

LEGO® Minifigures: Reflections of Human Experience through the Materialization of Stereotypes

LEGO® Minifiguren: Reflexionen menschlicher Erfahrung durch die Materialisierung von Stereotypen

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ABSTRACT (English)

By applying object-based analysis and content analysis to 203 LEGO® minifigures, this survey explores how they mirror preconceptions based on professions (*ergo-types*), involvement in sport activities (*kinetypes*), and transitory states (*stigmatypes*). The underlying premise is that the figurines participate in the creation and intensification of stereotypes. Ultimately, this paper suggests that these action figures make *solid* attempts to ‘dollify’ human diversity.

Keywords: boy dolls, action figures, LEGO® minifigures, stereotypes, ‘dollify’

ABSTRACT (Deutsch)

Mittels objektbezogener Analyse und Inhalts-Analyse von 203 LEGO® Mini-figuren wird untersucht, inwieweit sie Vorurteile widerspiegeln, die sich auf Berufe (*Ergotypen*), auf die Ausübung sportlicher Aktivitäten (*Kinotypen*) und auf verdichtet-ritualisierte Übergangsmomente (*Stigmatypen*) beziehen. Die zugrunde liegende Prämisse lautet, dass die Mini-Figuren an der Entstehung und Intensivierung von Stereotypen beteiligt sind. Letztendlich legt der Text nahe, dass diese Aktions-Figuren *materialisierte* Versuche darstellen, menschliche Vielfalt zu ‚puppifizieren‘.

Schlüsselwörter: Jungen-Puppen, Aktionsfiguren, LEGO® Minifiguren, Stereotype, ‚puppifizieren‘

Introduction

Central to this paper is to shed light on the ways in which Lego® Minifigures offer archetypical representations of the human condition. A basic point of reflection in this survey is that stereotypical references to practices and culture repertoires are used to create credible, indexical, iconic, but above all, playable characters. Thus, by applying object-based analysis and content analysis to 204 minifigures (2010–2019), this study seeks to identify patterns in the way Lego® creates representations of the (human) world and its diversity. The aim is to present a taxonomy of archetypes and patterns of representation that explain how these lines of collectibles/toys ‘dollify’ the human experience.

Development of boy dolls

Historically, boy dolls differ from other types of dolls, in the sense that they emerged from the need to expand the market for companies struggling to make profits. In practice, however, “the line between action figures and dolls is largely set at the whim of the individual consumer” (Alexandratos 2017, 6). At their core, minifigures are dolls that respond to the needs of a stage in life in which children want to impersonate others, create self-steered stories, and engage with their peers in the co-creation of active narratives. Economic progress, technological advancements and a change in social attitudes have resulted in the recognition of childhood as a period of life with specific needs, conditions and practices (Jenkins 1998). Action figures have gained a certain degree of positionality as a standard type of toy enjoying a high degree of popularity among younger generations (Alexandratos 2017). Creation of toys, in many ways, reflects the state of affairs, historic events, social climate and ideological attitudes of the producing and consuming societies. The minifigures emerged as part of the evolution of action figures initiated in 1964 by Stan Weston and his revolutionary army-inspired GI Joe figurine (Misiroglu 2012). Companies such as Hasbro and Roscoe were pioneers in the production of movable figures, boy dolls or minifigs, as they have been known in the last decades.

Lego®’s first version of a minifigure dates from 1975, but current models have evolved from prototypes developed in 1978. In line with the bricks for which the Danish company is known, the first model consisted of a solid torso without movable limbs, but decoratively complemented with a limited number of head-pieces (Farshety & Lipkowitz 2013). Since 1989, Lego Group designers have

added elements such as facial expressions, printed outfits and interchangeable accessories. Human biology is used as inspiration, and is partially emulated in the actual physical structure of the figurines. Most minifigures are made of a head, torso, arms, hands, hips and legs, steered by four points of articulation. While the company’s website states that “we chose yellow because it’s a neutral ‘skin colour’—nobody in real life has bright yellow skin, so Lego® minifigures don’t represent a specific race or ethnic background and nobody is left out”, naturalistic skin tones have been partially used since 2003. Above all, Lego®’s main goal is to transform pieces of acrylonitrile butadiene styrene into characters that children or collectors appreciate for their symbolic, indexical and iconic value.

