

# THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER STEREOTYPES ON PARENTS' DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES WHILE BUYING TOYS

Kateryna Martiushenko<sup>1</sup>, Eduard Palovchyk<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bc. Kateryna Martiushenko, Faculty of Management, Prague University of Economics and Business, mark11@vse.cz

<sup>2</sup> Bc. Eduard Palovchyk, Faculty of Management, Prague University of Economics and Business, pale00@vse.cz

**Abstract:** This paper examines the influence of gender factors and stereotypes in the toy industry by investigating the opinions of parents on Creatable World's gender-neutral doll. It aims to explore the factors influencing the decisions parents make when choosing toys for their children. The paper uses a mixed research method, combining individual semi-structured in-depth interviews as a qualitative method, and a structured questionnaire as a quantitative method. The qualitative study serves as preliminary research for the quantitative method. It helps to outline the main aspects and factors influencing parents' purchasing decisions and children's toy preferences. The quantitative element of the study examines the connection between aspects and factors discovered and is aimed to investigate existing patterns. The results indicate that gender impacts both parents' purchasing decisions and their perception of children's toys.

**Keywords:** gender stereotypes, toy industry, parents' decision-making, gender-neutral toys

**JEL Classification:** M30

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## INTRODUCTION

A child lives in a society where it is influenced by different biases and stereotypes, which surround it. One of those stereotypes is gender stereotypes. From a young age, a child absorbs a great deal of information, including the behaviour and choices of its family or friends and information from the media. According to Kollmayer et al. (2018) toy is one of the first things which causes stereotyped thinking among children and their thinking stereotypical right from the start. Blakemore & Centers (2005) claim that toys play an important role in children's lives, they can strengthen children's stereotypical thinking, put "roles" in their heads, which they are assumed to "play" in the future. As Cherney & Dempsey (2010) write, that toys have an impact on their socialization, educational pathways, and stimulates the development of certain cognitive skills.

This paper deals with a very particular form of gender stereotyping within the toy market. We aim to investigate the factors which have an impact on decision-making process of parents when they buy toys for their children, with a specific emphasis on the gender factor. The paper considers gender stereotype as a strong factor, and it covers the differences between toys for girls and boys and how toys impact gender stereotyping from a young age. External causalities in this research include gender predisposition (Campenni, 1999), age (Martin et al., 1995), and social biases enforced on children by the society around them (Boe & Woods, 2018; Wood et al., 2002). Because toys are one of the tools which impact children, they need to help children develop their individuality, personal traits and to contribute to their future placement in society. Hence, the research motivation is to understand better the parents' choice of toy which can contribute the most to their children's development.

The research results could contribute to understanding of parents' decision-making while purchasing toys, and the factors influencing it. The research also aims to deepen knowledge of gender stereotyping. Our findings could also benefit toy producers to improve their products and to make them more suitable for children's needs and contribute to children's development in general and as individuals. and the non-profit organization.

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Toys play an important role in children's development. According to Weisgram (2016), some part of a childhood child spends in a play, which is the result of child's environment and culture. As Leaper & Friedman (2007) believe, play is an important socializer of beliefs about gender. Children can differentiate men and women in their social surroundings at the age of two (Zosuls et al., 2009). Around the age of three, children are able to categorize themselves and others based on gender. Eisen et al. (2021) provides evidence that at this age children start to link different characteristics and behaviours to males and females, and they can identify some features, objects, and activities and assign those defining characteristics to gender groups.

### 1.1 Factors influencing toy choice

Many toys contribute to children's development and offer educational opportunities, where only a small part involves children's feelings, senses, their fantasies, and motivate them to relate with others (Trawick-Smith et al., 2011). However, there also are some factors, which influence either a child's or parental preferences when purchasing the toys. According to Wood et al. (2002) one of them are child's preferences. Kollmayer et al. (2018) also state that parents have a distinguishable influence on children's toy preferences. The parents can reinforce children's toy choice based on their own preferences or on the influence of social biases. Likewise, Bussey & Bandura (1999) write, "parents are very important in child's socialization, including their gender socialization". As some authors, like Boe & Woods (2018) point out, parents play a key role in children's acquisition of gendered stereotypes since childhood, even before they start going to school. Children tend to choose toys that are stereotypically linked to their gender (Cherney & Dempsey, 2010). As Blakemore & Centers (2005) point out, "stereotypically toys for girls relate to attractiveness, nurturance, care, and beauty, whereas toys for boys relate to technology, competition, aggression, construction, and action".

