

MODULE: Critical Studies Research Report

TITLE: Are we strictly blue or pink? In what ways is the gendering of toys reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes.

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DATE SUBMITTED: 30 October 2017

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Word Count (From the Introduction up to and including the Conclusion): 7593



A research report submitted to Greenside Design Center, College of Design, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA Honours, Multimedia Design.

Declaration

I declare that this research is my own unaided work and that I have given full acknowledgement to the sources that I have used. It is submitted for the degree of BA Honours Multimedia Design at The Greenside Design Center, College of Design, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other institution, college or university.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Suzanne Erasmus for her support, advice, and encouragement throughout this project. Without her help and time, I would have not been able to achieve this project. I would like to thank the rest of the staff and faculty at Greenside Design Center as they have encouraged my interest in academia and taught me a lot within the past four years. I appreciate the experiences of the last four years; they have helped me to grow as a designer and as a person.

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1. Abstract

Gender representation in toys has been a subject of debate amongst parents, teachers and toymakers, and while sex is biological and not representational gender issues and biological debates become intertwined with the inclusion of toy figurines such as *Barbie* and *Action Man*. This paper reflects on the diverse and contradictory ways in which gender identity is constructed in the discourse of gendered toys aimed at children. There is argument that supports the idea that gendered toys are problematic to children's gender identity construction as well as arguments that seek to ascertain that gendered toys have no effect at all on the children's gender identity construction. Toys are being manufactured to adhere strictly to gender differentiation and while toys serve different needs to different children, the question arises whether gender differentiated by biological sex need result in differentiated and separated play. One wonders if toys are important at all and what purpose the toys serve to the developing child. Role-play, entertainment and cognitive development are listed as the primary purpose of playing with toys. This research questions why children across the world are given toys that drive them towards gendered stereotypical behaviours instead of encouraging a holistic approach to role-play, entertainment, and cognitive stimulation.

2. Research Question

My research focuses on the role that toys play in gender identity construction of children who are exposed to toys from American and European cultures, commonly referred to as the west. The research also investigates how certain toys become gender specific. To understand this phenomenon, the research addresses the following questions.

- What is the use of children's toys?
- How do toys reinforce traditional gender stereotypes?
- How is play defined today and what is its importance to children?
- What role does the media play in targetting gender specific toys at girls and at boys so rigidly?
- Where do gendered associations such as pink for girls and blue for boys come from?
- What are the roles of the parents versus the media in the of toys that children make?

- Do children have the ability to choose toys that are not stereotypically gendered?
- What role do gendered toys play in making children aware of their gender and its expectations
- Does interaction with gendered toys enforce gendered decision making in things such as career choices
- Are there other societal and cultural factors such as films that reinforce gender stereotypes and what is the extent of these cultural influences?
- Has the consumption of toys marketed through western media reinforced western ideals and constructs.

3. Aims and Objectives

Aims

To understand how toys became gender orientated within the media and what role that has had on identity formation in children.

To understand how the gendering of toys reinforces traditional gender stereotypes by looking at the design of toys and their portrayal through the media.

Objectives

In order to achieve the above aims, the research explains the importance of toys and play to children. The research is specific to toys which are play items for children and has the goal of showing that there is actually a difference between toys for boys and toys for girls. Investigations in to the process that goes in to the design and marketing of children's toys will be critical to the research, as well as an investigation into the possibility of a correlation between a gender socialised childhood and adult gender performance. It is a goal of the research to explain how western media has made gender identity a social and cultural construct or even questioned the gender stereotypes.

4. Context and relevance

Context

This research is set in the context of western media and this is because of how western media is highly consumed and almost a monopoly in the toy industry. Ross (1996) argues that toys in the African context were usually self-made by the children who play with them, therefore not needing any marketing or media influence. He (Ross, 1996) goes on to discuss the cultural transfer which has necessitated the need for every middle class girl to have a *Barbie* doll complete with the playhouse and furniture in order to conform to stereotypical western ideals such as having the ideal female body image, male aggressiveness and rigid social roles. This cultural transfer occurred as the influence of western media widened in Africa and new norms were adopted.

Some non-western communities have held the belief that dolls could be dangerous especially for pregnant women (Ross 1996). Because of such beliefs, there is a necessity to situate toys as play things when introducing them to non western communities and even some western communities. Western media, through advertising and film became the vehicle of communication for situating toys as play things for children, hence why the research is situated in western media. Toys were initially advertised as instigators of play but eventually western media became a tool for identity construction, specifically gender orientated construction.

Relevance

Play is described as a remarkably important activity for children, which is like a laboratory where toys are the apparatus for self development (Henricks 2006). Shahidi (2016) describes how toy engage children's fine and gross motor skills using their sense of touch and sight. Children discover balance and coordination from their playtime. Parents intentionally place a baby's toy a distance from them to get them to crawl or walk and this works because children imprint on their toys and the toys hold their attention easily (Shahidi 2016).

