AWARENESS, PERCEPTION AND PREFERENCE FOR GENDER COLORS IN ADVERTISEMENTS BY PARENTS IN KOSOFE LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, LAGOS STATE

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, color studies show that the favorite colors for boys were pink due to its semblance of calmness and blue for girls because of its royalty presence. Today, it is the reverse as pink is now the female gender color while blue replaces pink as the male gender color. This study examined parent's awareness, perception and preference for gender colors portrayed in advertisements. The cultivation and social learning theories provided theoretical background for the study. 300 parents participated from Kosofe Local Government Secretariat participated in the study. Results show that parents are aware of gender color stereotypes in advertisements, they perceive the use of gender colors in advertisement to be stereotypic. It was established that there is a gender difference in preferences for pink versus blue for female and male children as internalized by parents. The need for advertisers to desist from reinforcing gender color stereotypes in advertising was recommended.

Keywords: *Gender colors, Stereotypes, Perception, Preference, Children Advertisement*

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Introduction

Colors convey a lot about human emotions by reflecting our inner personalities and moods. Colors are closely tied to the decisions we make most times subconsciously. Colors may generate the sexism perception when such colors are ascribed to a particular gender and given a superior representation as is usually the case with men and women. The color pink and blue are mostly affiliated with sexes (Wong and Hines, 2015). This has led to the creation of certain popular stereotypical thoughts and ideas such as when men are typically portrayed as working and leading in the work place while women are seen taking care of the home or doing petty jobs that does not require much intellectual rigor.

The media has been blamed for perpetuating most of these stereotypical ideas in its representation of the male and female roles. Rost (2018) pointed out that in the last four years, *New York Times, Bloomberg and the Wall Street Journal* used the colors blue and pink to convey information about men and women. Wood (1994) had earlier noted that the media is the most pervasive and powerful when it comes to how men and women are viewed. Respondents in a survey conducted by … revealed that colors and fonts in ads promote certain gender stereotypes (Sullivan-Jenks, 2017). In the advertising industry, much of the adverts on children portray the blue color as meant for mechanic and the pink wear is meant for a fashion house dolls and any profession that seem girly so seeing a lady in that blue overall going under a car trying to repair seems weird and awkward.

This is the same for a male who appears in all pink overall and working in a fashion house. This is because overtime, these colors have been used in relation to specific gender and people have come to internalize these ideas as the ideal.

In some cases, advertisements portrayed girls as much less physically active with strong emphasis on colors like pink, purple with gentle chiming music. There is strong prominence on female appearances in terms of clothing, fashion dolls implying nurturing and domesticity (baby dolls, domestic toys) and also on creativity and self-expression (art materials, singing and dancing). It is common to see advertisements of pink colored Barbie doll house portraying girls as fashion conscious, Lego games in blue color indicating more of action figures for boys. Kinder Joy creates a distinction between girl's toys from the boys with the color blue for the packaging portraying more of dolls and fashion items (mirror, lipstick and figurines) for girls and more action figures (cars, robots and bikes) for boys. Lately, the cosmetic industry has joined with the increasing use of colors to distinguish gender colors in products such as bathing soaps, shaving sticks, toothbrushes, amongst others. The food industry is equally not exempted as the taste palates of children have not just only been the target but their sense of sight through different gender color packaging.

According to Eagly (1987) cited in Owen and Padron (2015) children are socialized from very young ages to conform to traditional gender role stereotypes. On one hand, girls learn throughout childhood the social role expectations of nurturance, dependence, and passivity while boys in the opinion of Kimmel (2011) learn from a younger age the roles of social consonant with traditional views of masculinity, roles which emphasize dominance, independence and emotional reserve.

In contrast to popular belief and what advertisers say, Karniol (2011) in a survey of 98 children between ages 4-8 tested the influence of color stereotypes by providing pink and blue books, the result showed that most of the girls chose blue books while most of the boys chose pink. In view of this revelation, this study aims to investigate parents' level of awareness of gender colors, how they perceive the use of the stereotypes as well as their preference when it comes to making choices of products which come with the gender colors.

Statement of the problem

According to Glick and Fiske (1996) in Rollero and Fedi (2012), stereotyping remains an insidious societal problem and clear efforts to promote gender equality have been rewarded with reduction in people's tolerance of sexism. Gender stereotyping continues to spread through public life, although in a less explicit form. Stereotyping has become a serious social problem and is now extended to children who have internalized certain perceptions.

