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Commercials in Pink and Blue: Stereotyping gender in contemporary advertising

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Table of contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
Theoretical framework	5
Methodology	9
Which signs are present within the commercial that visualize the role of gender?	11
The example of color	16
Overarching themes of stereotyping	17
In what ways do these signs relate to theories of gender stereotypes?	19
Conclusion	22
Bibliography	23

Abstract

By doing this research, I will show my reader how the commercial *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls*, made by the company Mattel, affirms and empowers stereotypical ideology when it comes to centralizing and essentializing gender roles and femininity. My main research question will be: *“In what ways do the visual aspects/signs of the commercial ‘New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls’ by Mattel affirm and empower stereotypical imagery?”*. For me to answer this main question, I will have to find answers to two sub questions first: *“Which signs are present within the commercial that visualize the role of gender?”* and *“In what ways do these signs relate to theories of gender stereotypes?”*. These research questions will be answered through the use of combining a case-specific visual analysis and the method of semiotics to find out which images are used to affirm and empower a stereotypical ideology. By using theories of gender, stereotypical aspects, cultural identities, womanhood and burden of representation, I will be able to put the commercial in a different perspective and look at it from a critical angle. *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* is a commercial, created by the American cooperation Mattel, that is filled with signs based on stereotypical ideologies of womanhood. Therefore, the harmfulness in stereotyping the feminine, which is present in the commercial, should be analyzed and criticized in detail. By listing the different signs, that have to do with gender, and contextualizing them through the use of theories of gender, I will be able to deconstruct the commercial and make the hidden gender-based stereotyping visible and discussable.

Introduction

“You can be anything” is the slogan of the commercial *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* by the company Mattel. You can be anything, or can you? On the official website of Barbie, it is clearly stated that the Barbie dolls have always been breaking the boundaries since the official release of the first Barbie doll in 1959. Ruth Handler is the original Barbie creator and states on the website that the reason for her to create these Barbie dolls is because she saw that the choices her daughter had, when it comes to picking a toy, were limited. Handler noticed that her daughter only had the opportunity to pick toys that allowed her to play a mom or a caregiver, while boys had more options to choose from. The first Barbie that hit

the market was a white Barbie wearing a black and white skirt. During the course of history, Barbie dolls tend to become more inclusive in the way the dolls are being presented. This is because of the fact that more Barbie dolls started to hit the market that were different from the usual 'white doll'.¹ One could argue that the production of multiple kinds of Barbies, even a male Barbie doll (Ken), is a positive continuation of the popular Barbie brand. However, I believe that there is still a lot of process to be made when it comes to representing gender in an appropriate, correct and nuanced way. It might be true that the Barbie dolls became more diverse overtime, as mentioned by the website, but the ways in which the Barbie dolls are being marketed might undo this conclusion.² If the goal of 'modern Barbies' is to be as appropriate as can be when it comes to diversity and identity, the commercials should follow the same ideology. During the course of this research, I will take a closer look at how one of the newest Barbie dolls is being marketed by advertising. My research will be about the commercial *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* by Mattel. The popularity of the commercial on YouTube, 800.000 views since the launch of the add on the 2nd of December 2019, shows that a big group of people have been exposed to what this commercial has to offer.³ The fact that this is a popular video makes it very interesting to look at how gender is being represented and what people are being exposed to when watching this advertisement. Therefore, my research question for this thesis will be: *"In what ways do the visual aspects/signs of the commercial 'New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls' by Mattel affirm and empower stereotypical imagery?"* For me to answer this research question, I will try to answer these two sub questions first: *"Which signs are present within the commercial that visualize the role of gender?"* and *"In what ways do these signs relate to theories of gender stereotypes?"* I will try to answer these sub questions by deconstructing the video first. I will create a table in which I will filter and categorize the signs that have to do with the visualization of gender. Secondly, I will talk about the different categories of signs and how these different categories work together in order to market the toy and what the consequences of this will be for the affirmation of stereotypical gender norms. After

¹ "Our History, "Barbie History Foundation, Barbie.Mattel, last accessed on 16-6-2020, https://barbie.mattel.com/en-us/about/history.html?icid=home_body-5_module_history_p1.

² "Our History, "Barbie History Foundation, Barbie.Mattel, last accessed on 16-6-2020, https://barbie.mattel.com/en-us/about/history.html?icid=home_body-5_module_history_p1.

³ "New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls," Youtube, last accessed on 07-05-2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV9zaA_LfW0.

doing this, I will take a closer look at how theories of gender and stereotypical imagery can help me formulate an answer to my main research question.

By doing this research, I will try to unveil the underlying gender-based constructions to contribute in the discussion on how we should represent gender in contemporary media. The ways in which we, as a society, choose to show children, and their parents, what it means to be a boy or a girl is interesting and problematic at the same time. The interesting part is to figure out how these underlying narratives, present in commercials, are being formed. However, selling toys by creating a stereotypical commercial is problematic because of the fact that stereotypes are constructs that are misleading and based on generalizations. Also, stereotypes provoke certain expectations about individuals based on social group membership.⁴ These three main arguments are the reason for me to do this research and talk about the practice of stereotyping within advertising. This research is part of a movement that focusses on the exposure of such misleading stereotypes and the decoding of signs which enforce and affirm them.

