

To What Extent Does Gender Marketing Influence the Parental Purchase Decisions of Children's Products, and How Would These Customers React in a Genderless Informational World?

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Abstract

This research study explores the extent to which parents rely on gender marketing when purchasing products for their children, and how these consumers would react in a genderless informational world. The project presents theories found in consumer behavior and child psychology, including Scott Wards Theory of Consumer Socialization, Judith Butler's views of sex, gender, and gender identity, and the idea of Unconscious Branding by professor Douglas Van Praet. The methodology used for the completion of this research can be subdivided into two forms of primary research: an open questionnaire and an online survey. The study uses APA formatting to structure the above-mentioned section, and alters it to include both a discussion and a methodology evaluation subsection. The project gives examples of gender marketing and its uses for the past decade, it shows how parents aim to control the practice, and it identifies the existence of three types of parent buyers: The Id-Mom, Ego-Dad and Super-Ego-Parents. Gender marketing does, to different degrees, influence parent-buying behavior both consciously and unconsciously. The extent to which these forces impact each parent is directly correlated to the level of critical thought and social desirability bias they find within. These three categories define parents that would react independently from one another when faced with a genderless informational world. Future directions of research suggest an extension of the research study to include a longitudinal design that will allow for the tracking of the respondents' actions and opinions over time.

Keywords: gender marketing, purchase decision, consumer behavior

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

1.1 Gender Marketing: Defined, Discussed, And Depicted

For the purpose of this academic research, gender marketing will be defined as the intended alteration and adaptation of marketing policies, as dictated by the target gender, and its constant reinforcement with the central aim of increasing a product's sale. Though dating back to the mid 20th century, this 'antiquated and potentially damaging' (Parsons, 2015) practice has resurfaced and finds itself under scrutiny and debate. Disappointingly enough, the 1970s saw a 70% non-gender-labeling rate in all children's products – a percentage that has since decreased to below a healthy half. (Robb, 2015).

1.2 Butler's Gender, Sex & Gender Identity

In order to fully understand, assess, and appreciate this research project it is vital to distinguish and discuss the existing and conflicting views of gender, gender identity, and sex. In Judith Butler's 1999 feminist book titled 'Gender Trouble' we are presented with contradictory opinions concerning the types, characteristics, and expression of gender. "The distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (Butler, 1999). By accepting this theory we are able to assume that sex and gender, while interrelated, differ in their cultural and biological construction and individual physiognomies. Having established a discrepancy between the two terms most people consider to be synonyms, we must now identify and define the interjection of gender identity. A person can identify him or herself with

a gender when, and only when, this person becomes “intelligible” in conformity with “recognizable standards of gender illegibility” (Butler, 1999). Gender identity therefore assumes viability when the identified person concedes to “various roles and functions that result in social visibility and meaning” (Butler, 1999). Notable failures of “intelligibility” are considered to create “persons who fail to conform to the gendered norms of culture by which persons are defined” (Butler, pg. 28). These ‘anomalies’ belong to neither gender, resulting in the impossibility of them being defined in terms of gender identity and sex. If gender is, thus, a “cultural interpretation of sex (Butler, 1999), gender identity can be defined as the connection of both “biological and culturally constituted selves”) and their “established continuity and self-identity over time” (Butler, 1999).

1.3 Ward’s Consumer Socialization Model

In order to identify the sources responsible for a child’s developmental and social learning behaviors we will use Ward’s Consumer Socialization Model of 1985 (Association for Consumer Research, 1985). This model provides a multi-theoretical approach and presents how “individuals develop consumption-related cognitions and behaviors” from a young age. Ward identified the pivotal importance of environmental forces, or “socialization agents”, in children’s development, and the construction of their attitudes and behaviors. The theoretician then discusses Jean Piaget’s Theory 1936 of Intellectual Development. The French genetic epistemology researcher has identified three basic building blocks to the process of child cognition: Schemas, Assimilation & Accommodation, and the Four Stages of Development. The relevant aspect of Piaget’s study is the identification of Schemas, or environmentally observed “index cards” that aid developing children in learning the “rules” of the world around them (American Psychological Association, 1988). All of the schemas gathered by infants and adolescents gradually increase in complexity with age and can be applied to numerous aspects of their life, ranging from what they do in a social situation, to what they like and what they eventually develop into purchasing patterns. If Piaget’s study is accepted as a universal theorem, for the purpose of this research we may note that a child does indeed learn from his/her environment – ranging from the heart of the family to the 4,000 advertisements a 10 year old is bombarded with on a weekly basis. Piaget’s schemas develop well into adulthood and can be considered essential pieces in the molding of an individual.

