

Disco Divas and Heroic Knights:

A critical multimodal analysis of gender roles in ‘create the world’ LEGO cards

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Abstract

This chapter investigates how gendered identities are constructed in a promotional series of collectable cards, co-created by Sainsbury’s (a UK Supermarket) and LEGO (an international toy manufacturer). It focuses on the representation of LEGO minifigures (small human-like toy figurines), presenting a systematic analysis of the way these figures are named, visually depicted and linguistically described on the cards. The findings reveal, first, that female is the marked form for a LEGO minifigure; female minifigures are represented half as often as male minifigures, and indices of gender are more compulsory for female characters. Second, the analysis shows that male and female minifigures are differentiated in distinct and restrictive ways, with women generally represented in terms of who and what they *are* (i.e. youthful and slim, with accentuated facial features) but men by what they *do* (i.e. being adventurous, taking risks, and having an occupation, especially one that relates to manual labour). These findings highlight some of the ways in which restrictive norms and sexist ideologies can be perpetuated through products targeting young children. They also demonstrate the importance of in-depth analysis and critique of such products, as a resource for resisting and challenging harmful and limiting gendered norms.

Introduction

In 2017, LEGO teamed up with major UK supermarket chain Sainsbury’s for the distribution of a set of 140 ‘create the world’ collectible trading cards. Children were invited to join ‘Lily’ and ‘Sam’ on a round-the-world adventure, with each card featuring a minifigure (small human-like toy figurine) or LEGO creation that they would encounter on their journey. The

cards captured a range of the minifigure characters offered by LEGO at the time, and many of these minifigures displayed roles, occupations, hobbies and personality traits associated with ‘real’ life, such as Grandpa, Nurse, Skier and Clumsy Guy. The promotion was extremely popular, and garnered attention from UK regional and national newspapers (*Birmingham Mail*, June 13, 2017; *Gazette Live*, May 8, 2017; *The Sun*, June 28, 2017). In this chapter, we investigate the extent to which the minifigures represented in the ‘create the world’ set are gendered, and what particular roles, identities and actions are attributed to these figures. We consider what children may learn about gender roles through playing with the cards, and whether those lessons are likely to help or hinder young people in moving beyond the limiting roles and commonly-held stereotypes that perpetuate sexism in the adult world.

We take the position that toys are significant artefacts for social semiotic analysis because they facilitate the imaginative play through which children learn and become socially aware (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen 2002; Kahlenberg and Hein 2010). Toys can also be seen as ‘texts’, with designs that “communicat[e] symbolic and interactive meanings” (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen 2003, 19). We therefore suggest that this is an important area of research. Nevertheless, there has been little social semiotic work to date that focuses on children’s toys and products, with the exception of Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen’s analyses of baby toys (2001), action figures (2002) and teddy bears (2003). Through playing with toys such as the ‘create the world’ cards, children develop their sense of what social roles and relationships are available to them, and what is ‘normal’, expected or desirable behaviour. For example, they may use the representations on the cards as starting points as they engage in role play, building worlds, relationships and qualities for the minifigures alongside their developing sense of their own worlds. Given LEGO’s worldwide popularity and success – they reported their highest revenue in 85 years and introduced 355 new products in 2017 alone (*The Telegraph*, March 9, 2017) – it is especially important to consider the socialising potential of their products. By examining these cards, we hope to reveal the messages that children absorb when they ‘create the world’ through reading, collecting and playing with them, and to consider whether these messages may perpetuate discriminatory norms and practices.

Gender and children’s toys

In recent years, toys have increasingly been developed and marketed for gender-differentiated audiences, with distinctive sets of gendered semiotic resources coming to

signal whether a toy is for boys or girls (Auster and Mansbach 2012; Kahlenberg and Hein 2010; Martinez et al. 2013). For example, toys marketed towards boys typically include action figures, vehicles, building toys and weapons, thus promoting strength, outdoor play and physicality, whilst 'girls' toys' tend to include dolls, cosmetics and jewellery, promoting the values of beauty, indoor play, domesticity and motherhood (Auster and Mansbach 2012; Caldas-Coulthard and Van Leeuwen 2002; Kahlenberg and Hein 2010; Martinez et al. 2013). In terms of colour, boys' toys (and the boys who play with them) tend to be depicted in colours such as red, blue, black or grey, whilst girls' toys (and the girls who play with them) are usually associated with pastels such as purple and pink (Auster and Mansbach 2012; Caldas-Coulthard and Van Leeuwen 2002; Kahlenberg and Hein 2010). The pervasive association of boys with blue and girls with pink has led some to suggest that there is now a ubiquitous visual discourse of gender difference (Baker 2008, 96), and that the visual (re)production of such difference serves to enforce and perpetuate limiting stereotypes (Cunningham and MaCrae 2011, 608). Pink is shown to be the most gender-marked colour for toys, being strongly associated with girls (Auster and Mansbach 2012; Cunningham and MaCrae 2011; Wong and Hines 2015). This is consistent with Koller's (2008) claim that pink is also used pervasively in marketing that targets women.

