# Gendered Bricks: A Semiotic Approach to the Marketing of Lego in Singapore

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## Abstract

Toys perpetuate dichotomization of gender, as evidenced by a multimodal analysis of Lego marketing. Employing multimodal critical discourse analysis and geosemiotics as frameworks, this study answers the research question: "How does Lego (re)produce gendered discourses vis-à-vis toy marketing in Singapore?" While Lego does not present sufficient textual evidence of marketing their products as either and exclusively for girls or boys, semiotic resources of color, space, product design, type fonts, and suggested activities for play on toy packaging, on the website, and in Bricks World Singapore, collectively index which gender the manufacturer positions as its target consumer. Lego is primarily targeted at boys, indexed as "default," while those targeted at girls are "marked variants," propagating gender segregation and asymmetry among young and impressionable toy consumers. The study recommends the consumption of gender-neutral toys to lessen chances of gendering childhood socialization and play, bullying, and gender policing especially among children.

Keywords: Gender, geosemiotics, Lego, multimodality

## Introduction

According to brand analysts, Lego has become one of the world's most valuable and strongest toy brands in the world (Bhasin, Brand Finance, The Daily Records). The brand has "a value of nearly US$7.6 billion, an exceptional Brand Strength Index (BSI) score of 90.6 and a corresponding brand rating of AAA+" (Brand Finance 8), indicating the company's wide reach and popularity (Weinberg). With its trademark colored plastic bricks embodying the company's aim of "inspir[ing] and develop[ing] the builders of tomorrow" (The Lego Group 4), Lego is widely considered to be innovative and beneficial to advancing childhood development (Blackburn). Lego's aim likewise translates into the company's marketing: "Lego both won prestige for its lucrative line of building blocks introduced in the sixties, by associating their brand of 'creative play' with professional success while condemning other kinds of play—the kind boys do with television-advertised action figures" (Seiter 71). Back in the sixties, Lego's mandate of "build and create" became the highly successful counter-product to the dominant G.I. Joe action figures that were hugely popular, in the wake of the Vietnam War, in the United States. Over the years, however, Lego's marketing gradually shifted towards a more male-focused marketing and by 2005 Lego had almost exclusively marketed towards boys (Gray).

In 2012, Lego introduced Friends, a product line targeted at girls in an attempt to integrate them into Lego's brand of creative play. Lego Friends "is the first 100 percent LEGO building experience fully optimized to girls' tastes and interests" (The Lego Group). McGuire interprets Lego's move as sending a message that "if you want a more equal number of girls and boys playing with Legos, you have to make them different" (10). In creating a theme that is distinctly catered towards girls and marketing it exclusively to them, Lego draws on dominant ideologies that stereotype girls' interests, behavior, and play, and consequently what boys are not into as well (Black, Tomlinson, and Korobkova; Reich, Black, and Foliaki; Gutwald. Thus, this study analyzes Lego's marketing found in Lego Certified Stores (Bricks World) in Singapore, its official Lego Singapore online store, and product packaging.

## Methodology

This study addresses the question: How does Lego (re)produce gendered discourses in relation to toy marketing in Singapore? This is refined with the following subsidiary questions:

- What strategies does Lego use in constructing girls' and boys' play through its toy packaging and online merchandising?

- What type of socialization and play are (re)presented in their marketing?

- What strategies does Lego use in its physical stores to (re)produce gender constructs?

The first and second subsidiary questions will be investigated and discussed via the employment of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), a framework that according to Kress assumes that "neither discourse nor text is sufficient, semiotically speaking, to account for the manifold meanings of … social organization"(qtd. in Rogers xxiii–xxiv). Critical discourse analysis has traditionally been done solely on texts to uncover underlying ideologies. Discourses, however, are often accompanied by semiotic resources like colors, font styles, images, layout, and videos, among others, which collectively affect perceptions of viewers. Analysis must then include these semiotic resources called modes, "socially made and culturally available material-semiotic resources for representation" (Kress 208), to investigate how they reinforce or negate the ideology behind a given text. While Lego primarily does not rely much on textual descriptions to market their products, it is in multimodality that the product packaging, the online store, and the store layout that a gendered discourse can be found dichotomizing childhood play into girls- and boys-targeted toys. In the absence of words, modes such as character design, colors, font styles, suggested activities, and physical placement of products in Bricks World will then be analyzed using MCDA.