Theoretical framework

During the course of the thesis, I will be taking a closer look at how gender is being represented throughout the commercial. Gender is a socially constructed concept, which means that gender is not something that is fixed or unchangeable.⁵ Because of the idea that gender is not fixed, it becomes possible for media to represent gender roles in different ways. If gender can be visualized in different ways, it is also possible for companies to create advertisements that are based around stereotypical ideas about gender. Because of the idea that gender is not fixed and therefore relative and changeable, it becomes an ethic responsibility for companies and/or media platforms to show gender in a nuanced and non-stereotypical way. For example, if a commercial shows a form of gender norms that seem to be fixed and naturally formed, it produces meaning that goes against the idea of gender as a social construct and therefore becomes something stereotypical.⁶ Stereotypes are being

⁴ Stacey Goguen, "The Different Kinds, and Effects, of Stereotypes," (2018).

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, routledge, 2011.

⁶ Richard Dyer, "The role of Stereotypes," *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd edition, Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

used to create and dictate certain boundaries between groups of people.⁷ These boundaries are being created because of power dynamics that are in play when it comes to representation.⁸ Stereotypes are mental images that are supposed to represent a certain group of people with certain essentialized characteristics.⁹ For me to explain in better detail how this works and why the implicit discrimination, present within the commercial, is worth doing research on, it is important for me to have a clear understanding of what a stereotype is and how it affects the creation of the commercial.

“A meta-analysis of gender roles in advertising” and *“Gender stereotypes in advertising: A review of current research”* are two articles that will play a huge part in explaining how my research contributes to the debate on gender stereotypes in a whole new way. The two articles are greatly detailed overviews of what has already been written in the field of gender stereotyping in advertising. One of the big conclusions of *“A meta-analysis of gender roles in advertising”* is that the stereotyping of gender roles in temporary advertising has decreased over the last few years. However, this is only visible in “high-masculine countries”.¹⁰ America, the country that forms the foundation of this research, is not included in this decrease of stereotyping gender roles because it is not seen as a high-masculine country. In *“Gender stereotypes in advertising: A review of current research”* the authors discuss all the methods that have been used by researchers who have written previous literature on the topic of gender stereotyping in advertising. Interviews, meta-analysis and content analysis are three of most mentioned methods.¹¹ Therefore, the use of semiotics, within the parameters of a visual analysis, is something that will contribute to the debate in an original way.

For me to explain why doing research on the topic of gender stereotyping is important, I will go deeper into how the notion of gender is being constructed by society itself. Gender is not something that comes naturally. Gender is solely a social construct that is a product of the ways in which we, as a society, decide what it means to be a boy or a

⁷ Richard Dyer, “The role of Stereotypes,” *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd edition, Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

⁸ Stuart Hall, “Cultural identity and diaspora,” (1990).

⁹ Penelope J. Oakes, S. Alexander Haslam, and John C. Turner, *Stereotyping and social reality*, Blackwell Publishing, 1994.

¹⁰ Martin Eisend, “A meta-analysis of gender roles in advertising,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 38, no.4 (2010), 418-440.

¹¹ Stacy Landreth Grau, Yorgos C. Zotos, “Gender stereotypes in advertising: A review of current research,” *International Journal of Advertising* 35, no.5 (2016), 761-770.

girl.¹² The distinction between the two and the idea that certain products are only meant for boys or girls is something that we decide. The thesis is about looking at all the different visual aspects that contribute to the showing of these socially constructed gender norms. Judith Butler wrote a book called "*Gender Trouble*", in which she goes into detail on why gender is a social construct and why this is important to notice.¹³ Butler talks about her performative theory of gender and how the role of gender can change accordingly to the sociographic context in which gender is being shaped. Butler argues that gender roles, such as masculine and feminine, are being formed by certain (everyday) actions and therefore are not fixed but rather flexible. Also, she talks about the idea that there is not a big difference between sex and gender. Whereas sex is mostly seen as being born as a female or male, gender is mostly seen as a certain cultural identity which people may or may not identify with. However, Butler argues that sex as well as gender is not something that is naturally fixed. Both are cultural and social constructions and therefore do not find their origin in nature/biology, Butler argues. This concept of gender is important to my own research because of the fact that if gender is something that is not fixed it means that stereotypes can never represent gender in a correct and functioning way. The way in which we identify something, or someone, as male/masculine or female/feminine is always socially constructed, which means that stereotypes, which exist of essentialized characteristics, can never be right in their way of representing gender.¹⁴

In the case of representing a certain cultural identity, it comes with a certain responsibility. There would not be cultural identities if it was not for the practice of representation. Because of the fact that representation creates dimensions of differences between groups of people, it is important that the creators of media platforms realize that there is a certain responsibility when it comes to representing people. The burden of representation exists when one person/one team/one group becomes responsible for representing an entire community and/or cultural identity.¹⁵

I will use three different sources to provide a deeper context of what certain groups of signs, such as colors and clothes, can mean within Western society. The first one I would

¹²Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, routledge, 2011.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, routledge, 2011.

