

Let Toys Be Toys

Boys' Toys, Girls' Toys, or Toys for Children?
How are retailers presenting toys online in 2014?

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Summary

The Let Toys Be Toys Campaign is asking the toy and publishing industries to stop limiting children's interests by promoting some toys and books as only suitable for girls, and others only for boys. Since 2012 we have conducted annual surveys assessing the use of gender in their marketing/advertising.

In 2014 we reviewed online shopping sites selling toys and children's books.

Headline results

Categorising toys 'Boys' or 'Girls' is falling out of favour online, with under half of retailers reviewed using gender as a navigation aid or filter in online stores.

- Just under half (24/50) of the websites reviewed use gender to categorise toys or direct shoppers.
- Only half (12/24) of these offer gender as a prominent way to browse products.
- None of the online booksellers surveyed used gender to organise children's books.
- Sites are much less likely to use gender to organise toys than 2 years ago, with household names including Tesco, Asda, Boots, M&S, Sainsbury's and Hamley's dropping gendered navigation or filters during this time.

Gender as a navigation tool

Twenty-four of the fifty sites reviewed offered gender as a way to navigate products via main menu options, filters, interactive present pickers or gift guides.

Twelve sites offered gender as a prominent way to navigate toys (i.e. as one of the first options you see when navigating toys, either in top navigation options, flyout menus, promotional blocks or a prominent interactive present picker on the toys index page.) A further 12 used gender as a secondary way to view products (e.g. less prominent filters or gift guides).

Good practice

Just over half (26 out of 50) of websites reviewed, including household names with large toy ranges such as Amazon.co.uk, Tesco.com and Hamley's did not use gender as part of their navigation and signposting for toys, instead using a range of alternative ways to view and sort products such as 'Category' (e.g. dolls, vehicles), 'Age range', 'Brand', 'Character', 'Price range' etc. (Stereotyping also exists in the packaging and marketing of individual products, and in the range a retailer chooses to stock but the survey looked specifically at navigation and categorisation.)

The Let Toys be Toys campaign awards a good practice Toymark to retailers which commit to marketing toys in an inclusive way, both in store and online. Please see our recommended retailers page for more information: lettoysbetoys.org.uk/recommended-retailers

What's the problem with organising toys online by gender?

At Let Toys Be Toys we believe that there is no such thing as a 'girls' toy' or a 'boys' toy'. A child should feel free to pick up and play with any toy they like. Marketing toys by gender limits children's choices, limits their chances to learn and develop and feeds bullying.

Companies defend the decision to organise toys into 'Boys' and 'Girls' categories, or to offer 'Boys' or 'Girls' filter options saying that they are helping customers. The same arguments were made for signage in toyshops, but after a 60% drop in gendered signage last year (see our 2013 survey results), shoppers seem still to be able to find a doll under 'Dolls' instead of 'Girls'.

The use of gender filters as an alternative or secondary way of browsing products, or providing 'Gift guides' or 'Ideas' for boys or girls may appear more acceptable. If analysis of web data shows that customers are using them then retailers may understandably be reluctant to remove them. But providing these filters, or presenting them as primary ways to view products is still suggesting to shoppers that gender is a good way to decide what will interest a child. It simply isn't - selecting toys by gender means that children may only be offered a limited range, and miss out on the chance to find and enjoy things that really interest them.

When retailers talk about the uncles, aunts and grandparents who would be lost without something telling them what to buy for 'a girl age 6', they are underestimating the majority of relatives who know more about the children they shop for than their age and sex, or take the time to ask parents or carers about children's interests. They also do a disservice to children, whose interests range more widely than the narrow pink and blue boxes of gender stereotypes, and who don't deserve to be told that their interests are 'wrong'.

Says Barbara Burke, present-buyer to four young grandchildren, "I often buy presents for my grandchildren online, and that's easiest when toys are arranged by type. For example, two of my grandchildren (a girl and a boy) currently enjoy playing with small plastic people - whether that's pirates, fairies, knights etc. If a website is divided into 'boys' and 'girls' I have to check both sections, so I tend not to bother and find a more helpful website."

Using the filters doesn't necessarily mean the shoppers agree with the stereotypes, either. Says Hannah, "I might use a filter because you know what the stereotypes are, so if you're looking for a superhero toy, you'll know it will be under 'Boys'. You need some means of filtering the thousands of products available, but I don't think 'Boys' and 'Girls' is really the best way."

And of course it isn't just adults that use shopping websites - see Abbie's story for more.

As we can see from the survey results, the majority of sites, from toy specialists to department stores and supermarkets (including household names such as Amazon.co.uk, Argos.co.uk, Tesco.com and Hamleys.com) are selling toys online successfully without gender navigation or filters.

Abbie's story

Abbie, 7, has always been keen on trains, but this year felt it was time to move on from her beloved wooden train set and get a 'real model train set' which she could build, drive and create scenery for. She and Mum, Kim, sat down to view the options on the Toys R Us website. Says Kim, "All well and good until she noticed we hadn't clicked the 'girl' selection at the side. Dutifully I clicked and lo and behold, the two more expensive options, more suited to her age group, disappeared, including the one she had her eye on. 'It doesn't matter, you can still ask for it,' I said. 'Train sets can be for boys or girls. After all, you are a girl and you like trains.' But too late. Not only has she now decided that she doesn't want a train set any more as 'even the shop says they are for boys,' she is now also

doubting her confidence in her choice of toy, to the point of questioning why she doesn't like the things that 'normal' girls do."

How do sites present gender navigation?

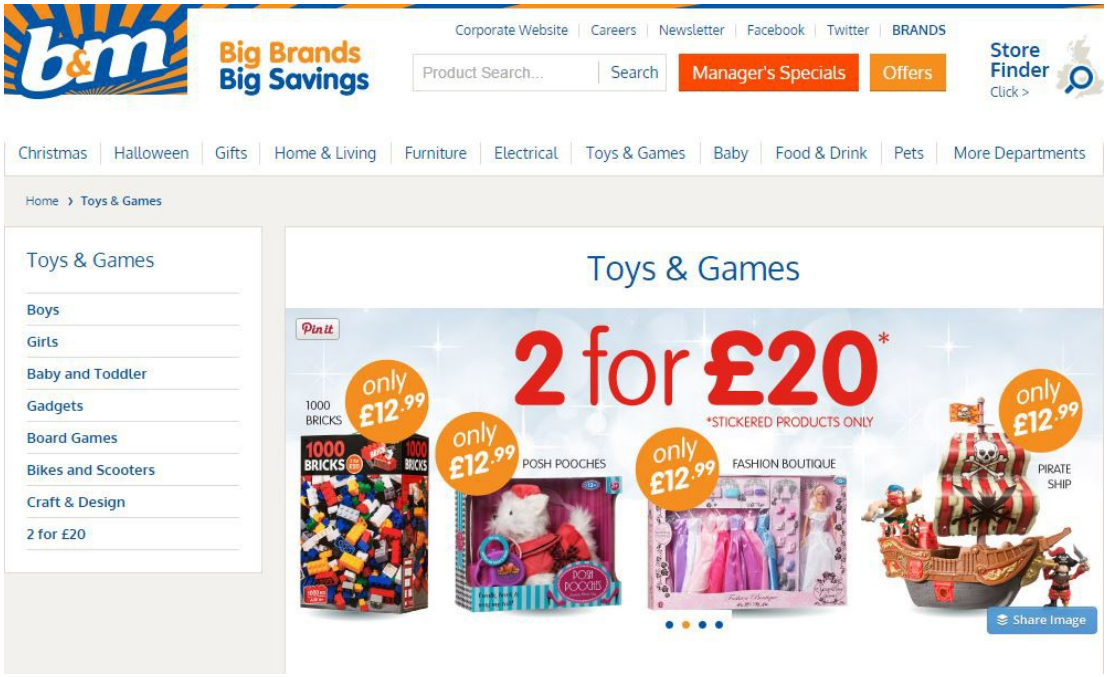
Unlike a physical shop, websites can offer multiple ways to sort and navigate content. In total, 24 sites offered Boy/Girl options as a way to navigate content, 12 as a prominent way of viewing products, 11 as an alternative or less prominent way to view products, or in one case (Harrods) only allowed access to an ungendered toy section through gendered navigation.