The third subsidiary question will be addressed via geosemiotics, a framework that views space not simply as a physical formation but also

a discursive one (Jaworski and Thurlow). Within this framework, Scollon and Scollon posit interactions between three semiotic systems: *interaction order*, *visual semiotics* and *place semiotics*. Interaction order is understood as interactions taking place in the material world indexing identities, social roles or positions (Goffman). Visual semiotics refers to "all of the ways in which meaning is structured within our visual fields" (Scollon and Scollon 11). Lastly, place semiotics refers to the meaning system of a particular spatial organization (Scollon and Scollon). In line with this subsystem, Scollon and Scollon introduce the term "emplacement" to refer to the setting in the material world a sign is located.

Scollon and Scollon's framework can thus be operationalized in analyzing semiotic aggregates of a physical, public space. The emplacement of semiotic resources and the manner in which they interact with each other can be analyzed to uncover the manner in which these discursively (re)produce ideological assumptions. In this regard, Bricks World is a veritable social semiotic system which encodes ideologies that are resourced from Lego's own views of girls and boys.

The researchers collected data from all nine Bricks World stores in Singapore (Compass One, ION, Jem, Jurong Point, Ngee Ann City, Plaza Singapura, Resorts World Sentosa, Suntec City, and Vivo City) from January to March of 2018. Data consists of images taken from these stores, screenshots of its official online store, and product packaging.

## Results and Discussion

Lego's gendered marketing manifests in the semiotic modes of color, emplacement, product design, type font, and suggested play, which are collectively evident in material and online spaces in and on which Lego markets its products. Each of these modes will be discussed below.

*Color*. Color is a prominent visual resource, the perception of which is subjective, hence, Pastoureau argues, "has to be explained, in social and

anthropological terms, as a cultural practice and system of symbolic values" (qtd. in Koller 397). Thus, color palettes can be used as a resource to (re)enforce values that relate to gender. Auster and Manbach note that "color palette as bold or pastel and predominant color are often an important aspect of gendered learning that allows children to begin to associate objects, including toys, with one gender or the other" (376).

Within Bricks World stores, the colors of Lego boxes and their respective emplacement serve as visual cues as to which toys target girls and which target boys. In Image 1 below, City and Ninjago are placed next to each other creating a male space, which are encoded via prominent use of bold colors blue, red, and black for the boxes of the Lego sets that target boys.



Image 1: Left, boxes of City coded in blue, and right, boxes of Ninjago coded in black and red

In Image 2 below, Lego sets targeted at girls like Friends (left) and Disney (right) are colored pink and purple, and in pastels. Similarly, these products are grouped together and their emplacement creates a female space primarily encoded by color to indicate gender.

Image 2: Boxes of Friends and Disney coded in pink and purple, and pastels

The same color palettes are used for featured themes on the online store. In Image 3, Disney and Friends remain in pink and purple, and pastels, and City, Ninjago, and Marvel Super Heroes (three rightmost products) are blue, black and red.
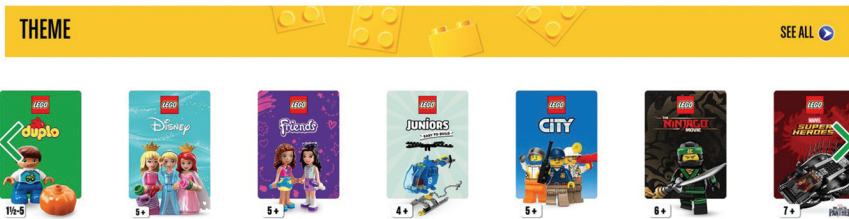


Image 3: Themes featured on Bricksworld.com

These color choices draw on and manifest stereotyped gender views. The use of blue to index "for boys" relates to the notion of blue "signify[ing] male professions, most notably the navy" and eventually "became associated with masculinity" (Koller 404). Auster and Manbach note the choice of using red and black to index dominance as well as its target demographic (i.e. boys)

coincides with marketing practices that pertain to color choices of other toy companies. On the other hand, colors that index "girls' toys" or "for girls" (Auster & Mansbach) make use of pink as an icon of femininity, which aids in keeping gender binaries intact (Koller 404). Notably, the color palettes for Lego sets targeted boys make use of high contrast colors, whereas the colors for sets that targeted at girls have low contrast and are more mellow.

*Space.* Besides color, space also creates a noticeable segregation between girls and boys. In Images 4 and 5 taken from Bricks World, Vivo City, Lego sets which target similar age range of 5+ are placed at opposite sides of the store: products targeting boys are usually on the left and those targeting girls are usually on the right.



