

The Language of Toys: Gendered Language in Toy Advertisements

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Abstract

Children are socialized to conform to traditional gender role stereotypes, a developmental process affected by elements of popular culture that associate femininity with passivity, nurturance, and emotional expressivity; and masculinity with power, agency, and aggression. Toys, as one element of popular culture, often reflect these stereotypes through manipulations of design features that signify the gender appropriateness of toy play. Prior research on toys has documented the gender-differentiated use of such overt markers as colors, names, and logos in toy marketing. However, subtler gender markers such as the language used to advertise toys has received little research attention. This is surprising given the evidence of distinctive language styles adopted by females and males that are considered to reflect traditional gender role stereotypes. In this study, the narrative language that accompanied action figures marketed for girls, and action figures marketed for boys was analyzed for the presence of gendered language. It was hypothesized that lexical elements associated with traditional gender role stereotypes would differentiate the narratives as a function of gender. Results showed that female action figure narratives contained more intensive adverbs, more social words, and more adjectival references to physical appearance, fantasy, and triviality, supporting stereotypes of females as emotional, social, and uninvolved with real world concerns. Male narratives contained more second-person plural pronouns, more aggression words, and more adjectival references to power, destructive action, and science and technology, supporting stereotypic masculinity associations to power, aggression, action, and involvement with real-life endeavors. Discussion focuses on potential adverse consequences to children's psychosocial development that is posed by exposure to gender-polarized toys.

Keywords

gendered language, gender role stereotypes, toys, children's marketing, text analytics, children's advertising

Children are socialized from very young ages to conform to traditional gender role stereotypes. Girls learn throughout childhood the social role expectations of nurturance, dependence, and passivity (Eagly, 1987). These expectations are consonant with traditional ideolo-

gy of femininity, a tradition that holds that a female's primary obligation is to caregiving and domestic tasks. Girls are also socialized at young ages to be emotionally expressive and other-oriented, attributes that facilitate cooperation, social harmony, and affiliation with others (Williams & Best, 1990).

By contrast, boys learn from young ages the social roles consonant with traditional views of masculinity, roles which emphasize dominance, independence, and emotional reserve (Kimmel, 2011). Boys also learn that competition and expressions of aggression are tolerated and even promoted, as these attributes are viewed as aligned with males' agentic role in society (Eagly & Wood, 1991). Extensive research has documented that popular culture has significant impact on children's learning of these traditional gender role stereotypes. Picture books (Crabb & Bielawski, 1994), television cartoons (Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman, 2002), and play-things (Klinger, Hamilton, & Cantrell, 2001) are among those socialization agents that impart strong messages about roles deemed appropriate for girls and for boys.

Toys in particular convey powerful messages about female and male roles. Previous research has documented that toys are highly gender-typed. In a content analysis of contemporary toys, Blakemore and Centers (2005) demonstrated clear associations of toy types with traditional gender stereotypes. The toys designed for girls featured themes of nurturance, domesticity, and concern with appearance and attractiveness, while boys' toys focused almost exclusively on themes of aggression, competition, and action, both constructive and destructive. These gender-associated attributes also appear in advertisements for toys. Macklin and Kolbe (1994) found that television commercials aimed at girls invariably involved dolls, fashion, and caring for others. Play for girls takes place in domestic settings while boys' play occurs outside the home (Larson, 2001). Boys' toys featured in television commercials are rated as both more aggressive and more desirable (Klinger et al., 2001). Television commercials show girls and boys interacting with toys in quite different ways. In studies by Browne (1998)

and Kahlenberg and Hein (2010), girls' play with objects was passive (e.g., gentle touching) and involved cooperation with others, while boys' play was competitive and action based, involving manipulation and construction of objects. Even the words in television voice-overs for toy ads differ as a function of gender. Data from a study by Johnson and Young (2002) showed that verbs describing girls' interactions with toys emphasized nurturance, emotional expressivity, and passivity, while boys' verbs emphasized agency, competition, and destruction.

