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THE COMPARISON OF GENDER STEREOTYPING IN BOYS' TOY COMMERCIALS IN SLOVAKIA AND IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Abstract: *The paper examines and compares the principles of gender stereotyping in British and Slovak commercials of boys' toys. The study understands the process of television advertising as a form of mass communication, where advertisements play the role of messages, television behaves as a channel, advertisers figure as senders of the messages and children represent the audience. The analysis of the commercials shows that the Slovak commercials do not present any scientific toys, instead, they promote a toy gun from Hasbro, while the sample of British commercials offer at least one scientific toy and no gun. The Slovak advertisements do not play with the language, and they rather prefer a plain presentation, where the voice-overs sometimes use voice changers that turn their presentation into a robot-like speech.*

Key words: *television advertising, gender stereotypes, toy commercials, strongly masculine toys, moderately masculine toys.*

Media figures as an inseparable constituent of the contemporary society, often described as consumer society. People meet and use the media almost continuously every day, e.g. when they watch television, read newspapers and magazines, browse the Internet or pass a billboard. Media becomes the primary source of information and as a result, it plays an important role in shaping people's ideas about the real world, and it also influences the way of people's life, interaction or communication. Television advertising, as part of the world of media, concentrates primarily on selling products or services. Because they have only a limited time to do so (20 maybe 30 seconds), they need to present the product in a condensed but attractive form that takes hold of viewers' attention. The target audience determines the way of the product's presentation, and because of that, commercials for toys choose different tactics from those of promoting, e.g. luxuries. Although the tactics of presentation differ in commercials, the frequent occurrence of gender stereotypes remains. The analysis of television toy commercials enables to examine to what extent they use the stereotypes and what kind of messages they present and suggest for children. The paper examines and compares the principles of gender stereotyping in British and Slovak commercials of

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boys' toys. The sample of British commercials was drawn from databases and archives, while the sample of Slovak commercials was drawn from two television networks (TV Joj and Markíza) broadcast during Saturday and Sunday morning cartoons. The work approaches the process of television advertising as a form of mass communication, where advertisements play the role of messages, television behaves as a channel, advertisers figure as senders of the messages and children represent the audience.

Guy Cook (Cook 1-3) emphasises the importance of understanding advertising as a discourse, because it also reflects communicating patterns in the society, and because advertisements do not exist on their own, without any external influences. He sees advertisements as a conglomeration of elements that interact with each other, while these elements include other discourses, other advertisements, language, paralanguage, a society, participants, function, substance, picture, music and a situation. The analysis also understands the process of television advertising as a form of mass communication, where advertisements play the role of messages, television behaves as a channel, advertisers figure as senders of the messages and children represent the audience.

According to Petr Pavlík (Pavlík 53-54) media plays an important role in popularising and in spreading concrete definitions of gender roles and gender relations, very often in a form of a stereotype. The products of media present a very clear idea about men's and women's expected appearance, behaviour, and also about the relationships between them. He exemplifies his claim by analysing the depiction of men and women in media. According to his findings in the description of men, media concentrates on their achievements in their professional life, while references to their family life slightly occur. Women tend to be described from the perspective of their relationship with men, or in connection with their family background. When discussing the effect of these stereotypes on adults and children, Shannon N. Davis claims, that (Davis 407-408):

> While commercials may not influence their [adults'] definition of what is "masculine" or "feminine", they may simply reinforce what adults believe. Children, on the other hand, are still forming their values and beliefs. They are more vulnerable to many types of images or stereotypes presented to them, particularly those with audio and visual reinforcement. (Davis 407-408)

The presented stereotypes may serve as examples for them, giving guidelines how to behave and what to do in certain situations.