Literature Review

Minifigures reflect mundane attributes, practices, customs, and rituals, in a succinct and easily understood manner. Action figures, labelled as such, originally meant to encourage young boys to play with dolls or doll-like figures without threatening their sense of masculinity (Reese 2011), are toys specifically designed to be adaptable, movable and flexible. Besides an ever-growing number of grown-up collectors, the primary target users of minifigures are children. Boy dolls often respond to current trends in popular culture, tactically in sync with well-received thematic flows in television and cinema (Johnson 2013). Entertainment and media platforms are strongly entwined with the production and promotion of toys (Marsh & Bishop 2013). Nowadays, media outlets provide children with cultural references that complement, explain and add to their knowledge about the origin, backstory, specificities, attributes and limitations of their action figures.

To date little attention has been paid to the ways in which minifigures offer representations of human activities, behaviors, rituals and emotions. Research on the articulation of stereotypes in Lego® figurines has focused on perception of attributes (Hurtienne, Stöbel & Weber 2009), gender-based stereotypes (Black, Tomlinson & Korobkova 2016; Gutwald 2017; Reich, Black and Foliaki 2018), and racialized archetypical representations (Johnson 2014). This paper intends to fill this gap. Therefore, the primary goal of this study is to answer the following research question: How do minifigures present a ‘dollified’ version of the human experience?

Objects of Study

In this paper, the main objects of study are action figures defined as miniature figurines, once commonly regarded as ‘boy dolls’ (cf. Reese 2011). In specific, this study focuses on 203 statuettes released by Lego® as part of their Minifigure Series. The corpus also includes the lines of accessories (e.g. mobile phone), tools (e.g. shovel), complements (e.g. headpieces), mundane objects (e.g. pizza box), and other markers (e.g. dog poo) used to imprint a sense of specificity to each minifigure. Since this study focuses on the embodiment of human experience, and not historical or biographical accounts, models inspired in living celebrities (e.g. Harry Potter), film characters (e.g. Elsa), famous superheroes (e.g. Batman), popular icons (e.g. Abraham Lincoln) and sportsmen (e.g. Manuel Neuer) are not part of the corpus of study. Attempts to duplicate real or fictitious characters predictably result in the creation of miniature versions of well-established typifications. Nostalgia-driven minifigures are not necessarily innovative attempts to create miniature versions of daily activities or behaviors. Therefore, figurines such as Aztec Warrior, Conquistador, Roman Gladiator or Viking have been excluded from the set of objects of study. Other examples of minifigure not considered in this study include the eight series so far released as byproducts or derivatives of popular films or television shows: The Simpsons Series (2014), Disney Characters (2016, 2019), Batman Movie Series (2017, 2018), Ninjago Movie Series (2017) and Harry Potter Series (2018).

Methods

Object-based and content analyses were applied to the selected corpus of minifigures produced by Lego® between 2010 and 2019. In order to contextualize this analysis, publicity, advertising campaigns and marketability approaches were used as additional sources of information. Due to the didactic aspects of toys, the focus lies specifically on identifying patterns, and how the corpus of minifigures operate on a micro level as tangible reflections of discursive practices.

Results

The analysis of the 203 statuettes reveals five categories of minifigures. The results serve as the backbone for a taxonomy that attempts to classify the selected corpus of models of Lego® figurines (cf. Table 1).

Table 1: Taxonomy of Lego® Minifigure Series figurine models according to the empirically identified categories

