



The Marketing of Children's Toys

Critical Perspectives on Children's Consumer Culture

Edited by
Rebecca C. Hains
Nancy A. Jennings

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“A diverse collection that critically examines different lines of toys and their role in consumer culture, and how they are intertwined with children's socialization processes. I am impressed by the diversity of the topics, as well as the diversity of the authors in terms of seniority, gender, institution affiliation and the inclusion of perspectives from outside the US.”

—Dafna Lemish, *Distinguished Professor at Rutgers University and Founding Editor of the Journal of Children and Media*

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Editors

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Rebecca C. Hains
Department of Media &
Communication
Salem State University
Salem, MA, USA

Nancy A. Jennings
Department of Communication
University of Cincinnati
Cincinnati, OH, USA

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*To my parents, Tony and Lucie, whose love of books, learning, and children
continues to inspire.*

—Rebecca C. Hains

To my children and husband who continue to encourage me to play.

—Nancy A. Jennings

PREFACE

Over the course of my work as a children's media studies scholar, I have read with great interest popular and scholarly reports on children and consumer culture, especially those relevant to children's toys and licensed properties. When working on my books *Growing Up With Girl Power* (2012) and *The Princess Problem* (2014), I found it was not possible to discuss girls' negotiations of children's media culture without considering the roles of children's toys in their lives. After all, media properties' toyetic nature—or their potential for marketability in toy form—influences what appears on screen; and in my work, I found that toys based upon on-screen characters could become important components of girls' play, bringing themes associated with shows and movies into girls' lives even when they were nowhere near a screen. But, the more I wrote about the relationship between children's media culture and toy marketing, the more I recognized a gap in the literature: children's toys and their marketing are rarely subjected to the kind of critical/cultural studies analyses that characterize children's media studies scholarship. That is a gap that this volume, in tandem with the recent volume *Cultural Studies of LEGO* (2019), endeavors to address.

Nancy Jennings and I created this book for scholars and students who have an interest in children's culture and are interested in considering children's consumer culture and the marketing of children's toys from a critical perspective. Rather than offering a marketing how-to, we examine the ideologies and cultural implications of the toy marketing industry, considering the power dynamics that shape how toy marketers communicate with the members of their target audiences. In creating this volume,

we bring together scholars from a range of backgrounds, such as critical media studies, English, mass communication, and law. Here, they apply their expertise to the marketing of children's toys and play, attending to the history of toy marketing; contemporary issues, examples, and industry trends; matters of representation, including gender and race/ethnicity; and audience reception of and cultural discourses surrounding children's toys and play. The findings our contributors present in their chapters have implications for a range of disciplines, and we value the array of perspectives they bring to the subject matter. We are incredibly grateful that they joined our team, committing enthusiastically to the project of critically interrogating children's toys and their messaging. It has been a pleasure to work with this group of scholars.

We appreciate the many individuals whose behind-the-scenes work made this volume a reality, as well. Many thanks go to Morgan Blue for creating a useful, comprehensive, and thoughtful index for this volume. We are also fortunate to have the support and encouragement of our educational institutions. At Salem State University, Hains appreciates the support of graduate assistant Simone Dancier from the School of Social Work, the University Research Committee, the School of Graduate Studies, and the College of Arts and Sciences. At the University of Cincinnati, Jennings appreciates the support of her colleagues, faculty, and staff in the Department of Communication and the Taft Research Center.

Finally, we thank Emily Wood, Julia Brockley, Lina Aboujieb, Raghupathy Kalyanaraman, and the extended Palgrave Macmillan - Springer Nature team for their guidance and support through the editorial and production process. We value Palgrave Macmillan's commitment to providing space for scholars to conduct this type of interdisciplinary work, exploring and interrogating popular culture beyond the boundaries of academic disciplines.

Salem, MA, USA

Rebecca C. Hains

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez is Assistant Professor of English at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Her teaching and research are in the areas of children's literature, girlhood studies, and children's cultures (particularly Latinx). Her work has appeared in *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children's Literature*, *Oxford Bibliographies in Childhood Studies*, and *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, among other. Her research has focused on girlhood as represented in literature and on Puerto Rican girls' identity formation with Barbie dolls. In addition, she is a reviewer for Latinxs in Kid Lit and is managing editor of *Anansesem: The Caribbean Children's Literature Magazine*.

Tyler Brunette is a lecturer in the Department of Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. He received his PhD in Communication from the University of Pittsburgh in 2019 and his M.A. in Communication Studies from Colorado State University in 2015. His dissertation, *A (Subaltern) Space of Their Own: Public Space, Middle Class Childhood, and Mass Media in Late Capitalism*, focuses on how mass media produced for children in the 1980s and 1990s can be seen in conjunction with the realignments and restrictions of middleclass children's spatial mobility during that time.

