

Introduction to Cultural Studies (I)  
PHILGEIST\_V\_17322\_12S  
Wednesdays 12:00am- 2:00pm  
Sommersemester  
Lukas Lammers

*Batman or My Little Pony?*

The role of the McDonald's advertisements on the impossibility for children to change the status quo.

By

Marie Turcan

Erasmus Student

01/09/2012

## Introduction

The McDonald's franchise has existed since 1940, but it was not until 1979 that Bob Bernstein created the Happy Meal (Hawley), a paperboard box created for children that contains food, a small drink, and always a small toy.

From July 7<sup>th</sup> to August 3<sup>rd</sup> 2011, McDonald's created a new advertisement campaign for eight Happy Meal Toys, four of which were Batman characters, the four others were My Little Ponies.



Source: Moreau, Nicholas. "Zaninum". Kids Meal Wiki. Wikia.com 09.07.2011. 01.08.2012 < [http://images.wikia.com/happymeal/images/9/9a/McD\\_Malaysia\\_Brave\\_Pony.jpg](http://images.wikia.com/happymeal/images/9/9a/McD_Malaysia_Brave_Pony.jpg) >

The Happy Meal product has been created for children, who naturally became the demographic target of the marketing advertisements. Thus, the colors are bright and numerous and the toys are, except for possible collectors, designed to appeal to children. However, one cannot help but see the division of the McDonald's advertisement into two distinct parts: the My Little Ponies are separated from the Batman characters by a white lightning bolt. The obvious reason for this choice is to make clear that all the toys are not for the same children, and the designers of the ad are assuming that little girls will first go for the Little Ponies than for the Batman characters, more reserved to young boys.

In 1994, Otnes et al. (183–194) examined children's letter to Santa Claus, and realized that if there were – even if it was a minority – girls who asked for *Batman* or *Turtle Ninja* toys, there were close to no boys who wanted something to do with a *Barbie* or *Baby Alive* dolls. If it is true that girls are more likely than boys to choose a toy that has been designed for the other sex, they are still a striking minority, little girls largely preferring toys that have been labeled as “girly”.

This study proved that even from the early age, children already make gender oriented choices, as if it were unnatural for a boy to ask for a Barbie or a My Little Pony doll. According to Butler (Gender Trouble Chapter 1), gender is constructed by the repetition of acts that seem to express gender, but in fact rather constitute the illusion of gender identity. This notion of performativity can be found in the constant choice of little girls to go for the pink toys that have been marketed for them, which is not a result of them being girls, but rather what will make them take on the girl identity.

In this paper, I argue that the Happy Meal advertisement that I chose to analyze almost makes it impossible for children to choose a toy that has not been designed for their sex. The advertisement is reinforcing gender stereotypes with the use of color, words and shape that prevent children to have any motivation to change the status quo. Because the Happy Meal advertisement is aimed at teenagers but especially children, it is reinforcing gender stereotypes from the very early childhood, which is adding another level to Butler's notion of performativity. Indeed, if gender is constructed through the repetition of certain acts, the fact that the repetition starts from a very early age deeply reinforces the construction of the gender identity because the repetitions will be all the more numerous. Boys and girls, through the act

of choosing a simple toy, which is influenced by the advertising campaigns like the one I analyze here, build their gender identity, which they will then keep as adults in today's society.

- **Children's particular suggestibility to cultural myths**

When Butler (Gender Trouble), throughout her book, takes the example of drag to illustrate the way in which gender is in fact constructed, she insists on adults, yet the construction of gender starts earlier. It is in the first years of elementary school that children are at a "pivotal point" in forming their own sense of gender (Kolbe & Muehling, 49-64). Moreover, people learn how to behave not only through experience but also through what they see and hear (Bandura, 121-154), so if the parents' or the school's influence are a big part of this construction, the media also tend to be very important sources of information, advertisements being one of the strongest influences possible.

If the McDonald's ad that I analyze has such a potential to reinforce stereotypical gender choices from children, it is mainly because it makes the choice almost natural. For a little boy to go for the Batman toy in his Batcopter is a code that is accepted by children as it is by parents, because it seems "natural" that a he would prefer playing with it rather than braid the hair of a pink Pony. These codes are anything but natural, yet they have been naturalized (Hall 132) to the point of children or even parents not questioning them. It seems naturally given that the girls will prefer ponies, because the advertisement has been designed especially to convey this message, so that there will be a strong difference between boys and girls and each sex will turn to the constructed gender that is supposed to be "normal": maleness for boys, femininity for girls. As a result, when the exposure to an advertisement or television commercial is strong, "children are enculturated to develop a preference for toys that are designed, packaged, and marketed to be commensurate with their masculine or feminine identities" (Kahlenberg & Hein 830).