Having established the importance of a child’s environment in their cognitive upbringing we must now consider the “socialization agents” Ward identified as being the main facilitators of this education. These social learning theories differ from the developmental models of cognitive growth in the sense that the latter requires subjects to be “actively involved in the education, whereas the first emphasizes the environment’s impact on consumer socialization regardless of subject passivity” (Association for Consumer Research, 1985). Ward identifies “learning from socialization agents (to) often (be) inferred from the socializee’s interaction with the various agents... television ads, parents” (Idem). By accepting Ward’s 1985 theory we may henceforth deduce that from infancy to adolescence a child unwillingly waives his or her right to educational choice and is thus a result of the environment and socialization agents she/he finds himself a part of.

As we take into consideration Ward’s 1985 theorem we are able to conclude that parents are vital influences in the cognitive and social development of a child. If parents themselves are bombarded with a clutter of marketing messages on a daily basis and then proceed to pass them on to their child, then we can consider gender marketing a *source* and child-rearers *facilitators*. The effects of gender marketing, as described above, are dangerous and long lasting. This parent-child developmental relationship becomes a vicious circle, indirectly affecting generations to come.

2. Methodology

The project's methodology combines two forms of primary research, the first being an informal written, open questionnaire with one of the biggest gender-marketing opposing parental communities, "Let Toys Be Toys", and the second in the form of an online survey. In describing these forms of research we must first understand why this coalition is of relevance for this academic study. The first form of primary research provided this study with insights into the Western mentality of the gender marketing aware parents of the UK and how they are able to recognize, filter and explain the practice to their children. This information acted as a catalyst for the formulation of the online survey, allowing for the creation of questions that challenged respondents. The two procedures of primary data collection reinforce one another.

2.1 Participants

The analysis will be conducted in partnership with Chicco Romania, the country's largest chain of highly priced-positioned children's toys, garments and accessories. The retailer has agreed to facilitate the completion of this survey through its diffusion via their official mailing lists (See Appendix 2).

The participants targeted for the facilitation of this investigation are retailer Chicco Romania's most loyal customers, a total of 1,000 men and women ranging in age from 25 to 45 years with an above-average disposable household income. The respondents present a random selection of both mothers and fathers with children between the ages of 0 and 12. The reason for this delimitation is that, as mentioned in the *Literature Review* section of this research study, children will begin to detect bias in advertising and media beginning with 12 years of age. Seeing as this survey is intended to understand how parents react to the practice of gender marketing and further impose their gathered information on their offspring, the respondents must have children that are not yet on the brink of their *tween years*. Members of the initial population with children older than the age of 12 were deliberately excluded for the completion of this survey.

The sample will be randomly selected from a population of 2,378 through the use of Excel Random Sample 7.0. The chosen sampling procedure is that of controlled probability samples where every element in the population is given a nonzero chance of being selected. A total of 1,000 participants have been randomly chosen from Chicco Romania's database. This research study includes the analysis of 1,000 respondents, as it reduces the complexity of response analysis and simultaneously maintains a representative sample. Respondents were offered a financial incentive of a 10RON (£1.76) voucher in exchange for their participation.

2.2 Materials

A survey was assembled and employed that contained five visual aid scaling, two comparative ratio and five dichotomous nominal scaling questions. The survey was constructed online and distributed via direct emailing. This form of quantitative research has been employed due to its low cost and sense of respondent anonymity, "removing the interviewer bias and lowering social desirability bias" (Pearson et al., 2015).