Moreover, Martin et al. (1995) assumed that toy preferences can also differ depending on the age of the child. Infants are eager to discover everything around them, including different colours, shapes, textures, sounds, etc. Toys for infants should be simple, safe, and stimulating, following, so children can experience and learn all the senses, which are new for them. On the other hand, for children in preschool, toys should be different to motivate them to learn further, because they already recognize or know different letters and numbers. Boe & Woods (2018) state that those toys should be much more complex (electronic gadgets included) than those for toddlers.

### 1.2 Gender stereotypes vs. predisposition and their role in toy choice

The other decisive factor while choosing toy is gender factor (Boe & Woods, 2018; Campenni, 1999). Nowadays many toys are stereotyped and highly gendered. Why toys for boys mostly are blasters, cars and Legos, and toys for girls are dolls, kitchen utensils or a cleaning set? Why „blue“ toys are for boys and „pink“ toys are specifically for girls? All those stereotypes surround children from their birth. These differences can be seen in the retail stores, where there are separate sections for girls and for boys, or in the online stores, where the toys are categorized similarly. As Skočajić et al. (2020) write, gender is a principal psychological construct that affects many areas of children's lives including their behaviour, interests, academic performance, sense of self, and cognitive development. At the same time, according to Eisen et al. (2021) gender stereotypes are strongly influenced by children's and adults' behaviour, interests, attitudes, and activities.

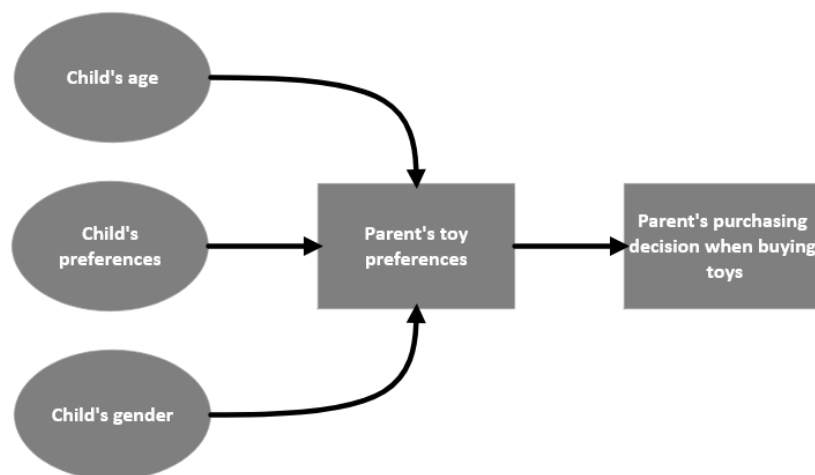
This issue is important and relevant for toymakers to attract customers and for children's parents to satisfy their child and to help it develop. It is almost impossible to define the line for toymakers between making products children love and telling kids how they should play, behave or even think. These days most toy producers create toys suitable for both genders. For example, the Hot wheels brand, mainly aimed for boys, tries to broaden their customer segments by adapting the features of their products to the preferences of girls. On one hand, this removes stereotypical thinking, which is contained in their products, by offering the same product, cars, for the opposite gender. On the other hand, by improving

features like colour, form and design of their toys using more girlish features (like pink colour and creating thematic “Barby cars”), the brand only contributes to gender stereotypes. Moreover, the campaigns of “No Gender December” Medhora (2014) assume that gender differences in children’s toys can later lead to gender inequality, which limits them to do only what is expected from them depending on their sex. Some researchers suggest that the preferences of toys are genetically implied in child’s gender, it is influenced by the so-called gender predisposition (Boe & Woods, 2018; Dinella et al., 2017). Psychologists also suppose that by allowing children to be who they want to be, following the naturally rooted preferences will arise, even without an impact on culture. Miller et al. (2009) also confirm that depending on gender, the preferred characteristics of the toys will differ respectively, as in the case of gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, the existence of gender stereotypes in the toy industry is hard not to acknowledge. Therefore, gender-neutral toys have become popular on the market.

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

We used the mixed research method to fulfil the goal of the research. The research consists of two studies, which use qualitative, individual semi-structured in-depth interviews, and quantitative, a structured questionnaire, research methods. The research approach follows from information gathered during the literature review as shown in the Fig. 1. At early ages, children are mostly influenced by the toys parents buy for them. Hence, parents are perceived as main decision-makers in the toy purchasing process. Toy choice can be influenced by variables like children’s age, gender (parent’s gender stereotypes), and gender predispositions, which are reflected in children’s toy preferences. We believe that these variables also have an impact on the parents’ decision to purchase a specific toy.