In fact, the choice of the pink toy for the girl seems natural because it feels easy. Like Cassel and Jenkins (2-3) state, "[Girl] games allow girls to feel comfortable in their girlhood. Those games fit comfortably into what a girl believes (consciously or unconsciously) is expected of her in order to merit the label 'girl'. The games are created and sold with the help of stereotyped roles and binary oppositions (Jennings & Wartella) because it is what the

designers and advertisers assume the clients want; a practice Ellen van Oost calls “gender scripts” (194). Thus, because the products are popular and the advertisements numerous (the McDonald’s advertisement was available in every Happy Meal in America), the codes become omnipresent and are naturalized, which leads kids to choose the toys that are supposedly appropriate for their gender (Gilmour, 265). The advertisement does not force boys to buy the Batman figures, yet it invites them strongly and leaves little space for another choice.

- **Happy Meal Toys marketing**

The codes that are encrypted in the McDonald’s advertisement here are not all obvious ones; it is not explicitly written that the Batman figures are for boys and the Ponies for girls, yet everyone knows which one is for which. This cultural norm, which can be seen as a myth, is definitely constructed through signifying systems. If I take Roland Barthes’ approach (123), the first signifier would be an advertisement for McDonald’s, and in this signifier there are the signifier (an advertisement computer-created) and the signified (little pink ponies on one side, dark Batman characters on the others). The second signified, the connotation, is that My Little Ponies are for girls and Batman is for boys.

This myth is created in this ad by the designers’ use of color and shape and the characters’ actions.

The color pink has “functioned as a prominent signifier of patriarchal heterosexual femininity since at least the mid-twentieth century” (Kearney 28), a color that can almost never be found in boy-oriented toys (Kahlenberg & Hein 844), because it has been associated with females and femininity. Pastel colors and pink in particular are omnipresent here, in the right side of the advertisement, the one reserved to My Little Ponies. Barthes states for that matter that pink has become more than just a color, but a real myth that keeps the status quo by operating on a secondary level of signification that maintains gender essentialism.

However, my Little Ponies are also objects that cannot move (whereas they are representing animals), stuck to a pedestal, when boys are encourage to use the Batman character to move: three of the four boy-oriented toys contain a vehicle (Batcopter, Jokermobile, Submarine). The idea to keep the girls inside of the house has been underlined by many scholars (Robbie

& Garber 213) as common in their parents' minds, as if to prepare them for the future role as mothers and homemakers. On the contrary, boy-oriented toys encourage them to go out and fight (here the toys all have missiles), confirming the theory that strongly masculine toys are clearly more violent than all other categories (Blakemore and Centers 628).

Finally, the advertisement also conveys a strong meaning with the sentences above each toys: "Batman to the Rescue" and "My Beautiful Pony Tails". Girl-oriented toys are indeed more associated by people to appearance and attractiveness than boy-oriented toys (Blakemore and Centers 626) and commercials do not hesitate to accentuate traditional gender roles (Smith 323-333): boys are encouraged to fight to "rescue" whereas girls play with beautiful toys that cannot move.

- **Gender construction: Could a boy play with a Beautiful Pink Pony?**

If one sees gender as a construction, like Butler, then choosing My Little Pony over Batman for a girl is not girlhood but a reflection of girlhood. The advertisers use little boys and little girls as a specific demographic, market products by using gender scripts that create specific gender codes and even tend to exaggerate unnecessarily gender differences (Bakir 255-266). Moreover, there is a strong relationship between the exposure of children to gendered images and how the children perceive gender roles (Pike and Jennings 84), thus it is easy for girls to reproduce the belief that femininity is the more appropriate gender for them, since toys for girls are more and more feminized (Kearney 3).

There is indeed an undeniable limitation in the choices for a little boy or a little girl to go for the toy that has not been marketed for them, because the advertisements like McDonald's' give them no other alternative that might challenge or construct their identity (Kearney 3). Children have then no real motivation or possibility to change the status quo, not because girls like feminized products for their femininity but rather because there are so little other sources of fantasy to create one's identity (Seiter 157). This is especially important when it comes to children, because as Pomerleau et al. (197-218) put it, "unlike older women, young girls rarely have the opportunity to choose other colors [than pink] with which to identify", because the advertisers use close to no other color than pink to market products oriented towards little girls, like the Little Ponies from the McDonald's ad.

The advertisement here thus encourages a norm that is reiterated but not always performed by the subject (Butler, Bodies That Matter 95); the little boys are drawn towards choosing the Batman toy because the advertisement encourages them to do so, and then repeat this act each time they go to McDonald's, whereas they still have the possibility, each time, to choose which kind of toy they want in their Happy Meal box. Thus if behavior is produced, performative, then buying My Little Pony is not girlhood – little girls do not buy a pink pony just because they were born as a girl – but a reflection of girlhood, like choosing to wear a suit for a man is not maleness but a reflection of maleness.

## **Conclusion**

It is many of the critics' fear that because little girls are continuously subject to the same kinds of advertisements that encourage them to use feminized products, they will behave according to the most widespread logics of heteronormativity and patriarchy (Kearney 4). For example, toys that emphasize nurturance and domestic skills (taking care of the hair of toy ponies for girls) provides a gendered experience (Blakemore and Centers 631) that brings them closer to the femininity that is required of them. This femininity, which the Little Ponies on the advertisement embody with their pastel colors, long mane of hair and no possibility to move, is the "master discourse" (Hudson 51) for girls who are in the – conscious or unconscious – process of constructing their gender.