LEGO and LEGO bodies

Historically, LEGO has been a toy that boys play with: in 2011, boys made up 90% of LEGO's customer base (*The Guardian*, June 4, 2017). However, in recent years, the company has made a number of efforts to target girls. For example, they moved to increase the representation of women in STEM professions, and present women in more intellectually challenging roles, through their introduction of the Research Institute set in 2014, which featured three female scientist figures. In 2017, they went a step further with the Women of NASA set, which included four female scientists who made significant contributions to major NASA missions. Despite their popularity and apparently progressive aims, however, the LEGO group have often been the subject of controversy with regard to the way they represent different groups in society. For example, the 'LEGO Friends' range, which was launched in 2012 and includes 'mini-doll' figures and sets with themes such as a bakery, riding camp and amusement park (*The Guardian*, June 4, 2017; Johnson 2014), was criticised for the over-use of pastel colours and promotion of stereotypical female roles, with some even condemning the range as a regression to 1970s gender stereotypes (*The Telegraph*, June 1, 2017). This range changed the shape of the minifigure for the first time, with its exclusively female

characters including slimmer bodies, shaped breasts and small waists. Similar markers are now painted on to the standard body shape for female minifigures in the mainstream range, although there have historically been far fewer of these explicitly marked female minifigures than the standard (presumably male) form (Johnson 2014).

In this chapter, we are particularly interested in LEGO's representation of human or human-like figures in children's products. Although there has been little social semiotic research that explores children's toy figurines, Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen (2002) have analysed the popular action figure franchises of Action Man and Barbie, focusing on the toys' design and movement, use of colour and the language used in advertising materials. They observe that these semiotic resources are harnessed to demarcate clearly gendered roles for the toys: Action Man appears in professional or action-oriented settings, whilst Barbie occupies settings and roles associated with stereotypical femininity such as shopping, hairdressing, nursing and motherhood. They show that naming strategies for Barbie are linked with idealised notions of womanhood and romance (e.g. Blushing Orchid Barbie, Harpist Angel, Summer Dream), whereas Action Man's personae relate to power, danger and authority (e.g. Dr X, Bungee Jumper, Ninja). The world of Action Man is also characterised by dark colours 'evoking mystery or danger', whereas Barbie's world is populated by pinks and purples which create 'a sense of romance' (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen 2002, 102). LEGO minifigures are quite different from these other action figure toys in size, feel and playability. Most notably, and in keeping with LEGO's primary remit as a building toy, the legs, bodies, heads and hair can be taken apart and reconstructed, enabling different assemblages to be imagined and constructed. The LEGO company themselves seem to encourage play with the bodies of these figures. For example, the 'build a minifigure' feature in large LEGO stores invites customers to create their own characters from a range of different body parts. In 2017, the Manchester LEGO Discovery Centre had a 'gay pride' display in which traditional gender norms were subverted through the configuration of minifigure parts. One minifigure in this display, for example, had a bearded face, long blonde hair and wore a bikini.

The 'create the world' minifigure cards may be a small data set, but they have been extremely popular with young children in the UK, are part of a large, successful franchise that has made efforts to break gendered stereotypes, and represent many real-world characters and roles. We therefore believe that they are an important site for influencing young people's developing concepts of their own, and others', position in the world. In producing these

cards, LEGO and Sainsbury's have the power to offer transformative positions; the creative potential of the malleable minifigures and the inclusion of many fantasy characters means that they have plenty of opportunities to transgress restrictive social norms and boundaries or damaging stereotypes. This chapter will critically examine whether that is achieved.

Methodology

Data collection

The data for this study comprise the names, visual depictions and textual descriptions from a set of 140 'create the world' LEGO collectible cards. These cards were the product of a joint promotion with the UK supermarket Sainsbury's, and were distributed to customers who spent over £10 between 3 May and 13 June 2017. They could also be bought from Sainsbury's for 50p, along with a £2 collector's album to display the cards. We only included cards that featured minifigures for our analysis, resulting in a data set of 104 cards. We documented these data by first photographing the collection, and then transcribing the textual data, which included the card number, title and full description, into a spreadsheet. This textual dataset amounted to 2,265 words.