Fig. 1 Research approach



Source: Authors

**RQ1:** Which chosen variables influence parents’ decision-making when purchasing toys for their children?

**RQ2:** How do gender stereotypes and gender predispositions impact parents’ decisions?

**RQ3:** What is parents’ opinion on gender-neutral toys on the example of “Creatable World” doll?

Answering these questions could contribute to better understanding of parent’ decision-making and the factors influencing it.

### 2.1 Qualitative study

The qualitative study aims to determine main factors which influence parents’ preferences and following decision-making process. Our goal was to find out more about the toys children play with and parent’s opinion on gender-neutral toys on example of the “Creatable World” doll. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used for the collection of data. Individual interviews served as preliminary research for the second quantitative part of this research. The interviews were conducted in a friendly atmosphere

to avoid anxiety bias, and to enable participants to answer questions based on their emotions and experience. This allows us to better understand the respondents by uncovering topics through improvisation and provides more flexibility.

The respondent sample consisted of 5 people. Participants were chosen from different countries to find out more about stereotypes in diverse cultures. In the research took part parents with a child or children aged under 12. This limitation was due to the previous research, which states that children usually stop playing with toys during their pre-teen or early teenage years. Since the „pre-teen“ age can be defined as a range of 9-12 years old due to the same research, the upper limit of 12 years was made (Martin et al., 1995). The creators of the „Creatable world“ mention that their doll is for children starting from 6 years old because of the smaller elements. However, it was decided not to determine a lower age limit to find out more information and opinions from respondents to “Creatable world” doll.

Due to the current pandemic situation, interviews were conducted using various video-call applications (Skype, MS Teams). The interview structure allowed to the uncover hidden thoughts of the respondents regarding the parents' toy choice, when buying toys for children. The paper-pencil technique was used to collect the data from individuals resulting in more “in-depth” findings. This method highlights the main and the most interesting thoughts discovered from the interviews. The interviews were also recorded using a Dictaphone. The respondents were informed of audio recording of the interview in the beginning of it. We used the content analysis to analyse qualitative data. This method was chosen because of its advantages, which are unobtrusive data collection, transparency, replicability, and flexibility (Bengtsson, 2016; Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The main purpose of this analysis was to simplify the data by summarizing and structuring them.

## **2.2 Quantitative study**

This study generalizes the information obtained during the qualitative part of this research and examines respondents' perception of their children's opinion on this toy and willingness to play with it. A structured questionnaire was chosen for this part of the research. The questionnaire consists of 23 questions in a structured manner, which allows us to obtain relatively accurate data. The questionnaire is designed to find out more about the factors, which influence respondents' toy choices, and their opinion and suggestions for improvement of the “Creatable World” doll. This idea refers to the funnel approach, where general questions are asked first and specific questions later. The questionnaire starts off with simple questions to ease the participant into the survey, followed by basic information questions and then moving into classification and identification. It allows a researcher to minimise response error to easing participants without information overload (Goertzen, 2017).

We used 7-point Likert scale to give respondents a choice where 1 means strong disagreement and 7 - strong agreement. This technique ensured that the respondents had a range of options. However, there were some limitations in this method as well. For example, short-term feelings and the mood of participants is something that is always difficult to avoid. Temporary feelings may have divert opinions of participants while answering the survey (Almeida et al., 2017). Additionally, characteristics of every individual are distinct; different personalities and beliefs might have interfered with honest answers and could have diverted the results.

The respondent sample consisted of more than 100 respondents, and used a judgmental sampling technique, because only parents with child/children under 12 took part in the research. The respondents were considered individuals, not depending on whether they represent one family or not. The participants belonged to different age groups, they were citizens of different countries, and had different socio-cultural backgrounds. The aim of having a diverse sample was to find out more about stereotypes in diverse cultures.

We created the questionnaire using the Qualtrics online service. This software was also used to perform the primary analysis of the collected data and to derive some of the first conclusions. The questionnaire was shared using the “snowball” technique. At the beginning, the questionnaire was shared with people, who met the requirements regarding the respondent sample. Later, after filling in the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to either recommend someone from their surroundings, who met the criteria

(has children in a certain age interval) or to pass on the questionnaire to them by themselves. The questionnaire was also shared using the SurveySwap platform. This method of data collection allowed us to attain the desired number of respondents and ensured the most diverse sample possible in the current circumstances. The respondents received the link for the questionnaire and were asked to follow all the instructions and to answer quickly and honestly.