Judi Puritz Cook is an Affiliated Faculty Member at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), where she also serves as Director of the Office of Instructional Design. Cook's research focuses on the intersection of media and technology, with an emphasis on emerging media and commercial culture. She also develops digital pedagogy resources for faculty who teach

in blended and online environments. Prior to working at TCNJ, Cook served as a Professor in the Media and Communication Department at Salem State University for 16 years.

Lauren DeLaCruz is an assistant professor in the English and Foreign Languages Department at Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia (United States) and received her Ph.D. in Communication Studies, Rhetoric and Public Culture from Northwestern University. She specializes in critical rhetoric, gender, and childhood studies. Her dissertation research focused on how rhetorical processes of public memory influence the articulation and communication of gender norms. Her chapter, “Growing Up Girl: A Rhetoric of Restrained Empowerment in American Girl’s Self-Help Books about Puberty” was published in the 2017 edited collection, *Gender(ed) Identities: Critical Rereadings of Gender in Children’s and Young Adult Literature*.

Spring-Serenity Duvall is Associate Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Salem College, USA. She is the editor of *Celebrity & Youth: Mediated audiences, fame aspirations, and identity formation* (2018) and the co-author, with Leigh Moscovitz, of *Snatched: News Coverage of Child Abductions in U.S. Media* (2016). Her research appears in *Celebrity Studies; Communication, Culture, and Critique; Feminist Media Studies; Journal of Communication Inquiry*; and *Journal of Children & Media*.

Jaclyn Griffith earned a Master of Arts in Communication Studies from the University of Rhode Island, where she taught several sections of Communication Fundamentals. She researches and writes about understandings of gender and feminism in contemporary culture, particularly pop music. Her thesis, *If I was a man, then I’d be the man: Understandings of gender, race, and social class in postfeminist popular culture* analyzes the political messaging used by Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift as they construct their careers.

Rebecca C. Hains is Professor of Media and Communication at Salem State University. She has authored two books—*Growing Up With Girl Power: Girlhood on Screen and in Everyday Life* (2012) and *The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls Through the Princess-Obsessed Years* (2014)—and co-edited the anthologies *Cultural Studies of LEGO: More Than Just Bricks* (Palgrave 2019) and *Princess Cultures: Mediating Girls’ Identities and Imaginations* (2015). Her work has also appeared in a range of

scholarly anthologies and journals including *Girlhood Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *Popular Communication*, and *Women's Studies in Communication*.

Kyra Hunting is Assistant Professor of Media Arts and Studies at the University of Kentucky. She studies children and media through the perspectives of industry, fandom, and cultural studies. Her work has appeared in assorted anthologies and journals including the *Journal of Fandom Studies*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Mass Communication and Society*, and *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Her research has become a part of her life as the mother of an amazing two-year-old boy and aunt to four incredible nieces, who helped her better understand *Ryan's World*.

Fadlin Nur Ichwan is a lecturer at London School of Public Relations Jakarta's Communication and Business Institute, and is actively teaching in the department of advertising.

Nancy A. Jennings is a professor in the Department of Communication with an affiliate appointment in the Departments of Journalism, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Cincinnati. She has written or co-edited the books *Tween Girls and Their Mediated Lives* (2014) and *20 Questions about Youth and the Media, 2nd Edition* (co-edited with Sharon Mazzarella, 2018). Jennings has published peer-reviewed articles in *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Family Communication*, *Journal of Children and Media*, *Mass Communication and Society*, *Communication Research Reports*, and *Learning, Media and Technology*.

Trine Kvidal-Røvik is Professor in Communication and Cultural Studies and the leader of the research group *Narrating the Postcolonial North: Travel, Writing, Performance* at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. Her work explores media, representations, and power and she has published in anthologies on gender, innovation, and regional development and in journals such as *Media & Communication*, *Nordicom Review*, and *Environmental Communication*.

Margeaux B. Lippman is a tenured Instructor of Speech at Dutchess Community College in Poughkeepsie, NY. She is also a PhD Candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington. Her research agenda aims to illumine how girl power texts enable and constrain girls' identity through material and textual analysis of the organizations,

practices, and objects that structure American girlhood. Her other research examines the intersection between feminism and rhetoric in order to illumine emergent activist trends in response to post-feminism and neo-backlash.

