



# LUND UNIVERSITY

**“Of course boys should be boys. No fucking fag nonsense!”**

A study about gender-segregated toys

Viktoria Teichler

# Abstract

<b>TITLE</b>	“Of course boys should be boys. No fucking fag nonsense!” A study about gender-segregated toys
<b>AUTHOR</b>	Viktoria Teichler
<b>SUPERVISOR</b>	Johan Alvehus
<b>PURPOSE</b>	The objective of this research paper is to explore parents’ perceptions about gender-segregation when it comes to toys for children.
<b>RESEARCH QUESTION</b>	How is the subject of gender and toys discussed among parents?
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	A netnographic approach was implemented and the site for data collection was Familjeliv.se. At the site were 10 discussion threads including 1 834 comments analyzed. Discourse was used as an analysis method.
<b>RESULTS</b>	The results of the study indicate that the discussion about gender and toys do not cover the subject of gender and toys. It rather includes greater subjects and problems and becomes a question of being. The results also demonstrate that the perceptions and truths about the subject are presented with emotions and research alternately and are communicated through individuals' perceptions of the world. It is also proven that the discussion about the subject have not changed over the last ten years. So, the discourse about gender and toys is always in motion, yet it stands completely still.
<b>KEYWORDS</b>	Gender, Segregation, Toys, Parents, Familjeliv.se, Discourse

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# Table of contents

<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.2 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTION .....	10
<b>2. THEORY .....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 GENDER AND TOYS.....	11
2.1.1 Toys Importance.....	13
2.2 RETAILERS INFLUENCE ON GENDER-SEGREGATION .....	13
2.3 PARENTS CHOOSING TOYS.....	15
2.4 CHILDREN CHOOSING TOYS.....	16
2.5 DISCOURSE .....	17
2.6 USING DISCOURSE TO UNDERSTAND GENDER AND TOYS .....	19
<b>3. METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH .....	20
3.2 DATA COLLECTION.....	21
3.2.1 Threads .....	22
3.3 DATA ANALYSIS .....	24
3.4 LIMITATIONS.....	26
3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	27
<b>4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>29</b>
4.1 THE THREADS .....	29
4.2 USE OF LANGUAGE.....	30
4.3 GENDER AND TOYS .....	32
4.4 THE ACT OF GENDER AND TOYS .....	33
4.5 DEVELOPMENTS IN THE DISCUSSIONS .....	36
4.5.1 Equality.....	36
4.5.2 Norms in society.....	37
4.5.3 Is gender in our biology?.....	39
4.5.4 Gendered toys as an aspect of raising children.....	40
4.5.5 Playing with pink toys will make my son gay .....	42
4.5.6 Using research to prove a point.....	44
4.6 CONCLUDING ANALYSIS.....	46
<b>5. DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>6. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>52</b>
6.1 FUTURE RESEARCH.....	53
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>59</b>

*“I admire those who dare to break the norms”*

# 1. Introduction

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While entering any kind of retail establishment where toys can be found it is nearly impossible to miss the segregation of girls' and boys' sections (Fine & Rush, 2018). Products are gender-segregated through colors and shapes to make them associated with girls and boys where blue is used for masculine and pink for feminine products (Hess & Melnyk, 2016). And gendering in retail and its products reflects broader social and cultural processes of gendering (Pettinger, 2005). By doing this, stores strengthen the social gender roles for children and give them guidelines on how both children and parents should choose toys (Reich, Black & Foliaki, 2018). Gender-segregation reinforces boys to compete and achieve, and girls to nurture and collaborate (Fine & Rush, 2018). However, parents also have a great part in gender-segregation since parents socialize with children in a gendered way and tend to have different expectations on them depending on their gender (Brusdal & Berg, 2010). And this is also shown in the way parents purchase. Studies have shown that parents buy gender-segregated toys for their children while they at the same time play with them in a gendered way (Endendijk, Groeneveld, van Berkel, Hallers-Haalboom, Mesman & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013).

When it comes to toys, the segregation is clear and shown when toys for girls often involve caregiving, like dolls, domesticity including cleaning and shopping, and products connected with attractiveness like fashion and make-up (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Fine & Rush, 2018; Reich et al., 2018). While toys for boys focus on transportation such as cars and trucks, construction involving building sets, and adventure, danger, and aggression (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Fine & Rush, 2018; Reich et al., 2018). This helps children to create gendered social relations. But even if retailers are a part of the segregation of toys they are not alone in the reinforcement since parents have an important impact on children and their gender socialization. Because when it comes to buying toys, children are often not the ones making decisions. Children are according to scholars seen as consumers from an early stage in life, but their consumption depends on their parents (Brusdal & Berg, 2010). Throughout the childhood years it is the parents, or other adults, that have the control of what is being purchased, which reflects what these adults believe is appropriate toys or not for the children (Auster & Mansbach, 2012). One approach is how colors like blue and pink automatically activate the stereotypical associations of masculinity and femininity in adults (Fine & Rush, 2018), which will affect them in the purchasing process.