Main navigation

On four sites (B&M Homestores, Cath Kidston, Poundland and Wicked Uncle) it is only possible to view toys by gender. One site (GALT toys) had a prominent 'Girls Club' subsection in the main site navigation.

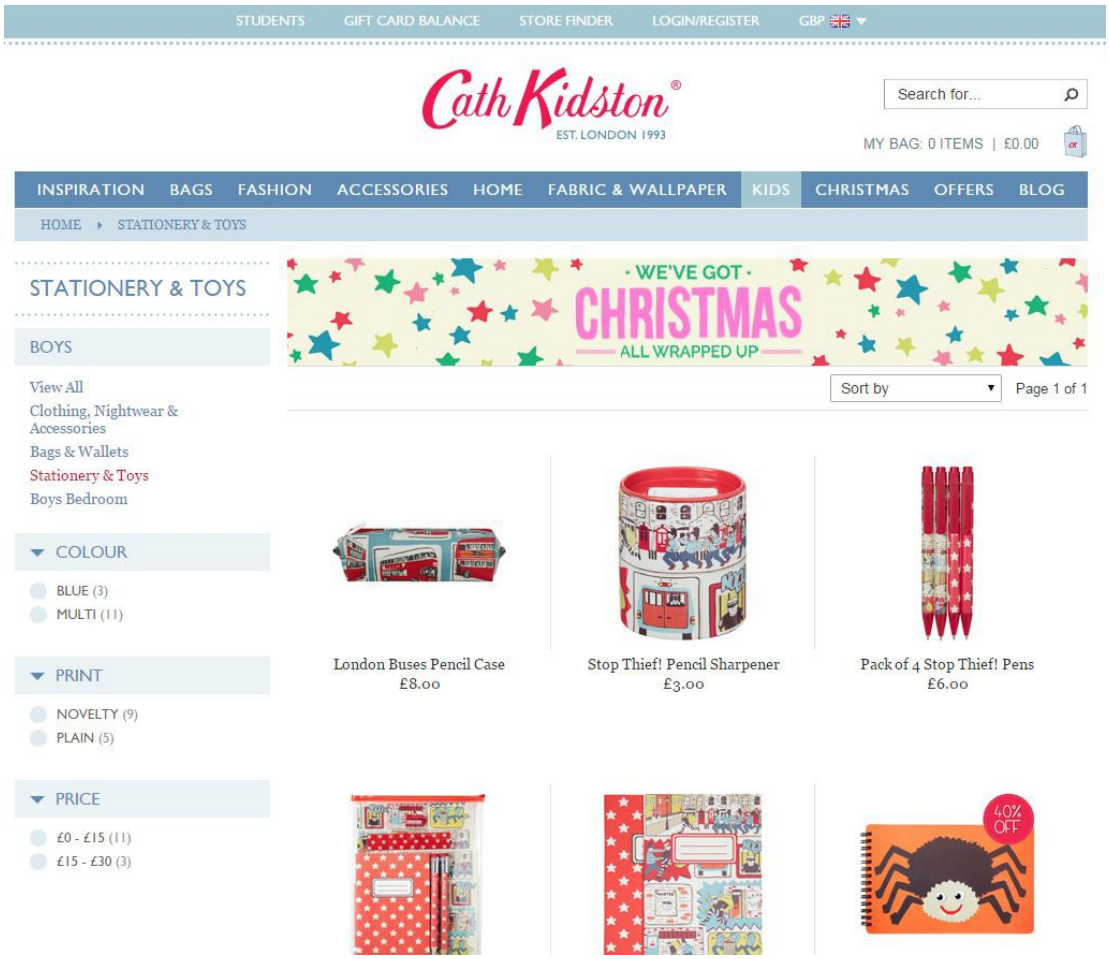
B&M Homestores

Most toys are only accessible by choosing either 'Boys' or 'Girls' options. *[NB B&M Homestores has been included as it showcases toys on its website, but it is not possible to purchase online.]*



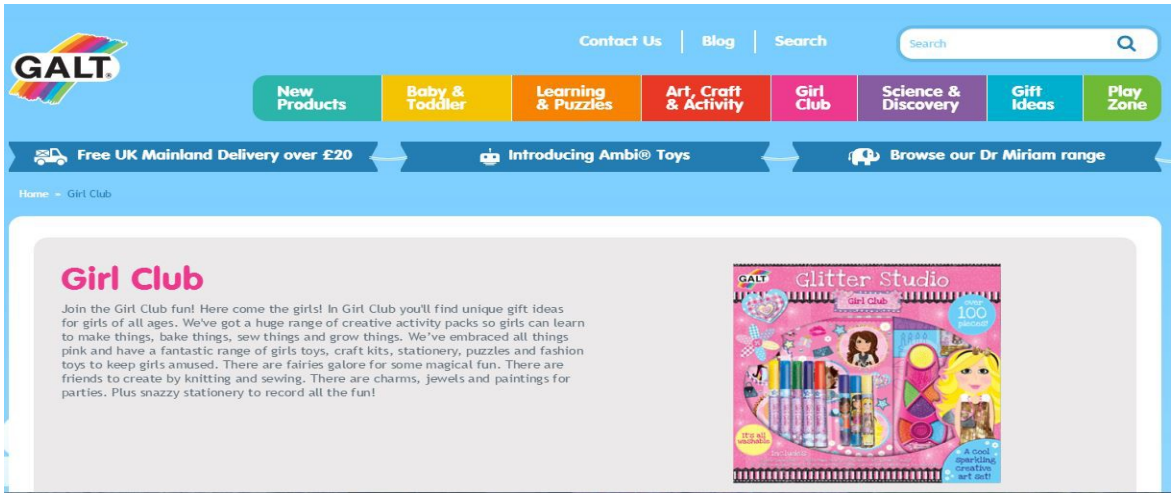
Cath Kidston

It is only possible to access stationery and toys by picking either ‘Boys’ or ‘Girls’. The selection is small – a few products in both categories, but most only appear in one or the other.



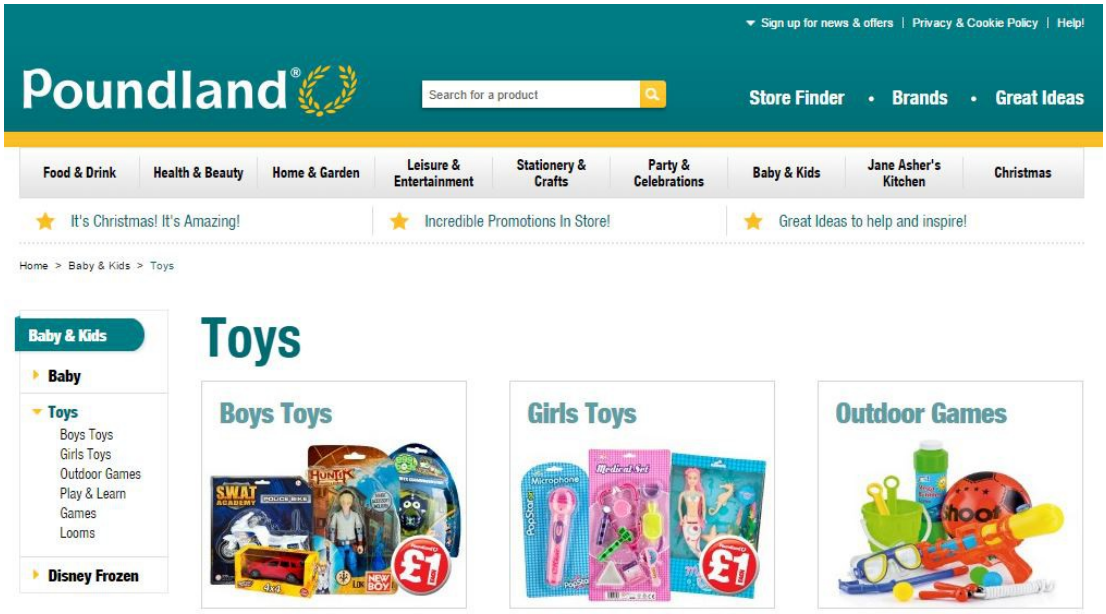
Galt Toys

The Galt website has a prominent, pink ‘Girl Club’ section as one of the main navigation options for the site.