2.3 Procedure

Romania has been chosen as the geographical location of this study because aside from it being of personal interest, it is also a post-Soviet influence Eastern European country. Research has shown that "the lagging economic crisis has resulted in marketing budget cuts, in the decrease of creative professional salaries, and in the overall misalignment of promotional messages" (Galos, 2012). National marketers no longer understand their market, which is why this constitutes the perfect location for the conduct of this research study. More so, in one of the

most important national psychological studies completed in the last decade titled “Psihologia Poporului Roman: Profilul Psihologic al Romanilor” (The Psychology of the Romanian People), Romanian psychologist Daniel David identifies “general distrust as being one of the fundamental characteristics of Romanian culture” (David, 2015). The tradeoff between this incredulity and parental purchase behavior will be interesting to observe and analyze.

Subjects were first thanked for their purchasing loyalty to Chicco Romania and then told that the survey would help the retailer improve their product range and seasonal collections. Respondents were then made aware of the Data Protection Act of 1998. The structure of this survey allows for exploratory research as it aims to provide insight, allow for flexible research, and collect qualitative data. The methodology follows a descriptive research design in order to describe market trends and collect data through a planned, structured survey. This form of primary research resulted in both quantitative and qualitative information. While the survey itself has first been written in English, its translation into Romanian was necessary for the ease of the respondents and for the possibility to increase the survey’s reach. In avoiding any possible translational bias, this study has been rewritten in Romanian by a professional translator of S.C. OMNIA LINGUA S.R.L, Traduceri Autorizate Romania.

The survey has been constructed, distributed online for measurement, collected for response, and edited to represent data. The chosen survey output is computer based, through the issuing of individual emails. All randomly chosen respondents have received a personalized email containing the survey, altered to include their names in both the subject line and the survey introduction. E-mail reminders have been issued at two and four weeks post the initial survey distribution, highlighting the 10RON voucher attached for the survey’s completion.

The survey construction takes into account Dillman’s Total Design Method (Dillman, 2000). The survey eases subject participation through the reduction of perceived costs and the increase of perceived rewards. This is achieved through the ordering of questions with the most interesting ones at the beginning, personal information enquiries in the middle, and the biased questions at the very end. Respondents therefore feel that the survey is not only short, but also easily worded and quick to complete. The survey includes visual aids in the form of five randomly ordered images, and graphical design is used to ease completion. Lastly, the survey increases respondent trust through the use of official stationery.

Taking a look at the survey construct (See Appendix 3), we are able to identify a number of different question designs. The inclusion of nominal, comparative ratio, and visual aid scaling helps in maintaining both survey interest and in helping the research questions target respondents through a number of facilitated enquiries. The first and second survey questions follow a dichotomous nominal scaling approach, simply asking parents to select one of the two possible simple answers. Once we have identified the sex of the parent and his/her role in the purchasing of their children’s products, the survey asks respondents to allocate 100 points in order of importance to five main motives behind their buying behavior: recommendations, brand, availability, marketing and price. The 100-point allocation will not only establish what the main purchase motive is, but also how parents make these decisions based on personal importance.

Questions four to eight provide a total of 5 images and follow a visual aid nominal scaling approach, with an added qualitative explanation. The images depict the same simple, bland, brand-less plush teddy bear that could easily be “assigned” to each gender. This toy has been approved by Chicco Romania as it carries little to no resemblance to any competitor product and it doesn’t influence respondent answers by being a labeled Chicco product. While questions four and five present a color-altered teddy bear, one hot pink and the other one an electric blue, they offer no additional text. The question simply asks if the respondent would purchase the product and if yes, why. These first two inquiries simulate a blunt form of product

design in terms of gender marketing. Questions six and seven are designed to simulate the promotional messages parents are faced with on a daily basis, one reading “THIS IS FOR BOYS” in a bright pink color, while the other “THIS IS FOR GIRLS” in a beautiful shade of baby blue. This contradiction of colors aims to further challenge respondent cognitive activity. With these clear purchasing indications at hand, we must note that the teddy bear is a simple, neutral color – identical in both cases. These two questions aim to establish whether or not marketers really do get a say in purchase decisions, especially when the product is undifferentiated. The last question that includes a visual aid presents the same simple beige, neutral teddy bear, with no marketing message attached. This toy is a metaphor for the possible genderless informational world that marketers find themselves on the brink of and it challenges parents with the possibility of a new marketing era.

