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Constructing Gender Through Color: A Comparative Semiotic Analysis of Signs in Barbie and LEGO Friends Animation Series

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ABSTRACT: This research investigates on how gender is constructed by color in two widespread girls' animation franchises, Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends. Drawing on social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen) and feminist media theory on postfeminist girlhood (Gill; McRobbie), it shows color as a sign system resource in multimodal texts. The corpus of this article covers four purposively selected episodes (two from each series) introducing of main girl characters and daily life, school and friendship scenarios. By focusing on qualitative content analysis and semiotic approach, the study shows color palettes linked to female characters, interiors and activity types. Findings of this article shows both franchises focuses on pinks, purples and pastels to normalize a 'girly' aesthetic, while scenes of competence and leadership use somewhat broader palettes. Color therefore articulates a postfeminist ideal in which girls appear active and capable yet remain visually anchored in commodified femininity.

KEYWORDS: children's animation, color symbolism, gender representation, social semiotics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children's media is one of the most obvious and recognizable aspects of children's media, and its function to form gendered meanings is often neglected. In the present context of girls' animation, the use of color is saturated, not simply a matter of character and space, but one of the buildings of certain kinds of girlhoods. Global brands like Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends are integral to this, existing not only as narratives, but also as extensions of strong toy franchises. They are therefore a very rich site to analyze the encoding of gender and its marketing to young audiences.

The semiotics of media have always highlighted that signs do not just represent reality, but also construct it (Saussure, 1916/1983; Barthes, 1972). Classical semiotics distinguishes between signifier and signified, between denotation and connotation, and indicates how seemingly neutral images have multiple and complex ideological resonances. In mass-mediated children's culture, these processes are tied to commercial and branding logics (Danesi, 2018; Eco, 1976). Toys, clothing and media, in particular, have become a major symbol of gender in consumer culture, creating the binary of pink for girls and blue for boys which has become a very naturalized binary (Paoletti, 2012).

More recent advances in social semiotics have focused on how semiotic resources like color are used in multimodal sets, and how their meaning potentials relate to social and cultural practices (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2002). As such, color is not an indifferent characteristic of things but a tool that can be used to enact specific discourses and identities. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2002) the selection of color is historically contingent and is ideologically charged, and is part of "visual grammars" that carry evaluations as well as power and affect relations. This multimodal analysis is an ideal place for the children's animation, with its image, dialogue, sound, music and movement.

Meanwhile feminist media scholars have pointed to the way in which the representations of girls in contemporary media are becoming more and more post-feminist, incorporating new discourses of choice, empowerment and individuality alongside the continued focus on appearance, consumption and normative femininity (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). The rhetoric of "can do," (girls can be anything and do anything) is often a component of the image of branded girlhood, which is typically accompanied by pink hues, glitter, and mannerisms of fashion (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this context, color becomes a key component in reconciling empowerment with traditional gender roles and expectations.

This is particularly the case for Barbie and LEGO. Barbie dolls have faced criticism for decades for its portrayal of limited beauty standards and femininity, although the company has recently shifted its focus to diversity and women empowerment (Stone, 2010; Heljakka & Okdeh, 2020). The re-branding of Barbie is carried over to the animated series Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures, which gives Barbie a strong sense of stylization and a hyper-feminine aesthetic, but also a character that is capable, caring and multi-

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talented. Also noteworthy in terms of the debate over gendered design are the color schemes and figurines of the LEGO universe's female-themed set, LEGO Friends, which overrepresents pinks, purples and pastels as a color palette, in contrast to the more "neutral" or "masculine" schemes of other LEGO-building sets (Horton, 2012; Hjarvard, 2015).

In this context, this article will discuss the ways in which gender is produced through the use of color in Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends. The study draws on social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2002) and feminist media theory on postfeminist girlhood (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009) to consider color as a semiotic resource which helps distinguish, describe and assess girl characters, spaces and activities. The basic analytical tools are classical semiotic terms of sign, denotation and connotation (Saussure, 1916/1983) with a focus on the culturally constructed, negotiated and branded meanings of color for young female audiences.

