

Representações de Gênero na Publicidade Televisiva Infantil: As percepções e a literacia para a publicidade das crianças

Gender Representation in TV Advertising for Children: Children's perceptions and advertising literacy

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Resumo: *As crianças tornam-se consumidores cada vez mais cedo, e são cada vez mais influentes no consumo da família. A televisão ainda é uma das principais formas através das quais são expostas à publicidade. O nosso estudo, realizado em Portugal, foca-se em estereótipos de gênero na publicidade televisiva infantil e combina uma análise de conteúdo a anúncios com grupos de discussão com crianças entre os 8 e os 12 anos. Os nossos resultados mostram que, em 3 meses, 75% dos anúncios televisivos para crianças continham estereótipos de gênero. As crianças são capazes de reconhecer esses estereótipos e, em geral, não se identificam ou não concordam com essas representações dos gêneros. Finalmente, as crianças revelaram bons níveis de literacia para a publicidade, sendo capazes de reconhecer a intenção persuasiva das marcas.*

Palavras-chave: *gênero; estereótipo; crianças; publicidade; televisão; literacia para a publicidade.*

Abstract: *Children are becoming consumers at increasingly younger age and are more influential in consumption decisions within the family. Television still is one of the main ways they are exposed to advertising. Our study, conducted in*

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Portugal, focuses on gender stereotypes on TV advertisements for children and combines a content analysis of advertisements and focus groups with children between 7 and 12 years old. Our findings show that, during a period of 3 months, about 75% of TV advertisements for children contain gender stereotypes. In addition, children are able to recognize such stereotypes, and in general do not identify or agree with the way each gender is portrayed. Finally, children display good levels of advertising literacy, as they are able to recognize the intentions of the brands in the commercials.

Keywords: *gender; stereotype; children; advertising; television; advertising literacy.*

Introduction

In the last few decades, there have been profound sociological changes in the family. Families tend to be child-centric and to invest more money in products for children, ranging from toys to clothes and technology (HAMMOND, 2010).

Since the 1980s, brands have developed specific marketing strategies for children, and even for more specific segments (MCNEAL, 2007), such as “tweens” for example – a group “in between” childhood and adolescence, from 8 to 12 years old. These strategies aim at not only selling more quantity and a wider range of specific products and services to these targets, and influencing the consumption decisions within the family, but also at building brand equity from an early age – awareness, brand associations, loyalty – thus increasing the customer lifetime value and building strong and emotional relationships that nurture loyalty and advocacy throughout life (BUCKINGHAM, 2000; ARMSTRONG, 2014; KOTLER; KARTAJAYA; SETIAWAN, 2017). Advertising is an important promotional tool in children marketing, and television was pivotal in the early experiences. For example, creating a cartoon series around certain toys was very effective in increasing sales, as was the case of He-Man and My Little Pony, for example (BANSAL, 2008).

As digital technologies became widespread and fully integrated in our daily lives, teenagers (and sometimes children) acted as early adopters and even trendsetters, being described as “digital natives” (PRENSKY, 2001) due to their “at easiness” with digital devices and content. Consequently, brands started to bet on digital media and content as a way of connecting to these targets (BLADES; OATES; BLUMBERG; GUNTER, 2014). However, television still plays an important role in the quotidian lives of children (REIDEOUT; FOEHR; ROBERTS, 2010; PONTE; BATISTA, 2019). There are multiple specific cable channels for children broadcasting continuously, and these are usually the background and soundtrack of homes with young children. Thus, television is still today one of the main ways of children’s exposure to

advertising (GUNTER; OATES; BLADES, 2005; PONTE; SIMÕES; BATISTA; JORGE, 2017).

Considering as starting point previous research about the influence of television advertising on children, and also about the presence of gender stereotypes in advertising, our study focuses on the identification and interpretation of gender stereotypes in television advertisements by children between 8 and 12 years old, in Portugal. We chose this age range because according to developmental psychology theories (e.g. BRONFENBRENNER, 1979; PIAGET, 1999; KOHLBERG, 1966), at the age of 7, children are aware not only of their biological features regarding sex, but also of the social constructions of gender identity (MCNEAL, 2007; PAECHTER, 2007), and are starting to negotiate their own gender identity and the perception of the gender identity of others (BROOKS; HÉBERT, 2006; MARTIN, 2011; MOOSMAYER; FULJAHN, 2010; YELLAND, 2003).

