 14 months to 11 years old.

Informants located in the Paris region were met at their home, the others were interviewed via video telephony. Interviewed lasted between 45minutes to 2hours. Content analysis was conducted on their transcripts; in this abstract we will only roughly introduce the main results.

RESULTS

Greatly critical against gendered marketing to children, all the mothers we met admitted to do most of their shopping in the boys departments, however, and acknowledged that their sons were mainly gender conform. Indeed, when we met them we could see that they were dressed with typical boy clothes and their rooms could not be confused as a girl's. Still, times to times, mothers do consume "girl" products for their sons and/or, allow their son(s) to use them. Nevertheless, mothers' cross-gender consumption (or allowance for it) and their relations with gender norm are very different regarding the type of products, the main distinction being with products related to the body (garments, dressing-up clothes, make-up) and the others (toys, books...).

Mothers' discrete consumption in girl's clothing department

Mothers seldom visit girls clothing departments, perceived as "too stereotyped" even though they are not satisfied with what they find in the boys department. Many mothers expressed their dissatisfaction with boys clothing, offering too narrow options in colours (*"I had to go to seven shops to find red shoes for my son! [...] It's like, you can choose the colour of your shoes, but you can only choose between khaki green, blue, black or brown!"*[Estelle]),

quantity (*“In terms of quantity, the boy department is way less stocked than girls’!”* [Catherine]) or style (*“I often like it better [in girls’ departments] than in boys’. Often there are cars or print messages I don’t like! [...] And the shapes too, in girls’ [departments], for very young babies, they are more elastic, loose fitting, whereas for boys it’s... jeans of a ten year old put in a three months old size!”*[Cécilia])

Among mothers of boys only, Cécilia alone (a feminist activist) visits by herself girls departments for her infant boy (*“I try not to always go to the boys’ department! [...] when we go shopping for clothes we try, at least, to go to boys’ and girls’ [...] from three months old it’s totally separated so, it relies on you to go to both sides!”*[Cécilia]). Estelle also does, but only when looking for specific item requested by one of her sons. But other mothers of boys only, on the contrary, never visit girls’ department arguing that it is too stereotyped, as Catherine who stops to the gender label even before entering the department: *“I never [go to the girls department] no.[...] well, because... It seems so... marked.. on it... [...] I mean, I don’t go because the colours indicate right away that... it’s for girls! But... I don’t go to make sure, that’s true... [...] But if I ever thought to go the girls’ department I certainly would have come back empty-handed! But maybe I’m wrong...”* [Catherine]

Regarding garments, the gender binary norm effects can easily be seen as informants say to fear their sons to be stigmatised if they are gender atypical and to fear for their gender identity development. Thus, cross-gender consumption is always discrete (*“I go to the girls’ but... I don’t dress him with ruffles! [...] Well, I don’t want to treat him as a guinea pig for my feminist experience!”*[Cécilia]; *“I bought him camouflage trousers for example [...] it was in the girls’ department [...] but one don’t know, it can’t be seen [...] but there is still a brand one can recognise, if one looks carefully, recognise that it is the girls brand”* [Marie-Alice]). Nevertheless, if mothers’ consumption choices are driven in order to not differ from male gender norms, they also face cases where norm transgressions come from their sons themselves. In these cases, mothers do accept those transgressions but use different ways to limit them.

Containing boy-driven atypical body presentation

At first, all the mothers welcome very positively in their discourses the fact that their sons play with gender boundaries, finding it amusing to watch him dressing-up in princess costume (Véronique) or try on their sister’s clothes (Isabelle). However, following the discussion, mothers’ discourses reveal that, if they accept a range of gender atypicality, they do not support these in a movement toward celebration of “gender creativity”⁶, unlike products like toys, more related to gender-role (see next section).

Mothers limit gender variance in different ways. At first, one can see that if they allow their sons to play dressing-up, use nail polish or make up, they do not buy such products for their sons: they either belong to the sister or the mother. Even when the mothers admit that their sons particularly enjoy it (especially frequent with nail polish), they never – in our interviews – related buying some for them.