Scholars have long debated the appropriateness of assigning certain colors to a gender as some schools of thought believe that this will only hamper people's sense of color appreciation and may in the long run affect how certain products are perceived when they appear in certain colors associated with specific genders. Wong and Hines (2015) believe that a particular color should be attached to each gender suggesting further that the color pink, represents tenderness, beauty, gentleness and delicateness and therefore suits the girl-like attitude while blue on the other hand, signifies masculinity, boldness and strength and therefore suits the boys.

On the other hand, there is the concern that assigning these stereotypical roles in relation to colors may be detrimental to social relationships and often detrimental to the children's self-esteem, career, physical relationships and even mental effect. Today, when a man appears in a pink shirt, some people may assume he is gay and mothers who dress their baby girls in blue will have to deal with people assuming the baby is a boy when they make comments. Impliedly, these gender colors now have profound effect on cultural expectations and sexuality.

In view of the fact that children lack purchasing ability and may not be the ones to eventually make a choice, there is a possibility that parents reinforce certain gender stereotypes. Hence, the study examines the level of gender color stereotype awareness, perception and preferences among parents.

Objective of the study

The specific objectives are to;

1. find out the level of awareness of gender color stereotypes used in advertisements among parents in Kosofe Local Government Area.
2. determine how parents in Kosofe Local government area perceive the use of gender colors in advertisements
3. identify parents preferred gender colors portrayed in advertisements.

Research Questions

The study adopted four research questions in line with the objectives, these are:

1. What is the level of awareness of gender color stereotypes in advertisements among parents in Kosofe Local government area?
2. How do parents in Kosofe local government area perceive the use of gender colors in advertisement?
3. What is the most preferred gender colors by parents in Kosofe Local Government?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Colors: History and Trends

According to Frassanito and Pettorini (2008) the effect of color-coded gender differences (pink for girls and blue for boys) did not exist initially as white used to be the colors worn for infants, suggesting that color and dresses were not used to differentiate between boys and girls. The idea of blue for girls and pink for boys emerged from a notion that blue was delicate and dainty and is prettier for girls while pink was viewed as a stronger color and more suitable for boys. Researchers have alluded to the explosion in manufacturing and product choices witnessed in the 20th century as what spurs gender color coding (Macasev, n.d). Over time these perceptions changed due to Germanys color coding which associated pink with feminist and after the WWII the color pink was the marketing slogan to convince women to embrace feminist. It was concluded that the color pink is for girls because when an infant is born, they are usually reddish pink which may signal approach behaviors that enhance infant survival and that pink has an advantage for a successful female reproduction. Noting that the double blind that exists with blue versus pink stereotype is

driving inequality, Zalis (2019) submits that the idea was further strengthened in the 1950s when some big advertising campaigns pushed pink as the exclusive color for females.

Color is one of the most powerful forms of communication. Color has its way of stimulating, persuading, creating anxiety and evoking feelings of warmth. In other words, people ascribe a lot of importance to choice of colors. In contemporary times, the trend has not changed so much as different genders still have colors associated with them. Khouv (2002) cited in Minamyer (2015) noted that males tend to prefer blue while females seem to prefer red or pink revealing further that women preferred soft colors while men preferred the brighter pallets on the basis that men are more tolerant with the use of non-relational colors than women. Contrary to this, ASA and CAP (2018:23), published the opinion of ages 7 to 11 female children on their color preferences. They reported that these girls feel disappointed and underestimated when they come across gender color stereotypes. One of them stated: 'I don't like pink. I'm a girl but I like navy blue. It doesn't mean I'm a boy".

The harmful effect of gender color stereotypes in advertising

Colors affect preferences in obvious ways, hence the reason why manufacturers and advertisers deliberately use them to stir consumer's emotions and attention. For every purchase, color is key as it can change moods, thereby influencing perceptions and preferences. While the use of color in advertising is not in itself, one way in which advertisers reinforce gender stereotypes is through the use of gender colors.

Advertisers and manufacturers have taken advantage of "these stereotypes and incorporate them into marketing strategies "… a major U.S. corporation has designed disposable diapers with two kinds of paddings; the boys' diapers are blue, the girls diapers are pink" (Picariello, Greenberg & Pillemer, 1999:1453). This is done all in effort to appeal to the emotions of the different personalities and gender that make up the market segments including parents and children.