Image 4: City and Ninjago on the left side of the store



Image 5: Duplo (leftmost column), Friends, and Disney (both at the rightmost) are on the right

According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the left and right spatial orientation has an information value of "given and new" respectively (179–185). In cultures that read and write from left to right, information positioned on the left has a tendency to be the "given", "presented as something the viewer already knows, as a familiar and agreed-upon point of departure for the message" (Kress and van Leeuwen 181). Information on the right, on the other hand, tends to be "new," "presented as something which is not yet known, or perhaps not yet agreed upon by the viewer" (Kress and van Leeuwen 181). Image 4 features City and Ninjago on the left side of the store, considered targeting boys due to

prominence of blue and red, are the given, "commonsensical" and "self-evident" (Kress & van Leeuwen 181), reinforcing Lego's tendency of presenting their products as primarily for boys (Gray). Image 5 features Duplo, Friends, and Disney, with prominence of pink and purple to index "for girls", are literally new and "not yet known" (Kress & van Leeuwen 181), reinforcing as well the novelty of Lego including products targeting girls in an otherwise male-oriented toy brand. Of the nine stores in Singapore, seven follow this layout where sets targeting boys are the default and sets targeting girls are the marked variants of the default.

Space likewise illuminates for which demographic Lego is primarily marketing their products. Image 6 below shows the layout of Bricks World in Suntec City, in which one's spatial orientation shows a clear inclination of the store to cater to boys.



Image 6: From outside Bricksworld, Suntec City

Immediately upon entry, one can easily see the products on display from each side and the viewable sets (those that are removed from their boxes) are dominated by blue or red and black. Lego sets for girls are positioned on the left, atypical of its usual right side placement; however, it is necessary to note

that a pillar obstructs the customer's view of the girls' sets while the boys'
are shelved on the pillar display. Images 7 and 8 below show that similar to
Suntec City, Bricks World in Jurong Point also has an atypical placement where
products targeting girls are on the left and boys on the right.



Lego for girls on the left side (Image 7) and for boys on the right side (Image 8) of
Bricks World, Jurong Point

Instead of a pillar, the Pick-a-Brick wall (where customers can build their
own sets with loose Legos but not buy them) occupies the entrant's immediate
left and subsequently half of the entire left side of the store (see Image 9 below).



Image 9: Storefront of Bricks World, Jurong Point; the Pick-a-Brick wall is
obstructed from view by the ladies in red

The spatial constraint (i.e. the wall) may have affected the atypical placement of the Legos. Those targeted at girls, which are noticeably less compared to boys, occupy the remaining half of the left side (see Image 7), while the right side is occupied by products targeted at boys (see Image 8). Of the nine stores, only two do not follow the default arrangement of products. Even so, products for boys are either displayed around the eye level of children aged 5+ like in Suntec City or, in the case of Jurong Point, are more compared to those targeting girls and so is given the portion of the shop dedicated solely to saleable items.

An important consequence which arises from the emplacement of Lego sets within the physical stores is the creation of a space, which not only distinguishes between girls and boys but also encodes spatial rules and boundaries that segregate them. Considering the emplacement of these toys vis-à-vis the store's merchandising configuration (i.e. boys on the left, girls on the right), space is a resource that reinforces such gendered boundaries because a girl or boy who occupies an area within a particular gendered space becomes a clear marker of belonging with regard to what type of toy attracts her/him. A boy going to right side of the store (which displays sets targeting girls) and staying there would be marked as showing interest in "girly" things. In this case, the spatial organization of Legos in physical stores subtly communicates boundaries that may be used to gender childhood as well as police socialization and behavior. As evidenced in this study's analysis, there is clear interaction that occurs between the signs (i.e. Lego sets) and their emplacement to produce a kind of gendered space that cultivate expected and acceptable behaviors and attractions for girls and boys.

*Product Design*. On the Lego Singapore website, minifigures for each set likewise mark gender distinction. In Image 10 below, Lego sets that target boys due to dominance of blue make use of the default Lego mini-figures based on

the traditional and iconic Lego models with straight-lined torsos and block-shaped heads. Contrastingly, sets for girls make use of the mini-doll figure, visually indexing femininity by being "less blocky, more styled and taller" (Gutwald). In utilizing these specific character designs, Lego is able to visually cue gender differences and reinforce that Lego is "for boys."



Image 10: Default Lego mini-figures targeting boys and Lego mini-dolls targeting girls on the online store

*Type Fonts*. Type fonts are a subtle yet effective semiotic resource used in toy branding that encodes gender. Based on an online survey in which "participants rated the personality of 20 fonts using 15 adjective pairs" (Shaikh et al. 226), script type fonts are perceived as more feminine, while display type fonts are attributed with masculinity. In Image 11 below, these findings appear to recur in Lego's marketing.