Identified categories	Lego® Minifigures
Ergotypes (97)	Animal Control - Artist - Astronaut - Babysitter - Baggpiper - Ballerina - Bandit - Boxer - Businessman - Butcher - Carpenter - Cheerleader - Circus Clown - Computer Programmer - Connoisseur - Constable - Cowgirl - Crazy Scientist - Dance Instructor - Decorator - Deep Sea Diver - Desert Warrior - Detective - Diner Waitress - Dino Tracker - DJ - Dog Sitter - Explorer - Farmer - Fencer - Fire Fighter - Fisherman - Fitness Instructor - Flamenco Dancer - Fortune Teller - Gangster - Gardener - Gourmet Chef - Hazmat Guy - Hiker - Hollywood Starlet - Hot Dog Vendor - Janitor - Jewel Thief - Jungle Explorer - Librarian - Life Guard - Lumberjack - Magician - Mariachi - Mechanic - Mime - Monster Rocker - Monster Scientist - Motorcycle Mechanic - Ninja - Nurse - Paleontologist - Party Clown - Pilot - Pizza Delivery Man - Plumber - Policeman - Popstar - Programmer - Punk Rocker - Queen - Rapper - Ringmaster - Rock Star - Rocker Girl - Royal Guard - Sailor - Samurai - Saxophone Player - Scientist - Sea Captain - Small Clown - Snake Charmer - Space Miner - Spaceman - Spy - Superwrestler - Surgeon - Swimming Champion - Tennis Ace - Thespian - Traffic Cop - Veterinarian - Waiter - Welder - Wildlife Photographer - Yuppie - Zombie Businessman - Zombie Cheerleader - Zombie Cheerleader - Zookeeper
Stigmatypes (48)	Banana Guy - Bear Costume Guy - Birthday Party Boy - Birthday Party Girl - Brick Suit Guy - Bride - Bunny Suit Guy - Cactus Girl - Cat Costume Girl - Chicken Suit Guy - Clumsy Guy - Corn Cob Guy - Cowboy Costume Guy - Cute Little Devil - Disco Diva - Dog Show Winner - Dragon Suit Guy - Elephant Girl - Firework Guy - Flowerpot Girl - Fox Costume Girl - Gorilla Suit Guy - Graduate - Grandfather - Grandma - Grandma Visitor - Hot Dog Guy - Kimono Girl - Lederhosen Guy - Lizard Man - Mariachi - Penguin Boy - Piggy Guy - Pizza Costume Guy - Pretzel Girl - Race Car Guy - Rocket Boy - Sad Clown - Shark Suit Guy - Shower Guy - Sleepy Head - Spider Suit Boy - Strongman - Tiger Woman - Unicorn Guy - Unicorn Girl - Videogame Guy
Kinetypes (34)	Baseball Fielder - Baseball Player - Climber - Disco Dude - Diver - Downhill Skier - Football Player - Hockey Player - Hula Dancer - Ice Skater - Karate Master - Kickboxer - Mountaineer - Mountain Biker - Paintball Player - Pro Surfer - Race Car Driver - Roller Derby Guy - Rugby Player - Samuuri Warrior - Skater - Skater Girl - Skier - Skydiver - Snowboarder - Soccer Player - Street Skater - Sumo Wrestler - Surfer - Surfer Girl - Tennis Player - Video Game Champ - Weightlifter - Wrestling Champion
Mechatypes (18)	Alien Avenger - Alien Trooper - Alien Villainess - Battle Mech - Classic Alien - Clockwork Robot - Cyborg - Evil Mech - Evil Robot - Galaxy Trooper - Lady Robot - Laser Mech - Monkey King - Robot - Space Alien - Space Villain - Specter - Vampire
Ethnotypes (6)	Eskimo - Island Warrior - Kimono Girl - Tribal Chief - Tribal Hunter - Tribal Woman

Ergotypes

Figurines inspired by widespread assumptions and preconceptions about occupations, or *ergotypes*, are the most commonly identifiable formulas. A uniform (e.g. Firefighter) or recognizable outfit (e.g. Spaceman) and imagined physical attributes required for the job (e.g. Lifeguard), are complemented with one or two specific accessories. While the Cheerleader is identifiable by her pom-pom, the Popstar holds a microphone, the Magician carries a wand, the Ringmaster maneuvers his whip, and the Traffic Cop is endowed with a ticket and handcuffs. In each case, one central item operates as a marker, but also as evidence of the presumed daily activities of each character. *Ergotypes* build on prototypical ideas about professions, and character traits attributed to those who choose a specific line of work. Absence of female versions of many of the job-related figurines released by Lego® are aligned with long-established gender disparities at the workplace. While the printed features on the Ballerina model include images of purple butterflies and a heart-shaped necklace, the Babysitter model carries a baby and a milk bottle. The absence of a male version of these occupations, or a female version of the Butcher, Jungle Explorer, or the Welder, for instance, are statements about generalizations concerning vocation and dexterity. Gender imbalance in terms of representation has not gone unnoticed, and Lego® has been criticized for reinforcing negative gender stereotypes (Gutwald 2017).

Systematically, the minifigures reflect on long-established tropes and recognizable formulas. For instance, the Librarian is portrayed as a particularly ungroomed girl wearing thick glasses, old-fashioned clothes, and holding a cup of coffee and a heavy book. A point of reflection is that the variety of jobs is quite broad, and includes occupations that are normally overlooked (e.g. Janitor).

In line with a need to attract children's attention and retain a sense of novelty, each series has distinguished for including less-common professions. Bagpiper, Computer Programmer, Dino Tracker, Fitness Instructor, Hot Dog Vendor, Snake Charmer, Thespian and Wildlife Photographer (cf. Figure 1) exemplify characterizations of *ergotypes* not widely available in comparable miniature formats.