Defined as a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person that can be negative, the potential harm in gender stereotypes in advertising was published in a document after a public consultation involving 18 organizations and about 64 individuals who contributed their reasons in a survey. Giving the need for next generation to have diversity and not be limited by stereotypes, participants in the survey indicated that:

> Repeatedly showing e.g. girls playing with dolls and pink things, boys playing outdoors with blue things sends the message that girls can't be tough or clever and have to be pretty and demure, boys have to be loud, noisy and not caring or nurturing. This starts the cycle of girls giving up STEM subjects and sports, and boys not taking on caring/nurturing roles in the society such as nursing and teaching… Some boys in toy shops are stopped by adults from buying dolls because they are told: "that's for girls, see it's pink. Some boys feel excluded from stereotypically 'girls' toys by the ads they see. This limits boys' ability to develop their nurturing skills to become fathers or enter the caring profession (ASA & CAP, Report 2018:7-9)

Owen and Padron (2016) assert that toys as one element of popular culture can revert these stereotypes by controlling the design of features that signify the gender appropriateness of toy play. While examining the presence of gendered language in the narrative that supports action figures advertised for girls and boys, their study reinforced the use of toy as a detrimental factor that could be used stereotypically.

Another study by Auster and Mansbach (2012) showed that toys advertised on Disney store revealed that girls' toys emphasized importance of physical attractiveness and displayed in pink and purple while boys emphasized action and power and displayed in bold colors of brown, black and red. The researchers observed that bold colored toys, especially red, blue, black, and those action figure like building toys, weapons, etc, are classified to be for boys while the soft hued colored toys especially pink or purple toys like dolls, jewelries, cosmetics and domestic oriented toys are classified to be for girl. This study further states that the impact of separating toys in gender on individuals could be detrimental to gender roles in the society emphasizing that adults and children's perception and choices of toys are gendered while importance is given to certain colors which are strongly connected with gender.

Several scholars have observed the strong association between gender and color palette with bold colors likely to be connected or associated to boys while light colors are likely to be associated to girls. These studies concluded that there is a strong bond between gender and specific colors especially pink and blue noting that colors have a way of prying into selection of toys and careers in children's lives (Clark, 2007; Kahlenberg and Hein, 2010; Nelson, 2000; Pennell 1994 cited in Auster & Mansbach, 2012).

The role of parents in perpetuating gender stereotypes

Cohen (2013) had established in his study that the gendered social environment affects parents color preferences. In his survey, he asked the favorite color of each gender, men mostly picked blue while the female preferred pink, purple and red. The research concluded that to any genetic, the biological socialization affects shaping adults' tendency to segregate gender by color preferences.

The result of a campaign carried out by 'Let Toy Be Toys' in 2015 showed that parent are aware of gender stereotypes in colors. Further, Paoletti (2012) noted that the stereotypical ideas about boys and girls purchase of blue and pink clothing had a thing to do with the parents or consumers choice during the prenatal period. Karnoil (2011) found from a study on the impact of gender and gender-related color stereotypes (blue and pink) while boys mostly chose blue and girls pink, purple and red. It was concluded that the results were based on children's socialization into gender roles. Macasev (n.d.) noted that color coding is all about parents as a baby didn't really care about the color but will be raised to care a lot.

Over two decades ago, in order to study the emerging gender differences in infancy, the physical environment of 120 children of age groups 5, 13 and 25 months was observed in an experimental research conducted by Pomerleau, Bolduc, Malcuit and Cossette (1999). The result showed that the both boys and girls experience environments which are dissimilar kind of physical environment as provided by their parents. On one hand, boys were provided with more sports equipment, tools, and large and small vehicles while the girls had more dolls, fictional characters, child's furniture, and other toys for manipulation. In addition, the girls wore pink and multicolored clothes more

often, had more pink pacifiers and jewelry. Boys wore more blue, red and white clothing. They had more blue pacifiers. Yellow bedding was more frequently observed in the girls' rooms, while blue bedding and curtains were more prevalent in the boys' rooms.

Questioning why parents are so obsessed with the color-coding childhood culture, Catherine (2019:L.14-18) a parent and feminist started a blog "Think or Blue" aimed at helping parents raise or teach children who are confident, kind and proud to be themselves. She observed thus:

> this isn't just about the colors. A pink frilly dress and a sky blue sailor's outfit are not the devil. It's the messages hiding in the colors that are truly damaging. And in fact, the messages aren't really hiding. We give children a strict recipe for how to be a boy or a girl. And we deliver these instructions through colors; colors that we assign before life barely begins. Society isn't satisfied if kids like pink and blue; we want them to BE pink and blue.