Poundland

It is only possible to view toys by picking either 'Boys' or 'Girls'. Selection is relatively small – some overlap, e.g. Loom Bands. *[NB Poundland has been included because it showcases toys on its website, but it is not possible to purchase online.]*



Wicked Uncle

It is only possible to browse items on the Wicked Uncle site by selecting the age and gender of the recipient.

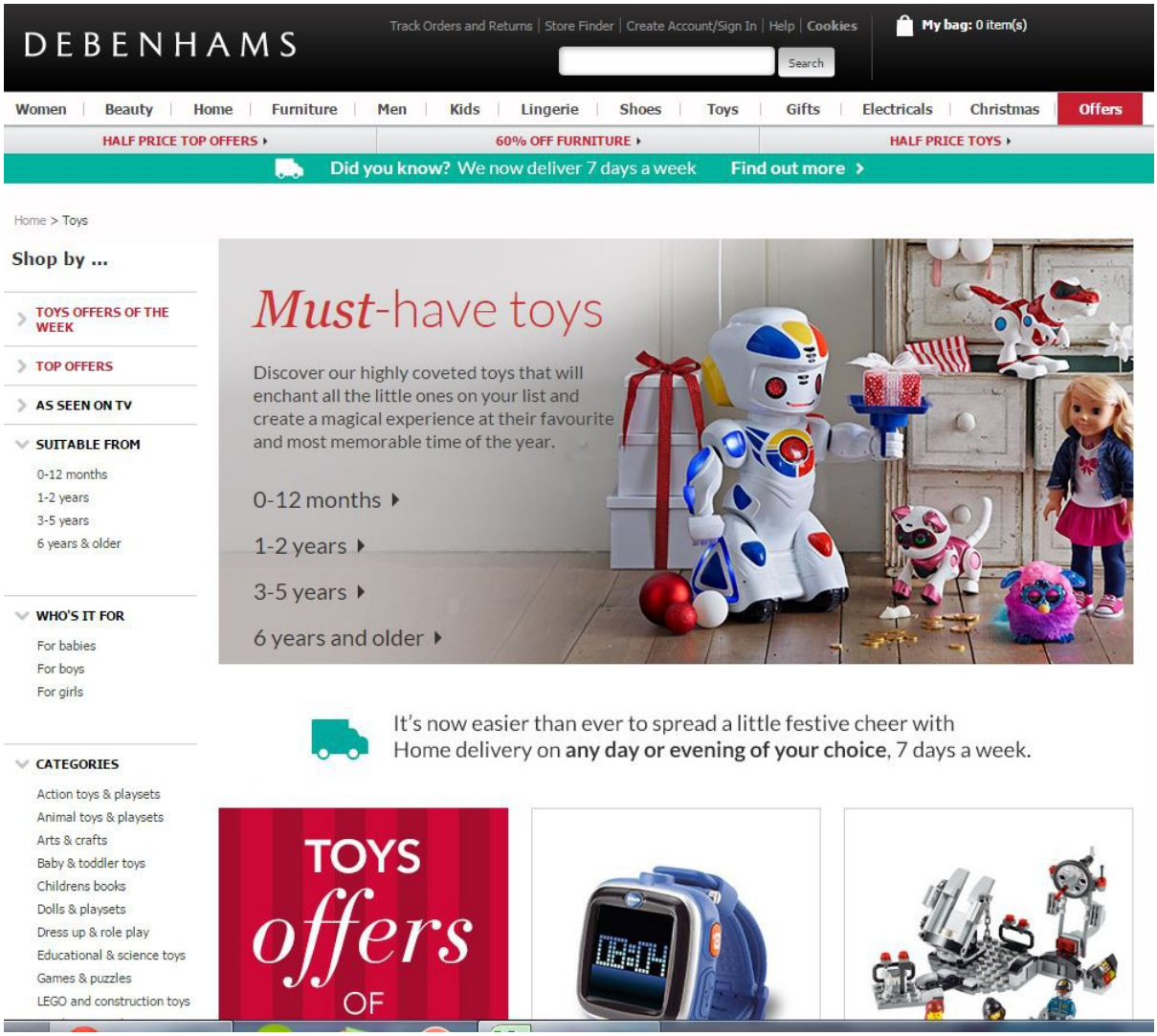


Gender filters

In three stores (Debenhams, Disney Store and Hawkins Bazaar) gender filters were presented as prominent navigation options. Five sites (Early Learning Centre, The Hut, Lego, Playmobil, Toys R Us) offered less prominent gender filters.

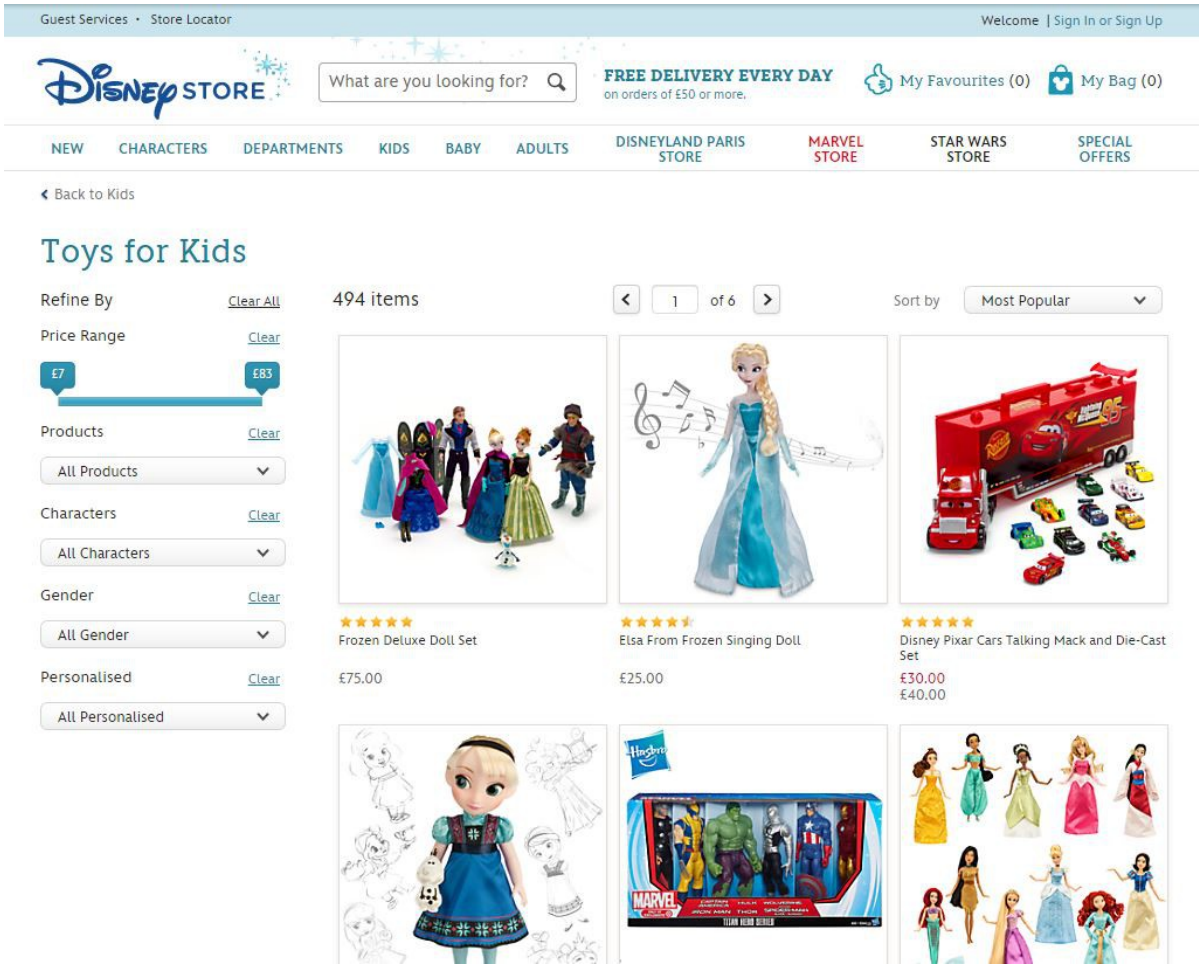
Debenhams

The 'Who's it for' gender filter appears above the list of 'Categories' on the toys index page.