Gender representation in television advertising for children

The importance of TV in advertising to children

In the last few decades, specific marketing strategies and tactics targeting children have been developed and adapted, as children become more influential on the consumption of the family, and more relevant consumers (BUCKINGHAM, 2000; ARMSTRONG, 2014). Brands are investing in conquering young targets because they are profitable, as contemporary families prioritize the safety, health, development, learning, and even entertainment of children (MCNEAL, 2007). Also, brands are attracted by the possibility of nurturing lasting and profitable relations of loyalty (BANSAL, 2008; PRIYA; BAISYA; SHARMA, 2010), throughout their life cycle (GUNTER et al., 2005). In addition, youngsters often set trends related to technology, sports, fashion, music, cinema and entertainment (KOTLER; KARTAJAYA; SETIAWAN, 2017).

In the last decades, digital media have become predominant in our society, and children and teenagers are highly attracted to them (HOLLOWAY; GREEN; STEPHENSON, 2015; CHAUDRON; DI GIOIA; GEMMO, 2018). Although they are considered digital natives (PRENSKY, 2001), the television is usually the first screen that children are exposed to and remains intensely present in the lives of young children (WILCOX; KUNKEL; CANTOR; DOWRICK; LINN; PALMER, 2004; KELLY et al., 2010). There is a broad offer of TV channels for children, exposing them to advertising. Children have developed new practices of audiovisual content consumption, such as using streaming platforms, OTT apps, and non-linear viewing (OFCOM, 2019). However, children's channels are often "continuously on" as a background to other play activities, and children are frequently exposed to commercial breaks (GUNTER; OATES; BLADES, 2005; PONTE; SIMÕES, BATISTA; JORGE, 2017). These commercials are usually fast-paced and include attractive colours and music. Another very common technique is using fictional characters that are familiar and loved by children and associating them to the products (BANSAL, 2008). The product categories most commonly advertised on TV are toys, cereals, candy and fast food (BANSAL, 2008; KELLY et al., 2010).

Due to changes in the media landscape and in consumptions practices, it is necessary to re-evaluate the influence of TV advertising on young children (STOILOVA; LIVINGSTONE; KARDEFELT-WINTHER, 2016; ARMSTRONG, 2014; BLADES; OATES; BLUMBERG; GUNTER, 2014; PONTE; BATISTA, 2019).

Gender stereotypes in advertising for children

Stereotypes are often used in advertising as a way of creating or reinforcing identification with the target audience (FURNHAM; MAK, 1999). However, this strategy may reinforce stereotyped beliefs and behaviours and even enhance prejudice as media are "shapers of our perceptions and ideas" (MASTERMAN, 1985, p. 3). Windels (2016) studied perceptions about using stereotypes in the advertising industry and

concluded that many marketers believe that stereotypes are a reflection of society and therefore minimize the influence that advertising may have on perceptions and behaviours. Some professionals have ethical concerns and prefer avoiding stereotypes but admit their effectiveness in creating identification with the target (BLOMQVIST, 2012).

Gender stereotypes are among the most common in advertising, although they vary according to countries and cultures, and there has been a decline of its use in the last few years. The most common examples are the association of men to leading roles and of women to supporting roles; men being portrayed as active workers and decision-makers and women as mothers, wives and caretakers; men appearing more often outdoors and women in the home; and women are more often objectified and sexualized (FURNHAM; MAK, 1999; BARTSCH; BURNETT; DILLER; RANKIN-WILLIAMS, 2000).

Concerning children, research shows that gender stereotypes are more frequently present in TV advertisements, particularly toys (ZIMMERMANN, 2017). Neto and Furnham (2005) highlight that this has “potential impact on gender socialization and, subsequently, on children’s views of themselves and other people” (p. 71). Martin (2011) gives an example, finding in his research that “girls had usually learned that pink is for girls before they came to school, from adults’ comments and behavior, from media images and advertising” (p. 68).

Lewin-Jones and Mitra (2009) agree that TV advertising is very influential of perceptions that children develop about gender, and consequently of the behaviour that they might have later on. They add that children display some capacity of identifying gender stereotypes in commercials around the age of 7 years old, but this doesn’t mean that their perceptions and behaviour is not influenced by them.