Gendered advertising of toys is also evident in print advertisements. Pennell's (1994) study of toy advertisements in newspapers and catalogues of popular toys showed striking differences between ads targeted to boys and those targeted to girls. Ads for boys' toys were displayed in intense bold colors and featured character names and other product attributes that connoted strength, power, and action. Ads for girls' toys were depicted in soft pastel colors and featured character names and product attributes that signified passivity, triviality, and preoccupation with fashion and physical attractiveness. Thematic content of girls' toys invoked fantasy and pretend worlds, while boys' toys involved complex, real-world endeavors. Toys advertised on the Internet similarly reflect gender stereotyping. A content analysis (Auster & Mansbach, 2012) of toys advertised on the Disney Store website revealed that girls' toys emphasized domesticity, nurturance and the importance of physical attractiveness, while boys' toys emphasized action and power. The Disney ads, color-coded by gender, displayed girls' toys in soft pastels, mostly pink and purple, and boys' toys in bold colors of red, black, and brown.

Although considerable research confirms the association of types of toys and design features of toys with traditional gender role

stereotypes, there is limited empirical research on the language used to describe and market toys. This research neglect is surprising given the evidence of gendered language or distinctive linguistic styles that characterize the communications of females and of males. Proponents of gendered language argue that word choice in communication is not indiscriminate but rather reflects psychological attributes that are informed in large part by understandings of social relationships (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). The significance of the meaning of observed gender differences in language is debated, though some scholars (Lakoff, 1975; Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001) contend that word choice is derivative of both early and ongoing socialization experiences that emanate from hierarchal power structures that view males as the dominant class, and females as subordinate. As such, language usage reflects differences in social power and socio-economic status which explains, according to Lakoff (1975), a feminine communication style characterized by linguistic markers signifying tentative, deferential, and trivial attributes.

Gendered language has been studied in a variety of contexts, ranging from informal and formal communications of females and males to the language of advertisers marketing gender-branded products. Evidence from empirical studies (Mulac, 1998; Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2008) demonstrates gender-linked tendencies in the use of a number of linguistic elements, including pronouns, imperatives, intensifier adverbs, and adjectives.

» Pronouns

Females appear to use more personal pronouns overall (Newman et al., 2008), and more first-person plural pronouns (*we*,

us, our) than do males in a variety of written contexts, including fiction and nonfiction writing (Argamon, Koppel, Fine, & Shimo-ni, 2003), text messaging (Newman et al., 2008), Twitter postings (Kivran-Swaine, Brody, & Mor Naaman, 2013), and Internet blogs (Schler, Koppel, Argamon, & Pennebaker, 2006). The use of second-person personal pronouns (*you, your*) may also be a gender marker as males have been noted to use second-person pronouns more frequently than females in conversation (Litosseliti, 2006). In marketing, pronouns are also used differentially as a function of gender. In a comparison of women's and men's magazines, Krizkiva (2009) discovered substantially more personal pronouns used in advertisements directed at women. Second-person pronouns were also more frequently used in advertising directed toward males than in advertising of female products (Whissell & McCall, 1997).

The differential use of personal pronouns by gender has been explained as both a reflection and reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes (Mulac et al., 2001). As noted by Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010), the pronouns used in conversational interactions reveal how people refer to each other, and serves as one indicator of the quality of a relationship. As such, females' more frequent usage of pronouns overall and first-person plural pronouns signifies a more personal and communal relationship with the intended audience, and is in accord with traditional gender stereotypes of females as more relational and socially sensitive. The use of second-person personal pronouns, on the other hand, suggests an authoritative manner of informing or instructing (Simmons, Chambless, & Gordon, 2008) and the more frequent association of these pronouns with males is aligned with traditionally masculine stereotypes of directness and dominance.

» Intensifier Adverbs and Imperatives

Intensifier adverbs and imperatives have been noted to be linguistic features that consistently discriminate the speech of females and males (Mulac & Lundell, 1994). Intensifier adverbs are words that emphasize or embellish the word or phrase they modify (Kivran-Swaine et al., 2013), and they appear to be used more by females than males in spoken communication. In an analysis of American and British English speech, Romero (2012) found that females used the intensifiers *just*, *very*, *so*, *quite*, *really*, *real*, *completely*, *quite*, *entirely*, *absolutely*, *totally*, and *pretty* more frequently than did males. Sharp (2012) also documented a greater use of the intensifiers *really* and *so* in the scripted dialogue of female television characters. Studies of written communication in a variety of contexts also reveal that intensifier adverbs are used more frequently by females than males (Arias, 1996; Mulac, 1998; Newman et al., 2008; Thomson, Murachver, & Green, 2001). Imperatives (or directives) refer to giving orders and commands, and research is consistent in finding that males use imperatives more than females (Mulac et al., 2001). In studies of children's language, boys use more commanding imperatives than girls, both on the playground (Goodwin, 1980) and in the classroom (Leaper & Smith, 2004). Adult males have been observed to use imperatives more than females in informal discussion groups (Preisler, 1986), in same-gender conversations (Lapadat & Seesahai, 1978), in cross-gender dyadic interactions (Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988), and in physician-patient interactions (West, 1993).