Through role playing children are given room to imagine and invent fantastical situations. This boosts emotional development as the capacity to generate

symbolical games reveals maturity in personality development and independent decision-making (Cherney, 2003). While toys may seem like simple play things to adults, for children they represent a whole universe where anything is possible which is why children can make a play thing out of anything from a set of keys to merely a stick (Inman & Cordella 2015). An equally important aspect of the effect of toys in a child's life is the social development they offer (Nichols, 2014). Toys invite children to interact, amongst themselves and with adults. Toys are a gateway to the society they live in; they challenge them to experience real-life situations.

According to Harmon (2013) toymakers *Mattel* and *Hasbro* have separate divisions that develop toys specifically for boys and for girls. *Hasbro's* 2011 annual report boasts of the boys' toys division's action figures and accessories, sports and action products, water blasters, construction sets, trucks and play sets, along with entertainment-based licensed products based on popular movie, television and comic book characters. For their girls' toys division, *Hasbro* seeks "to provide a traditional and wholesome play experience" (Harmon, 2013, p.24). To have whole companies intentionally structured to fragment play into gendered categories is problematic. The toy industry rakes in about 85 billion dollars a year which means they must be doing something right but are they being responsible with the power of altering children's motor skills, emotional development, social development and cognitive development (Nichols, 2014). The child has always been our hero, never a target, these are the words of Christian Majgaard (Bailey, 2017) who is former head of marketing at *Lego*. This may suggest that at 85 billion dollars a year, toy manufacturers have some moral obligation towards children. While it is noble to say children are the heroes and not the targets of marketing, the marketing game itself has changed. *Mattel* and *Hasbro* no longer need to produce their ads themselves but from a distance simply sponsor a child and parent to play with their toys and video tape their experience with the sponsored toy. This type of advertising is common on the video sharing platform *Youtube* where users such as *Ryan's Toy Reviews* have created channels dedicated to sharing their experience of interacting with toys. The video logs, or more commonly – vlogs, are created in a style that is less advertisement and more regular day-to-day life. This way, the intended market sees regular people whose lives they can relate to, interacting with certain toys, creating the feeling that these toys belong in their home as well. These creators of video logs

are known as social media influencers and this is indeed how it works; they use their relatability to influence people's purchases by showing how the object integrates into the lives of people. In the case of *Ryan's Toy Reviews*, Ryan represents a regular five year old middle class boy and his interaction with the toys and the kinds of toys he plays with cleverly suggests what toys a 5 year old boy should play with.

Ryan's Toy Reviews is a *Youtube* channel where Ryan, a young 5 year old, plays with toys, reviews them and shows just how much he has enjoyed a certain toy. The channel has almost ten million subscribers and has gained attention from toy makers who now sponsor the videos so that their products are featured in Ryan's videos. This is important to this research because it shows the new way that toys are being advertised to children and how children themselves are part of the adverts.

In 2016, at the height of the United States presidential campaign, *Mattel* released the President and Vice President *Barbie* to match the spectacle of the election in which a female candidate was running for the first time. This election was not a spectacle in the United States alone but world over. O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2002) suggest that the media is owned and controlled by a few who are predominantly white middle class men and in their small and exclusive platform, they speak for whole societies and to whole societies. The particular interest of this research to the President and Vice President *Barbie* dolls is that they are simply *Classic Barbie* in different clothes which raises the debates of female body images and societal expectations of female gender performance.

While *Action Man* may not be a current hype in western media, he is relevant to this research as a comparison to *Barbie* in terms of male body image and the roles he performed solely based on his gender. In researching the history of *Barbie*, it could not be separated from that of *Action Man*. While I may be using 2016 *Barbie*, I can't deny her history and how it is tied to that of *Action Man*. They both are toys that represent adult bodies but are meant for children as well as the very extreme spectrums of the genders — extremely feminine and aggressively masculine.

5. Methodology

This research is grounded in a critical theory paradigm and will seek to produce a qualitative data analysis. Henning (1996) describes critical theory as questioning of the nature of politics. “Critical theory research aims at promoting critical consciousness and breaking down the institutional structures and arrangements that reproduce oppressive ideologies and the social inequalities that are produced, maintained and reproduced by these social structures and ideologies” (Henning 1996, p. 83)

Using a critical theory paradigm for this research means that the research will hold that facts will not be isolated from the domain of values or removed from ideological inscription (Henning:1996). The research requires me to conduct a literature review. According to Henning (1996), a literature review is used to give context to the study, create arguments within the research and identify what has been done already within the field the research is in. The literature review aims to critically engage with the topic as well as to situate my findings within existing bodies of literature.

