

Exploring relationships between toys, dolls, and puppets in gender education web-series projects in Development Communication

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Abstract: *The study sought to determine whether the use of puppets as tools in gender education web series projects in Development Communication improved attitudes on said tools after the course and whether correlations exist between attitudes on said tools before and after the completion of the project. Using a researcher-made survey questionnaire using a 4-point Likert scale, it measured attitudes on toys, dolls, and puppets before and after the use of puppets in educational group projects using puppets as main characters of a 13-episode web series. The study used the T-test for paired samples and the Pearson Correlational Coefficient to test for significant difference and correlations, respectively. The study revealed that there was a significant difference between attitudes on toys, dolls, and puppets before and after the completion of their Development Communication web series project, and that correlations between attitudes exist before and after said project completion. This indicates the use of said tools by young adults favor their increasing use even by those who are not initially comfortable with them and could facilitate the development of said attitudes in their own children later on, or children they will communicate with for educational purposes using said tools.*

Keywords: *Toys, Dolls, Puppets, Gender Education, Web Series, Development Communication*

I. Introduction

In Europe, gender education is considered necessary, so much so that it is an essential part of all levels of education. Gender education, according to the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021), “enable(s) both girls and boys, women and men to understand how constructions of masculinities and femininities and models for assigning social roles – which shape our societies – influence their lives, relationships, life choices, career trajectories, etc.” In the Philippines, advocating for gender education has remained merely a gesture of “tokenism” (Hernando-Malipot, 2021, para. 1); however, advocates of the mainstreaming of gender equality in education persist to “ensure a safe and gender-fair learning environment for learners – especially to women and girls” (para. 1). The Philippines’ Commission on Higher Education (CHED, 2015) has acted towards the promotion of gender and development since 2010 by issuing policies, the most important of which is CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 01, series of 2015 or the “Establishing the Policies and Guidelines on Gender and Development in CHED and HEIs.”

According to the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (Philippine Commission on Women, 2021), the Philippines has closed its overall gender gap to 78 percent “with the narrowest gap between men and women” (para. 2) among 153 countries across the following indicators: “economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment” (para. 4). For the most part, however, the gender gap being addressed are between men and women and does not take into account the experiences of non-binary gender identities. According to the Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines in 2012, “Transgender people are one of the most marginalized and neglected sectors in the Philippines in terms of human rights protection, promotion, and fulfillment” (p.1). Nine

years, thereafter, Redfern (2021) reported that violence continues to threaten the lives of trans persons in the country.

Stanley of the UC Berkeley and Othering and Belonging Institute asserted that such violence is not caused by just one thing; "It's always a constellation of systems that are rubbing up against each other" (Natividad, 2021, para. 25). The World Health Organization (2009) posited that a culture of violence can be countered by "reducing access to lethal means; increasing safe, stable and nurturing relationships between children and their parents and caregivers; developing life skills in children and adolescents; reducing availability and misuse of alcohol; promoting gender equality; and victim identification, care, and support" (p. 1). Education, according to Methews and Savarimuthu (2020), being the means of transmitting any kind of culture, "brings the desirable change in both the culture and values for the progress and development of the society" (para. 1).

Serafica and Begszuren (2019) pointed out that gender stereotypes contribute to inequality and limit the potentials of human development. Development communication can be a means to address gender and development issues in a multitude of ways (Steeves, 2010) by "communicating particular assumptions made about groups of people, such as women and men, as responsible for social problems and subsequent change." (para. 1). In 2020, the Development Communication handled by the author taught the course by focusing on gender education directed towards grade school children 12 years old and below. The class was tasked to develop a web series that appropriately educates the target learners about gender diversity using puppets they made themselves to tell the story of characters representing a wider range of gender identities. Given that the target audience for the stories is children, the use of puppets was considered appropriate, especially with the success of puppetry in children's shows like *Sesame Street* in the 1970s until the 1990s with *Batibot* in the Philippines. To prepare the students for the project, they were given a backgrounder on Japanese culture, particularly, on the art of toys, dolls, masks, and puppets, focusing on the roles they play in sustaining a society.

Toy preferences of children were found to be subject to gender stereotypes (Caldera, Huston, & O'Brien, 1989). Toys in child's play set the stage for further human development (Smirnova & Nieves-Rosa, 2018). Dolls, in particular, or the representation of the human body in an inanimate object, were found to help embody empathy and estrangement, and "increasingly exemplified the bond between gender and mass culture to provide models of subjectivity and spectatorship" (Koss, 2003). Meanwhile, puppets "can address issues related to intergenerational connections, general and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, democracy and governance, and human rights" (Health Social and Behaviour Change Network - Africa, 2006, para. 1). Separately, toys, dolls, and puppets have educational value. Together within a specific context like gender education of children, it remains to be seen whether those values enhance or negate each other.