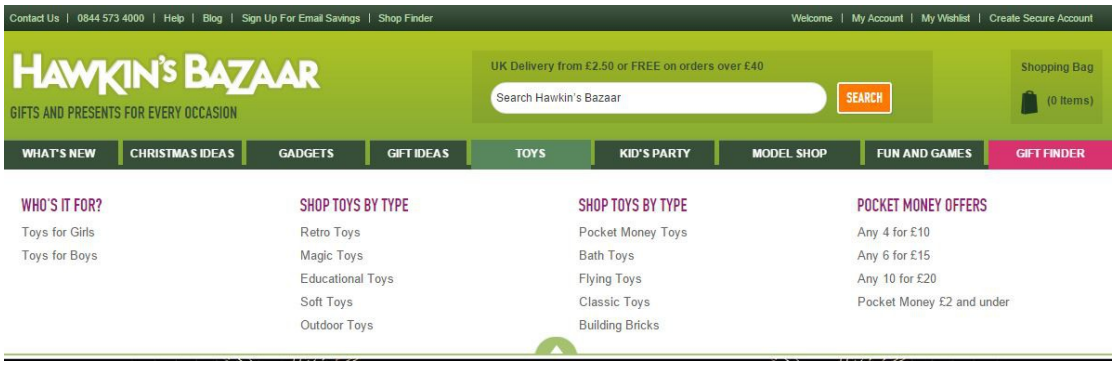
Disney store

The gender filter is one of the main navigation tools on the 'Toys for Kids' index page.



Hawkins' Bazaar

The Hawkins' Bazaar site offers 'Toys for Girls', 'Toys for Boys' as the first navigational option within the Toys section.

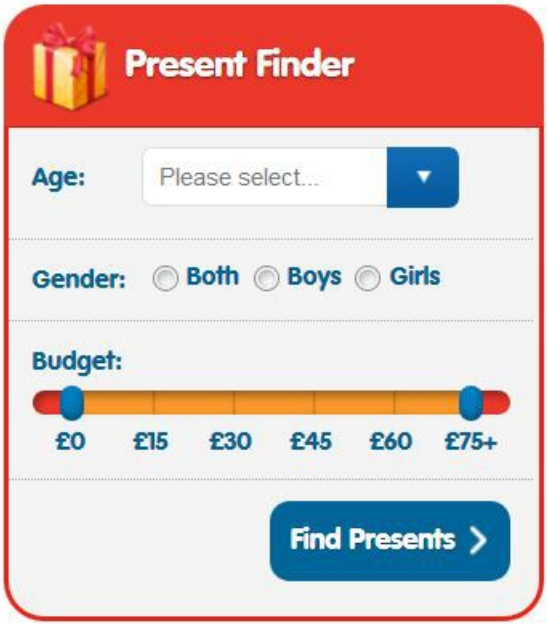


Interactive present pickers

Three sites (The Entertainer/thetoyshop.com, The Happy Puzzle Company and Prezzybox.com) offered interactive present pickers, with gender options, as main or prominent ways to navigate content.

The Entertainer

The Entertainer website (thetoyshop.com) has a prominent ‘present finder’ tool on the home page.



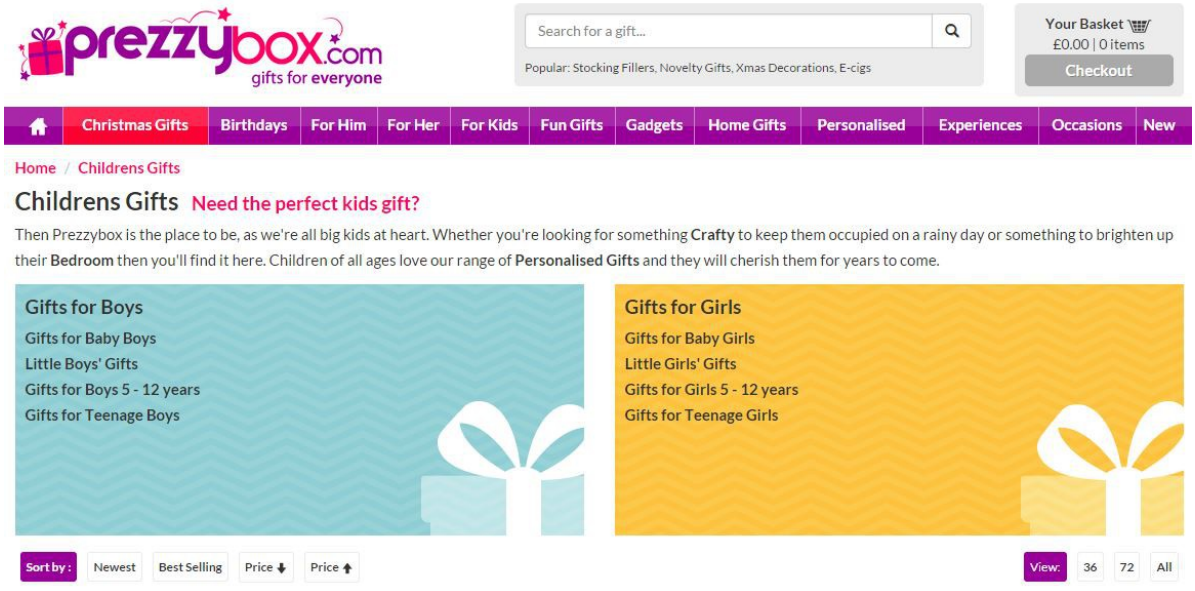
The Happy Puzzle Company

The Happy Puzzle Company site's gift picker offers the chance to filter toy options by gender. The gift picker appears on the homepage and throughout the site as a prominent navigation tool.



Prezzybox.com

Like Wicked Uncle (above) the prezzybox site is organised around picking presents by recipient, but does offer different ways to navigate products (e.g. toy type).