Case studies can be used where research is not a survey, experiment and is not statistical. Case studies require a qualitative approach in order to gain an in-depth understanding and meaning of my field of study and conducting a qualitative research on the design and marketing of children’s toys and relevant information will be extracted to compare the effect that gender specific toys have on children and their career choices and integration into society. Comparative data collection methods to analyse the difference between toys marketed to boys and those that are marketed to girls provide clear definitions of what traditional gender roles are and how identity is formed.

Structured email interviews have been conducted with parents whose children are between the ages of four to ten years as well as those whose children have just completed matric and are making their career decisions. Interviewing these parents has given me insight into the groups that will actually be playing with those toys as well as those on whom the toys may be having an effect on. Given that this information is secondary, it may be open to biases. By law, interviewing children is

illegal so I could only ask the parents. To get past this bias, I have used the findings of those who were able to interview children directly in my literature review.

6. Literature Review

Identity politics – construction of masculinity and femininity

West and Zimmerman's (1987) key claims is on how gender is a social construct. Further stated is how the social construction of gender is a system of society and culture. This article clearly differentiates sex categories and gender, and highlights the accepted cultural perspectives of the western society. This is useful to the research as it shows that the separation of boys and girl is through societal and cultural systems.

Butler (1993) explores the notion that gender is a performance. Like West and Zimmerman (1987), Butler asserts on gender being a social construct as well. Butler (1993) emphasises on how behaviour is governed by unwritten social norms. Although Butler(1993) specifies stereotypical adult female gender performance and adult male gender performance, there is no specification on stereotypical gender performance expected of male and female children.

O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2004) highlight the attributes expected of males and females. Furthermore, the article deals with how these attributes affect the relations between the genders. O'Shaughnessy and Stadler(2004) establish a crossover of expected attributes where males and females are both expected to have power, however it is power that is vastly different. This is important to the research as it offers insight into the notion that children's toys may be gendered to perpetuate expected gender performance.

The media and its roles

O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2002) describe the media as a conduit for understanding the world. The article points out the ways in which the media

influences people – through different forms of manipulating information. This article is critical to this research because it explains how information is manipulated to fit desired narratives, often resulting in the perpetuation of stereotypes.

Martinez, Nicolas and Salas' (2013) key points are on consumer representation and identification in the advertisement of toys. The article discusses how the media, through the packaging of toys, manipulates and biases buying choices. This is relevant to the research as it provides insight how buyers can be driven towards certain products over others through the manipulation of the media.

Let Toys be Toys (2017) is a campaign and organisation at the forefront of advocating for gender neutral toys. The campaign's key message is targetted at the display, arrangement and presentation of toys in shops. This campaign is critical to this research because of the campaign's notion that the labels on toys and how they are displayed affects consumer habits and cause discomfort in buying across the stipulated gender divides.

Gendering in Toys

Rosebaum's (2010) main claim is on the rigidity of labels on toys for children. The article further states the problematic issue of toy stores not stocking toys that are gender neutral. This is important to this research in order to establish a problem area of children's toys which is availability of alternative toys.

Johnson and Young's (2002) key claim is on how gendered marketing strategies are rooted in existing stereotypes. This article is critical to the research as it highlights the roots of gendered marketing strategies as well as the profitability of these strategies.

In this article, Inman and Cardella (2015) bring to light the importance of play as a developmental factor for children. The article further states that toys are essential to this development. This is important to the research to establish the relationship between play and toys and its importance to children.

Aistear (2009) lists the characteristics of play and how they affect development of a child. This is critical to the research because in establishing the importance of play, the problem of gendered toys can come to light.

Blackmore and Centers (2005) discuss how detrimental gendered toys can be in the context of symbolic play. This article is important to the research as it explores the effects certain toys may have on different characteristics of play.

Attfield (1996) discusses the targeted expectations of toys and what behaviours the toys enforce. Further in the article, Attfield (1996) discusses how the different features on Action Man and Barbie create different expectation for play.

In this article, Shahidi's (2016) key points are on gender typed preferences of toys. Through a study, Shahidi (2016) observed that children may have gendered inborn tendencies that may drive them towards certain toys over others, Furthermore, the article explores views of contrasting studies where children have no clear understanding of gender roles and show mixed preferences of toys. This is important to the research in answering if children have their own unbiased preferences of toys.

Elliot (2012) draws from personal experiences to give insight into how children may have gender typed preferences but also emphasizes on how this preference is magnified by parental input. This is further explained through a phenomenon known as brain plasticity which may suggest that continual parental input to a child may evolve in to preference.

Thibault's (2013) main points are on the cultural importance of toys. In this article, toys are defined as instigators of play as well as miniature models of adult world objects. Another key point of this article is the classification of toys as anything that a child can play with. This is relevant to the research in situating toys culturally.