According to Silveira (2015), researching about the influence of advertising on children can adopt one of two perspectives: a) studying the effects of exposure to advertising; and b) studying how children perceive and interpret advertising, how they are able to create meaning and integrate it in their daily lives. Our research focuses more on

this latter approach, aiming to study how children perceive gender stereotypes displayed on TV commercials and critically negotiate their meaning. With our research, we also intend to explore the possibility of advertising playing a role on promoting gender equality, as Lemish and Maya (2017) suggest, instead of enhancing gender stereotypes.

Children's advertising literacy and how they perceive gender stereotypes

In our society, children are exposed to promotional content, in particular to advertising, since very early age. Research on marketing to children generally agrees that they are usually vulnerable to advertising because they are still developing the literacy and critical skills necessary to identify its persuasive intent (WILCOX; KUNKEL; CANTOR; DOWRICK; LINN; PALMER, 2004; OPREE; BUIJZEN; VAN REIJMERSDAL; VALKENBURG, 2013, ŠEVIC, N.; ŠEVIC, A. & ŽIVKOVIĆ, 2017; MILOSEVIC; TRULTZSCH-WIJNEN; MIFSUD; DIAS, 2018).

One first step in developing advertising literacy is being able to distinguish between advertisements and other types of content that coexist in the same communication medium, such as an add and news, or advertising and entertainment. In the case of TV, this is connected to the ability of distinguishing between reality and fiction, as several TV commercials feature fictional characters (TIDHAR; LEMISH, 2003; GUNTER; MCALEER, 2005). These abilities develop as children grow up, have more experience with media, and learn more about the way media work and media content is produced (ROBERTSON; ROSSITER, 1974; SILVEIRA, 2015). However, researchers disagree about when children are able to proficiently identify advertising. Buckingham (2009) believes at 3 and 4 year-olds are able to identify advertisements and distinguish them from other types of content, but for Tidhar and Lemish (2003) this skill is acquired between 3 and 7 years old, and depends on the complexity and subtlety of the advertisement. John (1999) believes that 5 year-olds are able to distinguish commercials from other TV content, but Livingstone and Helsper (2006) disagree.

Despite this discussion, researchers are more unanimous about young children being unable of recognizing and understanding the persuasive intent of advertising, regardless of being able to identify ads (KUNKEL; ROBERTS, 1991; OATES; GUNTER; BLADES, 2002; GUNTER; MCALEER, 2005; LIVINGSTONE; HELSPER, 2006; BUCKINGHAM, 2009), and generally agree that this skill is developed around the age of 8.

For Robertson and Rossiter (1974, p. 14), in order to identify and understand the persuasive intent of advertising, children need to have the following literacy skills:

- a. Distinguishing advertising from another media content;
- b. Recognizing the target of an advertisement;
- c. Identifying the intent of the sender of the message;
- d. Being able to decode the meaning(s) of an advertisement;
- e. Understanding that products are portrayed in commercials differently than they are in reality.

The authors add that advertising literacy is key for understanding the effects that advertising might have on children. Children who do not recognize the persuasive intent of advertising are more vulnerable to its effects, as they are more trustworthy, they don't question what they see in commercials, and tend to have increased desire of the product featured (OWEN; LEWIS; AUTY; BUIJZEN, 2013). Wilcox, Kunkel, Cantor, Dornick, Linn and Palmer (2004) add that, besides age, the socioeconomic level of parents, the education of parents, and the education of children, are also key factors that influence advertising literacy.

Advertising literacy is important not only because it prevents children from becoming consumerists, but also because advertising might influence their perceptions and attitudes about society, social roles, relating to others, their own identity, and values – thus including gender (GUNTER; MCALLER, 2005).

Currently, there is increased concern about advertising strategies being more subtle, and therefore more difficult of identifying and

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decoding for children. Brands increasingly use omni-channel marketing strategies that blend information, advertising and entertainment across different media, and that also blend reality, virtuality and fiction (GUNTER; MCALEER, 2005; ROSADO; AGANTE, 2011).