All the above suggest that toys, dolls, and puppets offer ways to communicate the construct of gender to children. As such, and given that gender education in basic education in the Philippines operates with limited gender constructs in formal spaces of discourse (Laxa, 2020) and that the discourse itself is limited to equality gaps between male and female children (USC-Office of Population Studies, Inc., 2020), advancing the use of the abovementioned creative tools will benefit future practitioners of development communication aiming to make a difference in the area of non-traditional and mainstream gender education. As a consequence, this study sought to determine whether the use of toys, dolls, and puppets, common in Japanese culture, in teaching Development Communication in the Communication and Visual Design and Communication programs in St. Paul University Manila made a difference in their attitudes towards them while doing the project.

To do so, the study examined if there was a significant difference between the pre-project and post-project attitudes of the participants on toys, dolls, and puppets. Should a difference be found, continuing the project in the next semesters will be helpful not just in the area of progressive gender education but also in development communication, in general. To this, the study hypothesized that there is no significant difference

between the pre- and post-project attitudes of the Development Communication students across the different domains (toys, dolls, and puppets). The study also explored whether correlations exist between the different domains both before and after the project. To this, the study hypothesized that no such correlations exist.

II. Conceptual Framework

Being a correlational study, the figure below shows the relationships of the variables being examined in this study. To establish the likely influence of the gender education project in Development Communication, the significant difference was determined between the three domains before and after the project engagement. To establish whether there exists a relationship between specific attitudes between the three domains, before and after the project was conducted, a correlational test was crucial.