In this article, Gander's (2016) key point is that there is beneficial aspects to what children learn from their gendered toys, however, Gander (2016) emphasizes that it is problematic that only girls learn certain things from feminine gendered toys and

boys only learn certain things from masculine gendered toys. This is important to the research as it questions strict adherence to gendered toys.

7. Analysis and Discussion

Two parents walk into a toy store – which side do they shop? While this may sound like the beginning of an anecdote, it is a reality of toy shopping in parenting.

Children's toys are highly gendered that it is almost frowned upon to shop across the gender divide. According to Rosebaum (2010), stores do not stock gender-neutral toys because they believe there is no target market for it. Is it really a question of stocking gender-neutral toys or of creating toys without a subscribed gender in the first place? If toys were just created without the 'for girls' and 'for boys' labels and just placed in stores and children and parents could just get whatever toy they desire then neutrality would be achieved without the need to create another label called the gender-neutral toys.

However, we do not live in a Utopia but rather in a world obsessed with identity politics around gender, class, race and age that creates stereotypical power related divisions in societies. Gender-specific marketing strategies are based on cultural gender stereotypes already in existence. It is for this reason that toys marketed towards boys tend to be related to high activity, violence, competition, danger and problem solving, while toys targeted towards girls tend to have passivity, beauty, household skills and nurturing as their themes (Johnson and Young, 2002). Different toys are produced to target children based on gender because this is more profitable and plays on parents' needs to hyper masculinise their sons or hyper feminise their daughters, and this makes gender-based marketing targeted at children effective (Johnson and Young, 2002) and it also enables toy makers to sell more versions of the same toy.

Inman and Cardella (2015) refer to developmental studies on the importance of play in a child's formative years; they put forth an argument that while play without toys (i.e.: hide-and-seek) is beneficial in developing logical thought processes. Play is most prominently remembered by growing children as involving the use of physical

toys. Not only is play an important aspect in the development of a child; playing with toys is hugely beneficial to their cognitive development.

While there are different characteristics within the definition of play, its importance cannot be undervalued. Aistear (2009) lists the characteristics of play such as symbolic play, cooperative play, and active play. The most important aspect is the description of the developmental effect each scenario offers the child. It is imperative for this research to highlight the importance of play because by showing the importance of play, the severity of the issue of gendered toys can be explored more clearly as toys are the instigators of play. The gendering of toys leads to gendered play and a perpetuation of gendered expectations because play reflects what children already know, have observed and can do. It provides the context for extending knowledge, skills and understandings in a way that makes sense to the children. Blakemore and Centers (2005) discuss the notion of how gender prescribed toys can be detrimental to a child's freedom of development.

It is important to note that play is not categorised and characterised by gender. Symbolic play expects role play of feelings, behaviours and relationships. When toys are introduced to that play characteristic, they now begin to enforce the marketed expectations as toys targeted at boys enforce symbols of activity and adventure and toys targeted at girls enforce symbols of passivity and nurturing (Attfield 1996).

While there is nothing inherently wrong with instilling adventure and/or nurturing characteristics, this research questions why such characteristics are not encouraged for both boys and girls. From the educational viewpoint, Martinez, Nicolas and Salas (2013) describe how toy advertising for children must be presented with a neutral perspective that is centered on the product rather than on its symbolic stimulation via consumer representation and identification. If toys are fundamental instruments in a child's social and cognitive development then legislation must insist that toy advertisers promote a more equal representation of gender and with greater emphasis on choice of toys rather than dictating what a child should play with (Martinez, Nicolas and Salas 2013).

In the 1987 article "Doing Gender", West and Zimmerman (1987) posited it best to think of issues of male and masculine, female and feminine, in terms of sex, sex

category, and gender. Through this thinking, sex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males. Sex category, then, is the expression of the biological criteria, and gender is the activity of managing situated conduct of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category. In Western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being with distinctive psychological and behavioural propensities that can be predicted from their reproductive functions; the assigned biological sex category is expected to match the gender.

The emphasis on differentiating between genders is showing itself through the toys created for boys and those created for girls. Following West and Zimmerman's (1987) logic that doing gender involves differences that are not natural, essential or biological, one can assume that doing gender is only a performance. This performance has now been taken and is introduced in the formative years of children through the toys they play with. Butler (1993) writes,

. . . if gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an 'I' or a 'we' who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of 'before.' Indeed, it is unclear that there can be an 'I' or a "we" who had not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being . . . the 'I' neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within the matrix of gender relations themselves".