The advertisers as the senders of the message

The ten toys represent the products of six manufacturers, namely Mattel, Hasbro, Lego, Fisher-Price, Cepia and Giochi Preziosi. The only non-American manufacturer is the Italian Giochi Preziosi but the partly-Danish Lego also shows connection to the Europen market. In case of the Lego toys the company's logo occurs from the beginning of the advertisements, while Hasbro, Mattel and Fisher-Price choose the technique of presenting the company's logo only in the final part of

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the commercials. Giochi Preziosi does not present itself in the advertisement directly, in fact, the company's name is not presented at all. Instead, the name of the distributor appears in the commercial, namely EPline. EPline is a Czech company specialised in distributing and marketing strategies for toys. They handle the presentation of the toy, while the manufacturer stays in the background. Taking into consideration the companies' slogans, the formerly mentioned three companies emphasising the importance of play, happiness and adventure (Mattel, Hasbro, Fisher-Price) are accompanied by a fourth one, namely the Lego company. According to the Lego's official website, the name of the company comes from a Danish expression, 'leg godt', which means play well. The company claims to follow this idea since its establishment. As it was mentioned in the British commercials' analysis, the idea of careless, playful childhood for everyone figures as a dominating one in the commercials of these companies. As a result, the toy manufacturers produce boys' and girls' toys in an equal number. Lego developed this tendency by using computer and other techniques in order to eliminate children characters from the advertisements, so it is harder for the audience to differentiate between toys for boys and toys for girls. The rest of the toy companies (EPline and Cepia) concentrate mainly on the product. Cepia introduced its Kung Zhu hamsters within a bigger campaign promoting its stuffed pets by the slogan 'Pets without mess'. The Kung Zhu toys figure only as a category among several other that introduce the hamsters and other animals in different situations (ZhuZhu puppies, ZhuZhu babies, ZhuZhu Princess, etc.). As the description of the new companies shows, the tendency to produce and distribute gender neutral toys persists. Lego and Cepia approach this neutrality either by eliminating children characters from the advertisements, or by presenting various themes for the same toy types. EPline, as a distributor, also highlights diversity and distributes different toy types for boys and for girls as well. None of the examined toy companies can be associated only with toys of strongly masculine features.

The advertisements as messages

Children appear only in five advertisements out of ten, all of them boys. The age of these children varies from five to sixteen, and the number of the characters also shows a tendency towards alternation. The role of the children in these advertisements shares the features with that in the British commercials. The boys figure only as silent characters, they neither introduce the product and its parameters, nor talk to each other. Their role is to manipulate the toys in order to show how they work in action, and to express joy and excitement. Some of them have a short line during the play like 'Spustiť akciu!', 'Úžasné!', or 'Alebo nič!'. These lines show similarities with those presented in the British commercials: 'Dude, try to beat that!', 'Beat that!!!', 'Look out for its spike!', or 'Whoa!!!'.

The advertisements followed the same tactics as the British ones by presenting only boys highlighting by this step the commercials' main target audience. The presentation of the toys does not deviate from this tendency either. The commercials that do not present children use other means to address the correct audience. The colors, voice-overs and the music, for example, help

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them to create masculine advertisements without presenting boys but the number of tactics does not end here.

The commercials aired in Slovakia use the same techniques of gender stereotyping as the British ones. Hasbro's Nerf, for example, presents older boys dressed in black like members of a commando unit and all of them carry a gun. The characters simulate a night attack, during which they perform acrobatic jumps over big boxes, and aim to look professional and serious. The presentation of guns indicates the connection of the toy with violence and therefore, it belongs to the strongly masculine toys. The masculinity of the toy is underlined mainly by its presentation. The aggressive-looking boys, the night, the darkness and the gun itself resemble images from action movies and consequently, the aim to address children who often identify themselves with the heroes of such movies appears. The KungZhu hamsters use samurai kits and several types of weapons in order to look serious. They fight in an arena with each other highlighting by this the violent feature of the toys, and the aim to evoke the competitive spirit in children. The violent and competitive features of the toys, in case of these products, indicate the strongly masculine traits. The Gormiti advertisement introduces the forty-two new figures of the third series of the Gormiti show. The figures resemble different creatures, monsters, aliens, golems, and many other beast-like beings presented by the dichotomic principle as members of the good nation and the evil one. The advertisement highlights the frightful and aggressive appearance of these figures, and the division between good and evil implies a fight between the two nations. Because of the aggressive, violent and dreadful appearance these toys also belong to the category of strongly masculine toys. The Hot Wheels commercial presents similar cars as in the British one, and works with the same principles. This characterisation indicates that the toy also belongs to the category of masculine toys. However, the effect of the commercial had weakened because of the environment the toy is presented in. The producers of the commercials had decided to use a kitchen as background, and consequently, the masculinity of the toys deteriorated. Two of the Lego toys also belong to the strongly masculine products. NinjaGo and Lego Hero Factory also attract their audiences' attention by using elements supporting either competitiveness or the desire to fight against the evil characters.