Oates, Watkins and Thyne (2016) refer aspects of TV commercials that are purposefully ineffective, such as a written warning that a toy does not include batteries, or that the product has to be assembled by the children, which the youngest children will not be able to read, thus contributing for creating expectations that will not correspond to the product sold, but that make it more appealing on TV. It is very common that children are not aware that the way toys are portrayed on TV might make them seem different in size, colour and functionalities than they are in reality (WILCOX; KUNKEL; CANTOR; DOWRICK; LINN; PALMERW, 2004), leading to posterior frustration (CÁDIMA, 1997; ŠEVIC, N., ŠEVIC, A. & ŽIVKOVIĆ, 2017).

Bansal (2008) argues that a more ethical approach is needed on the part of brands and advertising professionals, but in parallel advises the development of the advertising literacy of children from an early age as a necessary skill for coping with the intense media exposure in contemporary society. Most previously mentioned authors agree that at age 12, most children are able of identifying advertising and acknowledging its persuasive intent. However, for most of them, this is too late, and advertising literacy must be explored and stimulated earlier on (LIVINGSTONE; HELSPER, 2006). Advertising literacy can be scaffolded and promoted not by restricting children's access to media, but by teaching children about how media work (SILVEIRA, 2015). Parents and teachers play a key role in this process (BUCKINGHAM, 2000), that includes teaching children to evaluate information critically, to question the sources of information, to reflect about the intent and interests of senders, to understand that media content depicts particular representations and perceptions of the world, and that there are numerous alternative and complementary perspectives. Šramová (2014) adds that media literacy in general, and advertising literacy

in particular, is grounded on the development of critical thinking in children, and this is the best way of protecting them from persuasion and preparing them for becoming active media users and citizens.

Despite these efforts, Buckingham (2015) stresses that having advertising literacy does not guarantee that children will not be influenced by advertising in any way or have the power to resist its appeal. Recognizing a persuasive intent might make children less vulnerable to consumerism, but only if they are able to identify gender stereotypes will they be able to negotiate their own meaning, instead of being influenced by media representations.

Thus, in our study sets out to explore, in the particular context of Portugal, to which extent gender stereotypes are still present in TV advertising, which are the advertising literacy levels of Portuguese children between 7 and 12 years old, and the way they perceive and interpret gender stereotypes in TV advertisements.

Methodology

Research design and methodology

Our research aims to:

- a. investigate to which extent gender stereotypes are present in TV advertisements for children in the Portuguese context;
- b. understand how children interpret and make sense of gender stereotypes present in TV advertisements they are exposed to; and
- c. explore the children's advertising literacy and ability to critically reflect upon gender representations in TV advertisements.

In order to do so, our approach is exploratory, and we followed a sequential research design with two phases (CRESWELL, 2014), including two data analysis techniques. In the first stage, we applied content analysis to a *corpus of TV advertisements aired in the Portuguese TV channels targeting 8-12 children, in order to determine to which extent gender stereotypes were present* (MOUTER; NOORDEGRAAF, 2012). In the second stage, we organized focus groups with children between

8 and 12 years old, in order to discuss with them how they interpret and make sense of gender stereotypes present in TV advertisements, and to assess their advertising literacy (GUERRA, 2006). Table 1 presents our research design.

Table 1 - Research design.

Research Design		
	Phase 1	Phase 2
Research questions	To which extent are gender stereotypes present in TV advertisements for children in the Portuguese context?	To which extent do children (8-12 years old) demonstrate advertising literacy and ability to critically reflect upon gender representations in TV advertisements? How do children (8-12 years old) interpret and make sense of gender stereotypes present in TV advertisements?
Data collection technique	Content analysis	Focus groups
Sample	104 TV advertisements aired in TV channels targeting tweens between March 23 rd and May 12 th 2018	4 focus groups with a total of 20 children between 8 and 12 years old
Data analysis technique	Content analysis	Thematic analysis

Concerning the content analysis of TV advertisements, information about each of them was coded in one database including as main categories the type of product/service advertised, the presence or absence of people, the gender of adults and children if they are present, and the activities of adults and children if they are present (MOUTER; NOORDEGRAAF, 2012).

Regarding the focus group, our script was organized according to 4 activities (GUERRA, 2006):

1. Ice-breaker activity: the children were invited to choose one nametag, write their name and decorate it, while the researcher informed

them about the research and obtained their consent (the parental consent had already been obtained but it is important to respect the children's will) (Brito e Autor, 2017); then, we discussed their choice of colours and decoration on the nametags, exploring their gender identity and the concept of gender stereotypes.