Gender performances, that fall into the category of social and behavioural practices as most notably seen in western societies are governed by unwritten social norms. In contemporary western culture, femininity is stereotypically synonymous with being nurturing, with dressing in clothing that emphasizes or even sexualizes their bodies, and with an interest in fashion. Stereotypical masculinity, on the other hand, emphasizes assertiveness, liking sports, and an excessive interest in sex. From West and Zimmerman(1989) and Butler (1993) , one can glean gender is something that has been socially constructed by set stereotypes not necessarily by anyone in particular but through systems of society and culture.

Children's toys have not escaped the matrix of culturally imposed gender constructs and may be considered the foundation of gender performance. In one study, Shahidi (2016), found that children's gender-typed preferences can be observed within the early months of life, and this preference is independent to toys' appearances such as pink versus blue or smooth versus rugged. It was argued that these gender-typed preferences may "reflect inborn tendencies for girls and boys to prefer different toys" (Shahidi 2016, p.17). A contrasting study on cognitive developmental processes related to gender revealed that children at early months of life do not have clear understanding of gender roles. The argument went to further state that even children who are under five years old show a mixed gender- typed preference of toys and play. Thus, it can be assumed that children's gender-typed preferences of toys have not been clearly differentiated during the early years of life. A boy may play with a doll and a girl may play with gun machine or train regardless of the gender-typed preference of toys (Shahidi 2016)

In the early years, children show gender-neutral preferences of toys. This preference changes as soon as they reach at five years of age and older at which it is important to note that this is when most institutionalised learning begins. West and Zimmerman (1987) allude to the idea that gender is performed and if studies that investigate gender awareness of children are to be taken into account then it can be gathered that when it comes to gender children are born in a tabula rasa state – that is, without any preconceived ideas. Investigating what children can and cannot decide themselves is important to the research because if indeed children are born without pre conceptions about gender then their interaction with toys in their development can be questioned.

Elliot (2012) describes a primal need to categorise the sexes in order to know how to treat the individual child. She (Eliot 2012) describes scenarios where upon meeting an expectant person the first question is often 'so do you know what you are having?'. Morden parents have begun deffering to the answer 'we really don't care as long as it is healthy'. Elliot (2012) describes this answer as naïve because while this is the era of gender equality different sexed children will display different interests and need to be treated differently. This is relevant to the research because it

marks the point at which gendering begins for the child. Elliot (2012) describes a situation where *Lego* blocks were passed from her daughter to her son in an almost new condition because she simply had not played with them. There are subtle developmental differences that have been observed in children; boys are physically more active than girls and are more spatially aware and girls learn to talk earlier than boys. Further observation has been that because of this, boys prefer more active play toys whereas girls will choose more verbal relational toys but this preference is magnified through parental treatment.

O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2002) describe the media as the place through which we receive most information and make sense of the world. The media works through the process of representation, interpretation and evaluation. Representation is how one can have a vivid idea of something without actually experiencing it physically but only having seen images or through hearing and reading. Interpretation is the explanation offered by the media based on how they arrange and prioritise some issues over others. Evaluation is how the media defines normal and assigns typical characteristics to groups of people thereby teaching relations of gender, race and ethnicity (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2002). The influence of the media's representation, interpretation and evaluation is present in the design and marketing of children's toys. Girls have cooking and cleaning toys marketed towards them and boys have hunting sets and outdoor kits. This reinforces the stereotypes of male aggression and females belonging in the kitchen. These are the interpretations and evaluations of the media. O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2002) describe the media as part of the many social forces that make sense of the world, clearly stated is that "Most significant for children will be the socialisation they receive through the family and education systems which teach them how to understand and act in the world (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2002, p. 22). The stereotypes that are then reinforced through the toys are those already socialised in to the communities then made apparent by the interpretation and evaluation of the media.

The media plays a big role in gender stereotyping because in order to sell, adverts are adapted to show the reflection of the recipient. This is evident in children's toys where boys and girls not only appear in different commercials featuring different toys and will only appear on the packaging of toys that are for boys or for girls. By

constantly showing only boys playing with trucks and only girls playing dolls, the reflection which the children see is that they are definitely the recipient of a certain toy and definitely not the other. In *Ryan's Toys Review* (Youtube 2017), Ryan plays with toys and does science experiments. It all seems like family home videos but it is actually well manufactured marketing. To a similar five year old boy, Ryan plays the role of the media in making interpretations and evaluations for what a boy should expect, the kinds of toys a boy should play with and how the toys should be played with.