This segregation can cause problems since it has an impact on children in the long term where it shapes how children engage and what they learn, but also how they create their identity and future behavior (Fine & Rush, 2018; Reich et al., 2018). Gender is a vital part of our identity (Brusdal & Berg, 2010), but parents treat girls and boys differently (Endendijk et al., 2013). This means that retailers, among others, together with parents are creating children's perception of gender. That is because a person's first encounter with the gendered world typically takes place with parents. And that is why it is of interest to study parents' and their perceptions, which this study will investigate, since it strongly influences the children's perceptions. Parents often interact with children in a gendered way because of the sex they were assigned at birth, which often, but not always, correspond to their gender later in life (Boe & Woods, 2018). And parents tend to encourage their children to play according to their gender (Fisher-Thompson, 1993). For example, studies show that parents purchase more same-gender toys for their children than cross-gender typed toys, even though children seem to accept all kinds of toys presented by their parents (Fisher-Thompson, 1993; Kollmayer, Schultes, Schober, Hodosi & Spiel, 2018). It is also shown that men tend to purchase more according to gender than women, especially for boys (Fisher-Thompson, 1993). However, it is also possible that there are disagreements between the wish of toys from children and their parents' ideas of what is a correct consumption pattern (Brusdal & Berg, 2010). But in the end, it is the parents who have the power. This is an issue since parents are role models and act with gender stereotypes through their own behavior and experiences and strengthen the gender stereotypical behavior in children (Endendijk et al., 2013). Thereby it is of importance to firstly understand the behavior and experiences that parents transfer to children, and that we can study by investigating how parents discuss the subject.

What we can see from the research done in this area today, is that the way gendered toys are marketed and purchased can guide children how to play and in that way create social roles, especially gender roles, for them (Reich et al., 2018). Research has shown that gender stereotypes have a great impact on how children identify how they should be in the sense of appearance, acting, and thinking (Reich et al., 2018). One study, for example, has shown results which indicate that girls playing with the doll Barbie (seen as a stereotypical girl toy) visualize themselves able to fewer jobs than girls that have played with Mr. Potato Head (seen as a more gender-neutral toy) (Reich et al., 2018). Even if correlation does not mean causation this study shows an important aspect. As well as other research shows that segregated toys are a factor to develop different cognitive competences including representative thinking and specific

academic interests (Weisgram & Dinella, 2018). These experiences can over time contribute to gender gaps in work motivation and achievements (Weisgram & Dinella, 2018). It has also been shown that the segregation in children's play can affect academic achievement later in life (Weisgram & Dinella, 2018). Gender-segregated toys have received a great deal of attention in research and we also know that it has an impact on children in multiple ways where some researchers explain how gender stereotypes contribute to gender inequalities in the long term, including gender pay gap and even domestic violence (Fine and Rush, 2018).

Concerning the phenomenon above is it possible to see that even if toys are made for children, it is the adults who do the actual purchase and choose what toys children can play with. Research indicates that both biological and social factors are affecting the children and their toy preferences and while other research have examined the influence of parents. Like these researchers, I recognize that it is important to examine in which ways children are exposed to gender-related beliefs and values through their parents. Because studies show that boys are avoiding toys that stereotypically are marked for girls (e.g., pink toys) even if they have a great desire for them, meaning that the segregation goes against what children actually want (Weisgram & Dinella, 2018). And parents have the greatest responsibility for this issue. Consequently, this also means that parents' perceptions about gender play an important role in children's gender socialization (Kollmayer et al., 2018). Because children are seen as products from the gender socialization of gender-segregated play (Weisgram & Dinella, 2018). And the way parents act towards their children, in this case through gender and toys, is strengthened by gender stereotypical perceptions (Endendijk et al., 2013), which then also indicates that studies about parents is relevant.

The results of these studies made on the subject are mixed and looking at existing data it is possible to see that mainly quantitative methods have been used. This further implies that there is room to investigate the phenomena more deeply with a qualitative approach to reach how, what, and why and to interpret these from its context. It has been said that the connection between parents' consumption and gender do not receive enough in-depth analysis, which can be reached with a qualitative approach (Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000). Therefore, we must look for other ways to make sense of this gender difference regarding toys. To my knowledge gender-segregation among toys have not yet been examined together in one study in relation to parents and their perception about it. Thus, this study will focus on perceptions about gender-segregated toys and how it is discussed among parents. And it is critical to understand the perception of gender and toys from parents since it is related to consequences for the children,



even later in life. Therefore, I argue that the subject needs to be studied from a different angle using a qualitative approach. Clearly, there is an inevitable rise in gender-neutral and gender-bending among retailers, but is it consistent with what consumers, in this case parents, and what they understand about gender and toys?