Each of the minifigure cards is composed in the same way (see Figure 1ⁱ). The visual depiction of a minifigure occupies the centre position, where it is framed by a range of marginal elements, including strongly demarcated frame lines and textual information such as the name of the minifigure character, a description of that character, and the number of the card in the series. For example, the Boxer is the central figure of card number 11, framed by a red background with a faded plant motif. Below the image is the typed description (see Figure 2). Because it is at the centre of the composition, it may be argued that the image of the minifigure is attributed a greater degree of salience than the other semiotic elements, and thus has high 'information value' (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 177). The prominence of the visual is not surprising given the young audience for the cards, many of whom will be emergent readers, and pay little attention to the linguistic elementsⁱⁱ. However, the construction of information value in the cards can also be analysed from top to bottom, with what is nearer the top taking the 'ideal' position - the 'generalized essence of the information' (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 187), and the information at the bottom being positioned as more 'real', detailed, specific information. In this respect, the linguistic resources mobilised in the lower portion of the cards also take a prominent position, and are

likely to be read by older children, or adult carers, in prolonged engagement with the cards. Because prominence is given to both visual and linguistic modes in the depiction of the minifigures, our analysis takes account of the range of semiotic resources that are deployed in relation to both of these modes.

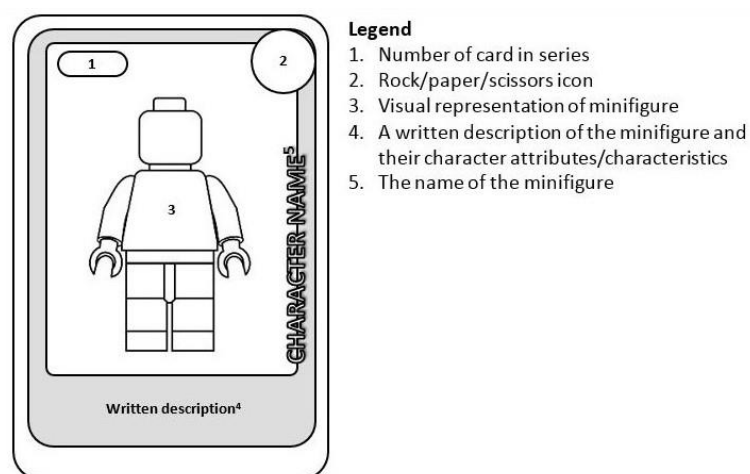


Figure 1. Composition of a LEGO 'create the world' card



Figure 2. Card 011: BOXER

Before analysing the content of the cards, we first attempted to categorise each of the minifigures represented therein as either male, female or gender-neutral. These identifications were checked by all four authors of this chapter and it was agreed that all representations could be identified as either female minifigures (henceforth FMs) or male minifigures (henceforth MMs). We then created two sub-corpora for the text of the FM and MM cards. Our coding of the minifigures by gender was checked by a group who represent the target audience for these cards: ten children between the ages of 6 and 9ⁱⁱⁱ. Each of these children

was separately shown each minifigure card in turn and asked to state whether the figure on the card was male, female, or they couldn't say, which would allow for interpretations of

gender-neutrality or non-binary gender. Overall, there was 99% agreement between the authors and the children. The generally agreed lack of gender-neutral or non-binary minifigures is indicative of the binary world depicted on the cards.

The Social Actor Framework

Our analysis of the ‘create the world’ minifigure cards focuses on the following research questions:

1. Are the ‘create the world’ minifigures differentiated by gender? If so, what gendered identities and roles are constructed for them?
2. What actions and functions do the minifigures perform?
3. What wider social norms are indexed and (re)produced through these depictions?

We seek to answer these questions through a multimodal social actor network analysis (van Leeuwen 2008). In doing so, we treat the minifigures as ‘social actors’, on to which an identity and a place in society is projected, and the cards as recontextualisations of social practices (van Leeuwen 2008). The social actor framework supports our exploration of the kinds of socio-cultural norms and expectations at work in the construction of the minifigures and, importantly, what they are teaching the children who play with them about their place in the world.

In order to theorise the connections between particular visual and linguistic resources, we draw on the concept of indexicality. An *index* is a type of sign that stands for something else. It is distinguished from other signs because it stands for an object ‘by virtue of a real connection with it’ (Peirce, 1998 [1895]: 14), or as Atkin (2005: 163) puts it, ‘through some existential or physical fact’. Peirce (1998 [1895]) offers as an example ‘a low barometer with a moist air’ as an index of rain; Atkin (2005) suggests that smoke is an index of fire. Both of these indices have a causal connection with the phenomenon to which they point.