Jody Lyneé Madeira is Professor of Law and Louis F. Neizer Faculty Fellow at the Indiana University Maurer School of Law in Bloomington, Indiana. She is an expert on qualitative and mixed-methods research, and her research focuses on the intersection of law, communication, and medicine, prioritizing assisted reproductive technology, bioethics, substance use, and firearm violence. She is the author of *Taking Baby Steps: How Patients and Fertility Clinics Collaborate in Conception* (2018) and *Killing McVeigh: The Death Penalty and the Myth of Closure* (2012).

Rani Chandra Oktaviani is a full-time lecturer and Head of Community Service at the London School of Public Relations Jakarta's Communication and Business Institute. With a research area in cultural studies and media studies, her research is on the theme of toys and communication.

Avi Santo is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication & Theatre Arts at Old Dominion University. He is the author of *Selling the Silver Bullet: The Lone Ranger and Transmedia Brand Licensing* (2015). His research focuses on consumer product extensions of media franchises, particularly those directed at children and fans as consumers.

Emilie Zaslow is a professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Pace University. She is the author of *Playing with America's Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (Palgrave, 2017) and *Feminism, Inc.: Coming of Age in Girl Power Media Culture* (Palgrave, 2009). She has also contributed to the *APA Handbook on the Psychology of Women, Information, Communication & Society*, *Journal of Children and Media*, and *Girlhood Studies*. Her research has explored the intersections of girlhood, race, popular culture, and capitalism, mediated representations of gender non-conforming boys, and mothers' communication in online health forums.

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Critiquing Children's Consumer Culture: An Introduction to *The Marketing of Children's Toys*

Rebecca C. Hains and Nancy A. Jennings

It's as simple as child's play. Or is it? The idea of children's play conjures images of purity and innocence (Spigel 1998), a contrast to adult labor and work (Ozanne and Ozanne 2011). Children's play occurs in many forms, including symbolic play, socio-dramatic play, exploratory play, and fantasy play (Hughes 2002), sometimes involving the use of play objects including toys. In today's world, however, toys and their marketing strategies are more complex than the perceived simplicity of child's play. Collectively, toys constitute economically important commodities, the products of a multi-billion-dollar industry that invests heavily in their

R. C. Hains (✉)

Department of Media & Communication, Salem State University,
Salem, MA, USA

e-mail: rhains@salemstate.edu

N. A. Jennings

Department of Communication, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, USA

e-mail: Nancy.Jennings@uc.edu

marketing and promotion. Moreover, children cherish their toys, and as Sutton-Smith (1986) notes, toys historically have become “personal possessions and the first form of private property for children” (p. 120), signifying the child as “an owner, a consumer, and an achiever” (p. 127). Toys thus hold significance for children growing up in a consumer culture, informing their identities and lived experiences. As such, toys and their marketing warrant sustained scholarly critique—a task this volume, *The Marketing of Children’s Toys: Critical Perspectives on Children’s Consumer Culture*, undertakes.

THE RISE OF TOYS AND CHILDREN’S CONSUMER CULTURE

The concepts of childhood, play, and leisure were not always interconnected. Children and childhood hold different values and meanings across time and cultures. Specifically, Gittins (2004) identified “the child as an embodied individual and childhood as a historical and social construction” (p. 48), and Jenks (2009) submits that “the child ... is presented through a variety of forms of discourse” (p. 94). Therefore, it is useful to consider how “children” and “childhood” have been socially constructed (Kapur 1999) in Western culture, from which today’s modern consumer culture emerged.

Historically, in Western societies (and beyond) many children were (and in some places, still are) expected to work, sharing the burden of producing goods the family needed to survive, making their lives not so different than those of adults (Kline 1998). Likewise, in the early industrial era, children in Western societies supported their families financially. In the US in the early 1900s, for example, working-class children of ages 12 and up commonly worked in factories, and children as young as age 4 labored on farms, sold newspapers, and worked in other settings (Contrera 2018; Reed 1976/2001; Illick 2002). After US child labor laws gradually limited and then finally ended this practice in 1949, children’s leisure time increased. Combined with mass production and television’s rise in the 1950s, a new market emerged for products meant to occupy, educate, and entertain children.

Prior to the 1950s, there existed neither brand-name toys that children could request, nor advertisements informing children of toys for purchase (Kapur 1999). Instead, parents could inquire about age-appropriate toys at local toy stores. But through television, toy manufacturers could inform and persuade children, “bringing toys into the living room and appealing

directly to the child's imagination (and the emerging consumption ethic)" (Illick 2002 p. 120)—which, combined with the 1940s' US post-war affluence that afforded many children discretionary spending money, raised marketers' interest (Kline 1995). In the mid-1950s, Mattel made television history by agreeing to sponsor Disney's *The Mickey Mouse Club*, advertising to children year-round. Mattel's burp gun, the first toy advertisement shown on screen in the family living room, sold one million units in a month's time (Kline 1995), demonstrating toy advertisements' effectiveness. During this period, the concept of the "teenager" also developed, originating with *Seventeen* magazine's 1940s-era success (Schrum 1998)—emerging as a marketing category to segment the child audience before becoming a mainstream term in the 1950s. Then, throughout the 1960s, as US children's allowances and daily television viewing time rose, children's value to marketers and advertisers only increased.