Survey questions nine to eleven establish the number, gender, and ages of the children in question, whereas question twelve aims to identify respondent bias regarding the issues discussed. The final question is constructed on a Likert Scale, a multidimensional rating scale on an odd number rating system, designed to include a neutral answer in its very midst. The questions asked are simple and straightforward, each implying a conclusive belief on behalf of the respondents. Statements such as “sex and gender is the same thing” challenge parents to not only distinguish between the two, but also to undertake an analytical approach in regards to their own children and their upbringing thus far. Seeing as the bias and opinion questions are the last in this survey, the previous enquiries build up to the mental stimulation necessary for their response.

While the survey’s structure has been kept largely the same for the entirety of this research, questions 4-8 (the visual questions), have been randomly arranged for each respondent so as not to induce any bias. The images differed in order but have maintained their essence and purpose. The controlling of random errors in design has been achieved through the anticipation of primary research errors including validity errors, measurement errors, coverage errors, sampling errors, non-response errors, and processing errors. In order to avoid these pitfalls, the survey has completed and updated sampling its frames, reduced random probability sampling to make sure certain members of the population are not deliberately excluded, and tried to increase response rates through advance notices, survey personalization, and individual incentives.

2.4 Discussion

As mentioned above, the survey was sent via email to a total of 1,000 possible respondents, randomly chosen from 2,378 candidates. Following both reminder emails, the total response rate for this survey stands at 16.6%. This result was surprising, especially considering the efforts made in order to control and prevent non-response errors. Possible explanations could include a general disinterest, lack of a palpable financial reward, or insufficient retailer-consumer trust.

Of the randomly selected sample, the respondents were 96% women and just 4% men. This could show that mothers are more involved and interested in choosing the product categories available for their children’s cognitive development. Of those surveyed, 96.5% were the main household purchasers of children’s products. Below (Figure 1) you will find an averaged visual representation of the parental purchase motives. A total of 28% of respondents stated that price firstly determines their purchase, with brand closely following at 27.25%, familial and friend recommendations at 20%, and availability and marketing at 14.5% and 10.25% respectively. Price was expected to be one of the main purchase catalysts – especially when the survey is conducted in partnership with a high price positioned children’s brand.