In this chapter, we do not employ the concept of indexicality in relation to physical objects or environmental phenomena such as fire and rain, but in relation to social constructs, especially gender. Ochs (1992) has developed the concept of indexicality in this respect, distinguishing two types of index. ‘Direct’ indices, such as the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘she’, or the explicitly gendered categories ‘man’ or ‘waitress’ (all of which are used in the minifigure cards),

directly point to the gender of the referent. With ‘indirect’ indices, which are of particular interest here, the connection between the sign and the individual, group or meaning for which it stands is made through shared cultural knowledge and assumptions. As an example, the word ‘glamorous’ is associated with women in a western cultural context, whereas ‘stocky’ tends to be reserved for men. Visual signs can also carry indexical meanings. For example, as shown above, the colour pink has come to be strongly associated with women and girls. The connection between indirect indices and the social meanings to which they point are not physical. Nor are they static or universal in their reference points - As Bucholtz (2009) and Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) have shown, the indexical meanings of particular signs are variable and context-dependent. The words *dude* and *güey*, for example, have both been associated with male referents, but in certain contexts these words can index a ‘stance of cool solidarity’ (Kiesling 2004: 282) and a ‘hip urban Latino identity’ (Bucholtz 2009: 158) that points not only to the gender of the referent, but also their age, ethnicity, and the stance of the speaker in relation to them. Our analysis is therefore sensitive to the context-specific social meanings that are indicated through a range of semiotic resources in the ‘create the world’ cards, and to the potential relevance of other factors such as age and body shape.

The analysis that follows will focus on the *categorisation* of the minifigures, which relates to how identities, roles and actions are represented (van Leeuwen 2008). We explore these categorisations through close examination of the names given to the minifigures in the titles, the visual images and colours (including the minifigure itself and the background) and the language of the descriptions at the bottom of each card. Within van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework, categorisation is divided into several sub-types. We focus here on those types that are most prominent in the collection: functionalisation and identification. When social actors are functionalised, they are categorised according to their functions – what they do – such as a paying job, or some other societal role (van Leeuwen 2008, 42). Identification categories, on the other hand, categorise actors according to what they ‘unavoidably are’ (van Leeuwen 2008, 42). In relation to identification, we explore the sub-categories of classification, whereby actors are divided according to the contingent socio-historical categories that a given society or institution uses to group and separate individuals, and physical identification, which categorises actors according to their physical appearance or part of their physical body (van Leeuwen 2008, 44).

Although van Leeuwen's (2008) initial description of the social actor framework focuses on linguistic realisations, he also shows that it can be adapted to analyse visual representations. Our visual social actor analysis focuses on how the minifigures are marked out as male or female through semiotic resources such as the colours used on the card backgrounds and minifigure bodies, and the markings on the faces and bodies of each figure. We consider whether meaningfully placed lines (implying, for example, make-up, facial hair, wrinkles, body fat or a slim waist), are indexical of gender, and other macro-social categories that may intersect with gender, such as age. We also consider how the items that the minifigures are depicted as wearing or holding contribute to an impression of the characters' roles, activities they engage in, or who they essentially *are*.

Our analysis of the textual descriptions considers how the minifigures are linguistically classified and identified through an exploration of adjectival descriptions. Using Wmatrix (Rayson 2009), we compare adjectival descriptions that are distinctive to each gendered group of cards, teasing out both qualitative and quantitative differences. We employ a modified version of Moon's (2014) model for classifying adjectival descriptions, grouping them together according to the categories of 'classification', 'physical characteristics', 'personal characteristics' and 'appraisalment'. These also map onto the categorisation types in van Leeuwen's (2008) framework. Where adjectives serve multiple functions (e.g. describing a personal characteristic in addition to appraisalment), they are coded in every relevant category.

Assigning the titles, visuals and descriptions of the minifigure cards to analytical categories was not always a straightforward process. In order to achieve some consistency and reliability, two authors of this chapter conducted each analysis separately, before coming together to discuss any divergent categorisations or problematic cases. This process of inter-rater coding helped us to specify and refine the boundaries of each analytical category.

Analysis

The minifigure cards can be grouped into two gender types, male and female, and are recognisable as such by adults and children alike, as explained in the previous section. An important point to note from the outset is that gender representation in the 'create the world' cards is not equal, with 67% (N70) of the 104 minifigures being identified as male, but only

33% (N34) as female; male minifigures (MMs) appear twice as often as female minifigures (FMs). This gender imbalance suggests that male is the default gender for a minifigure in this set, whilst the female form is marked (see Mills 2008 on the prevalence of this pattern in a wider social context). In the analysis that follows, we consider how the gender of the ‘create the world’ minifigure characters is indexed through the full range of semiotic resources available in the cards, through their titles, the visual resources employed in the images, and the linguistic choices made in the textual descriptions. As the section progresses, we draw out key themes, showing what kinds of gendered identities and roles are constructed overall in the ‘create the world’ set.