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, routledge, 2011.

¹⁵ Monica Juneja, "Global art history and the 'burden of representation,'" *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* (2011): 274-297.

like to talk about is: *The girl on the magazine cover: The origins of visual stereotypes in American mass media*, which is a book written by Carolyn Kitch. This book provides a better understanding of the representation of women and children on the covers of magazines (mass media) over the years and how this has influenced feminism, femininity, masculinity and gender-related issues. One of the main conclusions Kitch mentions in the book is that women were always being represented as housewives who had their own special place, mostly the kitchen, in the house and were always described as personifications of what it meant to be a mother and a woman on the covers of traditional magazines. This also came with traditional ideas about clothing and hairstyles.¹⁶ This research is important for me because it gives me an insight in how, in the traditional way, women have been represented throughout the years. It gives me the ability to compare this way of representing to my own case study and see if there are differences in representing gender and if so, which differences.

The second one I would like to talk about is *Profile: Gender stereotypes in MTV commercials: The beat goes on*. This is a study that also focusses on the representation of gender, focusing on women/femininity, but with MTV commercials as a case study. The study is a combination of a quantitative and a qualitative research. By examining different MTV commercials throughout the years, the writers found out that gender is being stereotyped in many different ways in MTV commercials. The actresses in the videos were always depicted as sexy and skinny and were always wearing short and revealing clothes.¹⁷ This research is important for my own thesis because of the fact that this research reveals insight in how commercials on television, just the same as covers of magazines, use stereotypical imagery for financial reasons. This research also shows the reader which images are made of these stereotypical notions, which will help me contextualize the signs in *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* and compare my findings to the findings of different scholars.

Pink and blue: Telling the boys from the girls in America is a book that specifically deals with the combination of different aspects of stereotyping. Jo Barraclough Paoletti looks at the evolvement of clothes made for children. Also, one chapter of her book deals specifically with the gendering of pink and blue in combination with the production of

¹⁶ Carolyn L. Kitch, *The girl on the magazine cover: The origins of visual stereotypes in American mass media*, Univ of North Carolina Press, 2001.

¹⁷ Nancy Signorielli, Douglas McLeod, and Elaine Healy, "Profile: Gender stereotypes in MTV commercials: The beat goes on," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 38, no. 1 (1994): 91-101.

children's clothing. She writes about how blue is seen as a masculine color in the West and how this influenced the production of clothes for boys. However, she also states that there has been a shift in gendering of colors, especially with the rise of unisex clothing. This shift makes the use of colors, during the production of clothes, relative to the context in which the colors are being used.¹⁸ This research is important for me because it offers a theoretical background to my own research. The book talks about how blue and pink are both gendered but can function in various ways regarding the context in which the color finds itself. This helps me contextualize the colors present in *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* in a way that is relative to the source material.

Methodology

I will be deconstructing the commercial *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* by using the method of semiotics to try to understand how the representation of the targeted audience could influence the ways in which we see 'gender appropriate' toys. The commercial shows two teenage girls talking about the toy and trying the toy out. By making use of the method of semiotics, I will take apart all the smaller bits that the commercial consists of. By doing this, I will be able to find information that can only be transmitted to the audience by combining certain visual elements and the combination of all the signs that can be seen in sequential shots. This is where the method of semiotics comes into play. By writing this thesis, I am trying to find the answers to my research questions by looking at what all the signs mean and how the meanings of these signs work together.

Firstly, I will take a closer look at all the signs that are present within the commercial. I will write down signs, that have to do with the representation of gender, and then I will put them in a table to get a good overview. After that, I am going to make groups of all the signs I have written down. Doing this will provide me the opportunity to see in what ways the signs interact with each other on group-level. For example, looking at the color pink while also looking at the age of the girls provides me different information than looking at the color pink in combination with the color of the Barbie dolls. I will go deeper into the effect that color has on the way in which gender is being represented. After that, I will talk about

¹⁸ Jo Barraclough Paoletti, *Pink and blue: Telling the boys from the girls in America*, Indiana University Press, 2012.

how signs, present in the video, together produce a certain meaning and why it is important to acknowledge and analyze this.