The coding for the first question with nominal scale was ascribed a value of 1 to every male response and 0 to female responses. Similarly, the coding proceeded in other questions with nominal scale. The 7-points Likert scale allowed us to enter these numbers directly into the grid. If the answers were in a different form, they were converted into a numerical scale. We mostly used nominal and ratio scales and a mix of descriptive and inferential statistics to analyse the data. The statistical analysis methods varied from basic calculations (averages, modus, medians etc.) through to more sophisticated analyses (correlations, regressions etc.). For data analysis, we used Excel and SPSS software.

Descriptive statistics (mean, median, skewness, standard deviation and variance) describe the data set and illuminate the details of the sample. This was the first set of statistics covered, before moving on to inferential statistics. Inferential statistics aimed to make inferences about the population and to make predictions about what could be found in the full population. These could include predictions about differences between groups and relationships between variables. Statistical techniques like T-Test, ANOVA, Correlation, Regression were used in this phase. This analysis allowed us to understand the sample better and to answer the research questions.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Qualitative study

Answering the first research question, we found out that children in a family try to find the way to play together, and it does not matter with which toys they play. They can play together with dolls, cars, and “all gender” toys, or play with intellectual toys or those that encourage creativity, like Lego and puzzles. However, parents who have girls, mentioned that their daughters prefer role-play as doctors, teachers, mothers, and cooks. They enjoy playing with kitchen sets and medical staff. When girls choose the toy, they prefer brighter or lighter colours like yellow, pink and pastels. Parents with boys mentioned that their children prefer to play with cars, building blocks, guns, and swords etc. The toys they like and prefer to play with are mostly blue and black.

Choice of the toys depends mostly on child's age. If child is younger than 3-4 and cannot make the decision, parents provide them with 2-3 options of toys to allow children to choose. It can be derived that children's preferences are especially important for parents, usually they buy toys, which children like and want. Parents can also choose toys for children themselves. For parents, their toy's quality, educational, innovative, and creative value are important. Their priority is how the toy contributes to their child's development and its engagement-attractiveness level.

Regarding gender stereotypes and their impact on both children's and parents' preferences, most of the parents admitted that their children play with toys meant for their gender. Nevertheless, in two cases, parents mentioned that their children sometimes play with toys which are primarily meant for the opposite sex. Parents outlined that their children seemed to enjoy the play, i.e., gender factor is not that important for children, but more of the parents themselves. According to parents, older children are able even to evaluate whether this toy is for girl or for boy. *“Boys and girls are different, and they have different preferences, they like different things. So, it is logic that there exist different toys for different genders, it evolved historically”* (Respondent 1, personal communication, 2021a).

Parents agreed that “Creatable world” gender-neutral doll serves as an important “message” to children and helps them to declare their personality and it is an opportunity for children to learn and to play together as in a society. Some psychologists also say that through the play children can discuss some topics or situations they worry about (Trawick-Smith et al., 2011). Gender-neutral toys can help a child to “show” itself to the world and be “real”. Parents liked the idea that those toys look natural, like a real person, because in real life all people look different, and they have unique personalities. *“I am glad that this toy is*

*not “telling” children who they should be and what they should do. Children can “create” and “build” their own character and its own path” (Respondent 3, personal communication, 2021).*

### **3.2 Quantitative study**

The questionnaire was distributed to 121 participants and 103 of them completed it (a response rate of 85%). In terms of gender, the sample was distributed as follows: 46 respondents were male (44,7%) and 57 were female (55,3%). The age of the respondents varied between 21 and 55, the average age – 31. Most of the respondents had one child (55%). Other respondents had 2 children (30%), 3 and more children (15%). The children’s age was split into 4 age categories: “under 3 years old” (42%), “between 4 and 6 years old” (26%), “between 7 and 9 years old” (26%), “between 10 and 12 years old” (14%). The number of the children in specific age intervals could differ, because of uncertainty of the total number of children.