An important distinction can be made, however, regarding how and where mothers allow their sons to play with gender boundaries. Some mothers do contain gender atypicality, allowing dressing-ups only inside home (Véronique). Others do allow it outside home but do not act the same way with their sons: Marie-Alice tries to stay back and not to overtly influence her

⁶ see for example Duron’s book relating her experience as a mother raising a “gender creative” child (Duron 2013)

son in order to let him experiment by himself (*“He absolutely wanted to wear [makeup]! And, well, Julie [his older sister] she said “oh... but...” but she did not daresay and, well, me neither, I did not but... he needs to experience by himself [...] I feel like it’s not something natural and that he understands step-by-step [...] but I’m not the one who tells him! [...] And well, he did it! Put lip-stick on and go to the public garden! And, well, yes indeed, people looked at him oddly...” [Marie-Alice]*), whereas Catherine, on the contrary, points out that if she allows her son to wear nail polish, he still might be victim of social sanction from his peers (*“He wanted me to put skull crossbones on his nails... So I told him “you need to know that at school you might have comments, and that you might be accused of doing like girls!” [...] I told him “you must take responsibility, if you want to do that”. And he did it, he took the risk!” [Catherine]*). Either way, those atypical behaviours are always time limited and not seen as “serious” but rather as child’s play.

Toy gendered marketing: weaker effects on mothers’ consumption choices?

As shown in Wood, Desmarais, and Gugula (2002), the mothers we interviewed also perceive toys like baby dolls and kitchen toys as gender neutral. As such, having to go to the girls department to find them is highly criticized, especially as stores offer a narrow choice of colours (*“It’s only pink! Every doll or kitchen toy is pink or purple or with lots of Hello Kitty on it!” [Rosa]*). All mothers hold similar discourses on toys issues, putting forward the child’s freedom and advocating gender equality to criticize and reject gender labels in toys departments. However, practices seem to be on two different levels. Some mothers do actively visit girls departments to provide their sons with toys in attempt to counter the traditional male gender socialization (Rosa) and develop future abilities (*“being a good father” [Estelle]*). Others, seem to have a more passive attitude, crossing gender-line only when explicitly requested by their son(s) (*“He requested a doll so I said “ok!” and I bought one for him, but I wouldn’t have forced him if he hadn’t ask for it” [Isabelle]*). Interestingly, for those mothers, not buying “girl” toys by themselves is justified as a wish not to force or have a negative influence on their sons (Catherine), a paradoxical justification especially as they also say to control a great amount of their sons’ toy purchase (and as they did not buy such products when their sons were in infancy) and admit that their sons are affected by social pressure to conform to gender norm standards, especially when they enter nursery school.

CONCLUSION

Previous researches show how parents hold different reactions to boys’ gender non-conforming behaviours: if mothers are usually more acceptant than fathers (Kane 2006; Sutfin *et al.* 2008), Kane (2006) showed how both mothers and fathers react negatively to boys using what she calls “icons of femininity” (e.g. nail polish, make up, frilly dress, etc). In this regard, our results are quite different. The mothers we interviewed revealed a broader set of reactions to “icons of femininity”, even though they do not encourage them overtly, they do not react negatively to them. The strength of the binary gender norm here holds a real power not only over mothers’ consumption but also over children gender differences themselves in its modern meaning. However, regarding toys, the trade (and the social norms they represent and/or produce) seem to have a more direct influence on mothers’ behaviours, who might help explain the gaps between mothers’ discourses and practices: if all the mothers are critical and resistant to gendered marketing, why only some of them do adopt cross-gender consumption practices and none of them boycott these gendered trade brands? The performative effect of gender labels developed in children retailing since the 1990’s are to be questioned as they do affect and transform the society.

APPENDIX: INFORMANTS' PROFILES

Informant	Age	Living situation with the father	Location	Children (age)
Cécilia	30	Married	Mid-sized city	Boy (14 months)
Isabelle	39	Married	Rural town	Boy (2), Boy (4), Girl (6)
Cécile	34	Married	Mid-sized city	Boy (2½), Twin boys (7)
Estelle	36	Married	Small-sized city	Boy (4), Boy (8), Boy (11)
Rosa	29	Married	Mid-sized city	Boy (5)
Marie-Alice	48	Divorced	Capital city	Boy (6), Girl (10)
Catherine	45	Married	Rural town	Boy (7), Boy (8½)
Marie-Anne	40	Separated	Capital city	Boy (9)
Véronique	47	Divorced	Capital city	Girl (2½), Boy (15), Girl (17)

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