Gender differences in the usage of both intensifier adverbs and imperatives have been explained through the association of these linguistic elements with tradition-

al gender stereotypic attributes. The use of intensifier adverbs by females has been explained as a facilitation of expressions of emotional topics (Bulgin et al., 2013; Carli, 1990) used to promote empathy and social harmony (Kivran-Swaine et al., 2013) and to capture the attention of the listener (Peters, 1994). This explanation is consistent with traditional female stereotypic characteristics of emotionality connected to social relatedness. The more frequent use of imperatives by males corresponds with traditional male gender stereotypes as imperative usage is associated with competence, power, and dominance (Cheng, Chen, Chandramouli, & Subbalakshmi, 2009; Weintraub, 1989). Imperatives, as Aries (1996) states, are a "face-threatening" speech form.

» Adjectives

Adjectives are words that describe nouns and are often used to embellish language by adding detail. The communication styles of females and males have been observed to differ in semantic properties of adjectives used. Adjectives associated with female communication have been characterized as social, emotional, judgmental (Caskey, 2011; Poynton, 1989), and, more pejoratively, as extravagant (Pei, 1969), appearance-focused (Ivey & Backlund, 2004), and "empty," a term connoting trivialities and what is "unimportant to the world" (Lakoff, 1975). Data from a number of empirical studies support observations that females in contrast to males use different adjectival referents. Investigations of text messaging (Newman et al., 2008), Twitter postings (Kivran-Swaine et al., 2013), blogs (Schler et al., 2006), and fiction and non-fiction writing (Argamon et al., 2003) reveal that the writings of females contain more emotion related words and more relationship references than do the

writings of males. Indeed, one of the largest differences found in Newman et al.'s (2008) meta-analysis of gendered language research was the more frequent use by females of psychological (i.e., inner thoughts and feelings) and social process words. In Rasmussen and Moely's (1986) study of perceptions of gendered language, femininity attributes were ascribed to speakers when language samples contained adjectives judged as "empty" and trivial. In contrast to a female language style described as emotional, social, and trivial male language style has been characterized as instrumental, technological, and informational (Newman et al., 2008). Adjectival references to masculinity are associated with action, power, independence, and logic (Rasmussen & Moely, 1986). Empirical studies of both spoken and written communications find that males make more frequent references to objects, and use more quantity, size, and number words than do females (Argamon et al., 2003; Caskey, 2011; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003; Mulac, 1998). Although male language is noted to contain less emotional content than female language (Newman et al., 2008), data from at least one study indicates that the use of anger words may be associated more with males (Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003).

Adjectives not only distinguish the spoken and written communication of females and males, but are used differentially in materials targeted to female and male audiences. Willemsen's (1998) study of magazines marketed for teens revealed that text material in girls' magazines contained a greater number of emotion-related adjectives and more references to fashion, beauty, and relationships than did boys' magazines. Krizkova (2009) noted similar adjectival semantic differences in advertisements placed in women's and men's magazines. Advertisements in women's magazines contained a high frequency of

adjectives that emphasized positive emotion, relationships, and brightness, whereas advertisements in men's magazines referenced attributes of superiority, adventure, achievement, and strength.

» Research Question and Hypotheses

Evidence from studies of language styles in adult communication indicates that some linguistic features are gendered, and that gender differences in usage reflect and reinforce traditional gender role divisions. These divisions are also found in advertising and marketing domains as advertisers engage in selective marketing strategies based on associations of gender with traditional gender attributes. Products targeted to females are branded to stereotypic notions of femininity as compliant and nurturing, and products targeted to males are branded as unemotional and work-oriented (Alreck, 1994; Fugate & Phillips, 2010). Products are even ascribed with distinctive personality traits based on their gender association. According to Grohmann (2009), feminine branded products are typed as *fragile*, *graceful*, *sensitive*, *sweet*, and *tender*, and masculine-branded products are *brave*, *adventurous*, *daring*, *aggressive*, and *dominant*. Gender branding begins in early childhood with gendered division of toys evident in a toy's name, color, logo, and packaging (Grohmann, 2009), and in segregated product placement in retail stores. While these more overt aspects of gender-branding in toy type and design have been investigated (Jadva, Golombok, & Hines, 2010), little research has been paid to subtler features such as the language used to describe toys. As action figures and their accessories represent a high volume growth industry, generating sales in 2014 of over one billion U.S dollars (NPD Group, 2013), this study examines the descriptive language of