Meanwhile, multinational US corporations sought further expansion into the global marketplace in the 1960s. Advertisers determined that the global market is fragmented and requires locally nuanced campaigns when targeting adults; but as children are socialized "through the realm of play" (Kline 1995, p. 125), many brands became enamored with the idea of a "common 'international youth consumer'" (Kline 1995, p. 109), making it relatively easy to launch a single campaign across global markets—saving time and money in comparison to the "glocal" advertising adult markets required. Major brands including McDonalds, Disney, and *Star Wars* found success using "universal themes [...]" for developing the youth market" (p. 110). As Kline (1995) observed, "Certainly the \$1 billion accumulated worldwide sales of Darth [Vader] and R2D2 toys that launched the Lucas Films global enterprise was an eye-opener for many children's marketers" (p. 110). Byrne (2016) notes that as the children's toy industry increasingly globalized, 19 toy trade associations joined to form the International Council of Toy Industries in 1975, serving as an international resource on advertising to children. But despite many nations' involvement in children's toy production, the toy market does not represent all cultures—raising concerns about toys' implications as cultural exports, given their socializing functions (Cross and Smits 2005, Liu 2019; see also Chap. 5 by Oktaviani & Ichwan in this volume).

In the ensuing decades, children's status as consumers has only grown in marketers' eyes. During the 1980s, the US media industry changed significantly when the Federal Communications Commission's television deregulation removed longstanding limitations on children's advertising.

Concurrently, widespread consumer adoption of cable greatly increased channel viewing options, allowing media owners to target even more narrowly segmented audiences and making children a more segmentable, highly lucrative demographic. McNeal (1992) presented data demonstrating that children influenced \$130 billion in annual US purchases—20% of all consumer spending—with “tweens” especially influential. Paralleling the teenager’s construction as a market in the 1940s, the “tween” emerged as a marketing concept in the 1980s, prompting marketers’ interest in “capturing” a share of this market (Siegel et al. 2004, p. x). Many brands are interested in securing and maintaining children’s brand loyalty into adulthood, gaining additional profits over their audience members’ lifetimes via such strategies as lifestyle branding and cradle-to-grave marketing (Lawlor and Prothero 2010; Linn 2004; McNeal 1992).

In the past two decades, media and digital technologies’ rapid changes also impacted children’s play, as seen in the explosion of personal digital devices and technology’s increased integration into traditional toys. First, mobile media such as smartphones and tablets have become family life staples. Smartphone ownership among parents of zero- to eight-year-olds rose from 41% in 2011 to 95% in 2017, and children’s personal tablet ownership rose from less than 1% in 2011 to 42% in 2017 (Rideout 2017). Second, the new “smart toys” category has expanded in children’s play and therefore within the toy market. Smart toys “combine the best of two worlds—traditional toys and the power of computers and electronic chips” (D’hooge et al. 2000, p. 247) and can feature voice recognition, internet and Bluetooth connectivity, artificial intelligence, and much more. Digital play has become a common childhood play form, creating new product categories and avenues for marketing and cross-promoting children’s toys and media properties.

As these factors make children an increasingly valuable market, consumer culture socializes children to be consumers from birth. Holt (2002) describes consumer culture as “the ideological infrastructure that undergirds what and how people consume and sets the ground rules for marketers’ branding activities” (p. 80). Consumer culture so values consumerism that in the modern Western sociocultural environment, Sassatelli (2007) notes, “we are born to consume”: “Consumer culture *produces consumers*” (p. 6). To this end, Valkenburg and Cantor (2001) submit that consumer development’s first stage occurs very early, with infants and toddlers expressing their own wants and preferences. As McNeal (1992) observes, “by the time a child can sit erect, he or she is placed in his or her culturally

defined observation post high atop a shopping cart” (p. 9). Children learn to understand advertising content, develop consumer behavior, learn the consumer environment, and negotiate advertising and consumerism, furthering their consumer socialization (Jennings 2007).

As contemporary children grow up in an increasingly commercialized consumer society, laced with company logos, brand names, and licensed products intended to solicit their purchases, children tend to favor mass-produced toys and can be quite attentive to brand name. Even children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are well aware of brand names and engage in complex decision-making as they juggle competing consumer needs of price and quality (Chin 2001).