The empirical corpus is composed of four episodes, two each from the two series of Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends. Episodes were selected because they introduce key girl characters and deal with typical family, school and friendship situations, where gendered color-coding of interiors, clothing and activities are particularly apparent. The study uses qualitative content analysis with social semiotics to map the recurrent color palettes of the main female characters, key interior spaces (specifically bedrooms and shared domestic spaces) and various types of activities (domestic, emotional/social, adventurous, technical). Such patterns are then analyzed semiotically in terms of how combinations and contrasts of color contribute to the construction of femininity, agency and relationality.

Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends are two products that involve a semiotic approach to color, which are distinct in their uses of color as a resource to build girl characters in common environments and domestic spaces. In the context of everyday and domestic space, the article asks three related questions: How is color used in both Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends as a resource to create girl characters? (2) How do the repeated use of color schemes contribute both to the empowerment and to the complication of the postfeminist discourses of 'empowered girlhood'? and (3) How do the similarities and differences in the color palettes of the two franchises offer insight into different approaches to branding girls?

The analysis is directed at the visual design, and not on dialog and plot exclusively, as it highlights the subtle yet strong role of visual design in children's media in terms of gender socialization. In comparing Barbie with LEGO Friends, the overall picture becomes stronger of a series of negotiations between empowerment and continuity with traditional notions of femininity that are being played out by different brands. The article is thus part of a discourse on gendered marketing to children, on the semiotics of color, and on the visual construction of postfeminist girlhood in a global media culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Semiotics, Color and Multimodal Media

It has long been shown that media texts are systems of signs which create, rather than simply mirror, social reality (Saussure, 1983; Barthes, 1972). In the realm of visual culture, meaning is not only established in terms of representation but also, and just as importantly, by formal features like color and composition or perspective. Social semiotics builds on this insight by imagining the elements that can be considered as 'semiotic resources': culturally and historically constructed ways of making sense (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2002). In this regard, color is viewed as a means that has its own "meaning potentials" which can be translated in various ways within different contexts and genres (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002).

There are a number of applications of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) "grammar of visual design" to still images as well as moving images, such as picture books, advertising and film. They believe that hues, values, saturations, contrasts are never neutral, but constitute a way of encoding affect, salience and interpersonal relations in visual choices. In their later research with regard to color as a semiotic mode, they suggest that color palettes can operate in a similar way to lexis and grammar in verbal language, creating patterned associations which are picked up by the viewer and interpreted as such (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). This work applies these ideas to examine the role of the recurring color palette in Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends for the building of particular models of girlhood.

The main methodology is social semiotics, but the traditional semiotic separation of the signifier and the signified, as well as the signifier and its denotation or connotation, are analytically useful (Saussure, 1983; Barthes, 1972). Literally speaking, pink dresses, purple accessories or turquoise bedrooms are pink dresses, purple accessories, turquoise bedrooms; connotatively speaking, they belong to a broader cultural context of femininity, youth, intimacy or playfulness. Barthes's (1972) definition of myth – that these

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connotations have the effect of making it seem natural and obvious – can shed light on the normalization of certain conceptions of "what girls are like" that results from using gendered color schemes in children's media.

2.2. Color, Gender and Children's Culture

There has been research on gendered marketing, where they have found that kids' consumer cultures are becoming increasingly segregated into "pink" and "blue" areas (Paoletti, 2012). A color code is a convention used to indicate gendered appropriateness, and is frequently adopted in packaging and toy design and in retail spaces. The color coding of differentiation is an expression and perpetuation of the presumption of boys' and girls' interests, capacities and identities. In this context, the pairing of animated series with toy brands carries these color codes into the realm of story, and young viewers are presented with a consistent view of gendered play that can be modeled by the characters they see in the series (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Danesi, 2018).

As a transmedia brand, Barbie has played a starring role in the debates about femininity and consumption. Given the dual nature of the discourse of aspirational empowerment (you can be anything) and the continued emphasis on restricted beauty ideals, consumerism and heteronormativity, it is important to note the contradictions of Barbie dolls and media studies (Stone, 2010; Heljakka & Okdeh, 2020). By visual analyses, the pink and pastel hues are found to be all around Barbie's world, which naturalizes and renders a glamorous and fashion-oriented femininity; however, newer stories depict Barbie as capable and ambitious.