Semiotics teaches us that an image consists of certain signs.¹⁹ These signs consist of both the signifier and the signified. The word signifier has been introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure was a swiss linguist who specialized in linguistics and the method of semiotics. The signifier is the physical existence of what is being seen (a word, image etc.) by someone (a viewer).²⁰ The signifier is the physical existence of the image and the signified is the concept or meaning behind the signifier. Understanding what certain signs mean can help us navigate through the world and understand underlying meanings behind cultural images. These signs can both be visual and aural.²¹ Before we are able to understand what a certain sign means and what the underlying message can be, we have to understand its context. Semiotics can be seen as a tool with which we can decode these signs and put them in the right sociographical context.²² A similarity between the concept of gender and the method of semiotics is that both should be approached as relative and not fixed. They both rely on the context. The connection between the signifier and the signified, of one specific sign, is created within certain culturally loaded discourses. For example, the color red can stand for multiple things, like love or anger/aggression, and therefore has to be examined by keeping the context in mind. In my own research, the color pink will be discussed in detail and decoded through the use of semiotics. However, for me to see clearly how this color works within the commercial, I have to know what the sociographical context of the commercial is and how this produces a certain meaning. I will discuss this later on at the beginning of the analysis.

Firstly, I will talk about the signifiers that have to do with the visualization of stereotypical gender roles. After doing this, I will talk about the mental concepts that can be found when analyzing the signs. After this, I will talk more about what my findings mean in the light of stereotyping gender. I will only take a look at all the visual aspects of the commercial rather than the words that are being spoken or the music that you may or may not hear. For this research, I will only look at visual aspects because making a clear choice on which aspects to focus on will help narrow my scope, which helps me to write a clear and

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (University of California Press, 1967/1990).

²⁰ Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1995). P.16.

²¹ Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Indiana University Press, 1995) p.16.

²² Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (University of California Press, 1967/1990).

focused paper. However, doing research on aspects of the audio can bring new and different insights to the research and therefore is a great example of a possible second study on the commercial. Also, this research is going to be a case-specific visual analysis.²³ This means that I have chosen to take a look at only one specific commercial instead of looking at multiple commercials.

Which signs are present within the commercial that visualize the role of gender?

In this paragraph, I will create a summary of signs, that are associated to gender, that are present within the commercial. As mentioned before, I have to talk about the general context of the commercial to be able to link the signifiers with what the mental concepts of these signifiers are. The Barbie doll in question is produced by an American company named Mattel. They have been producing these Barbie dolls since 1959.²⁴ The fact that the creative directors/creators are located in the U.S. makes it safe to say that we should interpret the signs, present within the video, as if the context of these signs is of a Western origin. The West is a large concept. However, I will be looking at the specific country, the U.S., where the creative executive ideas originate from so that I will have a narrowed scope that aims at decoding the signs within the same context as they are being created in. For example, within the context of a Western America, colors such as pink and purple stand for subtleness and femininity and the color blue stands for toughness and masculinity.²⁵ In the table below, I have summed up signifiers, that can be seen throughout the entire video, that have to do with the representation of gender norms. In the appendix you will find all these signifiers with the corresponding colors.

²³ Theo van Leeuwen. Carey Jewitt, eds. *The Handbook of Visual Analysis* (SAGE, 2001).

²⁴ "Our History," Barbie History Foundation, Barbie.Mattel, last accessed on 16-6-2020, https://barbie.mattel.com/en-us/about/history.html?icid=home_body-5_module_history_p1.

²⁵ Jo Barraclough Paoletti, *Pink and blue: Telling the boys from the girls in America*, Indiana University Press, 2012.

<i>Signifiers/denotations</i>	<i>Descriptions signifiers/denotations</i>	<i>Colors</i>	<i>When seen</i>
<i>Background</i>	Consists of different shapes. We can see question marks, stripes, shapes that go down the background in a water-like fashion and water splashes	Four different shades of pink, yellow, turquoise, blue (lightshade), purple and crème/white	Does not change, visible every time the background can be seen in the shot
<i>Visual words/letters, punctuation marks and numbers</i>	7 surprises, Alyssa (name tag), Kaitlyn (name tag), A Barbie Production, Barbie logo, descriptions in manual (unreadable in video), exclamation marks, question marks, collect them all, fun fact!, you can be anything, Barbie tm., Color Reveal, Mattel, Reveal doll with water, Series 1	Pink, yellow, crème/white, purple, blue, turquoise, grey	
<i>Appearances and facial expressions</i>	Black/dark hair Brown hair One has a lighter skin tone and the other has a darker skin tone, bobby pin in	Black, brown, pink, turquoise/green	Does not change, visible every time the girls are in the shot

	<p>hair, turquoise/green make-up, turquoise/green earrings, young (age unknown), smiling, surprised, make-up</p> <p>Kaitlyn changed after using big heart sponge</p>		
<i>Clothes (actresses)</i>	<p>Pants (2x), shirt (2x), denim jacket with buttons</p>	<p>Denim, green, pink, purple, orange, crème/white, yellow, turquoise</p>	<p>Does not change, visible every time the girls are in the shot</p>
<i>Barbie dolls and the package of the example doll</i>	<p>Packages of the dolls are round tubes with a lit on top of them, example Barbie has big eyes, big eyelashes, white teeth and a smile, Barbie doll (before going into the water), plastic, goes into water inside the tube, the manual shows 6 steps of using the doll and five examples of Barbies you can get, Barbie (after dipped into</p>	<p>Pink, yellow, blue, crème/white, purple, black, white, orange, rainbow colors</p>	<p>Does not change, visible every time the Barbie/packages are in the shot.</p>