Similar to other lines of action figures, Lego® Minifigures include models that do not necessarily lead exemplary lifestyles, such as the Bandit or the Jewel Thief. In some cases, there are various versions of the same *ergotype*, depending on the state of mind of the character in question. Noticeable differences can be found between the Scientist, the Crazy Scientist and the Zombie

Scientist, all of them available in female and male versions. Their various degrees of grooming standards, facial expressions and positionality of their eyes are used as codes that provide cues about their mental and physical state.

Furthermore, appearance is used as a marker in the embodiment of figurines that represent *ergotypes* of occupations that reflect trends in popular culture. Examples of these fashionable trades include the Connoisseur, DJ, Trendsetter and Yuppie minifigures. The Trendsetter model is a statuette of a blond girl featuring a facial expression that denotes confidence, and wearing several pieces of jewelry and large sunglasses. Her two signature complements are a small dog and a particularly large cell phone that display the applications she uses to promote her lifestyle. Whereas a dog is also used as complement to the Connoisseur, a large phone is the key piece that distinguishes the ultra-modernly dressed Yuppie figurine. In general terms, *ergotypes* are a dominant category along the spectrum of typifications conceived by Lego®.

Kinetypes

A closer look reveals the prevalence of action figures that logically imbue a sense of movement, energy, dynamicity, and logically *action*. Hence, typifications of individuals engaging in sport activities include some of the most prolific and popular Lego® minifigures. Visual embodiments of physical athleticism include models such as the Baseball Player, Football Player, Kickboxer, Hockey Player, Mountain Biker, Skater, Surfer and Weightlifter. They are *kinetypes* in the sense that they offer stereotypical representations and idealizations about those



Figure 1: Wildlife Photographer Minifigure. Source: Brickimedia; retrieved from: https://brickipedia.fandom.com/wiki/Wildlife_Photographer (March 30, 2020)

engaging in a particular sport discipline. Specific uniforms, sports equipment and various accessories are used to demarcate differences between each sport activity. Responding to the popularity of sport-oriented themes, Lego® has released two special edition series of minifigures: Olympic Games (2012) and Deutscher Fußball-Bund (German Football Association) (2016).

Stigmatypes

The sense of motion expressed through *kinetypes* is comparable to the sense of progression and atemporality articulated by figurines that depict transitional occurrences. Birthday Party Girl, Bride, Clumsy Guy, Disco Diva, Graduate, Shark Suit Guy, and Videogame Guy minifigures are examples of characters that make direct reference to specific actions, rituals and practices. They are *stigmatypes* in the sense that they encapsulate transformative moments that express a notion of movement and action through progress. Characters such as the Bride and Graduate models imply that there is a time before and after a specific rite of passage. A bouquet of flowers, a tiara, a long white wedding dress, and a big smile operate as markers of a moment, rather than an identity. Minifigures in this category rely on details to convey the idea that special occasions can be solidified and suspended in time and space. Ultimately, *stigmatypes* are idealized representations of emotions and feelings iconized through visual embodiments of transitory states. For instance, while the Sleepy Head model crystalizes the moments before falling asleep (fatigue), the Dog Show Winner character articulates a moment of victory (pride). Similar to photographs, these figurines offer the actual possibility of retrieving and making physical contact with mundane and memorable instants that punctuate people's lives.

This theme of characters also makes references to daily activities (e.g. Shower Guy), repetitive practices (e.g. Birthday Party Girl/Boy), or personality traits within a general context (e.g. Clumsy Guy). *Stigmatypes* also include figurines that embody characters wearing customs, such as the Bear Costume Guy, Bunny Suit Guy, Flowerpot Girl, Fox Costume Girl, Pizza Costume Guy, Shark Suit Guy, Spider Suit Boy and Unicorn Girl/Guy. Visually, action figures in this category depict the human tradition of impersonating others, presumably in the context of a tradition, such as Halloween. In the process, these statuettes imply that a 'real' identity is being disguised. In various ways, minifigures in this category are multilayered, convoluted and highly conceptual reflections of human nature.

Ethnotypes

Lego® Minifigures operate as small-scale versions of characters that kindle users' imagination, expand their cultural repertoire, and expose them to a broad range of identities, practices, themes and foci. This observation applies, for instance, to a variety of figurines conceived according to *ethnotypes*, ethnicity-based stereotypes (Leerssen 2007), and which include models such as Eskimo, Island Warrior, Kimono Girl, Maraca Man, Tribal Chief, Tribal Hunter and Tribal Woman.