Image 11: The default Lego mini-figures featuring angular and block type font for Minecraft, and the marked variant mini-dolls featuring cursive and script type fonts for Disney

Minecraft features an angular and block type font while Disney features a cursive and script type font. Grohmann explains that "a script (but not display) type font enhances the effect of a feminine brand name on likelihood to recommend the brand to another consumer looking for a feminine brand, whereas a display (but not script) type font enhances the effect of a masculine brand name on likelihood to recommend the brand to a consumer looking for a masculine brand" (Grohmann). Minecraft's angular and block type font, therefore, enhances brand masculine perceptions while Disney's cursive and script type font enhances brand femininity perceptions (Grohmann). Lego's choices of font types thus function in consonance with other semiotic modes (e.g. color and product design) and serve as a subtle gendering resource.

*Suggested Activities for Play.* While the centerpiece of Lego is creative play, the marketing discourse of Lego appears to encourage only particular kinds of

gendered play through the activities displayed on the toy packaging. In Images 12 and 13 below, we focus on two Lego sets that are for relatively the same age range but target different genders.



Image 12: Friends: City Park Café



Image 13: Ninjago: The Vermillion Attack

Common female-identified activities shown in Image 12 are engaged in feminized labor such as baking and serving food. These depictions of "girls' play are miniature versions of their mothers' domestic work" (Seiter 74). Such suggested activities on the boxes are deeply rooted in heteronormative ideologies of femininity that limit girls to "'institutionalized' form of play because they replicate the specific historical forms of women's domestic labor" (Seiter 74). In contrast, Image 13 features Ninjago displaying a warrior culture coded by battle and competition; further gendering play in which "action figures, building toys, weapons, or small vehicles typified toys for 'boys only'" (Auster and Mansbach 374). Borrowing Deborah Tannen's words from her difference approach, girls are socialized into cooperative play as Lego Friends: Bake Shop emphasizes friendship, whereas boys are socialized into engaging in competitive interactions with Lego Ninjago: The Vermillion Attack that highlights conflict.

Cooperation and competition as dichotomizing characteristics of gendered language appear to correlate with the socialization of childhood play. Lego's marketing does suggest that girls and boys take an active engagement through creative play, but the kind of engagement that girls and boys can partake in is entrenched in gender stereotypes. Gendered types of play in Lego's marketing inevitably have repercussions of childhood play and socialization. Marketing choice for Lego Friends to foreground nurturing, cooperation and maintenance of relationships as core to the creative play in some sense is beneficial in that it teaches girls values that may be socially beneficial; however, these values become problematic in that these are wrapped in limited and limiting gender stereotypes. Conversely, Lego sets targeting boys emphasize aggressive play which socializes boys into thinking that acts of aggression and engaging in conflict are "normal" for them.

## Conclusion

Multimodal and geosemiotic strategies that dichotomize gender are replicated in both physical and online spaces of Lego's marketing. Semiotic resources of color, emplacement, product design, type font, and suggested play collectively index the target gender of a Lego product. Especially with the introduction of Lego Friends, Lego not only reinforces the belief that "[b]oys and girls tend to play with children of their own gender, and their sex-separate groups have different organizational structures and interactive norms" (Tannen), the company has also (un)consciously maintained its male-oriented image since the 1980sby implicitly privileging boys via emplacement of products and product design. While girls are now explicitly included in Lego's marketing discourse, they are still the secondary toy consumer as products for them are not only less compared to boys' but also the marked variants of the default.

While Lego "generally avoids gendered marketing" (Brand Finance), its semiotic resources suggest otherwise. MCDA and geosemiotics make explicit Lego's ideology of male-centeredness which simultaneously perpetuates

notions of gendered differences. Given that "gender is culturally mediated, and gendered identities are interactionally achieved" (Kendall and Tannen 556–557), children's socialization and play inevitably become gendered through something as unassuming as Lego bricks.

Despite Lego's gendering tendencies, there may still be an avenue for wardens to work against the grain and provide gender-neutral toys. Lego has themes such as Architecture, BrickHeadz, Classic, Creator, Duplo, and Minifigures that focus more on the company's trademark "build and create" mandate rather than being overtly marketed to a specific gender. Guardians may opt to choose these themes for their ward, over those mentioned in the analysis, to lessen chances of gendering children's socialization and play especially from the Lego products they consume. In so doing, instances of bullying and gender policing among young toy consumers can be lessened and a child's preference for toys which does not align with heteronormative expectations would no longer be a marked choice.

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