	<p>water), short hair on Barbie, which is optional, after being dipped in the water the Barbie doll wears a swimsuit, Barbie has light skin, the water turns pink when the Barbie is being dipped into the water, Barbie has a rainbow-colored unicorn on her swimsuit, eye color changed after using sponge, lipstick changed after using sponge, animals portrayed on the clothes of the example Barbies are a cat, face of a dog, unicorn, alpaca/lama, panda, the five example Barbies are wearing skirts, high heels and tank tops, the five example Barbies all have different skin tones, all five example Barbies have long hair</p>		
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<p><i>Miscellaneous</i></p>	<p>Table, Wow-effect (stripes) Glitter-effect, towel, glass bowls (2x) with water in them, wow-effect (stripes), “collect them all” paper with five examples of Barbies, examples of Barbies have different skin tones, all examples have long hair, all examples are wearing skirts and high heels and tank tops, signs with question marks and mystery packages (optional wig, optional skirt, optional shoes and optional sponge), sign of water, shape of a water drop, shape of a snow flake, stars, circles, warm water sign/symbol of the sun, big heart (to change Kaitlyn), in the final shot you can see two shapes of flowers</p>	<p>Crème/white, turquoise, pink, red, yellow, blue, orange, purple, green, black, white, silver, dark purple</p>	<p>Does not change, visible every time the table is in the shot, wow-effect (0.04), glitter-effect (0.13), wow-effect (0.26 until 0.29), signs with question marks and mystery packages (1.15), sign of water (1.25), stars (1.29), stars (1.37), circles (1.38), warm water sign/symbol of the sun (1.40), question marks (2.03)</p>
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	on one of the girls' face		
<i>Mystery package reveals</i>	Skirt (reveal), star-pattern on optional skirt, Colorful wig (reveal), wig is long hair, shoes (reveal), shoes are high heels, sponge (reveal), sponge changes appearance of Barbie doll	Blue, pink, yellow, purple, turquoise, silver	Visible since 1.17 (when the revealing of the four items starts)

The example of color

After examining the signs that can be seen throughout the video, it is now time to see how they produce a certain meaning when being combined with each other. All the denotations have connotations that are specifically true for the denotation in question. However, when combining these denotations with each other by editing the commercial, the meaning that is being produced by one specific denotation changes.

Firstly, I would like to look at the group of colors that is present within the commercial. The colors that can be seen are blue, pink, yellow, purple, turquoise, silver, crème, white, red, orange, green, dark purple, denim, black, brown and grey. However, the colors that are most present are pink, turquoise, purple and yellow. These colors are bright but also have a crayon-ish look/pastel look. The color pink has the most screen time and variations of all the colors. Pink is recognized as the color that stands for femininity in Western society.²⁶ In theory, colors can stand for a lot of things. However, only in combination with all the other elements of the commercial it is possible to come to conclusions that represent the entire video. One of the other colors that can be found in the

²⁶ Jo Barraclough Paoletti, *Pink and blue: Telling the boys from the girls in America*, Indiana University Press, 2012.

commercial is blue. Within the American society, blue can be seen as a masculine color.²⁷ However, as I mentioned before, one sign (in this case color) can only create an overarching message when being combined with other signs. In this case, blue can be seen in the video in combination with the overwhelming color pink, the two girls, the Barbie doll (which is pink before getting dipped into water), glitter-effects etc. All these other signifiers can be interpreted as feminine because of the relation that pink and glitter has with gender and the sociographical history of the Barbie doll, which has evolved because of the distinction between male and female.²⁸ Because blue stands in relation to all the other signifiers, it gets an entirely different meaning. The meaning of blue as a masculine color gets erased, because of these connections with other signs, and replaced by expanding the color pallet of femininity. Stereotypes are representations that represent an entire group of people by simply exposing the stereotypical, essentialized characteristics that the group of people may or may not have²⁹. One of those stereotypical characteristics of women is symbolized by the relation between gender and pink. When looking at how much of an influence all the mentioned colors have on the commercial, the colors pink, blue and purple achieved the first spot. These are the colors that have the most prominent place on screen during the commercial.

Overarching themes of stereotyping

In the previous paragraph, we have acknowledged that the colors, that are being used throughout the commercial, can be categorized in many different ways. The color pink is the color that stands out the most. However, other colors like blue are also visible in the video. One could argue that blue stands for masculinity in countries like the U.S.³⁰ Because of this, it is important to not only look at one specific form of signs that are visible. The colors have been an example of how stereotypical gender norms can be visible in modern advertising.

²⁷ Jo Barraclough Paoletti, *Pink and blue: Telling the boys from the girls in America*, Indiana University Press, 2012.

²⁸ "Our History," Barbie History Foundation, Barbie.Mattel, last accessed on 16-6-2020, https://barbie.mattel.com/en-us/about/history.html?icid=home_body-5_module_history_p1.