Although traditionally a brand of construction and creativity, the LEGO brand has also been caught up in gender marketing with lines of products specifically aimed for girls. In 2012, the Lego brand released their first "girl" theme with mini-doll figures and mostly purples, pinks and soft pastel colors—the "Friends" theme—which ran in parallel to many of the "boys'" themes like Ninjago and City, which tend to be more primary and darker in colors (Horton, 2012; Hjarvard, 2015). The design of LEGO Friends is seen by some scholars as an expansion of girls' access to construction play and as a re-inscription of gendered interests, as the play focuses on friendship, caring and leisure in highly stylized, feminized environments (Hjarvard, 2015).

Very little, however, has been done so far to systematically analyze the semiotic aspects of color in the animated adaptation of these brands. The focus of most studies is on toys and advertising or promotional images, and not on the use of color in serialized stories or moving images from characters, settings, and actions. The aim of this article is to fill that void by using a social semiotic perspective on individual moments of Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends.

2.3. Postfeminist Girlhood and Branded Empowerment

These color lines perform an ideological function that can be understood in light of feminist media scholarship on the concept of post feminism. Gill (2007) describes post feminism not only as a period of time, but as a sentiment, one that is characterized by ideas of choice, empowerment, individualism, makeover and self-surveillance. Media texts targeted to women and girls often praise them for being highly confident, ambitious and having "girl power," but at the same time associate these attributes with consumption, appearance and heterosexual desire (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Branded girlhood, in this context, is not a throwback to a traditional femininity but a rebranding of it as a place of empowered self-expression. Such writing tends to obfuscate structural gender inequalities, sees success and failure as personal style and choice, and is the kind that McRobbie (2009) claims educators should avoid. In a similar vein, Banet-Weiser (2018) mentions the presence of feminism everywhere, in products and campaigns, where empowerment is represented visually in certain aesthetics.

In Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures, and LEGO Friends, this postfeminist logic is found in the stories in which the female characters are active, competent and faithful friends but are always implicitly embedded in the "world of the girl" and its codes of cuteness, fashion ability and consumption. This research analyzes the color as a semiotic tool to investigate the way in which it facilitates the image of the "empowered girl" which is active and competent, yet rooted in a limited and consumerist femininity.

The article will then be able to start to describe and explain how the use of these colors, as part of these visual patterns, help to construct wider ideologies of girlhood in contemporary children's media, which are drawn from social semiotics and postfeminist theory.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Corpus

The study uses qualitative type of research and design comparative case study with content analysis and social semiotic approach. There is a total of four episodes in the empirical corpus, two of which are Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and two of LEGO

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Friends. Episodes were chosen by purposive sampling and the following criteria were applied: It introduces the main girl characters or prominently features them. The story line is realistic, not necessarily fantasy or story events.

Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures

1. A variety of interior/exterior settings that create the opportunity to compare color schemes from one location to another. *Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures* – Season 1, Episode 1: *Magical Mermaid Mystery Part 1* (2020, Mattel Television; distributed by Netflix).

Reason for selection: First episode viewed; introduces Barbie and central family/friend characters in a strongly stylized, feminized environment, with underwater and domestic spaces that highlight gendered color schemes.

2. *Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures* – Season 1, Episode 2: *Magical Mermaid Mystery Part 2* (2020, Mattel Television; distributed by Netflix).

Reason for selection: Continues the same narrative arc and visual world, providing additional material for analyzing consistent use of pink/pastel palettes across characters, interiors and fantasy settings.

LEGO Friends (Netflix)

1. *LEGO Friends* – Season 1, Episode 1: *Welcome Zac* (2025, The LEGO Group; distributed by Netflix).

Reason for selection: First episode viewed; introduces the core group of girl protagonists and the new character Zac, establishing key Heartlake City locations and their associated color schemes.

2. *LEGO Friends* – Season 1, Episode 2: *Fright Night* (2025, The LEGO Group; distributed by Netflix).

Reason for selection: Depicts friendship and community activities in varied settings, including potentially darker or contrasting palettes (e.g., night or “scary” scenes), offering a useful counterpoint to the usual pastel environment.