Mechatypes

In this classification a division has been made between typifications conceived as part of the company's signature style and reformulated typifications of traditional, well-known, emblematic characters. Since human essence is the point of reference in the creation of minifigures, non-human (e.g. Classic Alien), semi-human (e.g. Cyborg) and pseudo-human (e.g. Lady Robot) characters are few in number. In most cases, these figurines are idealized conceptualizations of technologically enhanced human-inspired typifications (*mechatypes*).

Discussion

The need to create seductive and appealing characters that resonate with the imagination of children – mainly from a boy's perspective – explains the selection of typifications and visual codes. A valid observation is that minifigures participate in the creation of categorizations that pre-format, program and constrict how children understand their human condition and the diversity that surrounds them.

Lego® minifigures offer tangible representations of human nature (*mechatypes*), ethnicity (*ethnotypes*) and a set of rituals, transitory states and emotions (*stigmatypes*). Worthy of further consideration is that *stigmatypes* operate also as representations of practices and rituals, and as haptic idealizations of how moments or states ought to be according to stereotypical preconceptions. Alternatively, statuettes such as Cactus Girl or Lederhosen Guy are evidence that *stigmatypes* also convey the idea that identities fluctuate across different situations.

Minifigures are released as part of storylines that provide inspiration for users. Figurines designed in the context of daily practices are materialized, for instance, in the Dog Sitter, Diner Waitress or Sleepy Head models, which invite children to re-create imagined scenarios, situations and outcomes.

In various ways, Lego® figurines offer a reflection about the social implications of inequality, exemplified by the Yuppie model vis-à-vis the Janitor model, but also of mental state (e.g. Scientist vis-à-vis Crazy Scientist). All along, emphasis is placed on perceptual likeness to reality, but also on preconceptions. In the case of gender, Lego® assumes general interest in a male version of the Babysitter is less than in their Pizza Delivery Man or Detective models. Subtle strategies are used to distinguish, for instance, between the Waitress and Waiter minifigures. Whereas the Waitress model portrays an informal young woman wearing an apron and holding a tray with a large ice cream on it, the Waiter model wears a bowtie and a suit and is on his way to serve wine. Equal representation of female and male versions is mainly found in minifigures that convey a sense of physical activity (e.g. Skater, Skater Girl). Enthusiasm surrounding sport events and the increasingly visible role and popularity of sport celebrities as icons explain the special position of *kinetypes* as themes for toys.

Conclusion

Lego® figurines use historical characters, mythic figures and futuristic humanoids and robots as sources of inspiration, but emphasis is placed on creating compelling figurines that tangibly embody professions, sports and transitional states. Due to the compact, small-scale and condense format of the figurines, only self-explanatory, self-inferential and widely recognizable details are used to convey the identity of each minifigure. They are often conceived, marketed and distributed in line with narratives that resonate among target buyers. Films, television series and video games often provide the context for many of the scenarios that children are inclined to re-create in their playtime. Yet, daily life, mundane activities, rituals and emotions are the main points of reference in the creation of innovative figurines. Along this line of thought, this paper proposes a taxonomy of theme-based stereotypes that explains in which ways Lego® Minifigures series ‘dollify’ human essence. Firstly, the term *ergotypes* is used to describe stereotypes affixed to specific lines of work. Beyond a uniform (e.g. Firefighter), minifigures articulate preconceptions and assumptions through the strategic use of visual codes, or by adding markers of identity (e.g. Programmer holding a computer). Secondly, the term *kinetypes* is suggested to refer to stereotypical representations of characters engaged in a specific sport activity (e.g. Rugby Player). Thirdly, a focal point in this survey are *stigmatypes*, identified as idealized

‘dollified’ embodiments of involved in rites of passage (e.g. a birthday party), or who attempt to complete a task (e.g. going to bed), or express their feelings or emotions (e.g. pride). Other categories include ethnicity-centred statuettes (*ethnotypes*) and figurines conditioned by various levels of human-machine hybridity (*mechatypes*).

Action figures simplify the complexities of life and of those actors and elements that make up the imagined and real surroundings of each child. Yet, as simplified versions of real-life, multilayered, convoluted characters, they can also operate as reductions, and oversimplifications that eventually convey a superficial, incomplete and stereotypical dimension of certain realities (e.g. the fashionable young Trendsetter). Minifigures are ultimately boy dolls/action figures attempting to condense identity and suspend time, and this seems to be possible only by reducing diversity and preserving fixed idealizations.

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