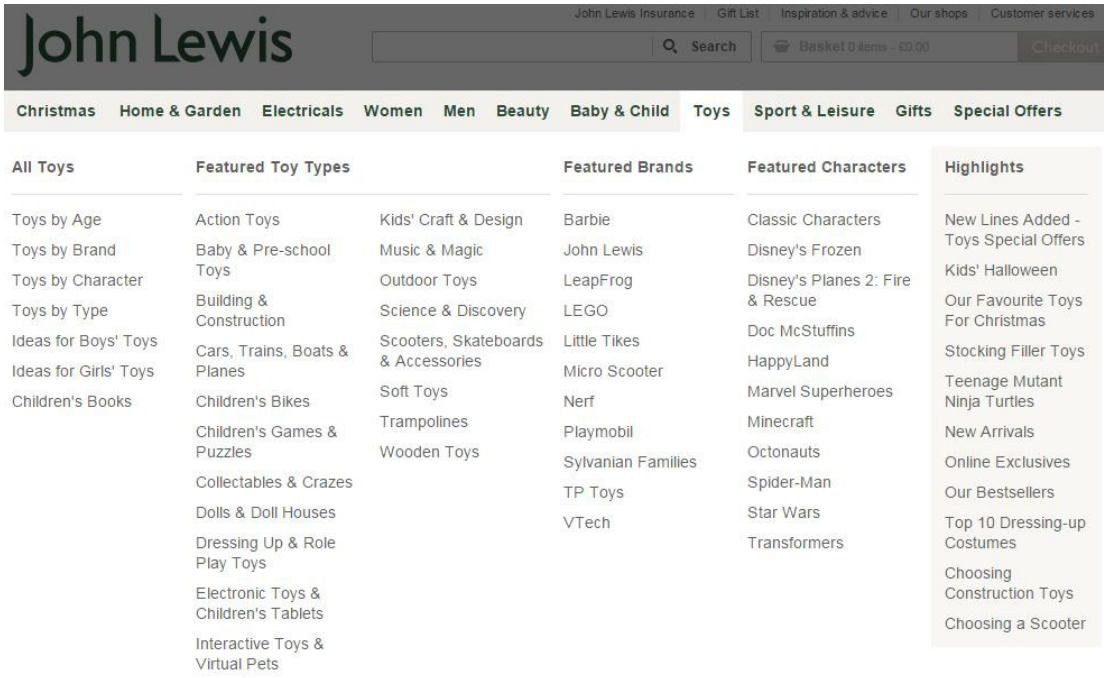


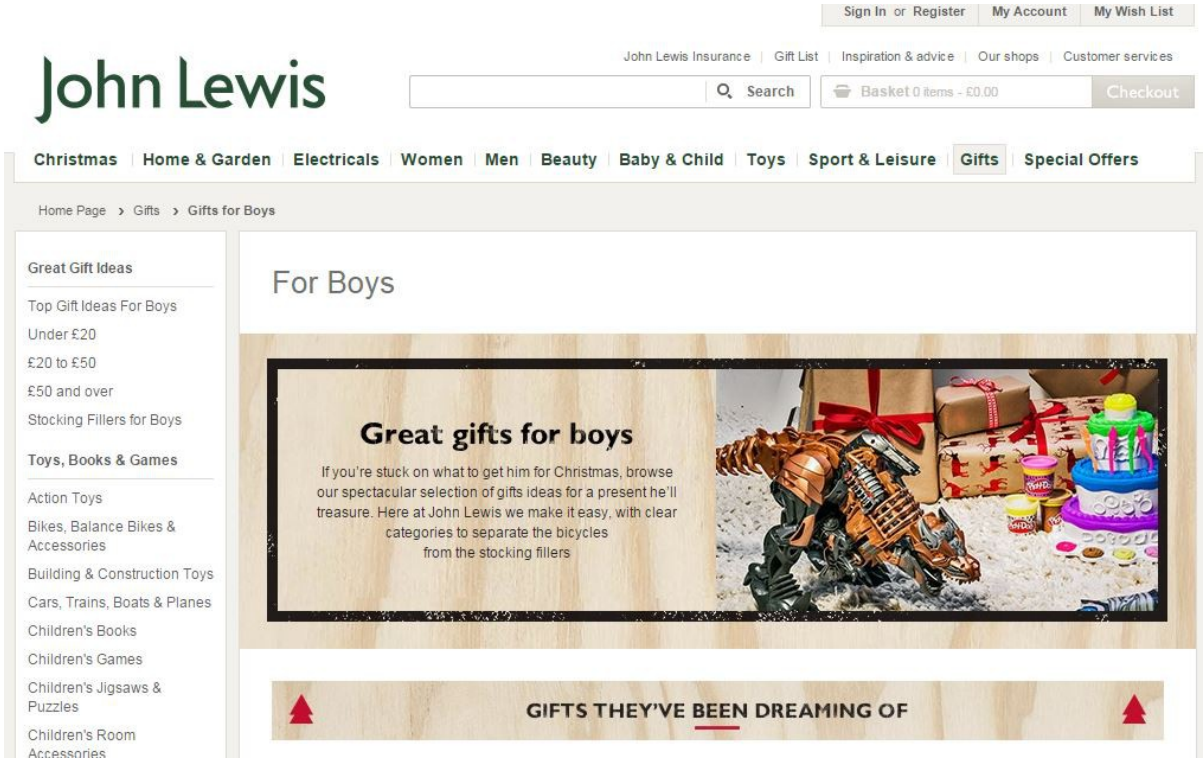
Gift guides

The John Lewis website offered ‘Ideas for Boys’ Toys’ and ‘Ideas for Girls’ Toys’ as a prominent option for viewing toys. Four other sites (WHSmith, BrightMinds, The Works, House of Fraser) offered 'Ideas' pages or 'Gift finders' using Boy/Girl categories that featured less prominently in navigation.

John Lewis

‘Ideas for Boys’ Toys’ and ‘Ideas for Girls’ Toys’ as among the first options for viewing toys.





Others

Two sites (Wilkinson's and Woolworth's) presented their fancy dress costumes by gender, though other toys were organised without gender filters or categories.

On the Harrods website it was only possible to access toys via ‘Boys’ or ‘Girls’ options in the main menu. However these options went to the same ‘Toys’ homepage, which contains navigation for the ‘Girls’ section (ie girls’ clothing). Toys subsections were not divided or filtered by gender.

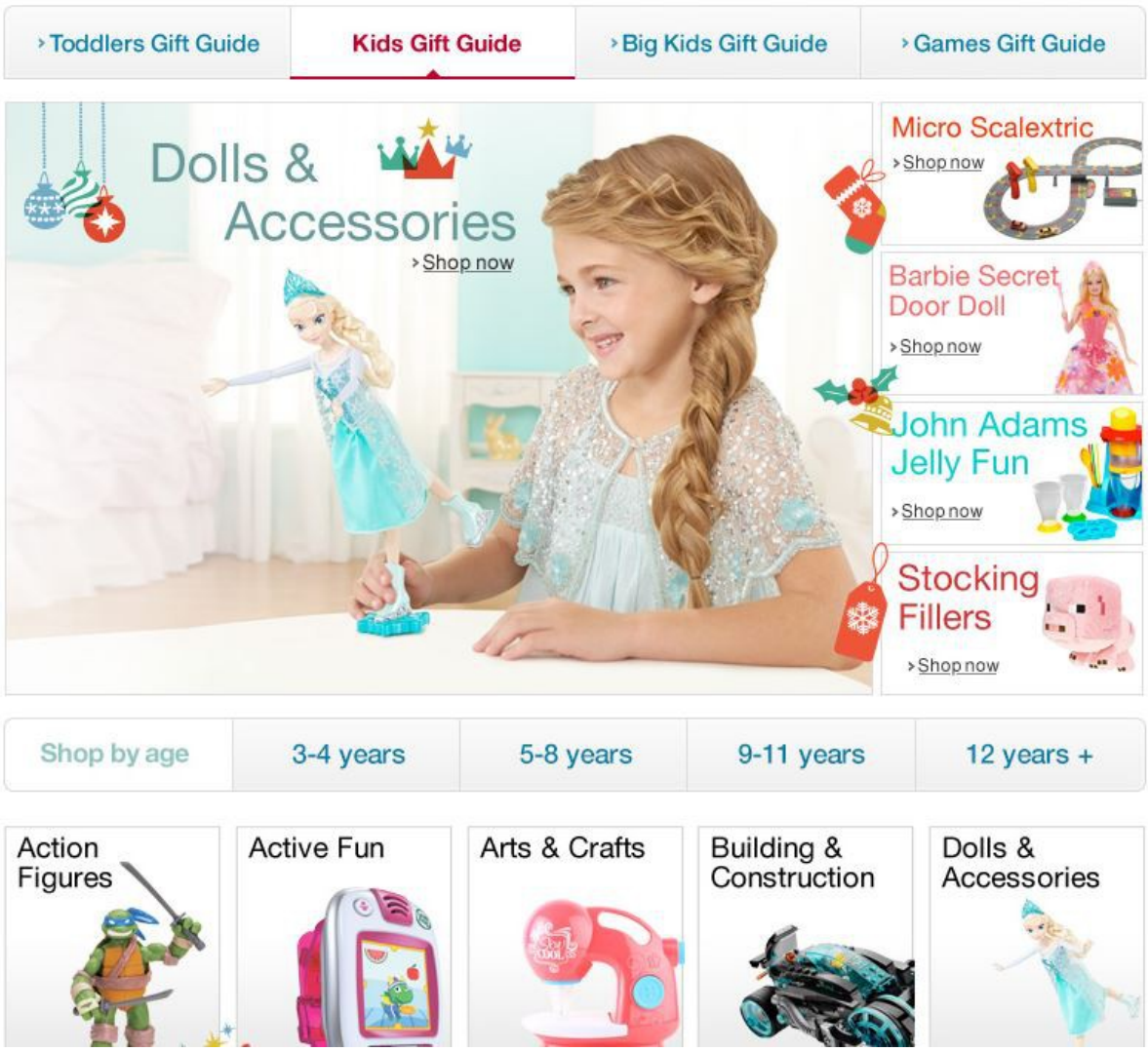
Site navigation – good practice

With some sites offering thousands of toys, it's clearly important to offer customers ways to filter and browse the products on offer. Over half the sites in our survey were doing this without reference to gender. We found no gender navigation on the following sites: Amazon.co.uk, Argos, Asda, Baker Ross, Bigjigs Toys, Blackwells, Boots, Build-A-Bear Workshop, Crafts 4 kids, Fun learning, Fun junction toys, Great Little Trading Co. Hamleys, hive.co.uk, Hobbycraft, Ikea, John Lewis – books, Kiddicare, M&S, Not on the High Street, Ocado, Play.com, Poundstretcher, Sainsbury's, Selfridges & Co, Smyths toys, The Book People, The Works – books, TJ Hughes, TK Maxx, Waterstones, WH Smiths – books.