Identification: classification and physical identification

Identification is the second most frequent type of linguistic categorisation in the naming of the ‘create the world’ minifigures, appearing in 53% (N55) of the card titles^{iv}. Classification by social category is by far the most common sub-type of identification, with 51% (N53) of the card titles featuring some form of classification. In this section, we begin by exploring the ways in which the minifigures are classified in the card titles, identifying three main sub-types of classification: gender, fantasy figure and personality. As shown in Table 1, we found that gender classifications (e.g. *Tiger Woman*, *Spooky Girl* and *Pizza Delivery Man*) were the most common type in the card titles, and that the FM titles were classified by gender more than twice as often (proportionally) as the MM titles.

Classification Type	Proportion of classifications (total N53)	Proportion of MMs (total N70)	Proportion of FMs (total N34)
Gender	62% (N33)	20% (N14)	56% (N19)
Fantasy Figure	42% (N22)	21% (N15)	21% (N7)
Personality	17% (N9)	10% (N7)	6% (N2)
Miscellaneous (historical & narrative figures, size, socio-political group)	8% (N4)	3% (N2)	6% (N2)

Table 1. Minifigure card titles by classification

Table 2 shows the linguistic forms used to classify the minifigures by gender. These can take the form of ‘highly generalised gendered classifications’ (van Leeuwen 2008: 42), such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’, which can appear as pre- or post- modifiers (*Lady Robot*, *Spider Lady*) or as compounds (*Cavewoman*). They can also take the form of derivations, created through suffixes such as ‘ess’, ‘let’ and ‘maid’, which in these cases have a diminutive effect, implying youthfulness, innocence or powerlessness. Others are more specific gendered categories that are part of a gendered pair, such as King, Queen and Witch (the male counterpart of the latter would be Wizard). ‘Girl’ (N7), a category that indicates youth, and ‘lady’ (N3), which can either indicate status, or be used as a euphemistic alternative to ‘woman’ (avoiding perceived connotations of sexual maturity), are the two most common gendered classifications used for FMs. By contrast, the equivalent denotative gendered counterparts for these categories - ‘boy’ and ‘gentleman’ are not used at all for the male minifigures. Instead, ‘guy’ (N7), a category that is increasingly used in a gender-neutral way in its plural form, yet at the time of writing still retains its gendered meaning in the singular, is the most common gendered classification for the MMs, followed by ‘man’ (N6). These findings reveal that the gender of the FMs is more often linguistically marked, and that gendered labels for the FMs often imply youthfulness or innocence in a way that the MM titles do not (see Mills 2008 for further discussion of inequalities in gendered categories).

Form of gender classification	Proportion of MM gender classifications (total N14)	Proportion of FM gender classifications (total N19)
Generalised category: guy	50% (N7)	-
Generalised category: girl	-	37% (N7)
Generalised category: man	43% (N6)	-
Generalised category: lady	-	16% (N3)
Generalised category: woman	-	11% (N2)
Other gendered category (king, queen, princess, witch)	7% (N1)	16% (N3)
Suffixes (-ess, -maid, -let)	-	21% (N4)

Table 2. Gender classification types in minifigure card titles

When it comes to the visual resources and textual descriptions that are used to represent the minifigures, appearance takes primacy, and is closely related to the characters' gender classification. Our analysis now turns to the ways in which the minifigures are identified by their appearance through a range of visual and linguistic resources.

Women as youthful with striking features, men as older with hairy faces

Visually, the physical attributes given to the minifigures sharply differentiate the FMs and MMs. For example, facial hair (i.e. moustaches, beards and sideburns) is only found on those minifigures linguistically identified as male. In addition to visual signs of facial hair, linguistic references to hair in the textual descriptions are also restricted to the MMs. The adjectival descriptions of MMs' facial hair often carry positive evaluations, with the adjectives 'sensational', 'magnificent' and 'sweet' premodifying 'moustache', 'facial hair' and 'beard' in descriptions of the Ringmaster, Evil Dwarf and Garden Gnome, respectively. The one reference to 'hair' in the FM descriptions relates to head hair from the Medusa card, referring to its functional attributes for this dangerous fictional character: "And don't offer to cut her hair either - it's got some 'sssserious' bite!"

Just as the FMs are more often linguistically classified as female, they are also more often visually identified as female through their physical appearance; all of the FMs have facial markers that index femininity (i.e. implied make-up such as coloured lips and prominent eyelashes), whereas only half of the MMs have facial markers that index masculinity (moustaches, beard stubble, sideburns or bushy eyebrows). However, since all the FMs' gender is marked through implied make-up, the very absence of feminine indices can be said to distinguish a minifigure as male. This lends further weight to the argument that male is the default gender for a minifigure in this set, whilst the female form is marked.