The rest of the Lego toys belong to the category of moderately masculine products. These advertisements do not popularise violence and aggression, they rather present the toys in a peaceful way. The elements that indicate boys as primary audience include the male voice-over, the seemingly male Lego figures with a masculine voice and the themes of police station and space centre. The toys of Fisher-Price's Imaginext also belong to the second category since the advertisement emphasises only the chance for an adventure when playing with these toys, and do not depict the products as elements of an action movie. The age of the child presented in the commercial also may indicate the toy's moderately masculine feature since he is not older than five.

The analysed toy advertisements highlight the fact that the strategies used in Slovak television broadcast show similarities to those used in the United

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Kingdom. While the British commercials included scientific toys and figures from movies or television series, Slovak advertisement do not show such diversity. Strongly masculine Slovak commercials encourage the same behaviour as the British ones. Both promote toys that suggest aggression, violence, competitiveness, and adventure. Moderately masculine toys, on the other hand, do not emphasise violence or aggression, they concentrate on the presented story in order to place the product into a context. The characteristics of the environment the toys are presented in also show the same tendencies. Strongly masculine advertisements prefer dark colours to the light ones. The rooms or the environment where the toys appear help to activate children's imagination, and the scarcely lit places also may imply the presence of a mystery making by this strategy the product even more interesting. Because most of the strongly masculine toys connect to warrior and fighter figures, the advertisements place them into an environment that corresponds with this image. As a result, most of the fighters appear on a battlefield, or in an arena. Moderately masculine toy advertisements do not use such techniques. Instead, they create a story around the product, where dark colours and other strongly masculine elements may be omitted, and let the story make the product interesting.

As it was mentioned before, the tendency to use male voice-overs in advertisements for boys' toys preserves without an exception in Slovak commercials. The dynamic presentation of strongly masculine toys and the usage of a slower technique in moderately masculine advertisements also remained. The voice-over of the strongly masculine commercials speaks in a rapid way multiplying by this the impression of dynamism, and the fast picture and image changes serve the same aim. Moderately masculine toys, on the other hand, prefer slower presentation, since they need to take into consideration the age of their target audience.

The music serves the aim to take hold of the attention of audience, and therefore its role is crucial in the presentation. The tendency to use expressive music in strongly masculine toys preserves only in Hot Wheels and Nerf, the other toy commercials place the voice-over into foreground and rely on his ability to present the product in an interesting way. Notwithstanding the fact that Imaginext promotes a moderately masculine toy package, it uses rock music during the presentation and works with the voice-over as partners. This is the only advertisement that uses a song to attract the audience's attention. Gormiti and Lego's Hero Factory apply only silent background music that resembles the tones of action movies, emphasising by this the heroic features of the toys. As the analysis shows, the means of presentation do not differ in Slovak and in British advertisements to a great extent. Both types differentiate between strongly and moderately masculine toys, and choose a promoting technique according the types of toys.

The graphic presentation of the brand names also shows similarities. Hot Wheels, for example, use the same technique in the brand name's depiction as in the British commercial. The Slovak presentation works with the English expression and does not replace them with a Slovak equivalent. Imaginext, Gormiti and Nerf do not use specific brand name depiction, and Lego

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also relies only on its well known logo. The company changed this strategy only at its NinjaGo, where the brand name imitated the Chinese writing system. In this case, the brand name serves as an index that refers to the Far East, connecting by this the product and the product's brand name. The depiction of Kung Zhu's brand name uses two types of presentation. The first technique uses a straightforward implication by placing the outline of a samurai into the centre of the brand name. The second technique uses the method of symbols by placing two crossed samurai swords under the brand name, symbolising by them the samurai theme of the toy.

