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L.E.G.O.: Leave Everyone's Gender Out

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In the realm of children's advertising, it's evident that toy companies often target gender-specific audiences. They teach children that Hot Wheels, Nerf guns, and action figures are meant for boys, while Barbies, Polly Pockets, and My Little Pony toys are meant for girls. According to Albert Bandura's social learning theory, children formulate gender role concepts through observations as well as rewards and punishments (581). So when a toy's advertising campaign targets just one gender to play with that product, it severely discourages the other from doing so. Unfortunately, as we have progressed into the 21st century, the need to identify specific toys with specific genders has become even more prevalent at an alarming rate. Companies deliberately associate certain words, colors, and activities with their products to draw a gender-definitive line and to encourage consumers from a specific gender to believe that this is the product for them *because* they are a boy or girl.

For example, Lego is a well-known and widely used brand of children's toys. In 1934, the company coined the name "Lego" which means "play well" in Danish and, coincidentally, "I assemble" in Latin. The Lego brand was constructed with an inclusive, accepting name and message, but today it has fallen into the same pattern of gendered marketing that most toys seem to be following. However, in 1981, Lego put out an advertisement supporting the view that their toy promotes an activity that everyone can enjoy. This ad didn't target little boys *or* girls, but rather boys *and* girls, young *and* old.

Lego's 1981 ad features a little girl clothed in baggy jeans, a striped T-shirt, and sneakers, with a satisfied smile plastered across her face. In her hands she holds her pride, her joy, her masterpiece: her Lego creation. Then, directly below the little girl's work of art, the advertisement reads, "What it is is beautiful" in large, bold letters. Lego's choice of a girl in its ad rather than a boy relays the message that the product is

appropriate for both genders. The girl's casual attire is inviting rather than intimidating for the opposite sex because it is relatable without being unusual. For example, if she was clothed in a pink, puffy dress, then the message would be altered. Additionally, Lego's incorporation of the word "beautiful" communicates that Legos can be not only fun, creative toys, but they can also be beautiful.

In the lower left-hand corner, Lego provides a few sentences that set its product apart from competitors by harnessing the power of creation and self-discovery. The introduction of the remaining text on the advertisement reads, "Have you ever seen anything like it? Not just what she's made, but how proud it's made her. It's a look you'll see whenever children build something all by themselves. No matter what they've created." The text promotes the joy that any child would experience once they have had the chance to build an object of their choosing. Although it explicitly states how proud the creation in the ad has made "her", it goes on to include all genders, saying that "children" could achieve a similar sense of pride after playing with Lego blocks. In saying this, Lego suggests that its product is special because it allows children to make their own decisions and, in doing so, embark on a journey of personal growth that will ultimately end in pride.

The advertisement then describes two products called Universal Building Sets, one for children ages 3 to 7, and the other for children ages 7 to 12. Lego differentiates these groups to highlight key points of childhood development, but by dividing them Lego also expands the age group of their audience. The Universal Building Sets are not just for younger or older children, but rather an appropriate toy for two different age groups at varying developmental stages. The building set aimed at younger children expresses the idea that kids in this age group "build for fun." The inclusion of "colorful

bricks” and “friendly Lego people” allows children to build creations from their own imaginations because they have not reached the advanced level of thinking that children from the older group have achieved. Lego acknowledges that this is simply the way their minds work at this age, and that its product is suited to meet that need.

The next building set, aimed at a slightly older age group, states that children of this age have reached a stage in their life where they “build for realism.” The ad notes that more detailed parts, such as tires, gears and rotors, will inspire children to create intellectually challenging pieces. For the more ambitious 7- to 12 year-olds, one set even includes a motor. Once again, Lego shows that they are producing a product that is well-equipped to meet the needs of children, both young and old.

Finally, the concluding text reads, “Lego Universal Building Sets will help your children discover something very, very special: themselves.” It leaves a lasting impression that this is a toy unlike any other; this is a toy that will usher your child into recognizing the power of their own capabilities and the power within themselves.

The 1981 Lego ad took a clear, gender-neutral toy and did something remarkable: actually advertised it as gender-neutral. Through the use of images, word choice, and careful articulation of ideas, Lego offers its product to children of all ages and genders. It’s through this tactic that Lego expands its primary audience from mostly males to include females, conveying the idea that any child can harness a similar experience with the same product. This advertisement grants children free play without feeling as though the toys they choose will define who they are as human beings.

In 2012, Lego released a short film titled, “The Lego Story,” in which Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, the former president and CEO of The Lego Group said, “I seek to take the Lego idea even further, encouraging children to explore, experience, and express their

own world, a world without limits.” The 1981 Lego ad was released during Kristiansen’s first two years of presidency, and with this ad Kristiansen succeeds in offering children a limitless product. But while the product itself is targeted towards children, the advertisement also appeals to a secondary audience, an audience who actually buys the toy for them: their parents.

The ad promotes an important experience for all children—the idea of becoming their own person through a very personal decision-making process. This is something that every parent wants for their child. Lego advertises the idea that their blocks will allow children to sense that they are special and to acknowledge their own self-worth. This theme is portrayed in all aspects of the ad in order to firmly persuade parents that their toy is the right one for them and their children. Regardless of the gender of their child, parents are reassured that they can enjoy the same benefits from Lego products.

However, the delivery of Lego products has changed substantially since 1981. In 2012, Lego introduced Lego Friends, re-establishing a definitive line between a product for boys and a product for girls. Although creating a “girly” version of Legos isn’t necessarily wrong, it can be argued that it may not be necessary at all. Why not add pink and purple blocks to the existing sets, rather than create new Lego sets with new Lego figures all wrapped up in a new purple box? By creating a new product specifically for girls, Lego reinforces the idea that Legos are just for boys and Lego Friends are just for girls.

In the past few years, excessively feminizing toys has become a disturbing trend in the toy industry. Products including Strawberry Shortcake, Cabbage Patch Kids, and Troll Dolls have taken on a new look with bigger eyes and hair, fuller lips, and the color pink in every place possible. Lego Friends is no stranger to this marketing idea, adding

extra elements to their characters such as skirts and breasts. Even worse than its new look are the sets that Lego Friends sell. If your child wants a Lego Friends set, he or she can opt for an imaginary day at the beauty salon, cooking at the cafe, or caring for animals at the animal hospital. Not to mention that of Lego Friends' five main characters not a single one is male. These sets emphasize the notion that certain activities are specifically for girls, reinforcing stereotypical gender roles.

Finally, Lego Friends has taken away a large portion of what the Lego toys are supposed to instill by providing full walls and already assembled objects in these sets. Lego assumes that girls do not want to build their own worlds and thus, take away that essential element from Lego Friends completely, inhibiting girls' creativity and sense of "self-discovery" as the 1981 ad portrays.

Poul Schou, Lego's vice president of product group 2, told "The Register," a British technology news site, that "Lego was for boys, not girls, because once the girls hit five, they weren't interested in construction anymore." But perhaps if Schou had remembered what their company had advertised 30 years earlier, he would have witnessed the compelling concepts their company had once promised and promoted. The 1981 Lego ad achieves the goal of reaching all children, whether male or female, young or old. It persuades parents that their product is one worth investing in not only for fun, but for developing their children into self-aware, self-accomplished individuals. The 1981 Lego ad erases gender stereotypes, conveying a message to all children, regardless of age or gender, that they are capable of anything, and that message is beautiful.

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