Example: Amazon.co.uk

Amazon.co.uk offers 'Age range' as the top navigation option in the toys section, followed by 'Category', 'Character', 'Brand', 'Price range' and more.

The Amazon.co.uk gift guide section refers to 'Kids'. In contrast Amazon.com has prominent 'Boys' and 'Girls' options.

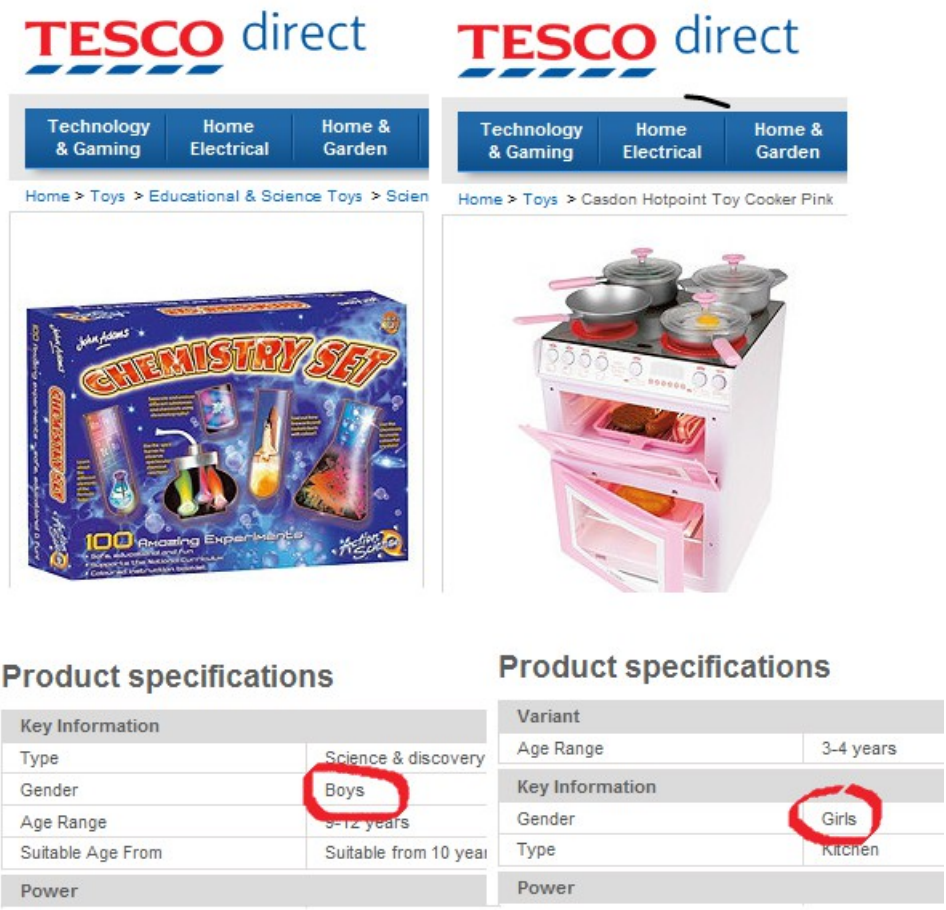


Example: Tesco.com

The Tesco.com website presents a large selection of toys without using gender as a navigational tool, instead allowing shoppers the chance to browse by ‘Category’, ‘Age range’, ‘Brand’, ‘Price bracket’ and ‘Top toys this Christmas’.

When we contacted Tesco in 2013 about their categorisation of science toys as 'Boys' and toy kitchens as 'Girls' they initially responded that customers needed these options.

Image from the Tesco.com site – May 2013.



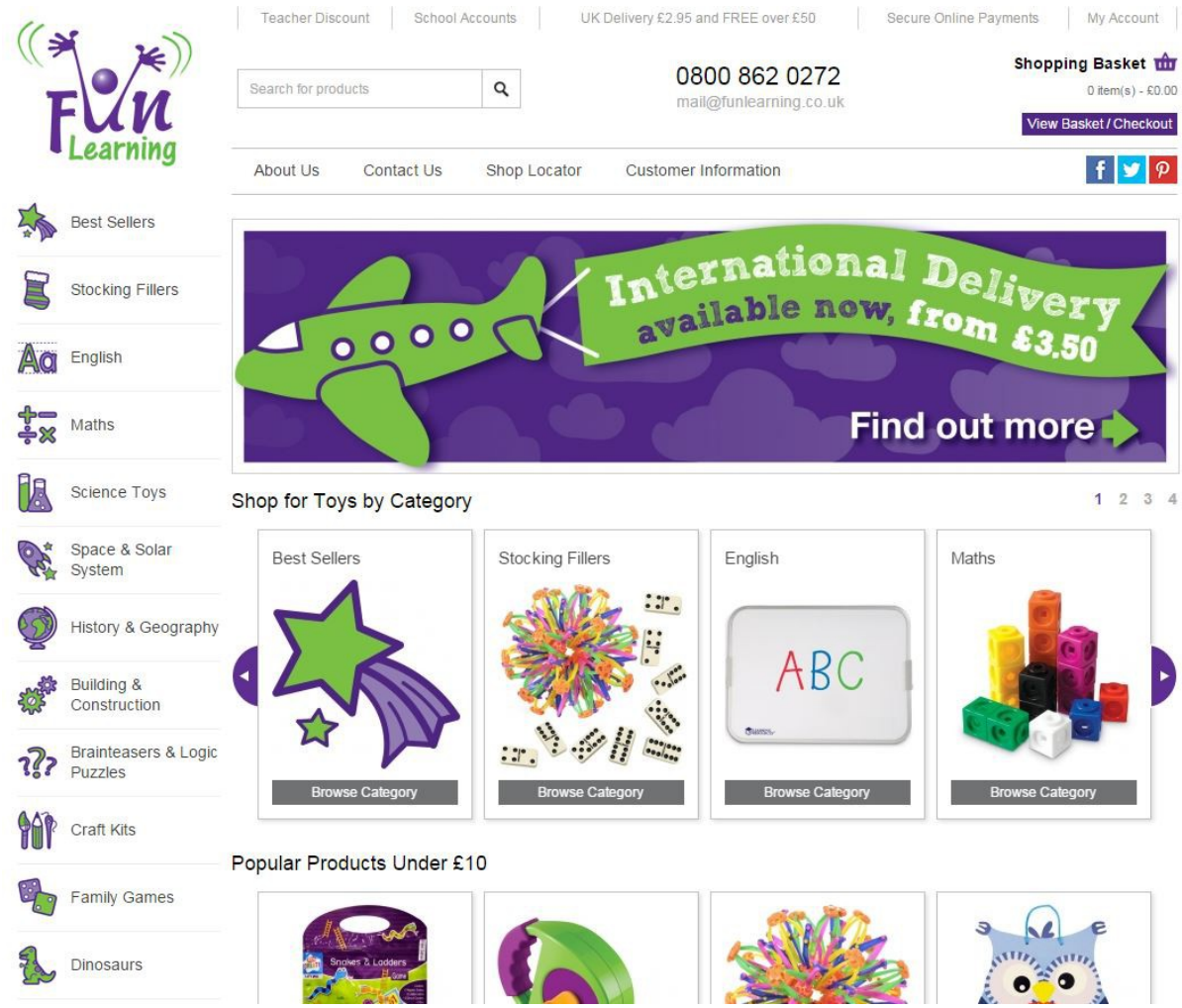
But shortly afterwards they took the decision to remove all the gender options from their site. Read some of the tweets and news reports from the time.