action figures marketed for girls, and action figures marketed for boys. Consistent with prior research on gendered language and on traditional gender stereotypes associated with toy type and design, it is hypothesized that lexical elements found in the narratives accompanying action figures will differ as a function of the gender of the intended consumer. It should be noted that throughout this study, the terms “female” and “male” are defined as binary constructs to conform with marketing industry gender divisions. The following hypotheses are generated with reference to boy-oriented action figures and girl-oriented action figures.

H1: The narrative language accompanying boy-oriented action figures in contrast to girl-oriented action figures will contain more references to (a) power, (b) action, (c) aggression, and (d) science and technology

H2: The narrative language accompanying girl-oriented action figures in contrast to boy-oriented action figures will contain more references to (a) physical appearance, (b) fantasy, (c) triviality, and (d) social relatedness.

Method

» Sample

The sample consisted of action figures that featured textual narratives about the figure on the packaging. An action figure was defined as a human-like figure that was poseable with at least two points of articulation, and thus included those figures conventionally classified as action figures and fashion dolls. The figures were categorized as boy-oriented or girl-oriented based on the name of the figure, its physical characteristics, and/or use of a gendered pronoun (e.g., *he*, *she*) in the accompanying narrative description. To assess the validity of action

figures’ categorization as boy-oriented or girl-oriented, each was cross-checked with the Toys “R” Us online toy catalogue to insure that the figure matched the catalogue’s gender classification of toys. Action figures included in the sample were available in national chain stores, targeted to age ranges corresponding to preschool or early elementary ages, and contained descriptive text ranging from 20 to 90 words on the packaging. Over a six-month period during the summer and fall of 2013, action figures were sampled from two national discount retail stores and one national chain toy store. The stores were selected based on their extensive toy inventory and consistency as to the availability of similar toy brands. The researchers entered each store at prescheduled intervals throughout the observation period, and photographed the narratives on the packages of all new action figures that met criteria. For product lines that had multiple figures available (e.g., the Disney Princess product line featured 10 princesses), only the first figure displayed that met criteria was included in the sample. The initial sample included 37 girl-oriented action figures, and 34 boy-oriented action figures. Preliminary data analysis revealed a discrepancy on the measure of total word count in that the girl action figures had significantly more words, attributable to the greater number of girl action figures. To achieve parity in the number of action figures analyzed, three additional boy-oriented action figures were added to the sample.

» Coding

The photographed narratives accompanying each action figure were converted into text files, and coded for seven language features. The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, & Fran-

cis, 2007) program was used to tabulate frequencies and percentages of six of the language features, and included first-person plural pronouns, second-person pronouns, imperatives, adverbs, words associated with aggression, and words associated with social relatedness. LIWC is a computerized text analytic program which counts frequencies of words in a text document, and, based on its extensive internal dictionary, categorizes these words into a number of linguistic dimensions such as parts of speech (e.g., pronouns, imperatives, and adverbs) and psychological and interpersonal processes (e.g., anger, social processes). In accord with this study's hypotheses, words in action figure narratives connoting aggression were counted in LIWC's anger dimension, which is subsumed under the negative emotions domain and includes words related to aggression (e.g., *hate, kill, annoyed*). Words in action figure narratives connoting social relatedness were counted in LIWC's text analysis of first-person plural pronouns, adverbs, and the social process dimension, which includes words related to family, friends, and humans (e.g., *mate, talk, buddy, baby*). LIWC is reported to be psychometrically sound with satisfactory inter-rater reliabilities for its word categorizations (Pennebaker et al., 2007). Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated LIWC's utility in linking linguistic dimensions to psychological and social processes (Alpers et al., 2005; Bantum & Owen, 2009; Kahn, Tobin, Massey, & Anderson, 2007; Kivran-Swaine et al., 2013; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997; Schultheiss, 2013).