2. General discussion about their TV viewing habits and preferences, about their favourite activities, and their gender identity and representations.
3. Visualization of 4 TV advertisements, selected among the most represented category in our sample – toys, featuring children, two of them presenting gender stereotypes and the other two without gender stereotypes.
4. Discussion about the way children made sense of the TV advertisements, focusing on their representations of gender, on the influence of TV and advertising, on their advertising literacy and on their critical ability.

Each focus group lasted about one hour. We asked the parents and the children permission to record the focus group discussions in video, as that helped us later on in associating excerpts of the transcriptions to each child. These recordings were transcribed with the children's names replaced by aliases, thus ensuring anonymity. The transcriptions were object of a thematic analysis (BOYATZIS, 1998).

Sampling and sample

Concerning the *corpus of the content analysis*, we first selected the three most-watched TV channels targeting tweens in Portugal: Cartoon Network, Panda Biggs and Disney Channel. In order to select a manageable corpus, we randomly selected 8 days between the dates of March 23rd and May 12th 2018 and a 3 hours period (9-12 a.m. or 5-8 p.m.) in each of the days. In total, we analysed 144 hours of TV during which we collected 104 unique advertisements.

For the focus group, we selected a purposive sample of children between 8 and 12 years old; and tried to obtain diversity in gender and socioeconomic status (GUERRA, 2006). We worked with activities centres during the summer holidays period, which contacted the parents and asked for volunteers to participate in our research. The focus groups were conducted in these centres' facilities, with support from the monitors, so that the children would be comfortable (BRITO; DIAS, 2017). We acknowledge that our sample is less diversified than we intended - all the children were residents of the metropolitan area of Lisbon, most had medium or high socioeconomic status, and we had more 10 and 11 year-olds participating than younger ages. However, many parents were quite sensitive to the topic of gender stereotypes, and it was hard recruiting participants. We organized 4 groups with 5 children each between July 1st and September 20th 2018. Table 2 presents more information on our sample.

Table 2 - Characterization of the focus groups' sample.

	Alias	Age	Gender
FG 1	Filipe	11	M
	Raquel	11	F
	Diogo	10	M
	Alice	12	F
	Tomás	10	M
FG 2	André	8	M
	Dinis	8	M
	Vasco	11	M
	Maria	11	F
	Joana	9	F
FG 3	Madalena	10	F
	Sofia	11	F
	Catarina	10	F
	Laura	11	F
	Tomás	11	M

	Alias	Age	Gender
FG 4	Rita	10	F
	Matilde	10	F
	Rodrigo	11	M
	Nuno	11	M
	Miguel	9	M

The Portuguese context

This section aims at highlighting the particularities of the Portuguese context concerning children's media consumption and media literacy, as well as their role as consumers and advertising target, drawing on comparative international studies.

As happens worldwide, Portuguese children are starting to use digital media from an increasingly younger age and spending more time online (PONTE; SIMÕES; BATISTA; JORGE, 2017). Also, their favourite activities are watching cartoons and music videos on YouTube and playing games (CHAUDRON, DI GIOIA, GEMMO, 2018). Usually, children are given their first smartphone around 10 years old, and this is when they start interacting with their friends online and using social media (PONTE; BATISTA, 2019). Research on younger children highlights the important role of TV in their media landscape (DIAS; BRITO, 2018). Although this importance loses terrain for digital media as children grow up, there are several TV channels that specifically target tweens, with Disney Channel and Cartoon Network being the 8th and 9th most watched channels in Portugal in July 2020 (HAVAS MEDIA MONITOR, 2020).

The Portuguese parental mediation style of digital technologies reveals peculiarities. Most Portuguese parents display negative perceptions and attitudes towards the use of digital technologies by young children. They justify them with their fear of negative consequences of excessive screen time – such as health problems, underdevelopment of social skills and addiction – and of privacy exposure – threat to safety. As a consequence, Portuguese parents are predominantly restrictive about screen time.