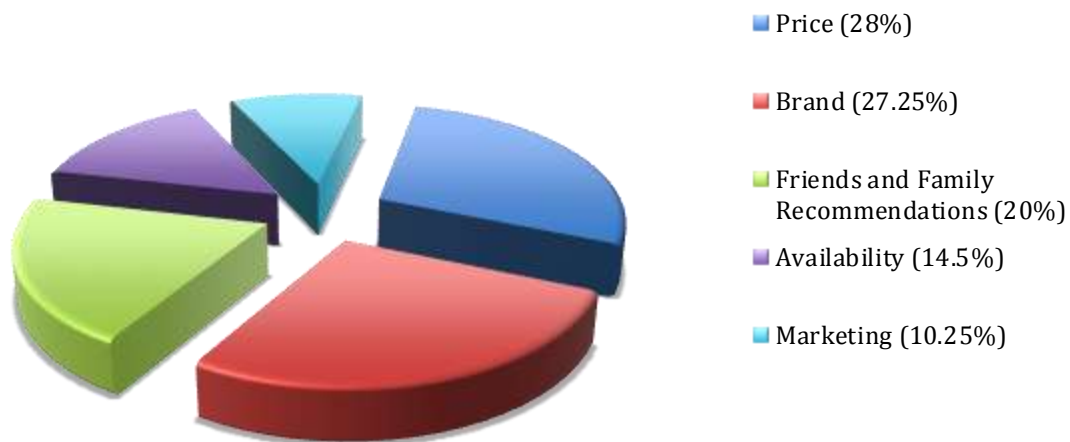


Figure 1. Male and Female Children's Product Purchase Determinants

Surprisingly, respondents named *brand* the second most important factor, overlooking essential elements such as recommendations and availability. This response has possibly been thwarted due to the survey's origin – Chicco Romania. Parents have answered in the way they assumed they should, ultimately altering survey results due to social desirability bias. Having looked at the general parental purchasing factors we must now consider the data collected by gender in order to analyze if parental roles influence the buy. The male averages comprised the point division in the following order: 36.6% of fathers think price is a children's product most important determinant, with availability (24.6%) and brand (21.4%) close to follow. To dads, external recommendations account for only 14% of their purchase decisions, whereas marketing and promotional activities have limited effect at an incomparable 3.8% (Figure 2).

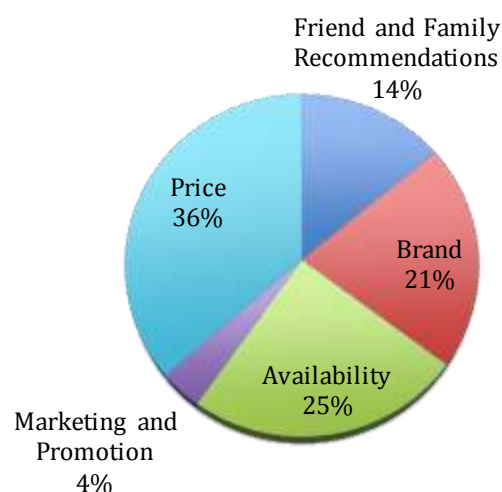


Figure 2. Male Children's Product Purchase Determinants

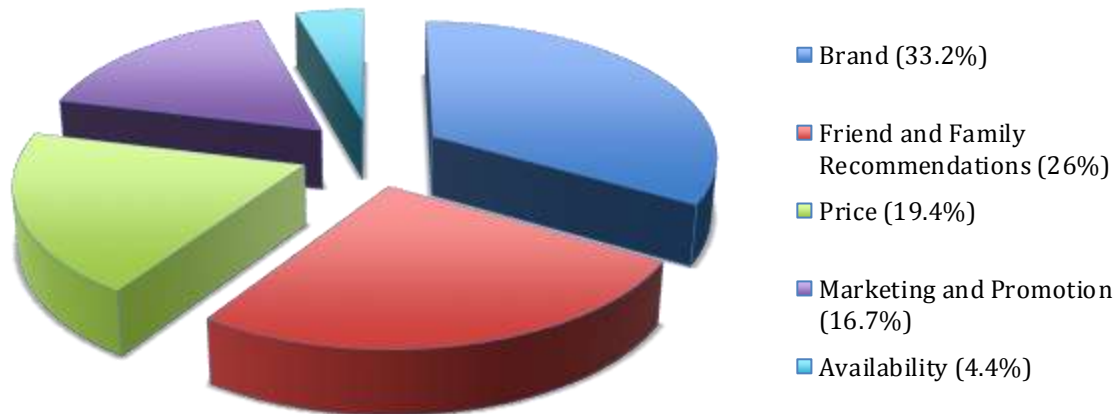


Figure 3. Female Children's Product Purchase Determinants

Female purchase determinants vastly differ from men's, with mothers citing the main factor behind their buys to be the brand (33.2%), external recommendations (26%), followed by a toy's price (19.4%), marketing campaigns (16.7%), and general availability (4.4%). As opposed to fathers, mothers tend rely their purchase decision less on price and availability and more on brand and recommendations (See Figure3). This behavior could reflect the effect of gender marketing on parents themselves, with money conscious, pragmatic, economic fathers and emotional and gullible mothers at opposite ends of the spectrum. Regardless of these differences, both mothers and fathers position marketing on the last two places as catalysts for their purchases, indicating that parents believe they are immune to these promotional activities and do not comprehend the underlying influence that they hold. This survey question was designed to challenge respondents in asking if both the brand and the existing product promotion have affected their buying choices – even though they are directly reliant on one another. As David Aaker cites in his 1996 revolutionary book *Building Strong Brands*, “an orange is an orange...is an orange. Unless, of course, that orange happens to be a Sunkist, a name eighty percent of consumers know and trust” (Aaker, pg.119, 1996).