²⁹ Penelope J. Oakes, S. Alexander Haslam, and John C. Turner, *stereotyping and social reality*, Blackwell Publishing, 1994.

³⁰ Jo Barraclough Paoletti, *Pink and blue: Telling the boys from the girls in America*, Indiana University Press, 2012.

The color blue, that typically stands for masculinity in the West, can be seen as a way of trying to be more nuanced throughout the video. However, the pastel colors and the color pink can be seen the most when watching the video. Pink is present almost everywhere on screen. What we already know, by simply looking at the screen time, is that pink is dominant over the other colors. Another form of signs, that have a big effect on how the commercial is shaped, are the surprise packages containing additional objects for the Barbie doll. The four packages contain a brand new skirt, wig, shoes and a sponge that has the ability to change the color of the hair and the eyes of the Barbie doll.³¹ Research shows that during MTV commercials, women are more often portrayed as sexy while wearing short clothes showing skin.³² I argue that this is also the case with the Barbie doll in the *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* commercial. The contents of the mystery packages highlight the femininity and also contribute to the stereotyping of gender during the commercial. Skirts are seen as clothes that are made specially for women. For centuries, women are being shown in mass media/advertising as personifications of “ideal womanhood”.³³ These personifications had to conform to the norm of what it means to be a woman in America, such as being slim and wearing woman-like clothes. Of course, as time passed, these norms began to change.³⁴ However, I would argue that the clothes that are being shown in *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* actually still symbolize the traditional stereotypes of how women should look like. The only kind of clothes that are hidden in the mystery packages are short skirts. Skirts with a bigger size or pants are nowhere to be found. Because of this, I argue that the Barbie dolls are personifications of what women should look like just the same as women were in commercials, media and advertisements during the course of time and that these personifications of womanhood are based on stereotypical ideas and ideologies.

The second example I want to talk about is the wig that comes out of one of the other mystery packages. It is important here to notice that the doll itself already has short hair as part of her ‘starting’ body. By using the sponge, which can be found in another

³¹ “New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls,” Youtube, last accessed on 07-05-2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV9zaA_LfW0.

³² Nancy Signorielli, Douglas McLeod, and Elaine Healy, "Profile: Gender stereotypes in MTV commercials: The beat goes on," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 38, no. 1 (1994): 91-101.

³³ Carolyn L. Kitch, *The girl on the magazine cover: The origins of visual stereotypes in American mass media*, Univ of North Carolina Press, 2001.

³⁴ Carolyn L. Kitch, *The girl on the magazine cover: The origins of visual stereotypes in American mass media*, Univ of North Carolina Press, 2001.

mystery package, the color of this specific hair can be changed as well as the color of her eyes. However, by unveiling what is in the mystery package containing the wig, it is implied that the already existing hair is not enough to make it a full working Barbie.³⁵ Of course, the option to not apply the wig to the Barbie doll is still open, but the fact that the doll automatically comes with a wig heavily suggests that the wig should become part of the Barbie doll. Here again, Mattel is forcing stereotypical ideology to become part of the production and distribution of the Barbie doll. Automatically adding an 'additional' wig to the package affirms the idea of women having long hair and being able to transition from one hairstyle to the other as if the short hairstyle is not enough.³⁶ These examples showcase the ways in which a traditional stereotypical ideology is still very present within the commercial. As talked about before, the color pink is the dominant color throughout the commercial. However, the combination of these signs, that have to do with gender, makes it easier to see how the stereotypical woman is personified through the Barbie doll and how prominent the stereotypical role of the woman actually is in *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls*.

In what ways do these signs relate to theories of gender stereotypes?

After examining the signs, that have to do with the representation of gender, it is now time to look at how these signs influence the ways in which gender is being portrayed and why this is important. *Cultural identities* are never fixed. Also, the representation of these cultural identities is never complete. Rather, cultural identities can only exist because of the fact that they are being represented in a certain way.³⁷ This also means that cultural identities are being shaped by the time and place in which they are being represented. Therefore, cultural identities can only be created through the ways in which they are being represented. This could be seen as an opportunity for society to give shape to how we see other people. However, this practice is also highly problematic. I argue that the commercial *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* is an example of media giving shape to cultural identity/gender in a stereotypical way. This stereotypical way of representing a group of people (in this case the

³⁵ "New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls," Youtube, last accessed on 07-05-2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV9zaA_LfW0.

³⁶ Carolyn L. Kitch, *The girl on the magazine cover: The origins of visual stereotypes in American mass media*, Univ of North Carolina Press, 2001.