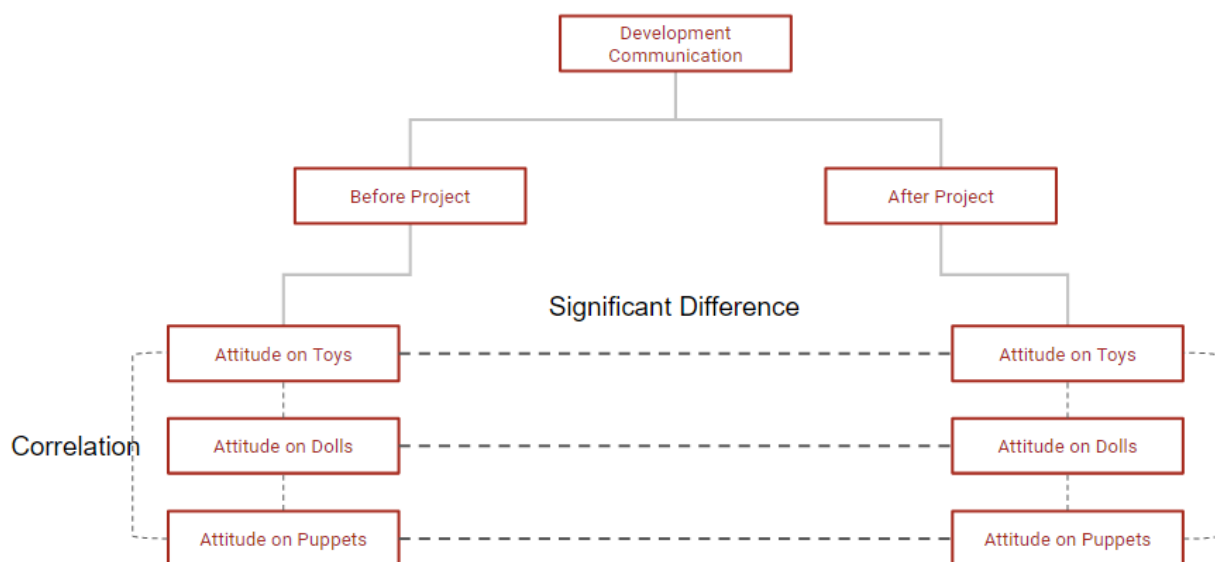


Figure 1. The conceptual framework for the study

III. Methodology

This study involved 22 Development Communication students enrolled in the first semester of academic year 2021-2022 who were educated on Japanese toys, masks, robots, and dolls in preparation for their production of a 13-episode web series on gender education for preteens using puppets as storytellers. The students voluntarily participated in a post-course online survey via Google Forms with 15 closed-ended attitudinal questions. The questions used a four-point Likert scale where 1 means "negative" and 4 means "positive". After the responses were collected, the data were sorted according to the domains and subjected to statistical treatment, particularly T-test for paired samples, using an open-source statistical calculator found in www.mathcracker.com/t-test-for-paired-samples to determine significant differences. Significant differences would indicate that their Development Communication project on gender education for children influenced a change in their attitudes on puppets, dolls, and toys. Meanwhile, correlations were determined within pre- and post-project scores using the Pearson Correlational Coefficient calculator found in www.socscistatistics.com/tests/pearson/default2.aspx. Correlations would suggest that one's attitude on one domain is linked to attitudes on other domains before and after the project.

IV. Results

The scores of the participants' attitudes on puppets, dolls, and toys before and after they engaged in the gender education project were paired and tested for significant difference and correlation via the paired T-test and the Pearson Correlation Coefficient. The results of which are discussed below.

Significant Differences between Pre- and Post-Project Attitudes on Domains

The paired T-test indicated that the hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference between the participants' attitudes on puppets must be rejected. Given the p-value of 0.0157 which is less than 0.95, this study found that the gender development project in Development Communication led to a more positive attitude on the use of puppets for gender education.

Next, the second hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference between the participants' attitudes on dolls must be rejected. Given the p-value of 0.0081 which is less than 0.95, this study revealed that the said project also led to a more positive attitude on the use of dolls in gender education.

Third, the hypothesis stating that there is no significant difference between the participants' attitudes on toys must also be rejected. Given the p-value of 0.1103 which is less than .95, this study showed that the same led to a more positive attitude on the use of toys in gender education.

Overall, the statistical tests show that, for the selected participants, the gender education project improved their attitudes on puppets, dolls, and toys as instruments for gender education for children. This is a positive sign in that the said project widened the range of communicative repertoire of the participants which is currently more oriented towards less tangible digital tools that has become more part of their lives before their enrollment in Development Communication, having been born into a more digital than analog technological landscape (ExLibris, n.d.).

Correlations between Attitudes on Domains before and After the Project

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient test showed that there is a weak positive correlation between (1) attitudes on puppets and dolls ($R = 0.1669$), (2) attitudes on puppets and toys ($R = 0.2502$), and (3) attitudes on dolls and toys ($R = 0.4573$) before the participants engaged in the gender education project for children in Development Communication. After the project, however, a strong positive correlation was found between (1) attitudes on puppets and dolls ($R = 0.8742$) in the context of gender education. Meanwhile, the study also found that there only exists a weak positive correlation between (2) attitudes on puppets and toys ($R = 0.3563$), and a moderate positive correlation between (3) attitudes on dolls and toys ($R = 0.546$) after the gender education project.

These results implied that the project strengthened the links students created between puppets and dolls, which is understandable since their projects used puppets and other forms very similar to anthropomorphic dolls which they used to talk and build relationships with each other in their web episodes and to relate with their target audiences. Toys, being a lot more non-specific or potentially less anthropomorphic were used less in their gender education projects. Hence, one can surmise that their actual engagement and manipulation of do-it-yourself puppets and varied improvised doll-like forms to tell a story could be deemed as most influential in the shift towards a more positive attitude on both at the end of the project.

V. Discussion

Culturally, dolls tend to be more associated with girls than boys. In a machismo-driven societies and where females are considered second-class citizens, boys playing with dolls can be seen negatively and labeled using pejorative words. However, a study by Cherney and associates (2010) revealed that "higher levels of play complexity were only manifested when children played with female stereotyped toys" (para. 1) which include dolls and their equivalents. This means that parents who grew up with anything less than female stereotyped toys may not be at par with those who were given opportunities to engage in higher levels of play complexity; meaning, the former may not be orienting the play of their children towards higher levels of cognitive development.

In situations where children are prevented from playing with dolls and their equivalents, alternative venues or platforms of engagement with them could be crucial in compensating for the lack of such in their families. A web series featuring dolls and puppets, allowing for higher levels of play complexity, can be a child's opportunity to transcend limitations set by his/her/their family if given access to online learning resources. Likewise, a student exposed to Development Communication dealing with a gender education project using puppets and doll-like toys could also experience the same breakthrough, albeit later in their formative years compared to the children constituting their target audience.