3.2. Data Collection and Units of Analysis

There were several viewings of each episode. Still images (screenshots) were taken of: scene information, character information, color coding, activity and interaction, narrative function and the analytical notes were written using connotative and denotative analysis.

The unit of analysis is the individual scene, in which a main female character is clearly identifiable in a specific setting and doing a recognizable activity. Notes were made on Dominant and secondary colors of character clothing and accessories and immediate background and furnishings for each of these scenes. Salient objects such as vehicles, devices, pets. Type of interaction and activity. Scene's narrative function, e.g. introduction, conflict, resolution etc.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

Initial coding of color and context: A preliminary coding scheme was created for color (dominant pink/purple pastels, mixed bright palette, darker tones) and for activity types and context. One episode from each series was initially viewed to create a preliminary coding scheme. This scheme was developed in an iterative manner.

All episodes were coded systematically: all four episodes were coded using the refined scheme. A brief description was captured for each applicable scene and color categories and contextual information were recorded. This phase yielded an overview of the repeated color–character–activity patterns in and between the two series.

Using the framework of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2002), the coded patterns were analyzed in terms of:

The special ways that certain colors and color juxtapositions signify "femininity," "competence," "intimacy," "play," etc.

How differences between various activities shape assessment of evaluations such as between domestic and “adventure” palettes.

It was then read through postfeminist theory (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2018) to take into account the role of color in articulating a branded, ‘empowered’ girlhood.

In the analysis, classical semiotic ideas of denotation, connotation and myth (Barthes, 1972) were applied to differentiate literal visual aspects from cultural sedimented meaning. Considerable attention was given not just to the obvious uses of pink and purple but also to the potential for more diverse or ‘neutral' color palette to indicate changes in role, agency or seriousness and the differences between Barbie and LEGO Friends in this field.

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4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Color Palettes and the Visual Coding of Girlhood

In all four episodes chosen, both Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends use highly regularized color palettes to help to visually differentiate a feminized sphere of girlhood. In the first series, girls' dresses, personal items, and interior spaces are mostly in pinks, purples, and soft pastels, with brighter, more vibrant colors used in scenes of activity, movement or public interaction. In the second series, the same is true, with the difference that the dresses are mostly small and the interior spaces rather crowded, whereas personal items and dresses in pinks, purples, and soft pastels dominate the scene.

Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures usually has Barbie's main outfits for the selected episodes be a light pink or fuchsia, white, and sometimes with a dash of denim blue. Pink and pastel colors dominate her bedroom and main household areas, with heart patterns and gentle lighting complementing. In terms of denotative meaning, they are just a matter of color, in terms of connotative meaning they are a sign of a glamorous, stylish, and reassuring "soft" femininity (Barthes, 1972; Paoletti, 2012). The repetition of the episodes reinforces the mythological link between "Barbie pink" and an idealized girlhood.

The core characters of girls in LEGO Friends are also in a pastel world, but with more frequent usage of turquoise, lilac and light blue. Bedrooms, hangout areas in Heartlake City are designed in cohesive color schemes but are still clearly feminine, with occasionally more daring accent colors for furniture, sports items or technological items. This implies that the visual repertoire is slightly wider than Barbie, but distinctly signals the series as "for girls" as opposed to more colorful LEGO lines (Horton, 2012; Hjarvard, 2015).

From a social semiotic analysis point of view, these regularities suggest that color is a semiotic resource that is used to secure a brand image of girlhood (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002). The uniformity of the pink and pastel color schemes in bodies, objects and spaces helps to create a sense of femininity as a visual environment – not a possible option for the designer.

4.2. Color, Character Roles and Activities

The second pattern relates to the correlation between the colors of the schemes, role types of characters and activities shown. Domestic and emotional activities (talking to family members, caring for animals, decorating rooms, organizing parties) are more likely to be in more of a pink/pastel palette in both series, while problem solving, adventure/technical, are more likely to be in slightly more varied or brighter palettes.

When Barbie is comforting a sibling, doing chores around the house or welcoming visitors, the interior settings are often very pink and cream, and extremely stylized. In this context color serves to enhance the meaning 'warmth', 'intimacy' and 'care', the opposite of which is 'domesticity', 'softness', 'beauty'. However, when Barbie is depicted taking an active role in an endeavor outside of the home, such as participating in a project or solving a real-world problem, her environment tends to include more intense blues, greens or accent colours. Her clothing is usually a combination of pink, but the context is not as "sugar-coated" and starts to imply competence and agency.