Another more subtle distinction between representations of the minifigures' faces is that the MMs are more likely to be marked with signs of being older. This is indicated by lines around the face in positions where we would typically expect to see wrinkles, namely across the forehead and next to the eyes. Several of the MMs include such marks, whilst only one of the FMs (Grandma) does. Indices of age therefore seem to intersect with gender here. The

implication that the MMs are older than the FMs is supported by the fact that many of the MMs have white or grey hair whereas only two of the FMs do^{vi}. Those playing with the cards may therefore infer that, whilst it is normal and acceptable for men to age, women are obliged to retain their youth.

Women as slim, curvaceous and well-dressed, men as larger and muscular

In terms of the minifigures' bodies, only a small number of the MMs have visual indices of gender, including chest hair and visible muscles. By contrast, the majority of the FMs have visual indices of gender on their body, namely narrowed waists and/or breasts, making their figures more curvaceous – less square – than the MMs. Of the 6 who do not have (visibly) narrowed waists, in two cases the bodies are obscured so the waists cannot be seen, two are wearing costumes and one is a robot. Additionally, several of the MMs have lines on their bodies that imply they have fat around their waists, and/or their clothes are baggy, whilst none of the FMs' bodies include such marks^{vii}. For example, the lines around the bottom of Baseball Player's body suggest he has a tucked-in baggy t-shirt, the lines above the waists of Grandpa, Piggy Guy and Prospector imply a rounded stomach, and the lines around the belts of Elf and Gnome imply body fat around a tightened area. The way the minifigures' upper bodies are presented therefore suggests that it is normal and acceptable for men to have muscles and body fat, whereas women are expected to have small waists and visible breasts. Furthermore, the textual descriptions of the minifigures suggest that appearance in general is more salient and important for women. Adjectives describing clothing, such as "royal robes" (Queen) and "her robe is *perfect*" (Kimono Girl) are more frequent in the FM descriptions compared with the MM descriptions^{viii}. Other adjectival descriptors distinctive to the FM set, such as 'glitter-filled' (Unicorn Girl) and 'dressed-up' (Bride), as well as references to jewellery such as 'sparkly stuff' (Jewel Thief) also imply attentiveness to looking special and striking through clothing and accessories. The inclusion of 'glitter' as a premodifier is particularly notable in this regard, given its cultural associations as an indirect index of femininity. Adjectives relating to physical appearance in the MM set are more likely to focus on facial hair (see above).

Pink and blue as visual discourses of gender differentiation

Another feature of visual categorisation that is largely restricted to the FMs is the inclusion of shades and hues of pink. Over half of the FM cards feature pinks and purples somewhere in the visual composition of the cards (mostly in their clothing, but sometimes in the

background or number colour), compared with only a handful of the MMs, one of which is Piggy Guy, whose outfit is the colour in which pigs are typically represented. Interestingly, two of the children who acted as second raters for this study identified Piggy Guy as female, presumably because of the strong association of pink with girls and women. The importance of pink as a resource for the ideational representation of femininity is particularly notable when considering the representation of non-human characters. As well as being linguistically marked for gender, the Alien Villainess, Lady Robot, and Lady Cyclops cards are also visually marked through the use of pink and feminising facial features, including lipstick (which is always pink) and exaggerated make-up, such as Lady Robot's pink cheeks. Moreover, pink is integrated into the dress of Alien Villainess and Lady Robot. The most frequently used colour on the MM cards, on the other hand, is blue (closely followed by green); less than half of the FM cards feature these colours. Overall, the use of pink (or purple) for the FMs and blue (or green) for the MMs reinforces and reproduces a visual discourse of gender difference (Baker 2008)^{ix}. In addition, the higher frequency of both linguistic and visual indices of gender for the FMs, together with the fact that there are double the amount of MMs in total, combine to create the very powerful impression that female is the marked form for a LEGO minifigure.

Functionalisation

Functionalisation is the most frequent type of linguistic categorisation in the naming of the 'create the world' minifigures, with 62% (N64) of the card titles referring to the characters' functionalised role (such as a paying job or other social activity). Slightly more MMs than FMs are given a title that refers to a functional role, such as Janitor, Fisherman, Fortune Teller and Disco Diva. These findings are echoed in the visual icons the minifigures are shown to be holding, where again slightly more MMs than FMs hold an item that draws attention to what the character *does* in their role, such as the Janitor and his mop, the Rockstar and his guitar, the Cavewoman and her club, and the Nurse and her syringe^x. These findings suggest a slight disparity between the kinds of roles the minifigures are given, with the MMs more likely to be categorised in terms of what they *do* in the world, and the FMs more likely to be categorised in terms of who they *are* and what they *wear*. The difference between the representation of the FMs and MMs becomes more marked when we consider the more specific types of functionalised roles and occupations they are given. Table 3 presents a summary of these types in the minifigure card titles, organised by theme.