THE TOY INDUSTRY: STATUS AND CRITICISMS

Today, the children's toy industry is economically important. In 2019, the toy industry boasted global sales of \$90.7 billion (Toy Association 2020b), including \$20.9 billion in US revenue (Toy Association 2020c). Despite total market revenue declining over the previous five years (MarketResearch.com 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused surges in toy and game purchases around the world (Whitten 2020). As school and workplace closures sent children and parents home to work, learn, teach, and entertain in physical isolation, parents turned to toys and games to help occupy their children and fill family time, and the US toy industry realized a 16% growth by the end of June 2020 (Whitten 2020). Meanwhile, international projections forecast growth in the worldwide toys and games market at a compound annual rate of 9.91% between 2020 and 2025 (Mordor Intelligence 2020). Different regions experience success in discrete ways; for example, “Asia is the fastest-growing market while expenditure is highest in the United States, where collectibles feature heavily” (Kneebone 2020, para. 5). Toy companies and distributors engage in mergers and acquisitions worldwide, and consumers' increasing comfort with e-commerce toy purchases furthers the toy industry's globalization (Kneebone 2020).

To keep up with marketplace trends and changing consumer demands, toy industry members and associations invest in significant market research (Toy Association 2020a). Using well-planned strategies, marketers vie to persuade parents and children to purchase their brands' goods, competing with other brands in their product category by addressing their audience members' perceived consumer needs. Whether appealing to reason,

emotion, and/or authority, toy industry leaders expend significant resources to create sophisticated marketing plans, using consumer research to inform the design, messaging, and promotion of ever-more products.

It is worth noting that LEGO and Disney, which specialize in producing children's toys and transmedia children's texts (e.g., movies and television shows), regularly top lists of the world's best brands. This means that some of the most powerful, influential, and best-regarded brands in the overall consumer landscape rely heavily upon child consumers. LEGO and Disney's exceptionally high revenues, reputations, and value in the broader consumer marketplace placed both on Brand Finance's 2018 "ten strongest brands" list (Brand Finance 2018, p. 11), and in 2019, Reputation Institute positioned them second and third, respectively, on their global corporate responsibility reputation list, which ranks "companies that have earned the trust of their customers, employees, and investors across the world" and are "perceived as having a greater purpose beyond profit" (Reptrak 2019, para.7).

As such lists' existence implies, the public does not regard all brands favorably. Even those generally favored have serious critics, as underscored by widespread criticisms of Disney media and products (Giroux 1998; Sun 2002; Orenstein 2011) and Mattel's Barbie (see Chap. 8 by Aguiló-Pérez and Chap. 14 by Hains in this volume). As Holt (2002) explains, a counterculture has formed "around the idea that the branding efforts of global consumer goods companies have spawned a societally destructive consumer culture," with concerns often directed toward "the most successful and lauded companies" (p. 70). Prior to the 1950s, consumers more readily acquiesced to brands' perceived cultural authority, seeking out brands' perspectives and accepting their efforts at "cultural engineering" as they engaged in the practice of "direct[ing] consumers as to how they should live and why their brand should be a central part of this kind of life" (Holt 2002, p. 80). But following the 1960s' counterculture movement and widespread consumer skepticism, the idea that brands would put consumers' best interests first became suspect. "When all brands are understood as commercial entities, through and through," Holt (2002) notes, "consumers will be less inclined to judge a brand's authenticity by its distance from the profit motive. [...] The question of authenticity will shift to the brand's contribution as a cultural resource" (p. 87). Indeed, market research indicates that millennial parents consider such matters in their purchasing decisions, presenting new challenges for toy brands with long histories of success (Dockterman 2016).

Brands that target children often receive special criticism. Ewen (1976/2001) argues that the advertising industry has long celebrated children's "innocence and malleability," which advertisers believe render children as "blank slate[s]" who are highly receptive to advertising messages (p. 143). Recognizing this, many critics perceive consumer culture as harmful to children's general welfare, in some cases expressing concern that it causes children to grow up too quickly—a threat to their innocence (Cross 2004). Various books offer to help parents address issues related to children's consumption and consumer culture (Linn 2004; Orenstein 2011; Walsh 1990).