A similar differentiation is found in LEGO Friends. Rooms are saturated with pastel hues and have matching decorative elements, and everyday acts of friendship take place there, like quietly chatting in bedrooms or organizing social gatherings. However, turquoise, bright purple, orange or green are often used more prominently in props and backgrounds in activity scenes with building, sports/community projects, etc. The girls look lively and energetic, with their actions highlighted in these scenes, but not losing the "cute" visual style. From a social semiotic point of view, the color also helps to make some activities more serious and action oriented, yet to keep them within a visual code that is still feminine (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

This is in line with the postfeminist media logics discussed by Gill (2007) and McRobbie (2009) who argued that girls are portrayed as active and competent, but their agency is visually mediated through a 'pretty' aesthetic that is always 'brand' oriented. There is empowerment, but it is often not independent of the visual cues to conventional gender.

4.3. Domestic and Public Spaces: Visual Boundaries of Femininity

The contrast of domestic/private and public/community spaces gives another dimension to the meaning. Bedrooms in both series are the most feminized spaces, and they are also crisscrossed with pink and purple and decorative elements. These areas serve as extensions of the girls' identities - personal, safe and well groomed. They are representative of Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of branded girlhood, or identity communicated through tidied objects and matching environments.

There is a little more color variety in public or semi-public areas such as schools, streets, parks or community centers, with the addition of more greens, browns and neutral colors. The main female characters, however, bring the feminized color schemes (such

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as clothes, accessories, vehicles) back into more neutral settings. In Barbie, for instance, Barbie's pink dress or pink-ish objects provide her with a visual signal of her mobility as a mobile stylish center, even in more mundane settings. The LEGO Friends also play a large part in the group's shared meeting places or vehicles, often using purples and pastels to visually 'mark' parts of the public realm as extensions of their feminine realm.

Semiotically, it implies that not only is the color employed to distinguish spaces, but it is also used to reinstate feminine branding to more neutral, or communal, spaces. The domestic/pastel opposition and the public/mixed opposition never become an opposition, as the presence of the girls in pastel clothes is always domesticated, ensuring their branded femininity travels wherever they go. This reinforces a postfeminist notion that girls are free to be active citizens in public spaces, but do it in a feminine, recognizable and fashionably consumable way (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

4.4. Comparative Branding Strategies: Barbie vs. LEGO Friends

This comparison between the two franchises brings to light both the similarities and differences in the way that gender is built up in terms of colors.

In both series: Pinks and Purples and Pastels are the constant markers of girlhood. Connect homemaking and emotional connection with more subdued, muted hues. Relate to scenes of competence, physical activity or technical engagement with a range of more varied or brighter colors. Ensure consistency in the visual appearance of dolls/sets and their animated versions, thus strengthening the transmedia brand (Heljakka & Okdeh, 2020; Hjarvard, 2015).

These intersections point to an investment in a 'postfeminist' vision of girlhood that combines agency with stylized, consumable femininity (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Meanwhile, distinctions start to appear: Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures is more filled with a brand's own “Barbie pink,” and takes on a very hyper-feminine look that chimes in with the long-running doll brand. LEGO Friends has a wider range, particularly for items associated with hobbies, sporting or technology-related, and includes more turquoise, lilac and pink in addition to pink. This is an example of a slightly more diverse profile of interests and skills being represented and still recognizing that it is a game for girls and is clearly a game that is not “boy-coded” (Horton, 2012), in the way that some LEGO theme games are.

This dichotomy and dichotomy help support the notion that color is more than a gender code, it is a branding strategy as well. LEGO Friends strives to find a balance between the company's past of building blocks and the market need to make “girly” toys that are obviously visible as “girl” products, while Barbie redefines an iconic femininity as “capable” and “modern” (Hjarvard, 2015). Taken together, the findings show that in both franchises, color functions at three interconnected levels:

As a resource for immediate visual differentiation of characters, spaces and activities.

As a means of articulating postfeminist narratives of empowerment, where agency is visually compatible with conventional femininity.