Theoretical Justification

The study was based on two theoretical positions. These are the cultivation and social learning theories. As a sociocultural theory having three components of media institutions, message production and message effects on viewers, the cultivation theory posits that the media shapes viewers perception, attitudes and beliefs on certain things. The theorists - Gerbener L. Gross, M. Morgan, and N. Signorielli (1976) postulated that TV viewers will cultivate the perception of reality portrayed by the TV which in this context may include negative stereotypes portrayed in children advertisements. On the other hand, gender stereotype may have evolved in relation to the assumption of social learning theory which posits that new behaviors can be acquired by observing and copying others. A behavior would last only when it is constantly rewarded while the one that is punished would be left behind. In this study, children can easily imbibe this stereotype not only by what is portrayed through ads but also from what their parents have taught and demonstrated as ideal. Since learning is not purely behavioral; rather, it is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context, cognition, environment, and behavior mutually influence each other (reciprocal determinism).

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative method of research was used for the study. The population targeted for this study are parents in Kosofe Local Government Area, Lagos State. The population of parents in this local government is 110586 (Kosofe Local Government Welfare Register, 2018). Members of staff in Kosofe Local Government Secretariat which has a good mix of both male and female parents' population were chosen as final respondents for the study. A sample size of 300 respondents constituted the sample size for this study while the research instrument is a questionnaire. Descriptive statistical tools were used in processing and presenting the data collected.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Research Question 1: Parents' level of awareness of gender colors used in advertisements

Table 1: Level of Awareness of Gender Colors Used in Advertisements

	Very High		High		Very Low		Low		Undecided	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I am aware that advertisement portray different gender colors	62	20.6%	87	28.9%	50	16.7%	56	18.9%	45	15.0%
I recognize the use of pink for girls and blue for boys to identify their gender colors.	63	21.1%	82	27.2%	50	16.7%	57	18.9%	48	16.1%
I recognize the use of pink for girls and blue for boys in food advertisement.	90	30.0%	70	23.3%	67	22.2%	50	16.7%	23	7.8%
I recognize the use of pink for girls and blue for boys in toy advertisement	58	19.4%	82	27.2%	62	20.6%	55	18.3%	43	14.4%
I recognize the use of different colour in clothing advertisement	58	19.4%	97	32.2%	62	20.6%	53	17.8%	30	10.0%

Source: Field survey, 2018

VH (very high), H(high), VL (very low), L(low), U(undecided)

From Table 1, on the average, parents have a high awareness of the presence of gender colors in advertisements in different percentages (28.9%, 27.2%, 23.3%, 27.2% & 32.2%). This is in line with the result of the campaign done by 'Let Toy Be Toys' in 2015 which showed that parent are aware of gender stereotypes in colors. It equally affirms the opinion of Paoletti (2012 and Pomerleau et al. (1990) that the stereotypical ideas about boys and girls purchase of blue and pink clothing had a thing to do with the parents or consumers choice during the prenatal period. Karnoil (2011) found from a study on the impact of gender and gender-related color stereotypes (blue and pink) that boys mostly chose blue and girls pink, purple and red. It was concluded that the results were based on children's socialization into gender roles.

Research Question 2: Parents Perception of the Use of Gender Colors

Table 2: How parents perceive the use of gender colors in advertisements

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I perceive the use of gender colors in advertisements to be stereotypic	60	20.0%	82	27.2%	63	21.1%	58	19.4%	37	12.2%
I perceive the use of gender color (pink, and blue) in advertisements to be trending	65	21.7%	77	25.6%	73	24.4%	62	20.6%	23	7.8%

	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I perceive the use of gender color (pink and blue) in advertisements as fashionable	57	18.9%	80	26.7%	62	20.6%	58	19.4%	43	14.4%
I perceive the use of gender colors (pink and blue) in advertisements as friendly.	58	19.4%	82	27.2%	65	21.7%	55	18.3%	40	13.3%
I am pleased with the use of gender colors in advertisements	60	20.0%	86	28.9%	52	17.2%	55	18.3%	47	15.6%
The use of pink and blue may affect child's career preference	74	25.0%	97	32.2%	62	20.6%	52	17.2%	15	5.0%
I perceive that colors have psychological effects on my children's behavior	67	22.2%	80	26.7%	70	23.3%	55	18.3%	28	9.4%

Source: Field survey, 2018
VH (very high), H(high), VL (very low), L(low), U(undecided)