Over the past few decades, critics have also expressed concern about the prevalence of gender stereotypes in children's advertising. US advertising often portrays girls and boys in very limiting ways, a pattern that has not changed significantly over time (Jennings 2007). Advertisements suggest gender-appropriate behaviors and mannerisms for children through the activities they depict children engaging in, the language they use, their settings, and more. Patterns have included depicting girls as shoppers (Smith 1994) and boys as aggressive (Smith 1994; Welch et al. 1979; Macklin and Kolbe 1984); girls as using feelings and nurturing verbs, and boys as using destruction and agency or control verbs (Johnson and Young 2002); and girl-oriented commercials featuring girls at home, while boy-oriented ads feature settings away from home (Smith 1994). Moreover, boys' commercials have contained highly active toys, higher rates of cuts, more rough cuts, less talking, and louder noise and music than do girls' commercials, whereas ads directed toward girls have featured more fades and dissolves, smoother transitions, a great deal of talking, and softer background music (Welch et al. 1979; Macklin and Kolbe 1984). Even toys' names can be gendered: consider the differences between boy-oriented toys, such as "Big Time Action Hero" and "Play Doh Demolition Derby" versus girl-oriented toys, such as "Take Care of Me Twins" and "Bedtime Bottle Baby" (Johnson and Young 2002, p. 469). Taken together, children's toy ads have presented gender stereotypes through overt factors such as activities and language as well as more subtle features such as product names and production features.

These factors have influenced children's television's programmatic content. US television networks are in the business of delivering viewers to advertisers, as advertising revenue is the networks' main source of profit. Gender stereotyping has come to dominate children's marketing, growing so strong in recent decades that it is more prevalent now than in the 1950s (Sweet 2013)—resulting in widespread demarcations between shows

meant for boys and shows meant for girls. These demarcations, also based on gender stereotypes, allow marketers to place ads for boy-oriented toys and girl-oriented toys on shows known to draw boy viewers and girl viewers, respectively. Gender stereotyping has also resulted in biased ideas informing the design of shows that are meant to appeal to children in general (as opposed to primarily drawing audiences of boys or girls). For example, Kline (1995) notes that from marketers' perspectives, girls cannot be the lead characters of television shows "if boys are to stay tuned," and claim this is "not sexist, just a 'pragmatic business judgment' [...], based on the fact that girls and boys are interested in different types of play" (p. 117). But, Kline adds, "Whether or not these differences pre-exist in children's television, the fact is that advertisers wish to emphasize this gender split in order to better reach the appropriate market segments and sell their toys" (p. 118)—reinforcing the gender stereotypes that circulate in Western culture.

Similar problems exist regarding race stereotyping and representation in children's commercials and children's television, intersecting with problems related to gender representation and stereotyping in various ways (Ellithorpe and Bleakley 2016; Michelle 2012). Scholars have documented that children's television commercials convey an array of racial stereotypes and too often privilege white children's representation (Bang and Reece 2005; Barry and Hansen 1973; Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder 2008; Seiter 1990; Taylor and Stern 1997), and children's television programs likewise feature problematic race representation and stereotyping (Roberts 2004; Bramlett-Solomon & Roeder 2008). While some studies indicate that overt racism has decreased in children's programming and that various attributes of race representation have become more equal over time (Klein and Shiffman 2006), a recent content analysis by Peruta and Powers (2017) found that in children's television commercials, Asian and Hispanic people continue to be significantly underrepresented, while Indigenous people are completely absent.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON TOY MARKETING AND CONSUMER CULTURE

Much of the research on children, media, and marketing comes from a tradition of media effects research, focusing on the individual level using social scientific methods. However, increasingly, scholars have been

exploring children's culture and media practices using a critical/cultural lens, often through a cultural studies approach. In this work, scholars are concerned with the connections between representation and ideology and "the examination of the relationships between popular culture artifacts and the dominant ideologies of a particular time and place" (Mazzarella and Hains 2019 p. 8). As Kellner (2015) has explained:

Cultural studies insists that culture must be studied within the social relations and systems through which culture is produced and consumed and that the study of culture is thus intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics. (p. 8)

In this way, even though children's toys may seem trivial—aspects of mere child's play that are unworthy of much time or attention—a cultural studies lens helps us see that children's toys and their marketing do matter. Like all cultural artifacts, they make and transmit meaning, and how they circulate these ideas within and across cultures is worthy of close consideration.

Although cultural studies does not have a "well-defined methodology" or "clearly demarcated fields for investigation" (During 2007, p. 1), Kellner (2015) notes that three components link cultural studies approaches: audience reception, political economy, and textual analysis. Audience reception concerns how audience members negotiate from specific cultural texts and artifacts such as media properties, toys, and other forms of material culture. Political economy focuses on the means and systems of production—*how* businesses create, promote, circulate, and profit from cultural texts and artifacts. And textual analysis interrogates the "ideological positions," "narrative strategies," and "image constructions" within cultural texts (Kellner 2015, p. 12).