#### **Common factors influencing parents’ purchasing decisions**

We found that mostly children chose their toys (mean=5,11). In other cases parents chose toys for children based on their own preferences (mean=4,31) or the variety of toys in the store (mean=4,62). The most crucial factors influencing parents’ toy choice were “Child’s age”, “Child’s preferences” and “Educational value” of the toy. Those factors also appeared in parent’s answer regarding the “Creatable world” doll. Fewer parents chose “Own preferences and opinion” and “Child’s gender” as important criteria for them. The reason could be that this question asked parents directly about those criteria, so they could have been influenced by this question.

#### **Influence of gender stereotypes and predispositions on parents’ purchasing decisions**

As follows from the results, boys appeared to play more with construction, soldiers and video games than girls. Girls preferred categories like dolls, make-up, kitchen, and cleaning sets. Regarding the gender-neutral toys or activities, it appeared that girls play with board games and puzzles, some figurines, do arts and crafts and read books more than boys, who prefer physical play and activities more. To sum up, overall descriptive statistics confirmed that boys play more with “male” toys; girls play more with “female” toys and are also more likely to play with gender-neutral toys.

From the correlation analysis it also appears, that parents’ gender has an influence on the evaluation of the Creatable World doll by parents with a p-value equal to <0,001 and a 0,351 correlation, meaning that males were more likely to select it. Female children, who often play with the gender-neutral toys, were more likely to play with male toys (p-value <0,001 and the 0,727 correlation) and were more likely to prefer the Creatable World doll to their parents’ opinion. The correlation analysis also pointed out that the gender of the respondents influences the selection of the “Child’s gender” as a decisive criterion when considering buying a toy with the -0,244 correlation and p-value of 0,013.

The first regression analysis (RA) considered a respondent’s gender as an independent variable (IV) and the variance of choice of the “Child’s gender” as a dependent variable (DV). The existent effect on the likeliness to choose “Child’s gender” depending on the respondent’s gender confirmed, with the p-value of 0,013 and influence of about 6%. The second RA took child’s gender as the IV and the evaluation of the Creatable World doll by the child as a DV. This RA confirmed the impact of the child’s gender on the parent’s perception of the child’s likelihood of loving the Creatable World doll, with the 7,7% influence with the p-value of 0,005. It was also confirmed in the next RA that the children’s gender (IV) has an impact on the selection on the gender-neutral toys to play with (DV). In fact, female children were confirmed as more likely to play with gender-neutral toys, as follows from the correlation rate of 0,774. The percentage of impact was 59,9% and the p-value of <0,001.

Using the t-test analysis we again confirm that the gender of parents (IV) has an influence on their evaluation of the Creatable world doll (DV). The average mean of how much parents like the doll was higher in case of female respondents with the mean of 5,46, when male respondents’ mean equalled to 4,62. The p-value for this relationship equalled <0,001 with the mean difference of 0,84. The t-test also

confirmed the causal effect between the respondent's, parent's, gender (IV) and the frequency of selection of the "Child's gender" (DV) as an important factor when choosing the toy.

According to the results of the following t-test, the gender of the children (IV) also had an influence on how their parents perceive their children's likeliness to play with the Creatable World doll (DV). The mean for male respondents was 4,64 and the mean for female respondents was 5,46. The p-value for this effect was equal to 0,005.

The last t-test analysis also confirmed that parents with children in the age intervals of 3-6 years old and 10-12 years old were more likely to evaluate the Creatable World doll as more attractive for their children. The test also showed that parents of females had a more positive opinion about the Creatable World doll than those of males, at a mean difference of 1,67 and 1,90, and the p-value of <0,001 and 0,026 respectively. The t-test also confirmed that parents of females in the age interval of 3-6 years old perceived the doll more positively, than parents of males (1,33 mean difference and p-value <0,001). They also had higher evaluation of the Creatable World product than other parents, whose children were in other age intervals.

A chi-square test was then carried out to ultimately confirm or deny the previously tested hypothesis about the causal effect between the parent's gender and the frequency of choosing the "Child's gender" as a criterion in the decision-making purchasing process. Even though the overall frequency of the occurrence of "Child's gender" as a decisive criterion was lower in comparison with other factors, the following is confirmed. Whilst the gender of the parent does not have any significant effect on the selection of other individual criteria, the "Child's gender" proves to be impacted by the gender of the parent with the p-value equal 0,15 (2-sided) and 0,12 (1-sided) respectively. This value confirms that the correlation exists between parents' gender and importance of the child's gender for them during the toy purchasing process. In fact, men were a little more likely to choose "Child's gender" in this question. However, even though the causal effect exists, the significance of the influence is rather low.