As the LIWC does not categorize adjectives into linguistic domains, the frequencies of descriptive common adjectives identified in each action figure narrative were manually tabulated. Based on prior research classifying adjectives as to their semantic attri-

butes and gender associations (Blakemore & Centers, 2005; Johnson & Young, 2002; Lakoff, 1975; Pennell, 1994; Poynton, 1989; Rasmussen & Moely, 1986; Turner-Bowkar, 1996), adjectives were placed into one of the following six categories: (a) power, to include words with connotations of strength, might, authority, dominance; (b) action, to include both constructive and destructive words related to purpose or activity, physical movement, object manipulation, doing, achievement; (c) science/technology, to include words referring to technological and scientific-sounding jargon; (d) physical appearance, to include words associated with the outward aspect of a person or thing that appeals to senses through physical attractiveness or brightness; (e) fantasy, to include words suggesting events beyond reality with connotations of dreaminess, otherworldliness, magic, and mysticism; and (f) triviality, to include words suggesting words that are non-serious, nonsensical, frivolous, innocuous, unimportant, or childlike. For the purpose of inter-rater reliability, a second person (an undergraduate college student trained in the classification of adjectives) independently classified all adjectives. Disagreements in classifications were discussed and resolved. Inter-rater reliabilities (alphas) were all at or above .89.

Results

A total of 37 girls' action figure toys and 37 boys' action figure toys comprised the sample. The total number of narrative words ($N=1718$) for the girl action figures did not differ significantly from the total number of narrative words for the boy action figures ($N=1704$). To examine differences of the six narrative language features of boy and girl action figures analyzed with the LIWC pro-

Table 1

Mean Levels of Language Features of Boy and Girl Action Figure (AF) Narratives

Language Dimension	Boy AF		Girl AF		t(72)
	M	SD	M	SD	
Power					
Second-Person Pronoun	1.84	2.65	0.38	1.44	2.92**
Imperatives	0.27	0.76	0.59	0.93	1.63**
Aggression	3.91	4.14	0.44	1.12	-4.92**
Social Relatedness					
First-Person Plural Pronouns	0.04	0.22	0.57	1.96	ns
Intensive Adverbs	1.71	1.59	3.42	3.25	2.88**
Social Process Words	7.33	4.90	10.43	5.75	2.49*

*p<.01. **p<.001.

Table 2

Cross Tabulation of Adjective Referents and Boy and Girl Action Figure (AF) Narratives

Adjective Referents	Boy AF		Girl AF		X ²
	%	n	%	n	
Power	13	28	1	2	16.00*
Action	8	17	4	7	17.00*
Science/ Technology	5	10	0	0	
Physical Appearance	0	0	13	25	
Fantasy	2	4	5	10	6.00*
Triviality	0	0	8	15	

Note: Percentages were computed on 209 boy AF adjectives and 197 girl AF adjectives. *p<.001.

gram, t-tests were conducted with an alpha of .01 selected to adjust for the large number of comparisons. These results are found in Table 1. Chi-square tests were conducted to examine differences in the frequencies of adjectival referents identified in girl and boy action figure narratives. A total of 197 adjectives were identified in girl action figure narratives, and 209 adjectives were identified in boy action figure narratives. These results are found in Table 2.

The first hypothesis (H1a), predicting that the language used to describe boy-oriented action figures in contrast to girl-oriented action figures would contain more references to power, was tested by counting frequencies of power-related adjectives, second-person pronouns, and imperatives in the boy and girl narratives. This hypothesis was partially supported. Analysis of the frequency of power-related adjectives yielded a significant difference, $\chi^2(5, N=90) = 16.00$,

$p < .001$, with a greater number of power-related adjectives identified in boy narratives. There were 28 (13%) power-related adjectives in boy narratives and two power-related adjectives (*strong-willed*, *superhuman*) in girl narratives. The most frequent adjectives in boys' narratives were *might*, *super*, and *power*. The use of second-person pronouns also differed significantly by gender ($t(72) = 2.92$, $p < .001$), with boys' narratives containing more second-person pronouns ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 2.65$) than girls' narratives ($M = 0.38$, $SD = 1.44$). There was a significant difference ($t(72) = 1.63$, $p < .001$) in the use of imperatives though not in the predicted direction, as girls' ($M = 0.59$, $SD = .93$) action figure narratives contained more imperatives ($n = 22$) than did boys' ($M = 0.27$, $SD = .76$; $n = 10$) narratives.