³⁷ Stuart Hall, "Cultural identity and diaspora," (1990).

targeted audience) has a negative influence on what we, as a society, consider as the norm and creates a sphere in which the American norms, regarding gender, are tactically being used for financial reasons by the company Mattel.³⁸

When we talk about certain people as subjects, like the audience of the commercial, it is important to realize that this is being done in a certain culture. We are positioned in time and space when we talk about these subjects. This also means that the ways in which we talk about these subjects is again not something that is fixed or something of intrinsic value.³⁹ Rather, cultural identities and concepts of gender are in constant transition and constantly undergo transformations throughout different sociographical locations. In conclusion, cultural identities and concepts of gender are not fixed but rather flexible. Cultural identities are “matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”.⁴⁰ When looking at the commercial *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls*, it becomes clear, by systematically listing all the signs that have to do with representation of gender, that the targeted audience is ‘feminine teenage girls’. As discussed before, the commercial chooses to represent this ‘fictional’ cultural identity by using signs that reference this femininity. As I have mentioned before, the choice of color combinations strongly references the femininity of the targeted audience. Also, the use of special effects (wow-effect and glitter-effect) can be interpreted as a way of determining that the targeted audience should be of a younger age. I argue that the use of these signs is not something that is coincidental, but rather something that is a marketing choice.

When representing an entire group as if it is a cultural identity, it comes with the ethical responsibility of choosing how you want to represent this group.⁴¹ The burden of representation here is representing the people who would be interested in the Barbie doll. From a marketing standpoint, it could be argued that filtering a targeted audience could be a way of securing that the doll speaks to a certain group of people and therefore will be sold more often. However, the ethical responsibility, that comes with representing a targeted audience, should also weigh in on how you choose to portray this group. The signs, present

³⁸ Richard Dyer, “The role of Stereotypes,” *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd edition, Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

³⁹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural identity and diaspora,” (1990).

⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, “Cultural identity and diaspora,” (1990).

⁴¹ Monica Juneja, “Global art history and the ‘burden of representation,’” *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* (2011): 274-297.

within the commercial (as listed in the appendix), are created around the idea of representing the targeted audience. In itself, this is already including certain people and excluding others based on the cultural identity they would identify with.

The reason why the representation of the cultural identity becomes dangerous is because of the use of stereotypical imagery. As explained before, the use of signs, like colors, all point towards the same stereotypical connotations. It all points toward an understanding of Barbie dolls as something that is only meant to be played with by highly feminine young girls. At least, that is the message that this commercial tries to bring across. The stereotypical way of representing the targeted audience as feminine is a subtle way of discrimination because of the boundaries that are being created based on imaginary binary opposites (masculine/feminine). The stereotypical ways in which the targeted audience is being represented creates a 'repressive construction' of inclusion and exclusion. However, these stereotypical gender representations are not only repressive but also underminable.⁴² This means that the ways in which we represent a certain cultural identity are always a choice and therefore changeable. We already established that representation and gender are two concepts that are relative to the sociographical location in which these concepts find themselves. We, as a society, have agency over our ways of representing groups of people and giving shape to the world of marketing. The commercial *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* is an example of a commercial that neglects its responsibility of representing their targeted audience in a non-discriminating fashion and, by doing this, affirms stereotypical concepts of cultural identities and gender.

⁴² Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, routledge, 2011.

Conclusion

This thesis is a case-specific visual analysis of the commercial *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* created by the American company Mattel. The commercial shows two teenage girls presenting a new Barbie toy. They explain how the Barbie can change by adding extra mystery products to the doll and how water reveals the 'starting' body of the doll.⁴³ By doing this analysis, I am trying to find an answer to my research question: *"In what ways do the visual aspects/signs of the commercial 'New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls' by Mattel affirm and empower stereotypical imagery?"* by answering the following two sub questions: *"Which signs are present within the commercial that visualize the role of gender?"* and *"In what ways do these signs relate to theories of gender stereotypes?"*. By creating an overview of visible signs, that have to do with the representation of gender, I have pointed out that there are a lot of signs that indicate a stereotypical ideology. As an example, I have talked about the role of pink, a traditional feminine color in the West, and how dominant this color is in comparison to all the other colors. I have backed up this conclusion by talking about other examples, which include 'additional' objects one can dress up their doll with. All these aspects of the video point towards a stereotypical imagery of the targeted audience, which gets more powerful because of the relations all the signs have with one another. One could argue that, although pink is dominant over other colors, blue is also visible in the video which could symbolize masculinity. However, by looking at different groups of signs I have listed and talking about some examples in relation to each other, I conclude that, however there might be signs of masculinity, the overall message is one of a stereotypical ideology that represents women in a fixed and unnuanced way. Authors, like Judith Butler, have shown us that gender and sex are not fixed nor are they different from one another.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the commercial tends to show us a cultural identity, based on the targeted audience, that seems very fixed and natural.⁴⁵ Representing this gender-based cultural identity through the making of a commercial comes with a burden of representation that

⁴³ "New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls," Youtube, last accessed on 07-05-2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dV9zaA_LfW0.

⁴⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, routledge, 2011.

⁴⁵ Richard Dyer, "The role of Stereotypes," *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd edition, Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

Thesis, *Commercials in Pink and Blue: Stereotyping gender in contemporary advertising*, Casper Rijke, 5734355

should be taken seriously.⁴⁶ Every company that chooses to represent a certain targeted audience, through the use of media and marketing, has this ethical responsibility of showing cultural identity as relative and dynamic. However, *New Barbie Color Reveal Dolls* does not succeed in this and represents the targeted audience in a stereotypical gender normative way that is both harmful and irresponsible.