The Slovak advertisements do not contain poems or borrowed song, similarly to the British ones. Because the products of Fisher-Price's Imaginext present themselves among Slovak and British commercials as well, it gives the possibility to compare their jingle. While the English version has two lines, the Slovak version uses only one right at the beginning of the advertisement: 'Imaginext – je čas na dobrodružstvo'. This line corresponds only partly with the first halves of the English version 'Imaginext adventures', while the second halves do not even appear in the commercial, and the music of these commercials does not correspond either. As it was mentioned before, the music of the British Imaginext commercial dominated over the voice-over, while the situation turns into its opposite in the Slovak advertisement. Most of the advertisements surround their product with a story that makes the toy more attractive. The stories remain unfinished, similarly to the British ones, in order to raise children's interest. All the Lego toys use this technique, except the NinjaGo, while from the non-Lego toys only Gormiti and Imaginext apply this form of presentation.

The Slovak variants of the advertisements show the biggest differences in the presentation of the products' brand name. They do not use alliteration, and none of the commercials describe the toys with hyperboles, in fact, they preserve the tendency towards a neutral language, making by this the advertisements less enjoyable. The advertisements do not play with the language, and they rather prefer a plain presentation, where the voice-overs sometimes use voicechangers that turn their presentation into a robot-like speech. The Slovak advertisements' messages correspond with the images presented in them, but sometimes they develop a context to the product in order to make it more attractive. The toys stand in the centre of the presentation, similarly to the British commercials, while the music, voice-overs, the lights and the colours serve as complementary means that highlight the masculine features of the presented toys. The voice-overs list adequate amount of information about the usage and the parameters of the products. The gender stereotypes that Slovak advertisements use correspond with those of British advertisements. By the presence of a toy gun advertisement Slovak advertising shows a stronger affinity towards violent and aggressive toys than the British one. Slovak commercials also tend to use the technique of presenting the toys either as strongly masculine, or as moderately masculine, while they apply the same methods as British advertising, when indicating the extent of masculinity. As it was mentioned before, the Slovak presentations of the toys do not use the same prosodic techniques in the brand name introduction as the British ones.

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While the English presentation plays with the language by using alliterations (Mega Mack Playtown, Hot Wheels Criss Cross Crash, Match Master, Test Tube Aliens, Ultra Blast Batman), hyperboles and figurative expressions, the Slovak variants prefer neutral voice and simple presentation (‘Nový výkonný policajný čln od Lego City‘, ‘Ste pripravení na naozajstné dobrodružstvá?’).

The receivers

Children figure as the primary target audience for the Slovak advertisements, showing by this a similar tendency to the British commercials. However, the presence of a toy gun commercial and the lack of scientific toys suggest a slightly different audience from the British one. The addressing takes into consideration the audience’s age, gender and interest, and use the means of presentation according to these categories. They address children primarily through their emotions and through appeals to become part of the presented adventures (‘Postav raketu, naloď astronauta a odštartuj do vesmíru opraviť satelit!’). While the characters play with the toys in the advertisements, they show excitement and joy in order to persuade children that they need a similar experience, which can be achieved only by the presented products. Lego toys address mainly children with creative imagination when they attach a story to their product with the appeal to construct a similar one or finish the old one. The commercials also address parents when describing the toys’ features and the number of figures in one package. The Slovak commercials emphasise only the number of toys within one package, while do not add whether they include the batteries, or not. The British advertisements act the opposite way.

The comparison of British and Slovak boys’ toy advertisements show that the Slovak ones use the same techniques in presenting their product. The only difference appears in the toy categories. The Slovak commercials did not present any scientific toys, instead, they promoted a toy gun from Hasbro, while the sample of British commercials offered at least one scientific toy and no gun. The Slovak variants of the advertisements show the biggest differences in the presentation of the products’ brand name. They do not use alliteration, and none of the commercials describe the toys with hyperboles, in fact, they preserve the tendency towards a neutral language, making by this the advertisements less enjoyable. The advertisements do not play with the language, and they rather prefer a plain presentation, where the voice-overs sometimes use voice changers that turn their presentation into a robot-like speech.

The paper serves as a source for further researches, since it maps only the present situation of television toy advertising. It can be used, for example, for the comparison of contemporary tendencies of presentation with the strategies of presentation in the past. This comparison examines the development of toy advertising in the United Kingdom linearly with the tendencies appearing in the Slovak Republic.

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