The study also showed that a correlation exists more between attitudes on puppets and toys after the participants' engagement in the gender education project. In particular, there is a higher correlation established between puppets and dolls, and dolls and toys, than between puppets and toys (see Figure 2). This may be partly explained by the dearth of puppet traditions in the Philippines (Bonifacio, 2003), as compared to other Southeast Asian countries (Liwanag, 2011). Compared to toys, and their more specific form, dolls, puppets are comparably less familiar to the participants as tools for children's play, and, hence, poses a greater challenge as communication tools.

The children's show titled *Batibot* went off-air in 2002 (IMDb, 2021), sometime when the participants were only infants. Later, similar shows that employed few to no puppets were unsuccessful and less popular than *Batibot* even when produced by a major network on free TV; hence, lasting only around five years on free TV before moving to subscription-based Knowledge Channel in 1999 (From the Tube, 2015). Hence, puppets are more associated with dolls due to their human-like qualities than with toys, even when toys could mean so many more things than dolls. This indicates that for puppets to become more acceptable both as toys and educational tools, they must be mainstreamed in Philippine culture in many ways possible.

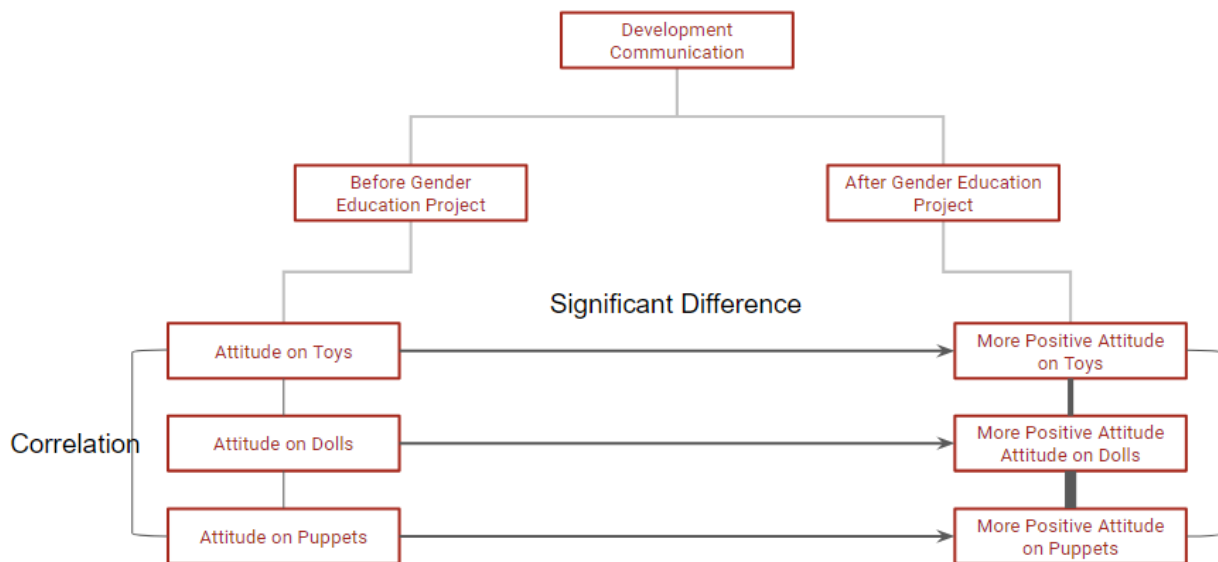


Figure 2. Relationships between domains and pre- and post-project attitudes on the domains

Puppets, compared to dolls, are more gender-neutral, however. Hence, while dolls are more familiar to Filipinos culturally, it is more gender-specific and less flexible as an educational tool because boys will not relate to dolls (Sax, 2018; Pollitt, 1995) as much as girls would. But puppets are not considered toys in Philippine culture, either by the boys or girls. In the Philippines, where no popular and indigenous puppet culture exists (Bonifacio, 2003), the challenge is to make puppets more accessible and mainstream, especially when there are benefits to doll play (Importance of Play, 2020).

For dolls and other forms of toys to be seen as puppet substitutes in the Philippines, children must be allowed to foster greater imagination through play and storytelling (Phillips, 2000). For puppetry (a tool in gender education among children due to its gender neutrality) to succeed, puppetry must be mainstreamed and promoted early in children's lives (McCudden, Mondro, O'Connor, & Ramos, 2020). This study revealed that the way to potentially open the door for puppetry is to dissociate dolls as tools of "girl-play only" because dolls can serve as puppets for boys (Tapp, 2021) as well. Such dissociation may still be done even at the college level through a course like Development Communication, for communicators who are strangers to puppetry as a form of communication tool for social change (Sala, 2018).

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