This notion begs the question – why are children's toys gendered at all. *Let Toys be Toys* (2017) is an organisation at the forefront of neutrality of children's toys. The campaign of the same name from this organisation, 'let toys be toys' is a parent led campaign that aims to eradicate gender sections of shops and get retailers to sort and label toys by function or theme. Members of the *Let Toys be Toys* campaign believe that the labels and display of toys affects consumers' buying habits and have noticed the discomfort in buying a boy a pink toy or a girl a blue toy. The *Let Toys be Toys* organisation's campaign is based on fighting the idea of what is appropriate for a girl and what is appropriate for a boy, which will then determine gender performance. An observation made is that children will now stipulate certain actions, careers and behaviours as 'can only be done by girls' or 'can only be done by boys'. This polarises masculinity and femininity and later on to shake off these ideas and make it okay for these children to do anything or follow any career path becomes difficult. The *Let Toys be Toys* campaign offers the research an insight into the thoughts of parents as they navigate the pressures of raising a child. The view of the parents is an important one as they are the ones purchasing the toys and instilling values into their children. Previous notions of western media have suggested that parents' interests are in hyper masculinising and hyper femininising their children but with insights from *Let Toys be Toys* one can see how parents are actually on the bandwagon of neutrality. Let Toys Be Toys Campaign 2017)



Figure 1. President and Vice President *Barbie* in a victory pose. (Mattel 2016)



Figure 2. President and Vice President *Barbie* full body pose. (Mattel 2016)



Figure 3. President and Vice President *Barbie* closeup showing mature female features. (Mattel 2016)



Figure 4. President and Vice President *Barbie* in packaging. (Mattel 2016)

In 2016 *Mattel* introduced president and vice president *Barbie*, this was the result of a collaboration with *She Should Run*, an organization dedicated to increasing the amount of women in elected offices. As seen in figure 1, the doll is good old *Barbie* out of a ballroom dress and in to formal clothing. Although intended for children, President and Vice President *Barbie* represent fully developed mature bodies and are dressed as expected of working adult women in formal industries. In this release, *Mattel* speaks of the intention to encourage girls' interest in political offices. This can be viewed as a clear acknowledgement of how toys influence children even up to career choices. While encouraging an admirable career, this version of *Barbie* is still built to the stereotypical male fantasy with an unrealistic over sexualised adult body. The first stereotypical reinforcement from this pair of dolls is that this is how women should look and this is the kind of woman who can be president. One can wonder what exactly it is about a doll that will really encourage a female child into a political career, the formal clothes, updo? Is not the position of president and vice president one that requires action? The dolls have no movable parts, permanently arched feet, bent hands and straight legs. President *Barbie* cannot be made to sit at a conference table, a commander in chief whose body cannot move enough to salute. Is it enough to take a traditional dress up doll, give it a new attire and call it president, perhaps President and Vice President *Barbie* are not problematic in themselves but the problem is in the body of *Barbie*. It has been established that toys are miniature representations and while liberties are taken as objects cannot be exact, a stiff immovable doll cannot fully represent a woman except to encourage passivity. It is

already a gender stereotype that women are passive except with clothing and makeup which is exactly the difference between President *Barbie* and classic *Barbie*. Femininity is traditionally defined as having the attributes associated with women. Some of the expectations for those that are feminine are the need for relationships, emotions and responsibility (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2004) Femininity, just like masculinity is defined by having power, in the case of femininity though, that power is sexual power over men. Even though this representation reduces women to sexual objects disregarding other attributes they possess such as intelligence, agility and practicality. This representation is clear in this case of President *Barbie* where her looks and image appear more important than the practicality required for a presidential figure. Figure 4 shows the packaging which President and Vice President *Barbie* come in and in a world that has established pink as the colour for girls, it is a curious observation to see how there is more blue than pink associated with this version of *Barbie* as if to suggest that to be President, more boy than girl personality is required.



Figure 5. Action Man showing hypermasculine muscular upperbody (Mattel 1966)

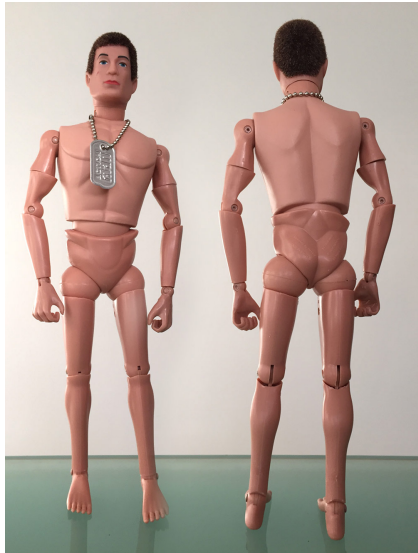


Figure 6. Action Man front and backview showing twenty movable joints (Mattel 1966)

Action Man was debuted in 1966. As seen in figure 6, he has twenty movable parts thanks to the ball and sockets joints in his built. According to Attfield (1996), *Action Man* could even move beyond what the human body can do and even had soft vinyl hands for gripping objects. This is wildly different from *Barbie*. Perhaps it stems from the idea that *Action Man* is an Action Figure and *Barbie* is a doll, which only raises questions as to why the miniature females are dolls and miniature males are action figures.