Pike and Jennings (85) have proved that "repeated exposure to these images contributes to the development of children's conceptions of gender and their expected roles as men and women". This paper wishes for a more variety of choices in the Happy Meal toys and for less stereotyped advertising, which would change the current status quo and allow children to base their choices on what they want and not what is "naturally" expected of them. This idea is also supported by what scholars call Third-Wave feminism (Kearney 4), whose wish is not for girls to act like boys but rather for society and marketing to provide a wider range of options for "men, women, boys and girls" to construct their own gender identity without inevitably having to conform to the codes of the patriarchal society.



## REFERENCES

- Bakir, A., Blodgett, J. G., & Rose, G. M. Children's response to gender-role stereotyped advertisements. Journal of Advertising Research, 48, 2008.
- Bandura, A. "Social cognitive theory of mass communication." In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), Media effects: Advances in theory and research Mahwah, Ed. Erlbaum, 2002.
- Barthes, Roland. "Myth Today". In Mythologies. Ed. London 1972, 1957.
- Blakemore, Judith E., and Centers, Renee E. Characteristics of Boys' and Girls' Toys. In Sex Roles, Vol. 53, Nos. 9/10, 2005.
- Butler, Judith. Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex". Ed. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Butler, Judith. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Ed. Routledge 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised edition, 1999.
- Gilmour, Heather "What Girls Want: The Intersections of Leisure and Power in Female Computer Game Play," in Kids' Media Culture, ed. Marsha Kinder. Ed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Hudson, Barbara. "Femininity and Adolescence," in Gender and Generation. Ed. Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava. London: Macmillan, 1984.
- Cassell, Justine and Jenkins, Henry. "Chess for Girls? Feminism and Computer Games," in From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games. Ed. Cassell and Jenkins. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998.
- Hawley, Amy. Creator of the Happy Meal says KC makes him happy. KSHB Online. 08.18.2011. 31.08.2012. <  
[http://www.kshb.com/dpp/about\\_us/community\\_affairs/profiles/creator-of-the-happy-meal-says-kc-makes-him-happy](http://www.kshb.com/dpp/about_us/community_affairs/profiles/creator-of-the-happy-meal-says-kc-makes-him-happy) >
- Jennings, N. A. and Wartella, E. A. (in preparation). Advertising and consumer development. In Children and television: 50 Years of research. N. Pecora, J. P. Murray, & E. Wartella (Eds.), Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. In Pike, Jennifer and Jennings, Nancy. The Effects of Commercials on Children's Perceptions of Gender Appropriate Toy Use. Sex Roles, Vol. 52, Nos. 1/2, January 2005.
- Kahlenberg, Susan and Hein, Michelle. Progression on Nickelodeon? Gender-Role Stereotypes in Toy Commercials. Springer Science + Business Media, LLC, 2009.
- Kearney, Mary C. Pink Technology: Mediamaking Gear for Girls. Camera Obscura 74, Volume 25, Number 2. Camera Obscura Published. Duke University Press
- Kolbe, R. H., and Muehling, D. Gender roles and children's television advertising. Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising, 17(1), 1995.



McRobbie, Angela and Garber, Jenny. "Girls and Subcultures," in Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain, Ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson. London: HarperCollins Academic, 1976.

Moreau, Nicholas. "Zaninum". Kids Meal Wiki. Wikia.com 09.07.2011. 01.08.2012 < [http://images.wikia.com/happymeal/images/9/9a/McD\\_Malaysia\\_Brave\\_Pony.jpg](http://images.wikia.com/happymeal/images/9/9a/McD_Malaysia_Brave_Pony.jpg) >

Otnes, C., Kim, Y. C., & Kim, K. All I want for Christmas: An analysis of children's brand requests to Santa Claus. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 27(4), 1994.

Pike, Jennifer and Jennings, Nancy. The Effects of Commercials on Children's Perceptions of Gender Appropriate Toy Use. *Sex Roles*, Vol. 52, Nos. 1/2, January 2005

Pomerleau et al. "Pink or Blue: Environmental Gender Stereotypes in the First Two Years of Life," *Sex Roles* 22, nos. 5–6 (1990): 359–67; Irene Cieraad, "Gender at Play: Décor Differences between Boys' and Girls' Bedrooms," in Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures and the Commercialization of Everyday Life, Ed. Emma Casey and Lydia Martens. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007.

Seiter, Ellen. Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Smith, L. J. A content analysis of gender differences in children's advertising. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 38, 1994

Van Oost, Ellen "Materialized Gender: How Shavers Configure the Users' Femininity and Masculinity," in How Users Matter: The Co-construction of Users and Technologies, Ed. Nelly Oudshoorn and Trevor Pinch. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.