The near-equivalent Casdon Hotpoint Toy Cooker and Action Chemistry Set are both now on the site with no gender labels (with reviews from shoppers who’ve bought them for both boys and girls).

The site offers ‘Category’ (e.g. Action figures, Animals and playsets…) as the primary navigation in the toys section, with options to browse by ‘Age’, ‘Price’, ‘Brand’ and ‘Special offers’. As well as dropping gender categories Tesco has obviously made an effort to use inclusive, or product-focused copy in product descriptions. (See below).

Example: funlearning.co.uk

Fun Learning organise their educational toys by ‘Category’, with additional options to filter by ‘Brand’ and ‘Age range’.



Gendered language

Many sites which don't direct shoppers by gender do use gendered language in product descriptions, directing shoppers about the suitability of a gift.

For example, Boots did not have ‘Boys’ and ‘Girls’ navigation, but used gendered language, e.g. ‘Little girls will love playing with this Mamas and Papas Urbo Sugar Spot pram’.



Amazon.co.uk did not have gender navigation, but a few items were labelled in the product details with a ‘Target gender’.

Many sites, including some of those which have gender navigation, use inclusive language, for example Toys R Us describes dolls in a way that includes boys as well as girls, e.g. 'Children will love this cute doll' (My First Baby Annabell)

Since most sites seemed inconsistent on this, it's reasonable to assume that many sites don't have a policy, and therefore that describing toys as specifically for boys or girls has no commercial advantage, e.g. by drawing more search traffic.

In many cases, sites are clearly using standard copy provided by the manufacturer. It's worth noting then that Tesco.com was the only site that used the wording 'Children will love...' rather than the wording 'Girls will love' with the Disney Kristoff Sparkle Doll.

Kristoff on Amazon.co.uk


Disney Frozen Kristoff Fashion Doll

by Disney Frozen

★★★★½ 38 customer reviews

Price: £16.99 & FREE Delivery in the UK. Details

In stock.

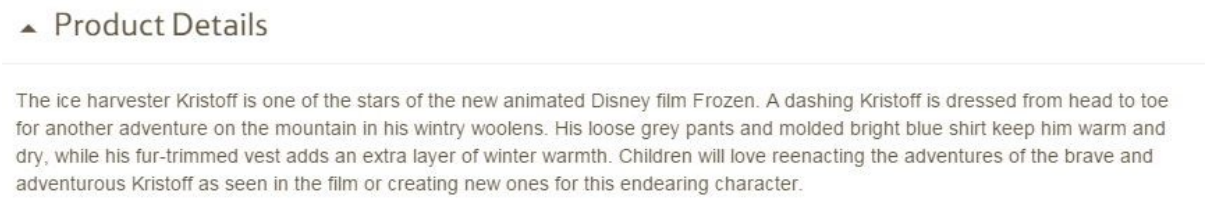
Dispatched from and sold by Amazon. Gift-wrap available.

Want it Monday, 3 Nov.? Order it within **20 hrs 24 mins** and choose **One-Day Delivery** at checkout. Details

62 new from £15.99 1 used from £14.38

- This Kristoff fashion doll, from the Disney film Frozen, captures the essence of the character in his iconic fashion
- A dashing Kristoff is dressed from head to toe for another adventure on the mountain in his wintry woollens
- His accessories are all about keeping away the cold; he comes with his knee-high black snow boots, a warm black cap and thick mittens
- His loose grey pants and moulded bright blue shirt keep him warm and dry, while his fur-trimmed vest adds an extra layer of winter warmth
- Girls will love re-enacting the adventures of the brave Kristoff from the film or creating new ones for this endearing character

Kristoff on Tesco.com


▲ Product Details

The ice harvester Kristoff is one of the stars of the new animated Disney film Frozen. A dashing Kristoff is dressed from head to toe for another adventure on the mountain in his wintry woolens. His loose grey pants and molded bright blue shirt keep him warm and dry, while his fur-trimmed vest adds an extra layer of winter warmth. Children will love reenacting the adventures of the brave and adventurous Kristoff as seen in the film or creating new ones for this endearing character.

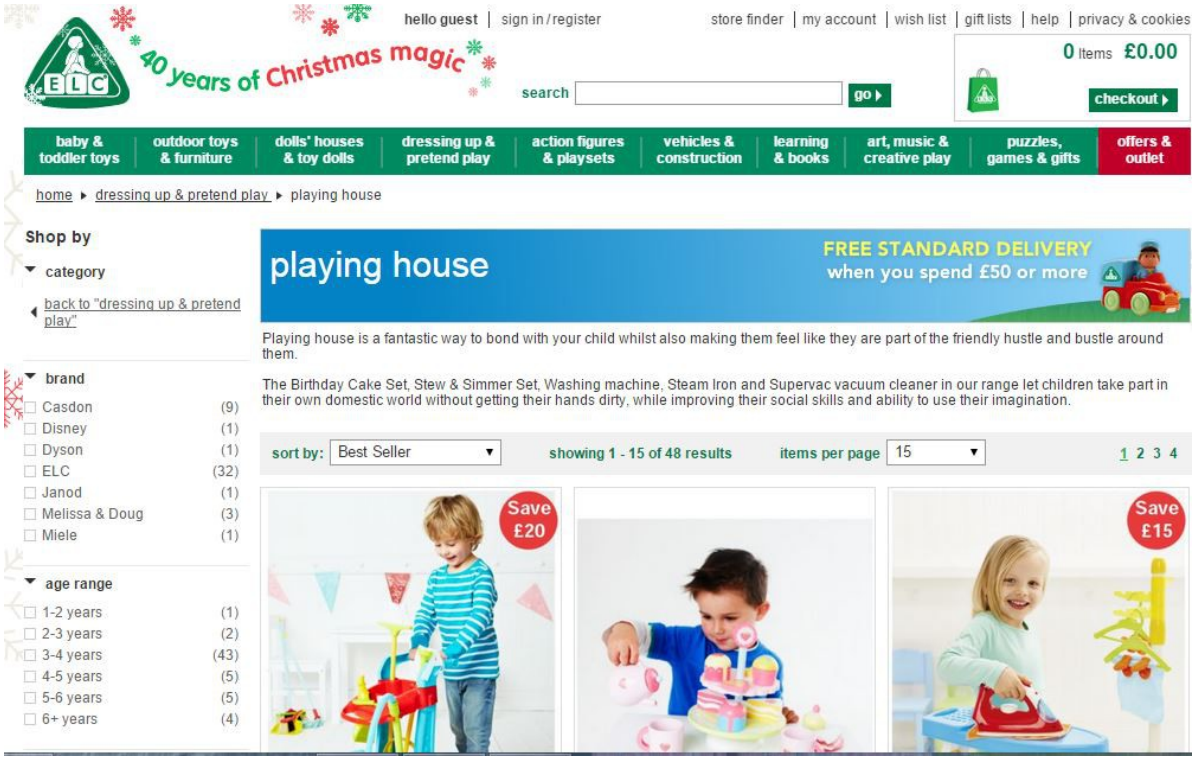
Photography

Most sites were using either product-only images, or standard product images provided by manufacturers, which tended to be stereotypical (e.g. only girls shown playing with dolls).

Happy Puzzle Company used gender as a navigational tool in its prominent present finder, but the site had inclusive photos, showing boys and girls playing together with the same toys.



Similarly, while elc.com offered the chance to filter toys by gender, the site also showed children playing with a wide range of non-stereotypical toys e.g. boys playing with cleaning set and tea set - below.



Toys R Us' own brand 'Just like home' products included photos of boys playing with 'home corner' toys.



Online bookshops

We looked at 10 booksellers, 4 book specialists (hive.co.uk, Blackwells, the Book People, Waterstones) and 6 sites which also sell toys (Amazon, Tesco.com, WHSmiths, The Works, M&S, John Lewis)

None of the sites surveyed used gendered navigation, or gender-based suggestions.

How have things changed?

Our research shows that using gender to signpost shoppers to toys online is falling out of favour.

In 2012 we reviewed 14 toy websites - 79% of them (11/14) used some form of gender signposting. (Asda, Boots, Debenhams, ELC, Hamleys, John Lewis, M&S, Sainsbury's, Tesco, The Entertainer, Wilkinsons did. Argos, Toys R Us and Fun learning did not.)