Masculinity is traditionally described as the possession of attributes associated with men. Some qualities attributed to masculinity as explored by O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2004) show how those who are masculine are expected to be strong, unfeeling, powerful and lacking in intimacy. The ideal man as holds physical and social power. Men are therefore represented as being defined by their jobs, influence and success. Male power does not exist just in itself but over women and other males and even over the environment and themselves.

O'Shaughnessy and Stadler (2004) explain this in how men's relationships are either competitive or controlling. Control is also a main feature in defining masculinity. This may explain why as an action figure, *Action Man* can really do anything and a child can role play any situation they want to imagine, on the other hand as President, *Barbie* can only be in a role play situation where she's standing still. As a miniature male, *Action Man* represents a body image that is impossible to achieve. The ideals

of strength, coolness, toughness and success actually present a problem to the real men and this is what becomes modelled for the boy who plays with this figure.

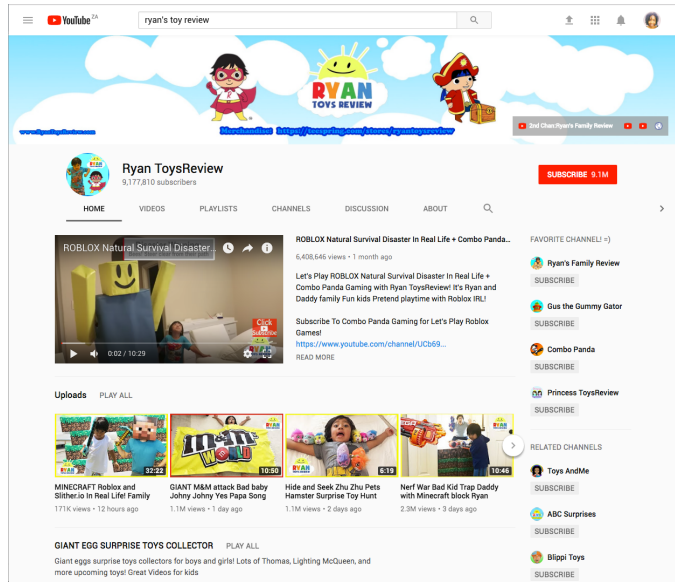


Figure 7. Screenshot of a Youtube page where Ryan's Toy Reviews is hosted. (Youtube 2017)

Ryan is not an average five year old, he is a five year old whose average monthly income is one million dollars and has an unlimited supply of toys. This is because Ryan, with the help of his parents, has made a name for himself as a toy reviewer on *Youtube*.

What Ryan does is unbox toys, the latest and his favourites, plays with them, shows how much he enjoys the toys and subtly recommends the toy. With a following of almost 10 million, Ryan has gained the attention of toy manufacturers who now send products to him for his review. *Youtube* reviews have become an excellent advertising tool in that the advertising is done by regular people who remind people of themselves making them more relatable and easier to trust. When a child sees Ryan, a regular kid just like them enjoying a certain toy, the influence is greater. The success of *Ryan Toys Review* as a media influencer lies in unrestrained consumerism of toys which not many parents at home can afford but will nudge them enough to buy some toys. *Ryan Toys Review* makes for a perfect case study for this research because it shows a big facet that the research is trying to explore which is the media. In his videos, Ryan is often wearing toy brand clothing to match the toy being advertised that day and Ryan also interacts with typically boy toys, in his 2

years of reviewing toys, there has never been a review of stereotypical girl toys. This can suggest that even at 3 years old when the reviews began, Ryan had already refined his choice of toys or that parental influence plays a big role in the toys that children choose.

Children's toys are tools and instigators of play. Mattia Thibault (2014) speaks of how there is no human civilisation which did not produce toys. Toys have become mass produced items but are still of just the same cultural importance as when a child had to make their own toys. By defining toys as instigators of play, play is introduced as a phenomenon by which reality is transformed into symbolic representations of the world. In this context one can assume that anything a child can safely play with can safely be defined as a toy which is not the case of this research report. This research report considers toys as those items manufactured specifically for the purpose of instigating certain aspects of play. Toys are typically a miniature model of something such as a doll representing a baby (Thibault 2014).

Defining toys as replicas of much larger everyday objects brings to light one of the most important uses for toys which is that they are objects of mimicry, a tool for role play. Peirce (2006) defines objects that represent as signs. Toys are therefore signs of the language of play. The toy signs can be fixed such as dolls which represent babies or can be modular like *Lego* with which the player can create new signs. It is crucial to this research report to explain then why play is of importance. The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (General Assembly resolution 44/25 1989) has recognised play as a right for every child. It is not only an important aspect of developing but actually a right. This research report thus investigates the child's interaction and response to gendered toys as signifiers of gendered stereotypes in western society perpetuated by the media.