Hypothesis 1b, predicting that the narratives of boy-oriented action figures in contrast to girl-oriented action figures would contain more references to action, was supported. Boys' narratives contained significantly more action-related adjectives than did girls' narratives $\chi^2(5, N = 90) = 17.00$, $p < .001$. There were 17 (8%) action-related adjectives in boys' narratives and seven (4%) in girls' narratives. Almost all of the girl action adjectives were judged as constructive or neutral (e.g., *sewing*, *designing*, *talking*), and nearly half ($n = 8$) of the boy action-related adjectives were judged as destructive (e.g., *battling*, *ramming*). Only one girl adjective was judged as destructive (*ravaged*).

An association was found between gender of action figure and words associated with aggression and words associated with science and technology, supporting Hypothesis 1c and 1d. The boys' narratives contained a greater number of anger/aggression words than did girls' narratives, $t(72) = -4.92$, $p < .001$ (boys $M = 3.91$, $SD = 4.14$, girls $M = 0.44$, $SD = 1.12$). Aggression words found in boys'

narratives included such words as *evil*, *ruthless*, *terrifying*, and *vile*. Girls' narratives contained two aggression-related words: *malicious* and *super-villain*. The narratives of boys' action figures contained 10 (5%) references to science and technology (e.g., *super-sonic*, *radioactive*, *electronic*, and *genetic*). There were no science or technology related adjectives in the girls' narratives.

The hypotheses predicting narrative linguistic differences between girl-oriented action figures and boy-oriented action figures in the constructs of physical appearance, fantasy, triviality, and social relatedness were supported. As predicted in Hypothesis 2a, large differences were found in adjectives associated with physical appearance, with girls' narratives containing significantly more of these adjectives than boys' narratives, $\chi^2(5, N = 90) = 13.00$, $p < .001$. Girls' narratives contained 25 (13%) appearance-related adjectives, with words related to brightness, fashion, and beauty (e.g., *shimmery*, *trendy*, *pretty*) occurring most frequently. There were no appearance-related adjectives in boys' narratives. An association between gender of action figure and fantasy-related words was found $\chi^2(5, N = 90) = 6.00$, $p < .001$, supporting Hypothesis 2b. Examination of cell frequencies show that narratives of girl-oriented action figures contained 10 (5%) fantasy-related adjectives (e.g., *magical*), while boys' narratives contained four (2%). As predicted in Hypothesis 2c, girl action figure narratives contained more trivial-related adjectives than did boys' narratives. The girls' narratives contained 15 (8%) words judged as trivial (e.g., *de-licious*, *bow-rific*, *silly*). There were no trivial-related adjectives in boys' narratives.

Hypotheses 2d and 2e, predicting that the narratives of girl-oriented action figures in contrast to boy-oriented action figures would contain more references to social relatedness,

were partially supported. Girls' narratives in contrast to boys' narratives contained significantly more social process words, $t(72)=2.49$, $p < .01$ (girls $M=10.43$, $SD=5.75$; boys $M=7.33$, $SD=4.90$). Social process words related to the word *friends* appeared frequently ($n=36$) in girls' narratives, but were absent in boys' narratives (girls $M=0.97$, $SD=1.43$; boys $M=0.00$, $SD=0.00$). Girls' narratives in contrast to boys' narratives contained significantly more intensive adverbs, $t(72)=2.88$, $p < .005$ (girls $M=3.42$, $SD=3.25$; boys $M=1.71$, $SD=1.59$), but did not contain, as hypothesized, more first-person plural pronouns, $t(72)=1.62$, $p = .108$ (girls $M=0.57$, $SD=1.96$; boys $M=0.04$, $SD=0.22$).

Discussion

Results of this study's content analysis of the narratives of contemporary action figure toys indicate that linguistic features used to market these figures differ as a function of the gender of the intended consumer. Findings that the narratives of girls' action figures in comparison to boys' action figures contained more intensive adverbs and social words mirrors research on gendered language, and suggests that traditional feminine attributes of emotional expressivity and social relatedness are promoted in girls' toys. Moreover, the stereotype of female non-engagement with substantive, real-world concerns was reinforced by the disproportionately greater number of adjectives associated with physical appearance, fantasy, and triviality found in girls' narratives as compared to boys' narratives. In girl action figures, the language of power, agency, and science does not exist. The narratives of boys' action figures, which contain more second-person pronouns and adjectival references to power, destructive action, and science and technology, reflect-

ed stereotyped gender roles with linguistic associations to masculine attributes of dominance, aggression, and involvement with real-life endeavors.