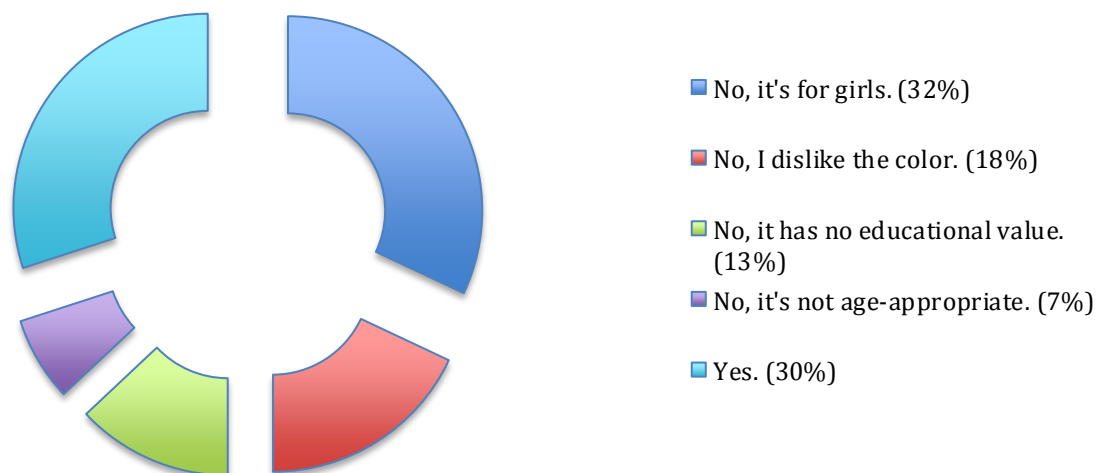


Figure 4. Would You Purchase The Pink Teddy Bear?

32% of respondents would refuse to buy a pink teddy bear because “it is for girls”, a total of 18% would not make the purchase because “they personally dislike the color, it is too flashy”, 13% of parents consider the pink toy to have “no educational value”, 7% of parents would not buy the product because “it is not suitable for their child’s age” and 30% of the subjects would go through with the purchase (Figure 4). Of the respondents that refused the purchase based on it’s supposed “girly” appearance, 100% of them have boys. On the contrary, the purchase decisions for the stuffed blue bear show that 27% of parents would refuse the purchase because “it’s blue and for boys”, 24% of respondents would make the purchase, 14% are afraid the play toy is “not suitable for the child’s age and could present a choking hazard”, 14% “dislike the color”, 11% consider that the product has no “didactic purpose”, 8% of parents think the bear “looks unnatural” and a mere 2% consider their offspring would “not appreciate and play with the toy” (Figure 5).