Comparing only the same 14 sites we see a 46% reduction in gender signposting between 2012 and 2014, dropping from 79% to 43% (11 to 6) sites. (Sites which have dropped gendered navigation since 2012: Asda, Boots, M&S, Sainsbury's, Hamley's, Tesco. Toys R Us now have a gender filter.)

In 2013 we reviewed 35 toy websites - 46% of them (16/35) used some form of gender signposting, half of those as a primary way of browsing content. Since then, Build a Bear, Great Little Trading Co, Ocado and Selfridges have dropped gendered navigation.

Conclusion

We are pleased to see that so many retailers are selling toys without signposting by gender, and that many household name sites have dropped gender filters or navigation. The many sites in our survey which were selling toys online without gender navigation show that there is no need to use these limiting labels.

About the campaign

Let Toys Be Toys is a grassroots campaign group established in November 2012. The campaign believes both boys and girls benefit from a range of play experiences, and should not be restricted by marketing which tells them which toys or activities are for boys or girls. More about the campaign: www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/about-2/

Toy signage in shops

Across 2013 the Let Toys Be Toys team worked hard to persuade retailers to stop selling toys in a gendered way. Through social media campaigns, letters, blogposts, visits to stores and meetings with directors, by Christmas 2013 fourteen major retailers had either removed 'Girls' and 'Boys' signage from shop floors or own-brand toy packaging or committed to do so. Our survey of shops, carried out in November-December 2013 showed a 60% drop in gendered signage in shops compared with the previous year. Please see our 2013 survey report for details: www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/media/

Supporting inclusive retailers

The Let Toys be Toys campaign awards our Toymark to retailers which commit to marketing toys in an inclusive way, both in store and online. Please see our recommended retailers page for more information: lettoysbetoys.org.uk/recommended-retailers

Let Books Be Books

In March 2014 Let Toys Be Toys launched a new campaign asking publishers to take 'boys' and 'girls' labels off books and let children choose their interests for themselves. The campaign has attracted widespread attention and support, with award-winning authors including Neil Gaiman, Anne Fine and Joanne Harris pledging their support. To date, seven publishers (Usborne, Dorling Kindersley, Miles Kelly, Paperchase, Parragon, Ladybird and Chad Valley) have said they will not be publishing any further titles labelled 'for boys' or 'for girls'. Igloo Books and Buster Books are the biggest remaining publishers of gendered titles. For more information please see www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/letbooksbebooks

Appendix 1: Methodology

The Let Toys Be Toys survey looked specifically at navigation and categorisation on websites showcasing and selling toys and books. Gender stereotypes also exist in the packaging and marketing of individual products, and in the range a retailer chooses to stock.

Sites were visited between 1 and 21 November 2014 by at least two reviewers. 2012 and 2014 surveys were carried out by volunteers who submitted reports via an online form. While we have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information in this report, these assessments were carried out by volunteers and may be subject to errors. If you spot anything that you think is wrong in this report, please alert us as quickly as possible and we will do our best to correct it.

Please also bear in mind that websites are subject to change.

The survey looked at 54 websites that sell toys and/or children's books.

Four sites offered books only (Blackwells, hive.co.uk, The Book People, Waterstones),

Six sites with a large range of both books and toys (M&S, Amazon, The Works, WH Smith, Tesco.com, John Lewis) analysed books and toys separately.

50 reviews of sites selling toys.

10 reviews of sites selling books.

The sites reviewed in 2014 included the 'top retailers' according to Toy News, (excluding retailers which do not sell or showcase toys online, or whose sites are predominantly toys and games aimed at adults rather than children), plus a range of household names, toy brands which sell directly to the public, and smaller independent businesses, to cover a range of outlets where shoppers may be buying or browsing toys online. (BM Stores and Poundland do not sell online, but do showcase a range of toys online for in-store purchase.)

In 2012 volunteers reviewed 14 websites as part of a general survey of gender labelling in toy stores.

In 2013 volunteers submitted reports via an online form about shops they had visited online or on the high street – the sample was therefore dependent on what volunteers submitted.

Criteria:

Gender - prominent navigation

Does the site mention Boys or Girls in prominent navigation options?

(e.g., as one of the first options you see when navigating toys, either in top nav options, flyout menus, promotional blocks or interactive present picker on the toys index page)

Gender - secondary navigation

Does the site mention Boys or girls in secondary navigation options?

(e.g. are there gender filters or additional gendered 'gift guides' which are less prominent, or which only appear once you get into the content.)

Gendered language

Does the site use gendered language in product descriptions? (It was impractical to review every product, so reviewers looked at the following, or nearest equivalent:

- a baby doll, e.g. Baby Annabell
- a pram/stroller e.g. Silver Cross Ranger pram
- Kristoff Sparkle doll
- a Batman/superhero costume
- a Hot Wheels car/playset

We've made every effort to make comparisons as fair as possible - e.g. we have excluded bikes as only a very few retailers carry these products.

Appendix 2: Full list of sites reviewed

1. Amazon - toys (www.amazon.co.uk)
2. Amazon - books (www.amazon.co.uk)
3. Argos (www.argos.co.uk)
4. Asda (direct.asda.com)

5. Baker Ross (www.bakerross.co.uk)
6. Bigjigs Toys (shop.bigjigstoys.co.uk)
7. Blackwells (bookshop.blackwell.co.uk)
8. BM homestores (www.bmstores.co.uk)
9. Boots (www.boots.com)
10. Bright Minds (www.brightminds.co.uk)
11. Build-A-Bear Workshop (www.buildabear.co.uk)
12. Cath Kidston (www.cathkidston.com)
13. Crafts 4 kids (www.crafts4kids.co.uk)
14. Debenhams (www.debenhams.com)
15. Disney store (www.disneystore.co.uk)
16. ELC (www.elc.co.uk)
17. Fun learning (www.funlearning.co.uk)
18. Fun junction toys (www.funjunctiontoys.com)
19. Galt Toys (www.galttoys.com)
20. Great Little Trading Co. (www.gltc.co.uk)
21. Happy Puzzle Co (www.happypuzzle.co.uk)
22. Hamleys (www.hamleys.com)
23. Harrods (www.harrods.com)
24. Hawkin's Bazaar (www.hawkin.com)
25. hive.co.uk (hive.co.uk)
26. Hobbycraft (www.hobbycraft.co.uk)
27. House of Fraser (www.houseoffraser.co.uk)
28. Hut (www.thehut.co.uk)
29. Ikea (www.ikea.com)
30. John Lewis - toys (www.johnlewis.com)
31. John Lewis - books (www.johnlewis.com)
32. Kiddicare (www.kiddicare.com)
33. Lego (www.lego.com)
34. M&S - books (www.marksandspencer.com)
35. M&S (www.marksandspencer.com)

36. Not on the High Street (www.notonthehighstreet.com)
37. Ocado (www.ocado.com)
38. Play.com (play.com)
39. Playmobil (www.playmobil.co.uk)
40. Poundland (www.poundland.co.uk)
41. Poundstretcher (www.poundstretcher.co.uk)
42. Prezzybox (www.prezzybox.com)
43. Sainsbury's (www.sainsburys.co.uk)
44. Selfridges & Co (www.selfridges.com)
45. Smyths toys (www.smythstoys.com/)
46. Tesco - toys (www.tesco.com/direct)
47. Tesco - books (www.tesco.com/direct)
48. The Book People (www.thebookpeople.co.uk)
49. The Entertainer (www.thetoyshop.co.uk)
50. The Works - toys (www.theworks.co.uk)
51. The Works - books (www.theworks.co.uk)
52. TJ Hughes (www.tjhughes.co.uk)
53. TK Maxx (www.tkmaxx.com)
54. Toys R Us (www.toysrus.co.uk)
55. Waterstones (www.waterstones.co.uk)
56. WH Smiths - Books (www.whsmith.co.uk)
57. WH Smiths - Toys (www.whsmith.co.uk)
58. Wicked Uncle (www.wickeduncle.co.uk)
59. Wilkinsons (www.wilko.com)
60. Woolworths (www.woolworths.co.uk)