A particularly striking finding in this content analysis was the extent to which the narratives of action figures were polarized with reference to adjectives associated with traditional gender roles. The boy-oriented action figure Batman, for example, is described as *deductive, unique, focused, mythical, fighting, awesome, and crime-fighting* while Bratz, a girl-oriented action figure, is *exotic, sparkling, amazing, fantastical, and beautiful*. Indeed, of the 37 boy action figures, there were no feminine-associated gender adjectives identified. Despite tougher, less feminine named toy lines for girls (e.g., Bratz; Monster High), only two masculine-associated gender adjectives were found in the narratives of the 37 girl action figures. One unexpected finding concerned the similar numbers of first-person plural pronouns in girl and boy narratives. First-person plural pronouns, however, were infrequently found in either gender narrative, which could be a function of the relatively few words found overall on toy packaging. Another unexpected finding concerned the more frequent inclusion of imperatives in girl action figure narratives. Perhaps this result reflects a marketing perception that girls, stereotyped as passive, non-imaginative, and technologically inept, require direction and instruction on how to play with their toys.

One limitation of the present study is methodological, as some words counted in the action figure narratives may have been misclassified. As acknowledged by Pennebaker et al. (2001), LIWC is unable to consider the subtle context in which a word is embedded, and therefore cannot disambiguate meanings of words. In addition, as the LIWC dictionary may not contain idio-

syncratic words found in the lexicon of toy marketers and copywriters, some of these words may have been missed in the LIWC analysis. Potential word omissions, however, probably had only a negligible effect on this study's results, as it is unlikely that marketing language is so idiosyncratic as to be missed by LIWC dictionaries, which claim to cover about 80% of vocabulary used in everyday language (Pennebaker et al., 2001).

Language, as advertisers well know, has a powerful effect on perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, and, as Ghromann (2009) noted, perceptions of gender can be influenced through choice of language. When the language used to market children's toys is gendered, a strong message is conveyed that traditional gender-role stereotypes are appropriate and valued. An important issue concerns the impact of these messages on children. A considerable body of research demonstrates that media depictions of traditional, stereotypic, and rigidly polarized gender roles affect children's perceptions of gender and play behaviors. Children appear to accept gender stereotypic media portrayals without critical evaluation (Henning, Brenick, Killen, O'Connor, & Collins, 2009; Pike & Jennings, 2005), and from young ages engage in gender-typed toy play (Weisgram, Fulcher, & Dinella, 2014) and play behaviors that mimic traditional gender roles (Klinger et al., 2001). Further, acceptance of strong gender-stereotyped beliefs in children has been linked to bullying and ostracism behaviors directed toward gender-nonconforming children (Meyer, 2009). Media and toy reinforcement of stereotyped gender roles also impart lessons about what roles are allowed, and which are not, as based on gender. Boys, bombarded by violence and dominance in media messages, are not afforded socialization experiences that teach nurturance and cooperation, and girls,

limited by messages promoting only fashion, grooming, and passivity, are deprived of lessons endorsing power, self-agency, and innovation.

In conclusion, this study is the first to quantitatively demonstrate that linguistic elements associated with traditional gender role stereotypes distinguish the narratives of girl-oriented and boy-oriented toys. Evidence of gendered language in this study supports documentations from other studies of gender-branding in toy design, color-coding, and packaging graphics, and contributes to an aggregated profile of girls as vain and vacuous, absorbed with concerns about physical appearance, and incapable of independent thought or action. Boys, on the other hand, are in the real world and in control with permissible destructive purpose. Recently, there has been a public outcry (Crouch, 2013) against these caricatured portraits of gender promoted by the toy industry. Public demands for gender-neutral toys featuring egalitarian values have had some success as a few toy companies have revised their marketing strategies to portray more cross-gender interactions with toys that were previously branded to one gender (Dockterman, 2014). Given the nature and extent of differentiated gendered-language found in action figure toy narratives, it is hoped as well that descriptions of toys will be linguistically balanced to indicate that girls too can fight battles, and boys too can comb ponies. ■

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