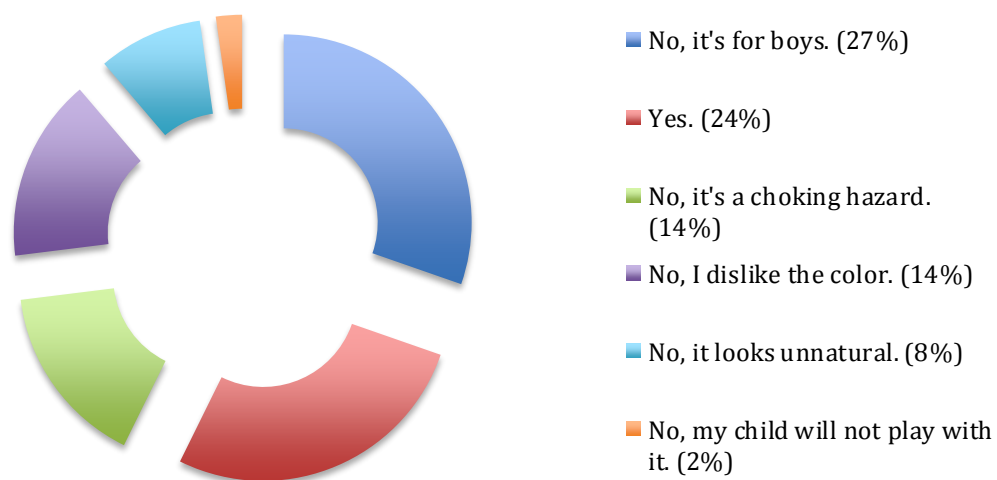


Figure 5. Would You Purchase The Blue Teddy Bear?

When looking at the purchase of the same neutral colored bear with a present marketing message, the data changed. When the identical plush toy presented a promotional message reading “This is FOR GIRLS”, a total of 51% of respondents would make the purchase. Similarly, when the neutral bear held above it a message reading “THIS IS FOR BOYS”, 55% of parents would buy it. The final visually represented survey question depicted the same neutrally colored plush bear, but this time it presented no gender indication. Purchase patterns in this case dictated a total of 57% parent buys (Table 1).

<u>Promotional Message</u>	<u>PURCHASE</u>	<u>NO PURCHASE</u>
“THIS IS FOR GIRLS	51%	49%
“THIS IS FOR BOYS	55%	45%
NO MESSAGE	57%	43%

Table 1. Neutral Teddy Bear Purchase Patterns

Of the sample of respondents, 18% had more than one child. This could constitute as a sampling error because the parent is familiar to the upbringing of both genders and thus, may have a different experience and approach to gender marketing. 46% of subjects were making purchase

decisions for their girl, whereas a total of 54% were buying for their boy. Finally, when looking at the relationship, opinion and knowledge each parent holds about gender, sex and gender marketing, we can identify the following: a total of 61% of respondents agree and strongly, 8% disagree and strongly disagree, and 31% are neutral when considering if gender marketing plays an important role in the purchase decisions they make for their children (Table 2).

Similarly, 77% of parents agree and strongly agree that they buy children’s products based on the sex they are intended for, with only 9% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing to the statement, and 14% taking a neutral stance concerning the matter. Lastly, when asked if sex and gender is the same thing, 39% of parents agreed and strongly agreed, 25% were recorded as unbiased, and a total of 36% disagreed or were in complete disagreement.

Question:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Gender marketing plays an important role in the purchase decisions I make for my children.	29%	32%	31%	8%	0%
I buy children’s products based on the sex they are intended for.	41%	36%	14%	6%	3%
Sex and gender is the same thing.	21%	18%	25%	27%	9%

Table 2. Gender Marketing Influence on Purchase Decisions

3. Conclusion and Future Directions of Research

3.1. Conclusion

The survey revealed a number of behavioral patterns, brought to light specifically through the visual questions depicting the on-sale teddy bear. In order to provide this research study with a clear, concise summary, three main descriptive categories have been derived, each describing a specific parent persona. These identified character traits and definite purchasing behaviors are titled after Freud’s well-known theory of the human psyche: the Id-Mom, the Ego-Dad and the Super Ego-Parents (See Appendix 4). The previously mentioned groups will establish to what extent parents rely on gender marketing for the purchase of their children’s products and how they would react (in terms of buying behaviors) in a genderless informational world. As we may find above in subsection 5.2.D, respondents have provided a total of three essentials answers for the completion of this research:

Question:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Gender marketing plays an important role in the purchase decisions I make for my children.	29%	32%	31%	8%	0%
I buy children’s products based on the sex they are intended for.	41%	36%	14%	6%	3%
Sex and gender is the same thing.	21%	18%	25%	27%	9%