Theme	Proportion of MM functionalisations (total N42)	Proportion of FM functionalisations (total N17)
Entertainment	29% (N12)	18% (N3)
Manual labour	21% (N9)	-
Physical activity	19% (N8)	53% (N9)
War/Conflict	10% (N4)	6% (N1)
Adventure/travelling	14% (N6)	-
Crime	5% (N2)	12% (N2)
Service	5% (N2)	6% (N1)
Science	2% (N1)	-
Business	2% (N1)	-
Health	-	6% (N1)
Magic	-	6% (N1)

Table 3. Functionalisation in card titles, organised by theme

There are a number of functionalisation themes that apply significantly more often to MMs, namely manual labour (e.g. Plumber and Welder), war/conflict (e.g. Knight and Trooper) and adventure/travelling (e.g. Explorer and Sea Captain). The fact that multiple MMs, but almost no FMs, have functionalised roles that relate to these themes implies that physical work, conflict, adventure and travel are generally available to men, but not to women. Additionally, a higher proportion of the MMs have a functionalised role that relates to an occupation^{xi}. This disparity is particularly apparent in the male-only manual labour category.

Men as daring and dangerous, women as fun, frivolous and decorative

There are a number of visual and linguistic markers that suggest the MMs are more dangerous and aggressive than the FMs. For example, more MMs than FMs hold an item that can be used to attack, such as Evil Dwarf's axe, Heroic Knight's sword and Alien Avenger's gun. Several MMs, but no FMs, hold some kind of tool that is used to cut or fix, such as Mechanic's spanner, Carpenter's saw and Butcher's knife. The visual implication that MMs do dangerous things becomes even more apparent when looking at what they wear, with many MMs wearing some kind of equipment that protects them from serious injury (usually helmets), whereas only one FM wears such equipment (Snowboarder, who wears a helmet)^{xii}.

The association of MMs with danger is also reflected in the textual descriptions of the minifigures. For example, in the MM descriptions there are a small number of adjectives that imply danger: Gangster is described metonymically as 'dangerous' ("there's something *dangerous* in that case and it's not an out-of-tune violin!"); the Pirate Captain is characterised as a "*merciless*, rotten old sea dog", and Ocean King is described as a "*hot-headed* monarch", which implies he is easily angered. There are also some FMs whose descriptions imply they are dangerous, but these characters are more likely to be mythical, suggesting that being dangerous is not an everyday trait for human women. For example, Wacky Witch is evaluated as "wicked", and Medusa is described metonymically as dangerous through reference to her hair: "don't offer to cut her hair either, it's got some *ssserious* bite!" Surfer Girl, a human-like FM, is described as "hot-blooded", but (by contrast with "hot-headed") this phrase has a semantic prosody of sexual, rather than dangerous, behaviour. This implication of sexual behaviour is reinforced with the description "She certainly knows how to make waves at the beach!", which points not only to the literal waves that she rides, but also the metaphorical waves of admiration that she inspires.

The functionalisation sub-category of 'physical activity' includes the largest number of FM cards, with more than half of the female minifigures' functionalised titles relating to physical activity^{xiii}. A third of the FMs with physical roles are dancers: performers who depend on viewers' evaluation for success. These functionalised roles are represented both linguistically, through the form 'dance + -er' (Flamenco Dancer, Hula Dancer), and through the minifigures' clothing: a traditional red and black dress and fan for Flamenco Dancer, and flower garland and grass skirt for Hula Dancer. The items held by the FMs engaging in physical activity tend to be symbolic, decorative, or serve to enhance their performance in

some way. For example, Flamenco Dancer carries a fan, Hula Dancer holds maracas and Disco Diva a microphone. In addition, Disco Diva is described in the textual descriptions as “the belle of the glitterball”, which echoes the idiomatic English phrase ‘the belle of the ball’, serving as an intertextual reference to the fairy-tale genre, where women traditionally occupy more passive, decorative roles. Even though she is visually active, linguistically Disco Diva is therefore represented as a passive object to be looked at. There are no visual or linguistic references to dancing for the MMs who engage in physical activity. These minifigures instead perform sports and leisure activities such as climbing (Mountain Climber), boxing (Boxer) and weightlifting (Weightlifter).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the LEGO ‘create the world’ minifigure cards, a range of semiotic resources combine to create a powerful impression of distinct and binary gender roles, with ‘femaleness’ being the marked form. All of the minifigure cards in the 2017 collection are linguistically and visually gendered in some way, there are twice as many MMs as there are FMs, and the gender of the FMs is foregrounded twice as often, through a range of linguistic and visual indices. Linguistic and visual patterns in the cards suggest that different roles, identities and activities are available to men and women: FMs are represented as younger and slimmer, with more emphasised facial features (such as eyelashes and lips), whereas MMs are depicted as physically stronger, larger and more mature. MMs are also more likely to be functionalised in more dangerous or physical occupations, whilst FMs take up less adventurous, and more frivolous, roles.