Therefore, critical perspectives add depth to the social scientific study of children's material culture, including macro factors such as the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions that contour media effects (Ramasubramanian and Banjo 2020). When scholars undertake studies of children's culture from critical/cultural approaches, it becomes clear that discourses surrounding toys—including whom certain toys are meant for and what various toys and brands can signify about their owners' identities—have implications for our understandings of adults' expectations of children and of broader societal norms into which children are being socialized. In the course of children's play, toys serve multiple functions,

contributing to children's socialization by teaching them about the roles available to them in our culture. This includes consumer socialization (Gunter and Furnham 1998), gender role socialization (Fine and Rush 2018), and racial socialization (Wilkinson 1974)—all sources of significant concern, and scholarly and popular debate (Buckingham 2011).

In recent years, children's brands, networks, and marketing trends have been the subject of sustained critical analysis, including books about American Girl dolls (Zaslow 2017), Disney (Cheu 2013), girl power (Hains 2014), LEGO (Hains and Mazarella 2019), Nickelodeon (Banet-Weiser 2007), and princess culture (Forman-Brunell and Hains 2013). In *The Marketing of Children's Toys: Critical Perspectives on Children's Consumer Culture*, we add to this growing body of literature, offering rich critical perspectives on a variety of toys, brands, and marketing techniques, approaching children's toy marketing with a range of cultural studies theories and lenses.

CHAPTERS

This book's first few chapters focus on the marketing of broad product categories—toy firearms, grotesque toys, minimalist toys, and international toys—followed by chapters that interrogate specific brands' marketing tactics and strategies.

First, in Chap. 2, Jody Madeira explores how marketers have framed and re-framed children's play with both toy and real firearms over the years, considering the connections between the marketing and positioning of toy guns and real guns. Madeira reviews changing regulations and shifting marketing discourses, revealing the industry's tactics to minimize controversies surrounding children's play with toy guns and youth firearms and its attempts to influence public discourse and policy.

Next, in Chap. 3, Tyler Brunette examines grotesque toys' rise in the 1980s and 1990s, considering what their advertisements conveyed about changing constructs of childhood and boys' positions within the home during that time period. Then, in sharp contrast to gross-out toy brands' kid-centric offerings, in Chap. 4, Spring-Serenity Duvall considers how the minimalist aesthetic and lifestyle has informed "natural" toys' marketing toward wealthy, primarily white adult consumers, promising beautiful items that will prompt children's imaginative play through their peaceful simplicity.

In Chap. 5, Rani Chandra Oktaviani and Fadlin Nur Ichwan interrogate international toys' marketing in Indonesia. Noting that globalization has resulted in ever-increasing numbers of toy imports into the Indonesian market, the authors note that many Indonesian parents find it challenging to understand which imported toys may be appropriate for children of varying ages and developmental stages. They also discuss issues related to the cultural hegemony of imported toys displacing toys that reflect local cultures.

Then, Chaps. 6, 7, and 8 focus on how specific brands and toy lines have emerged in response to toy marketplace trends. These chapters offer ample discussion of three specific trends—toy review/unboxing, smart toys, and Latinx marketing, respectively—before offering analyses of case studies from specific brands.

In Chap. 6, Kyra Hunting explores how the YouTube toy review/unboxing genre is changing the toy and media industries, examining the case of *Ryan's World*, a YouTube influencer-turned-multimillion-dollar brand and discussing the broader implications of the brand's success for the children's marketplace. Then, continuing on the theme of properties targeting very young children, in Chap. 7, Nancy Jennings and Judi Puritz Cook detail the toy industry's integration of digital features into toys and how such electronics have changed children's play landscapes. Jennings and Cook hone in on three lines of Fisher-Price smart toys for children of ages zero to six years and examine the strategies Fisher-Price uses to appeal to parents, keeping babies, toddlers, and preschoolers engaged as consumers along developmental milestones. Considering the products' marketing language as well as parents' product reviews, the authors unpack how the brand socializes children and their parents into the idea of young children as consumers of digital media technologies.

We turn toward the rise of Latinx marketing with Chap. 8 by Emily Aguiló-Pérez. In her chapter, Aguiló-Pérez discusses the concept of Latinx as a product category and interrogates Mattel's early attempts to incorporate Latinx culture into various Barbie lines. Aguiló-Pérez notes that as the demographic of Latinx youth in the US has grown rapidly, both Mattel and Disney have developed new strategies to leverage Latinx culture as a marketing tool for their toys and media. By interrogating the brands' assertive representations of Latinx identity, she explores the implications of using cultural identity to market toys to children and their families.