The parents that agree and strongly agree that gender marketing plays an important role in the purchase decisions made for their children are the parents that buy children's products based on the sex they are intended for, and consider sex and gender to be the same thing. These individuals are heavily subconsciously affected by the influence of gender marketing. Parents within this category would refuse a children's toy 'because it's for girls/boys', and reject it based on its positioning towards the opposite sex of their child. The Id-Mom focuses on the instinctive, primal desires they construct based on the external influences they encounter. These parents would not change in purchasing habits when faced with a genderless informational world, but would instead rely on their innermost stereotypical heuristics to do their shopping for them. The Ego-Dad category is defined by all of the subjects that have answered the above questions in a neutral manner. They are moderately reliant on and affected by gender promotion, though more critical in thought. Parents would refuse to buy a children's product based on its general unpleasant color or on the possibility of it being a safety hazard – and rarely comment on the sex it is intended for. They are seemingly impassive to gender marketing yet subconsciously still influenced, with some critical thought and reflection involved. These individuals would not change purchase behaviors in a genderless informational world, but would rather rely on both their gender stereotypical knowledge as well as their critical outlook to do the job. Finally, the Super-Ego-Parents present a new, rare wave of highly gender marketing informed parents who identify these harmful promotional messages on an everyday basis and are able to accept that their child has the right to choose their path in cognitive development. The responses provided by this category to the questions asked above include "disagree" and "strongly disagree". These individuals would thrive in a genderless informational world, encouraging a mentality shift towards the dissipation of gender stereotyping. The data presented above may resemble an example of the possible apparition of a general mentality shift towards the Super-Ego-Parents. As parents begin to understand and critique the practice of gender marketing, they are not only more attentive to what information surrounds their offspring, but also more alert as to how they discuss these external influences with their child. Parental education is the first step to a child's free choice in cognitive and gender identity development. Parents are seemingly unaffected by gender marketing – or so they like to appear. As discussed above in the work of Douglas Van Praet, "influence is born by appealing to emotions while overcoming rational restraints" (Praet, 2012). Neurologist Antonio Damasio, professor at the University of Southern California, has formulated the "landmark somatic marker hypothesis", showing that decision-making is often based on the "feelings that are tagged and stored in the body and our unconscious minds" (Praet, pg.86, 2012). If this is indeed the case, we may conclude that subconsciously, all parent purchase decisions, to a greater or lesser extent, rely on the teachings of gender marketing with the continuous support of societal gender stereotypes. The fight between the conscious and the subconscious minds is seen in all three of the identified parent categories, with the subconscious triumphant in the mind of the Id-Mom and with it being trampled by cognitive thought and rationality in the Super-Ego-Parents. The future of gender marketing is more than uncertain, now that the "traditional lines that were once drawn so definitively around broad product categories that entire marketing teams and experts even branded themselves as experts in marketing to women or men are now breaking down" (Bhargava, 2015). New York Magazine's October-November 2015 issue discusses the debated themes of gender and consent, providing a dictionary of unfamiliar sexual terminology including: "*genderqueer*, a person with an identity outside the traditional gender binaries, *agender*, a person who identifies as neither female nor male, and *cisgender*, or the state in which the gender you identify with matches the one you were assigned at birth" (Marchese, 2015). If the lines between genders have been blurred to the extent that we may now use the French 'neutrois' to describe our

individual gender (or lack thereof), how are marketers worldwide expected to effectively target individuals they no longer understand? While the practice of gender marketing is not one to be quickly dissolved and forgotten, creatives must now focus on “rethinking gender roles and societal relationships”, as well as embrace the cultural mentality shift and start making gender “irrelevant while expanding (their) target market” (Bhargava, 2015). A genderless informational world would force parents to question their methods of child upbringing and allow for a greater chance of developmental choice and youngster self-expression.

3.2 Future Directions of Research

Future directions of research for this study include further exploration into the underlying decision making motives of parents in order to establish if these customers really are resistant to gender information or if they present a form of demand characteristics. More so, a longitudinal design would allow the study to “track responses from the same sample of respondents over time” (Solomon, 2006), in order to establish if what people say they will do is really what their actions show. The question remains: if people are consciously unbiased, are they just as unconsciously unbiased as they try to appear?

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