However, the average Portuguese income is low when compared to the European average, and the Portuguese tend to work long hours in order to obtain extra income (PORDATA, 2019). Thus, Portuguese parents often use digital technologies as a strategy to keep children entertained when they need to work or do house chores. This screen time is usually unsupervised and tends to “bend” previously set screen-time (DIAS; BRITO, 2018).

The limited income is also reflected in consumption. Despite that, Portuguese children have access to a wider range of products and have become more influential in the family consumption choices, following global trends (BUCKINGHAM, 2000; KOTLER; KARTAJAYA; SETIAWAN, 2017). As a consequence, the Portuguese market is very competitive, as a multiplicity of brands struggle for a piece of a very limited budget. One of the most competitive sectors is food retail, and supermarket chains invest in several children’s marketing strategies, such as the most recent digital apps and advergames, but also the traditional TV ads, paper catalogues and campaigns with collectibles (AGANTE, 2011).

The latest EU Kids Online study in Portugal (PONTE; BATISTA, 2019) revealed that, comparatively to the previous data collection in 2010, and also following the European trend, children have more digital skills and display higher media literacy. In addition, media literacy is integrated in the school curricula – the topic is integrated as a type of text – distinguishable from news -, studied in Portuguese, in 5th grade, and is addressed transversally in Citizenship throughout the years (DGE, 2012). In addition, the ONG Media Smart works closely with the Ministry of Education to develop free-access pedagogical materials for teachers about advertising literacy.

Findings and Discussion

Content analysis of TV advertisements

The 104 advertisements in our *corpus* were distributed according to the following categories: toys (66,3%), shows and events (17,4%), restaurants (6,7%), food and beverages (5,8%), clothes (1,9%) and services (e.g. internet provider) (1,9%).

Considering our first research question - To which extent are gender stereotypes present in TV advertisements for children in the Portuguese context? – we concluded that gender stereotypes were present in 75% of the 104 advertisements in our corpus. We considered as gendered the advertisements that met at least one of the criteria established by Lemish and Maya (2017): a) featuring just children of the same gender; and b) associating a product to a gender or to a colour.

We concluded that TV advertisements broadcasted in Portugal targeting tweens are predominantly gendered, particularly in the toy category, whilst food advertisements are the less gender-stereotyped, usually featuring families or groups of children with gender diversity. Gender stereotypes are represented by associating children of the same gender to a certain product, and then reinforced by the use of colours, by activities and by the setting.

Focus groups with children

During the ice-breaker activity, it was possible to observe that all children were familiar with the association of certain colors to a specific gender, but they decorated their nametags according to their own preferences.

They could give definitions for “gender” and understood the notion of “gender equality” – mentioning that “*in the past, there wasn’t equality for men and women*” (Rodrigo, 11 years old) and that “*woman work more around the house than men*” (Madalena, 10 years old). Most of them weren’t familiar with the term “stereotype”, but associated it to “*people who want to change their gender sometimes are not accepted by others*”

(Alice, 12 years old), and to “*my father expects me to act like a boy, be a fan of soccer and be strong*” (Diogo, 10 years old).

When discussing their favorite activities and toys, children mentioned that most adults associate certain toys and colors to certain genders, but they didn’t agree.

“In kindergarten, girls wore pink uniforms and the boys’ were blue. I hated that. I don’t even like pink.” (Raquel, 11 years old)

“Adults expect girls to play with dolls and boys to play with cars. That’s sad. A friend of mine is a boy and likes to play with dolls. His father berates him for that. So, we put the toys together, and the adults don’t notice that he likes to play with dolls.” (Filipe, 11 years old)

When questioned about advertising, they agreed that many advertisements convey the idea that certain products are “for girls” and others “for boys”. Some children admitted being influenced by the rules and expectations of their close network of relationships regarding gender (especially parents and teachers), but not by advertising.

“If I see a toy on TV and the commercial is just with boys, but I like it, I still ask my parents for it.” (Maria, 11 years old)

“I might like to try out a certain toy, but if I think my parents are going to find it weird or not like it, I won’t play with it.” (André, 8 years old)

We then proceeded to showing them the four TV advertisements that we selected. All of them were able to identify the gender stereotypes.