As part of a broader ideological myth that presents a pastel-coded, brand-specific version of girlhood as natural, desirable and fun (Barthes, 1972; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

5. CONCLUSION

This research has investigated the role of color as a semiotic resource in multimodal, branded children's media, such as Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures and LEGO Friends, by understanding how gender is coded by color. Analyzing two episodes from each series reveals that both franchises use a predominantly pink, purple and pastel color palette to fix a distinctly feminine environment for their girl protagonists, drawing on social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2002) and feminist explorations of postfeminist girlhood (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

The use of color throughout characters, settings and activities serves to naturalize a certain version of girlhood that is warm, caring, and aesthetically curated. Meanwhile the scenes that include problem-solving, physical exertion or some technical interaction contain a little bit more interesting or intense color, which can be understood as an indicator of competence and agency, but which also maintains a consistency with a feminine “cute” and digestible. Empowerment is thus not in opposition to traditional femininity in Barbie and LEGO Friends, but is instead visually integrated with it, by color schemes that allow for the beauty, fashion and domestic comfort to blend with ambition and activity.

The comparison indicates that Barbie: Dreamhouse Adventures has a more distinctly hyper-feminine “Barbie pink” style, whereas LEGO Friends has a slightly more expansive color palette that remains distinctly gendered and different from other LEGO lines.

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These disparities point to brand-specific approaches, but they all have a common postfeminist message that girls can be "anything" in a narrow, colorblind notion of girlhood.

In theory, the article shows how the combination of social semiotics and feminist media theory can be used to analyze the animation of children. It demonstrates methodologically how a small corpus of texts can be analyzed qualitatively to uncover the consistent visual patterns that may not be observed in plot- or dialogue-oriented studies.

The study is limited by its small sample of episodes and its focus on two girl-oriented franchises. Future research could expand the corpus to include additional seasons, other LEGO themes, or series aimed at boys, in order to compare how color codes differentiate gender across a wider range of children's media. Audience-based research with child viewers could also explore how these color schemes are perceived and negotiated in everyday interpretation. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that color remains a powerful, if often invisible, means by which contemporary media construct and circulate commodified ideals of girlhood.

6. PRACTICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has a number of implications for teachers, parents, and media producers who are interested in the representation of gender in children's media.

First, the analysis reveals the subtle yet potent pedagogical function of color: recurrently, pink and pastel hues visually naturalize a hegemonic notion of girlhood that is soft, decorative, and consumption focused, even when narratives are in support of competence and agency. It means that for teachers and parents, there is great significance in conducting media literacy exercises that help children notice the importance of color as one of the elements of media content and not just as a background color. Simple activities in the classroom can enable children to think critically about the use of visual cues to make assumptions about "what girls like" or "how girls should look" (or "what boys like" or "how boys should look").

Secondly, the study highlights the need for diversification of visual codes of empowerment. If empowerment is always presented in the same manner through pink colors, sparkles and hyper-femininity, children might have feelings of empowerment, agency, leadership and creativity mostly based on the stereotype of conformity. This information can inform content creators and curriculum designers to broaden the spectrum of color associations in materials for children, such as providing a wider choice of colors and styles for indications of care, friendship and emotional intelligence, and using a wider range of colors for girl characters involved in technical and scientific activities, rather than a feminized pastel aesthetic.

Thirdly, in the field of teacher education and counselling, the study provides a practical illustration of the use of social semiotics. The idea of color as a semiotic resource can be introduced to trainee teachers by Kress and van Leeuwen, (2002) and trainee teachers can be encouraged to analyze not only commercial media but also the text book, posters and classroom decorations, as well. By doing so, they can develop a greater awareness of the potential for the visual environment in the school to reinforce or question gender stereotyping.

Finally, for media producers and brand managers, the comparison between Barbie and LEGO Friends illustrates that it is possible to maintain brand identity while experimenting with less rigid gender coding. The slightly broader palettes observed in LEGO Friends indicate room for visual innovation without sacrificing recognizability. Producers who aim to align with contemporary discourses of diversity and inclusion could build on this by deliberately decoupling particular colors from fixed gender roles, thereby supporting more flexible and plural visions of girlhood and childhood.

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