Table 2 above shows that a high percentage (47.2%) of the parents agreed that the use of gender colors in certain advertisements is stereotypic, 47.3% see the use of gender color (pink and blue) in advertisements as a trend, 45.6% think that the use of gender colors (pink and blue) is fashionable, 46.6% perceive the use of gender colors (pink and blue) to be friendly, 48.9% agreed that they find the use of gender colors pleasing, 57.2% of the respondents perceive that the use of pink and blue may affect a child's career preference while 48.9% of the respondents agreed that they perceive that colors have psychological effects on children's behavior. Catherine (n.d.) had noted how damaging the messages behind the color-coding culture which some parents in the current study are not aware of. The fact that some perceived the use of gender color stereotypes as pleasing shows how much some parents may not be aware of the damaging impact and how parents may be contributing to the gender color stereotypes unconsciously.

Research Question 3: Parents Preferred Gender Colors

Table 3: Showing Parents preferred gender color

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Undecided	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I prefer blue for my male child and pink for my female child	53	17.8%	88	29.4%	69	22.8%	53	17.8%	37	12.2%
I am highly in support of pink dolls for my female child and blue toys for my male child	58	19.4%	83	27.8%	63	21.1%	57	18.9%	39	12.8%

Statement										
I do think only blue and pink are gender stereotypic colors	63	21.1%	93	31.1%	67	22.2%	60	20.0%	17	5.6%
I prefer bright colors for my female child and dull colors for my male child	83	27.8%	63	21.1%	60	20.0%	58	19.4%	36	11.7%
In buying gifting items for children I will buy a Barbie collection with colors (pink, purple and red) for my female child and toys story collection of (green, blue, black and grey) for my male child	88	29.4%	70	23.3%	67	22.2%	53	17.8%	22	7.2%
I prefer red for my child (girl or boy) because it stimulates encouragement	68	22.8%	72	23.9%	75	25.0%	58	19.4%	27	8.9%
I prefer orange for my male child and green for my female child	59	19.4%	78	26.1%	73	24.4%	57	18.9%	33	11.1%
I would rather buy a grey dress and toy for my female child and black toy or clothes for my male child	72	23.9%	80	26.7%	57	18.9%	53	17.8%	38	12.8%
I don't see anything wrong in the use of pink, blue, red, purple, black, green and grey in children advertisement	67	22.2%	67	22.2%	65	21.7%	53	17.8%	48	16.1%

Source: Field survey, 2018
VH (very high), H(high), VL (very low), L(low), U(undecided)

Parents responses presented in table 3, shows that 47.2% of the respondents indicated that they prefer blue for their male child and pink for their female child, 47.2% agreed that they are highly in support of pink dolls for their female child and blue toys for their male child, 52.2% think only blue and pink are gender stereotypic colors, 48.9% prefer bright colors for their female child and dull colors for their male child, 52.7% of the respondents agreed that when buying gifting items for children they will buy a Barbie collection with colors (pink, purple and red) for their female child and toys story collection of (green, blue, black and grey) for their male child, 46.7% of the respondents agreed to prefer red for their child (girl or boy) because it stimulates encouragement. In addition, the study revealed that 50.6% of the respondents will rather buy a grey dress and toy for their female child and black toy or clothes for their male child while 44.4% do not see anything wrong in the use of pink, blue, red, purple, black, green and grey in children advertisement. Cohen (2013) had noted that the gendered social environment in adulthood affects parents color preferences and this is obviously why majority of the parents in this study will make choices for their children based on the prescribed gender color codes (blue and pink). The danger underscored given the strong bond between gender and specific colors especially pink and blue, which is parents prying into selection of toys and careers in children's lives is almost inevitable (Auster & Mansbach, 2012).

5.3   Conclusion

The study found that in parents in Kosofe Local Government Area in Lagos State are aware that there are gender stereotypes in children adverts, they perceive such ads to be stereotypic, pleasing and trending. These parents also prefer the stereotyped gender colors impliedly, they prefer their male children wear blue while the female dress in pink.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby offered;

1. Although, advertisers usually put forward the argument on the need to be creative when passing a message as the reason why most advertisements contain stereotypic portrayals, there are more responsible ways to achieve this without reinforcing dangerous beliefs about the male and female gender with the use of colors. Advertisers need to be more sensitive to the potential harm that several studies have linked with advertisements portraying gender colors.
2. Parents also need to desist from reinforcing gender color stereotypes by not showing any preference for any particular color for a gender.

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