Addressing our second research question - To which extent do children (8-12 years old) demonstrate advertising literacy and ability to critically reflect upon gender representations in TV advertisements? – we concluded that all the children are able to distinguish TV advertisements from other TV programmes (Tidhar & Lemish, 2003), even noticing that some brands use cartoon characters in their advertising as a strategy for “*confusing children, and influencing them*” (Alice, 12 year s old) (Neto & Furnham, 2005). In addition, most children associated advertisements with the goals of “*selling products*” (Tomás, 11 years old), of “*showing products so that people know that they exist, see if they like them, and buy them*” (Laura, 11 years old).

Despite enjoying Netflix and digital content, children were unanimous about TV being the medium where they are more exposed to advertising. Most of them dislike advertisements, mainly because they are intrusive and interrupt the activities that they are engaged with.

“Sometimes we are watching a series on TV and commercials interrupt. Then the same add is repeated in the same commercial break. When that happens, I feel like switching to another channel!” (Raquel, 11 years old)

“I always skip the ads on YouTube. I don’t know how to do it on it, but the TV ads are really boring!” (Diogo, 10 years old)

Nevertheless, some children enjoy watching TV advertisements if these are about a product that they are interested in – *“I watch commercials about the PlayStation, because I have one, so I am interested.”* (Tomás, 11 years old) – or *“are fun”* (Matilde, 10 years old), confirming the claim that including entertainment in advertising is a successful strategy when targeting children (Gunter e McAleer, 2005; Rosado & Agante, 2011).

Concerning our third research question - How do children (8-12 years old) interpret and make sense of gender stereotypes present in TV advertisements? – and using Stuart Hall’s (1973) terminology, children expressed negotiated or opposing decoding of such advertisements, not agreeing that gender should determine product preference or behavior.

“Some TV commercials always show girls playing with Barbies and boys playing with cars and guns. I have a brother and we often play together. We make stories using my Barbies and his superheroes.” (Joana, 10 years old)

“The cereal boxes had Marvel heroes on them. Others have Disney princesses. The cereals are exactly the same.” (Tomás, 11 years old)

The children acknowledged some strategies to associate products to gender, such as *“adds for girls are cuter”* (Raquel, 11 years old), *“adds for girls are very pink, while adds for boys are blue, black or red”* (Diogo, 10 years old), and *“there was a boy on that add but he wasn’t playing with the toy, he was just watching the girls play, showing that the toy is for the girls”* (Alice, 12 years old). All the children preferred the advertisements that didn’t have gender stereotypes, because *“I like the idea of equality,*

of boys and girls being allowed to play with whatever they like” (Maria, 11 years old) and *“I like it when boys and girls play together”* (Sofia, 11 years old).

When questioned about why they thought that brands used gender stereotypes, Tomás (11 years old) curiously argued that *“maybe no girl wanted to do the casting for the cars commercial”*, and Laura (11 years old) acknowledges that *“if they think that girls are going to like that kind of toy the most, they show girls in the add, so that we can relate to them”*. However, most of them disagree with this approach, and if they were in charge of creating the adds, they would *“show both genders playing with the same toy”* (Maria, 11 years old) and *“make the toys neutral, so that both boys and girls could play with any toy they liked”* (Vasco, 11 years old).

Conclusion

At a time when children are often associated with the digital environment, our study intended to reassess the role played by the TV on their exposure to advertising, concluding that this traditional medium remains present in their daily lives and can be influential of brand awareness and desire.

Most children in our sample revealed advertising literacy skills, as they were able to distinguish between advertisements and other TV formats and understood the persuasive intent of advertising (ROBERTSON; ROSSITER, 1974).

Concerning the interpretation of gender stereotypes present in advertising, all the children in our sample expressed negotiated or opposing decoding (HALL, 1973), questioning the logic and validity of social norms and expressing an equalitarian view towards gender. The children discarded the possibility of being influenced by gender stereotypes in advertising in their consumption choices or behavior, but some admitted acting in order to meet the expectations regarding gender roles of adults, even if they disagreed their stereotyped views.

With our research, we intend to contribute to interpellate marketing and advertising professionals to be more ethical in their portrayal

of gender in advertising. First, we demonstrated that using gender stereotypes does not result in the desired identification of the target audience, but instead causes disliking and disagreement. Second, these professionals can use advertising to promote gender equality (LEMISH; MAYA, 2017), thus contributing to educate the adults that still impose gender stereotypes on children.

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