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⁴⁶ Monica Juneja, "Global art history and the 'burden of representation,'" *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* (2011): 274-297.

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Appendix (1)

Background:

Different shades of pink (4)

Yellow

Turquoise

Blue (lightshade)

Purple

Crème/white

Splashes of water

Question marks

Stripes

Table:

White/crème

Colors (Barbie package):

Pink

Yellow

Blue

Crème/white

Purple

(Barbie Color Reveal)

Water splashes

7 surprises

(Reveal doll with water)

Colors (clothes):

Pink

Blue/denim

Purple

White

Yellow

Turquoise

Girls (actresses)

Black hair

Brown hair

Light skin tone

Darker skin tone

Pink bobby pin

Denim pants

Green pants

Shirt x2

Denim jacket with buttons

Thesis, Commercials in Pink and Blue: Stereotyping gender in contemporary advertising, Casper Rijke, 5734355

Turquoise/green make-up

Turquoise/green earrings

Young (age unknown)

Laughing

Name tags:

Turquoise

Purple

White

Pink

A-L-Y-S-S-A

K-A-I-T-L-Y-N

Barbie productions tag:

Yellow

White

Grey

Purple

Pink

-A-

B-A-R-B-I-E

P-R-O-D-U-C-T-I-O-N

Wow effect (0.04)

Turquoise

Pink/red

Stripes

Question marks (0.09)

Pink

Yellow

Glitter effect (0.13)

Turquoise

Yellow

Blue

Orange

Green

Purple

Pink

Barbie Doll (first shown) (0.16)

Completely pink

In plastic

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Pink package

Plastic (see-through) tube

Barbie logo

Pink

Towel

Pink

Glass bowls x2 with water

4 mystery packages

Pink and darker spots

Wow effect (0.26 until 0.29)

Stripes

Plastic

Light blue

Pink

Yellow

Color reveal dolls manual

Pink

Yellow

Blue

Crème/white

Purple

Orange

Beige

6 steps

5 examples of Barbies (different skin tones, long hair, slim)

Descriptions (unreadable)

Barbie dipped into water

The water turns completely pink

White skin tone

Short white/silver hair

Pink swimsuit

Rainbow-colored unicorn on swimsuit

Symmetrical eyebrows

Big eyes with big eye lashes

White teeth

smile

Exclamation marks (1.04)

White

Pink

Yellow

“Collect them all” paper

Yellow

Purple

Pink

5 examples of Barbies

Different skin tones (light-dark)

All long hair

Wearing skirts

High heels

Tank tops

Purple

Orange

Turquoise

White/silver

Black

White

Pink

(collect them all)

Signs with question marks and examples (1.15)

Dark purple

Pink

Yellow

Blue

Long hair

skirt

Heels

Sponge?

Skirt (reveal)

Blue

Pink

Yellow

Purple

Turquoise

Stars

Colorful wig (reveal)

Two shades of pink

Blue

Long hair

Shoes (reveal)

Silver

Thesis, Commercials in Pink and Blue: Stereotyping gender in contemporary advertising, Casper Rijke, 5734355

Heart-shaped sponge

Pink

Sign of water (1.25)

White

Pink

Turquoise

Shape of a water drop

Shape of a snowflake

Barbies short hair (changed after sponge dipped in water)

Crème

Blue

Stars (1.29)

Purple

Eye color (changed after sponge dipped in water)

Purple

Lipstick (changed after sponge dipped in water)

Pink/reddish

Starts (1.37)

Red

Fun fact! (1.38)

White

Pink

Purple

Yellow

Turquoise

Stripes

Circles

(Fun fact!)

Warm water sign (1.40)

White

Pink

Turquoise

Symbol of the sun

Big heart (to change Kaitlyn)

Heart shaped

Pink/orange

Make-up Kaitlyn after change with big heart:

Pink lipstick

Pink/red color in hair

5 different Barbies:

Different skin tones (light-dark)

All long hair

Wearing skirts

High heels

Tank tops

Purple

Orange

Turquoise

White/silver

Black

White

Pink

Question marks (2.03)

Shaped like question marks

Yellow

Pink

White

Final sequence

(Barbie)

7 surprises

Barbie doll

4 surprise packages

Barbie doll with short hair

(You can be anything)

Package tube

(Barbie tm.)

(Color Reveal)

Splashes of water

Shape of a barbie doll on the tube

(Reveal doll with water)

Water drop symbol on tube

(Mattel)

Pink

White

Yellow

Black

Purple

Blue

Turquoise

Orange

Red

Silver

(Series 1)

Animals portrayed on the clothes of the Barbies:

Cat (black, white, orange)

Face of dog (black, white, pink)

Unicorn (rainbow)

Alpaca/lama (white, pink)

Panda (black, white)

Final shot

Two shapes of flowers (three shapes of pink, white)