



Equal Play?

Analyzing Gender Stereotypes,
Diversity, and Inclusion in
Advertising and Marketing for the
Most Popular Toys of 2022

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If she can see it, she can be it.™

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our analysis of television advertisements made for the top-selling children's toys in 2022 suggests that representations of children should be more inclusive. And although boys and girls were nearly equally common in ads, the quality of their representation varied in ways that conform to traditional gender stereotypes. In terms of race and ethnicity, nearly 66 percent of children shown on screen were white, while 20 percent were Black. About 9 percent were Latino, and representation of children from other racial and ethnic groups, such as Native Americans or people from the Middle East, was even more uncommon. Although these figures may show improvements from toy advertisements of the past, the numbers fall short of mirroring the racial and ethnic diversity of young children in the United States today. Additionally, most dolls and action figures were white, suggesting limited opportunities for children of color to play with toys that look like them. Furthermore, there was no representation of LGBTQIA+ children or children with physical, cognitive, or communication disabilities. The lacking depiction of these diverse identities means that many children do not feel represented when they see children in advertisements.

Despite experts' calls for more gender-inclusive play, as well as parents' interest in expanded toy options, we find that contemporary toy advertisements have not evolved much over time in terms of the social messages they convey about gender. While 2022 toy advertisements showed girls and boys playing with a variety of toys, most toys had clearly gendered associations, with dolls targeted toward girls but sports equipment, cars, and toy weapons targeted toward boys. Marketing also continues to forge gendered associations in more subtle ways, such as through color, music, narrator gender, and the selective use of imaginative (for girls) and aggressive (for boys) language. Portrayals of toys in this manner reinforce stereotypes about girls' and boys' interests, and contribute to ideas that can hinder children's creativity and ambition.



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The gendering of toys in advertisements also communicates rigid social norms surrounding how girls and boys should behave. In turn, this buttresses an outdated gender binary, defining boys and girls in terms of what differentiates them rather than what similarities they share. To help disrupt reliance on gender tropes and stereotypes, and broaden diversity and inclusion, use our checklist:

MAKE TOY ADS MORE RACIALLY DIVERSE

My toy ads feature characters that are racially diverse.

What is the racial diversity of the cast in your ads? Do the ads include numerous racial identities, and are your ads reflecting the racial demographics of the population? When children from diverse racial backgrounds are represented on screen, more children will see themselves reflected and feel a part of a community. Cast racially diverse actors from many communities.

My toy ads avoid tokenism.

According to recent surveys, the vast majority of consumers can spot tokenism.¹⁹ Tokenism is the practice of including a single individual (or small relative number of people) from a marginalized group as a stand-in for their perceived group's culture. When your ads depict people of color, are they expected to be a representative for their racial group? It is important to include diverse characters, but when a child is tokenized they may still experience isolation and loneliness. Collaborate with your team to ensure that your ads have adequate diversity while also refraining from tokenism.

If my toy ads feature dolls or action figures, they are racially diverse.

Are the dolls shown in your ads racially diverse, and do they represent the children playing with them? It is important that children from diverse racial backgrounds see that toys reflect their racial identities. When making an advertisement for any type of doll, assess the racial identities of the children playing with the dolls *and* the identities of the dolls themselves. Children should also play with dolls with other racial identities, but our study found most dolls were white.

REJECT OUTDATED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GENDER AND PLAY IN TOY ADS

My toy ads encourage kids of all genders to play.

Do messages in your ad signal that a toy is for girls and not boys, or vice versa? Consider the assumptions you make about what girls and boys might want to play with, or how they would play with toys. Does your ad assume girls are nurturing, and boys are aggressive and competitive? Consult with others to correct when these assumptions unconsciously arise.

Leaders and mentors to children in my toy ads are modeling positive social norms around gender and play.

How do authoritative voices in your ads model social norms? When watching ads, children can identify authoritative figures, such as parents, grandparents, adults in general, and narrators. Do those authoritative figures reinforce gendered social norms? For example, are adults in the ad teaching girls to be calm but encouraging boys to be wild? In the storyline, are female figures cleaning the house, while male figures are engaging in leisure? Be conscious that the scene can influence how children understand gender roles and their own ambitions and aspirations.

FLIP IDENTITY-BASED STEREOTYPES ON THEIR HEAD

My toy ads flip expectations about how children should play.

Do your ads assume who should play with the toy? Think of ways to show children with physical disabilities playing with toys that are assumed to need more mobility, such as vehicles or sports equipment. Brainstorm how to show Black or Latino children demonstrating occupational leadership, such as playing a doctor or a scientist. Consider showing boys playing with baby dolls and girls playing with action figures. Address identity-based stereotypes and then flip it or tilt it!

My toy ads show children expressing a variety of emotions.

We often make assumptions about how children act based on their gender, or their race. Persistent gender assumptions include the notion that girls are sweet, and boys are reckless, and there are racial stereotypes such as Asian children are studious, but not creative. Collaborate with your production team to ensure that children of all identities showcase a variety of emotions as opposed to reinforcing stereotypes.

USE MARKETING STRATEGIES THAT DISRUPT THE GENDER STEREOTYPES

Colors in my marketing materials for toys avoid pink and purple exclusively for toys marketed to girls, and blue or green exclusively for toys marketed to boys.

Are the colors used in your ads conveying overt or subtle messages about gender? Instead of reinforcing existing associations between gender and color, use pink or purple when boys are in scenes, and use primary colors when girls are in scenes; these choices expand social norms for boys and girls. Exclusively using gendered colors reinforces when objects are expected to be played with by particular genders. Recognize that bias and to push against it. Work with your production designer and art director to ensure you do not reinforce the gender binary through use of color. The gender binary defines certain actions, aesthetics, and ideas as male or female and prescribes how boys and girls should act, which is unnecessarily exclusive and limits creativity and expression.

Music and language in my marketing materials for toys avoid feminine tones exclusively for toys marketed to girls, and masculine tones exclusively for toys marketed to boys.

Our study found that soft and light music is often associated with girls' toys, while loud and edgy music is often associated with boys' toys. If an advertisement is for action figures, you might refrain from using overly aggressive language and music to reject the expectation that action figures must be played with violently. If these tactics are used, diversify the characters' genders. Do not use language such as "awww" and "cute!" exclusively with fashion dolls to reject the expectation that fashion dolls must be played with in ways that center their appearances. Talk with your post-production team about ways to resist choosing music and narration that complements a gendered expectation.

EXPAND AND CELEBRATE INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES IN TOY ADS

My toy ads feature many different identities.

Intersectionality acknowledges that everyone has unique experiences especially when considering gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and age. An intersectional approach to casting means recognizing the many facets of people's identities. Presenting this in the production processes means developing well-rounded characters with multiple identities which influence their experiences and actions. Increasing diversity among one identity isn't enough. For example, an equal share of boys and girls on screen should be celebrated, but to reflect their dimensionality, we should consider the broad spectrum of boys' and girls' identities. When casting, try to reflect the diversity among boys and girls, including their race and ethnicity, physical or cognitive abilities, body type, socioeconomic status, and whether they are LGBTQIA+.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP

I asked for help.

Advertising has a big impact on kids, so it's always a good idea to ask for help. There are many ways to ask for help, such as eliciting feedback, especially from diverse crew members. Seek out organizations that can provide feedback and assistance to make sure that the impact of marketing and advertising directed to children is a positive one.

ENDNOTES

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