It is worth pointing out that there are some exceptions to these general patterns. For example, the MM cards Small Clown, Mime and Thespian break out of their typical gendered moulds because they wear make-up or have slightly narrowed waists. There are also several FMs who wield weapons (such as Alien Villainess, Lady Cyclops and Cavewoman), or who engage in adventurous and/or dangerous activities (such as Surfer Girl and Snowboarder). However, there are limited types of minifigures that are able to transcend the gender boundaries that pervade the ‘create the world’ set. For example, most MMs possessing visual characteristics more typical of FMs are performers. FMs who wield weapons are all either fantasy figures (Alien Villainess, Lady Cyclops and potentially Tiger Woman, who has a whip) or an exaggerated caricature of an historical figure (Cavewoman). This creates the impression that gender norms can only be transgressed within the confines of role play and

fantasy. Even when depicted in violent fantasy roles, however, the femininity of the women in the FM cards is emphasised. Indeed, indices of femininity are particularly prevalent in the textual and visual representations of fantasy figures that are not from the human (or even animal) world, such as Lady Robot, Alien Villainess, and Lady Cyclops. This excessive indexing of femininity on fantasy figures restricts the potential of children's imaginative and fantasy play to go beyond the limits of their immediate social worlds.

Our analysis has systematically evidenced the (re)production of gender norms and stereotypes in the 'create the world' cards, showing that this is one of many sites in which children learn that their place in the world is sharply determined and restricted along gendered lines. Whilst some of the minifigures do overcome dominant gender norms to an extent, the cards overall are overwhelmingly reliant on restrictive, hegemonic gender norms. The limiting and unbalanced nature of these constructions is not always immediately apparent, but as we have shown, it can be revealed through the kind of critical multimodal analysis deployed here. Given the important role toys play in children's development, it is imperative that we use methods like this to challenge discriminatory messages in children's toys and products, if we are to continue the work of transforming sexist ideologies in wider society.

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ⁱ Due to copyright restrictions, examples of the LEGO cards are included as illustrations. Neither LEGO nor Sainsbury's keep an accessible record of the 2017 cards, although a full list and selection of images can be found at <https://thecollector.io/features/2017/05/lego-create-the-world-complete-list/>

ⁱⁱ This claim is supported by the way a group of ten young second-raters engaged with the cards to identify their gender: they all looked first at the image, then at the title, and finally, if necessary, at the written description. Only three of the children read the written descriptions at all.

ⁱⁱⁱ This group consisted of five girls (one aged 6; three aged 7; one aged 9) and five boys (one aged 7; four aged 9)

^{iv} Throughout this chapter, percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

^v This statistic includes four 'fantasy figure' MMs who have hairy faces.

^{vi} 14% (N10) of the MMs have marks that imply wrinkles, compared with 3% (N1) of the FMs. 19% (N13) of the MMs have white or grey hair, compared with 6% (N2) of the FMs.

^{vii} 10% (N7) of the MMs and 82% (N28) of the FMs have visual indices of gender on their body. 11% (N8) have lines on their body that imply body fat or baggy clothing.

^{viii} 21% (N4) of the FM cards, and 1% (N1) of the MM cards, include adjectives describing clothing.

^{ix} 59% (N20) of the FM cards and 6% (N4) of the MM cards feature pinks and/or purples; 69% (N48) of the MM cards and 44% (N15) of the FM cards feature blues and/or greens.

^x 60% (N42) of the MMs, and 50% (N17) of the FMs, have a title that refers to a functional role; 61% (N43) of the MMs, and 50% (N17) of the FMs, hold functional items.

^{xi} 53% (N37) of the MMs and 35% (N12) of the FMs are given occupational roles.

^{xii} 14% (N10) of the MMs, and 9% of the FMs, hold an item which can be used to attack. 9% (N6) of the MMs, but no FMs, hold a tool that is used to cut or fix. 17% (N12) of the MMs, but only 3% (N1) of the FMs wear equipment that protects them from serious injury.

^{xiii} 53% (N9) of the female minifigures' functionalised titles relate to physical activity, compared with 19.04% (N8) of the MMs' functionalised titles.