According to Gander (2016), for children to be able to practice complex sequencing techniques that help them understand day to day organisation interaction with kitchen sets can be beneficial. The development of language and nurturing skills comes with interacting with dolls and building blocks will provide the basic foundations for mathematics and spatial awareness. The problem comes when

children do not get a chance to develop the whole range of skills provided by the different toys. The problem may not be in the toys themselves but begin with how they are produced, packaged, advertised and sold. The colour and material decisions all play a role on which child it will be deemed as suitable for. In the same way, the packaging of said toy and what child will be pictured playing with it will determine the end user of that toy. An even bigger determining factor will be about which isle the toys are placed in. For some reason the toy industry seems immovable on their rigidity about toys being strictly for boys or for girls as campaigns against gendering toys have been ongoing for years but without any changes. Through this chain of events, boys will become exposed to toys like building blocks, cranes and trucks which will develop their mathematics skills and girls will be exposed to dolls and develop their nurturing and caring skills. Also considering the idea that toys are miniature representations of objects in the adult world, we will end up with girls who only associate themselves with kitchen sets, makeup and dolls and boys who only associate themselves with trucks, outdoors and sport. It is important that children get an exposure to all aspects of the world without being pigeon holed into the gender roles. So how does exposure to certain toys all add up to influencing gender stereotypes. This is through the phenomenon of brain plasticity. Brain plasticity is the term used to describe how the brain changes in response to its own experiences (Elliot 2012). It is the basis of all learning. In childhood the brain learns more than at any stage in life. So whether we want to excuse the gendering of toys as a need of nature or a consequence of nurture, it all goes back to the biological which is that the brain will become what it experiences the most. Constantly bombarding the brain with associations of either trucks or dolls only will provide learning of certain attributes that come with exposure to either the dolls or the trucks instead of a rounded experience.

Elliot (2012) says

The male-female differences that have the most impact – cognitive skills such as speaking, reading, mathematics, mechanical ability and interpersonal skills such as aggression, empathy, risk taking and competitiveness are heavily shaped by learning. Yes, they germinate from basic instincts and initial biases in brain function, but each of these traits is

massively amplified by the different sorts of practice, role models and reinforcements that boys and girls are exposed to from birth onwards. Nature and nurture are no longer pitted against each other but even scientists acknowledge that they are interwoven.

Perhaps the saying that boys will be boys so often used in justifying that a male child is more inclined to choose a truck over a doll is nothing more than an epigenetic phenomenon. Epigenetic – the environment working on or through the genes (Elliot 2012). The idea that babies are born with defining characteristics which cannot be changed is easily disproved by adoption where the baby and its parents may not even share an ethnicity and yet the baby grows as one with its adoptive community. The media has played a big role in being the environment where children are raised and what is accepted for them. By creating and marketing targeted toys the environment is acting on what it thinks the genes are and therefore using toys to propagate already existing gender expectations.

8. Conclusion

Toys are a child's gateway in to the world, they are the first objects they interact with. Toy manufactures still insist on creating gender specified toys regardless of the shift in conversations about gender. Gender roles were created out of necessity for human species but have no place in an industrialised and agriculturally evolved world. There is no reason why toys should still perpetuate frowned upon practices. Parents are interested in diversifying play for their children as evidenced by campaigns such *Let Toys be Toys*. It is actually manufacturers that are letting the movement down as they continue peddling glittery pink items for girls and robust blue items for boys. The very act of labelling a toy as 'for girls' or as 'for boys' is the root of all the problems when toys should really be just toys.

9. Image List

- Figure 1. Mattel. (2016). President and Vice President Barbie. Retrieved from <http://shop.mattel.com/shop/en-us/ms/barbie-president-and-vice-president-dolls-dpn04>
- Figure 2. Mattel. (2016). President and Vice President Barbie. Retrieved from <http://shop.mattel.com/shop/en-us/ms/barbie-president-and-vice-president-dolls-dpn04>
- Figure 3. Mattel. (2016). President and Vice President Barbie. Retrieved from <http://shop.mattel.com/shop/en-us/ms/barbie-president-and-vice-president-dolls-dpn04>
- Figure 4. Mattel. (2016). President and Vice President Barbie. Retrieved from <http://shop.mattel.com/shop/en-us/ms/barbie-president-and-vice-president-dolls-dpn04>
- Figure 5. Haasbro. (1966). Action Man. Retrieved from <https://www.actionmanhq.co.uk/pages/body.html>
- Figure 6. Haasbro. (1966). Action Man. Retrieved from <https://www.actionmanhq.co.uk/pages/body.html>
- Figure 7. Ryan Toys Review Youtube channel
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChGJGhZ9SOOHvBB0Y4DOO_w/featured

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