### **Parents' opinion on gender-neutral toy ("Creatable World" doll example)**

Parents favoured the idea of "Creatable world" (mean=5,34), while a smaller number of them (mean=4,86) were more likely to buy this doll for their child. Moreover, some parents thought that doll didn't have enough creative and educational value (mean=5,06). Another reason was a lack of information about this doll (mean=5,30). Regarding child's preferences and interest in this doll, parents supposed their children will like it and will play with it (mean=5,09). The overall descriptive statistics of the categories "Parent's toy choice CW doll" (5,08 at 7-point scale) and "Child's toy choice CW doll" (5,08 at 7-point scale) confirmed this fact.

The parents were also more likely to evaluate Creatable World doll positively, if they thought that the children would like the doll, which could be represented by the p-value of <0,001 and the correlation of 0,724. Moreover, depending on the child's gender, the parents' opinion about how much their children would like the Creatable World doll varied with the 0,278 correlation and the p-value of 0,005. Female children were more likely to evaluate Creatable World doll positively from the parents' point of view. Finally, female children, whose age was in the interval from 3 to 6 years were more likely than males to like the Creatable World doll in their parents' opinion (p-value of <0,001; 0,342 correlation). The parents of female children in this age were also more likely to be fond of the toy (correlation of 0,343; the p-value of <0,001).

The RA confirmed that female children in the age intervals (IV) of 3-6 years old and 10-12 years old were more likely to enjoy playing with the Creatable World doll (DV), in their parents' opinion. Moreover, female children who played with the gender-neutral toys (IV), were perceived by their parents that they would like Creatable World doll (DV) more, than male children from the dataset. The impact on the child's evaluation of the Creatable World doll was around 10,7%, the correlation equalled 0,327 and the p-value - <0,001. The parents were then confirmed to like the Creatable World doll much more (DV) if they think that their children would like to play with it (IV). This fact confirms that the children's preferences have considerable influence on the parents' decision-making. Lastly, the RA confirmed that the children's gender (IV) has

an impact on how parents perceive the likelihood of their child to like the Creatable World doll (DV). With the correlation coefficient of 0,278, the relatively low influence rate of 7,7% and the p-value of <0,001, it was confirmed that the parents of females think that their child would like the Creatable World doll more than the parents of male children.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the research was to investigate parents' decision-making process, while buying toys for their children, and to investigate the causal effect between the different factors influencing parental decision-making. We aimed to find insights into how parents are influenced by the gender factor, meaning both gender of their children and themselves. The additional emphasize of the research was to explore the parents' opinion on the gender-neutral toys using an example of „Creatable World“ doll.

We confirmed that chosen variables have an impact on parental decision-making. Children's age, their preferences and gender factor proved to have a decisive influence on parents' toy preferences and opinions.

Most of the respondents are highly influenced by them in their decision-making and purchasing process. Moreover, educational value of the toy appeared to play an important role as well. We found that parents are mostly motivated by the creative and innovative value of the toy. The key criteria are if this toy leads to communicativeness, helps children to create their own “self” and allow them to be who they want to be. Even though the frequency of the “Child's gender” factor occurrence was lower, the influence of gender could be derived from the toys with which respondents' children are playing (and which are segregated by gender factor). So, it is possible to conclude that gender is of key importance, either from the point of view of the gender predispositions or gender stereotypes in parents' decision-making processes while buying toys. We also confirm that gender stereotypes influence parents' decision-making, but not the toy preferences of children. Nevertheless, this is true only to some age, while children are not yet influenced by the gender stereotypes imposed on them by their parents. Older children prove to be influenced by the gender factor in their toy preferences. As follows from the quantitative study, the gender factor is overly complicated to investigate.

The research aimed to deepen understanding of gender stereotyping. The research results also contribute to understanding of parents' decision-making process, when purchasing toys, and the factors influencing it. The findings could benefit toy producers to better target children's needs and bring understanding of gender stereotypes to individual parents.

## Future research

We assume, it would be beneficial to include a larger respondent sample, which will be diversified in terms of gender, age, and other demographical factors. It should also be expanded in terms of impact of cultural or other factors, which could influence the parents' decision-making process. The other interesting option to conduct research is to use practical methods to make much more valuable conclusions. The research could consist of an experiment, including a larger respondent sample of children, who represent different ages and genders equally. There are other options to enrich the results of the future research, such as, go into field, to observe the respondents, to simulate the purchasing situation, etc.

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