The next set of chapters explore specific brands' toy marketing practices, considering the marketing of three STEM brands—LEGO, Project MC²,

and GoldieBlox—and attending to each brand’s unique marketplace strategy.

In Chap. 9, Lauren DeLaCruz casts a long look back at parenting discourse, considering the evolution of advice to parents regarding children’s toys and play, then examines how LEGO’s rhetorical approaches helped the brand develop and establish a reputation as a healthy and reliable STEM toy that parents can trust. DeLaCruz notes that the brand has continued to benefit from this reputation, even after shifting its marketing strategies to focus on boy audience members and excluding girls, and then—controversially—trying to recapture the girl market with stereotypically girlish LEGO toys.

Chapters 10 and 11 further consider the trend of brands seeking to attract girls as target audience members for newly devised girl-oriented STEM products. In Chap. 10, Avi Santo considers MGA Entertainment’s development and promotion of Project MC². Santo argues that MGA positioned Project MC²’s STEM offerings as a consumption-based, girl-power-style tween lifestyle brand. As such, he notes that the brand focused very little on encouraging girls to consider STEM careers or to learn STEM-related concepts, functioning primarily as a way to help girls navigate gendered social expectations and gain social capital without actually challenging gender norms. In contrast, Chap. 11 by Margeaux Lippman details how GoldieBlox challenged the girl-power-derived idea that consumption is a means to girls’ empowerment. Lippman argues that during GoldieBlox’s heyday, the brand emphasized agency over femininity and positioned girls in productive “apprentice” roles in their play, encouraging girls to learn real engineering concepts.

The final three chapters attend to issues of gender marketing—first through a critical analysis of gender representation and stereotyping in a Norwegian toy catalog and then through interrogations of how two Mattel brands developed and marketed new products in response to consumers’ request for diversified dolls, with attention to these offerings’ reception.

In Chap. 12, Trine Kvidal-Røvik considers toy marketing in Norway. Noting that Norway is frequently ranked as one of the world’s most gender-equal countries, Kvidal-Røvik examines how popular toy catalog *Lekebladet*, which represents 200 Norwegian toy stores, uses gender stereotypes to market toys. She finds that while the *Lekebladet* catalogs represent boys and girls in approximately equal numbers, the catalog position the children in highly stereotypical gender roles—meaning that gendered

marketing continues to be an issue, despite Norway's relatively gender-equal status.

Next, in Chap. 13, Emilie Zaslow and Jaclyn Griffith consider the American Girl Doll line's introduction of Logan, the brand's first 18-inch boy doll. Carefully considering the doll's characteristics as well as the contents of related American Girl books, Zaslow and Griffith argue that Logan's release reinforced hegemonic masculinity and normative femininity, lacking the feminist critique necessary to provide the real gender progressivism parents had been requesting in relation to a boy doll from the brand. Finally, in Chap. 14, Rebecca Hains unpacks Mattel's marketing of body positivity and racial diversity in the Fashionistas Barbie launch, problematizing Mattel's emphasis on body type and deemphasis on racial and ethnic diversity. She notes that Mattel relied heavily upon public relations tactics to appeal to reluctant parents and that the line's reception featured a mix of praise for Mattel's promotion of body positivity, criticisms that Mattel had overstated the extent of the change represented by curvy Barbie's still-slender body type, and condemnation by politically conservative critics who accused Mattel of pandering to liberals and feminists to create a doll they perceived as "fat" and thus a threat to the status quo.

CONCLUSION

As Maria Montessori taught, "play is the work of the child" (Edwards 2020, para. 13). This work takes many forms, using a variety of tools known as toys. While play has not always been considered a primary form of children's work, children in many countries now have more leisure time than did their predecessors, allowing for more childhood play and amusement. Mass production offered an easy way to manufacture abundant playthings, and mass media provided a means to advertise these wonderful, engaging new products to children. Other macro factors, such as the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of the times and places where children grow up, impact how children and parents receive these messages and whether parenting practices reinforce them. This book applies a critical/cultural perspective to better understand how these conditions impact children's socialization, childhood, and children's play through toy marketing. We find these aspects worthy of study and share these perspectives as they relate to larger socializing practices.

While our book covers many aspects of children's consumer culture, we recognize that there are many more areas for exploration, including but not limited to globalization practices and intersectional approaches to studying racial representation and socialization. We hope this volume inspires more scholars to critically examine the marketing of children's toys and play, adding to the richness of this approach. As Fred Rogers (2003) has shared, "When we treat children's play as seriously as it deserves, we are helping them feel the joy that's to be found in the creative spirit. It's the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives" (p. 183). Let us continue to take play seriously, examine the things we play with, and query the people who help us play, including the makers and sellers of children's toys.

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