Since it is easier for people to express opinions, beliefs, and perceptions online when people are hiding behind a screen and do not have to take responsibility for their actions or way of communicating a netnographic method will be used. With this I argue that using a quantitative approach or a qualitative use of interviews respondents can feel the pressure to answer in a specific way that they believe is expected from them and where they have to explain their thoughts further. This is not necessary while talking about a phenomenon online. Today it is easy for people to express their opinions and perceptions online which makes it interesting to look at parents' perceptions from this perspective. Therefore, a netnographic approach will be used and an online forum explored to study the research question of this paper. An integrated approach on parents, gender, and toys and how it really is discussed has not been undertaken yet. So, with this approach and using discourse analysis the study provides an important first in the missing piece. Also by using a qualitative method on the subject the study can help to draw or re-make the map over an area, as well as also being helpful to identify the most interesting relations in a social phenomenon for other scholars later (Kozinets, 2015).

By using netnography and discourse analysis as a method it is possible to study the use of language and its contextual essence. Discourse here makes it possible to understand parents' perceptions within a greater social context (Nichols, 2002). This rather implies that reaching naturally occurring interactions and investigating the way people relationally construct realities about gender and toys through discourse will be possible. Because the way we speak about things affect the way we act (Paltridge, 2012). The goal for this research is therefore to look into perceptions and how they are expressed to build awareness and share knowledge among the overall public as well as among retailers and other actors in society about the impact on gender-segregation.

Within this report the words sex and gender will be used, which will be described further down in the study. Important to mention is though that in this paper mostly female and male will be mentioned as sex and gender since many of the earlier studies have been with the outline of these two genders. Although this is with an understanding that there are more than two genders and that it in some cases might exclude people with different gender identities.

## 1.2 Aim and Research Question

This paper aims to explore parents' perceptions about gender-segregation when it comes to toys for children. And to be able to reach the perceptions we need to see how the subject is discussed. Therefore, as a result of the above problematization and aim, the study will intend to answer the following question:

*- How is the subject of gender and toys discussed among parents?*

## 2. Theory

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The following chapter presents the theoretical background which the study is built on. The chapter deals with gender, toys, retailers influence, parents choosing toys, and everything that it includes. By the end of the chapter, discourse will be presented and how it can be connected to the subject discussed.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Gender and Toys

Scholars usually separates sex and gender were sex is something that is determined biologically at birth and is based on the differences between males and females (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Hyde, Bigler, Joel, Tate & van Anders, 2019). Gender is a much debated subject and complicated to define. Back in the 80's West and Zimmerman (1987) described it as “*an activity to handle behavior with the consideration of normative perceptions about attitude and activities suitable for a person's sex category*” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to Hyde et al. (2019) gender is something that is constructed socially and includes norms, roles and expectations for females and males which can then also vary depending on other various factors like masculinity, femininity, identity, and gender-conformity and nonconformity. Today gender is something that is well discussed in many different aspects and Butler (2011) is discussing gender as something that people are said to have, or an attribute that people are said to be. She is discussing the fact that gender is constructed but is arguing that if it is constructed, it could also be constructed differently. Butler is also extending the view of gender by arguing that gender should be seen as cultural or discursive. At the same time, she is asking that if gender can be constructed, could it also be a choice? (Butler, 2011). Butler says:

“... *what the person “is,” and, indeed, what gender “is,” is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined.*” (Butler, 2011, p15)

This implies that gender is a complex subject. Pryke, Rose, and Whatmore (2003) discuss Butler which argues that gender is not only constructed by powerfully productive discourses, but also

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of the chapter *Theory* have been used in previous papers by the author, however, this thesis is an extension of these papers and provides a deeper understanding about the subject by using additional literature and studying the phenomenon from a different angle. Thus, the thesis should be separated from the previous papers.

bodies. It is said that gender is not natural but rather artificial and that we should see our bodies in the same way, but only because discourse makes us see them like that (Pryke et al., 2003). Butler (2011) is arguing that men are seen as the original subject and that women “are the other sex”, this with the association of mind being masculine and body feminine. Therefore, the materiality of the body should also be seen as constructed (Pryke et al., 2003). Because the body exists before and beyond its discursive construction (Pryke et al., 2003), and is simply produced by discourse (Butler, 2011).

Gender stereotypes and gender-roles also focus on behavioral aspects of being a woman or a man. So, gender is not created at birth but is developed thereafter from norms in society. Gender is rooted in the traditional family structures where the female is seen as a homemaker including household and shopping and the male as the breadwinner (Teller & Thomson, 2012). And these distinctions between females and males impact the market system (McKeage, Crosby & Rittenburg, 2018). Because societal gender-roles and expectations within the marketplace can be excluded for many people who have identities that are outside these gender-roles (McKeage et al., 2018). Butler, (2011) describes this as the cultural matrix from which gender identity has become understandable demands that some kind of identities cannot “exist”. This since some gender identities do not meet the standards of cultural understanding, but rather appear as failures in that area (Butler, 2011).

Individuals have many social identities depending on the situation. One may be a friend, spouse, professional, citizen, and many other things to many different people, or the same person at different times (West & Zimmerman, 1987). An identity that is integrated with our understanding of who we are is our gender identity (Sandhu, 2017), and the disagreements about the meaning of gender establish the need for a rethinking of the categories of identity (Butler, 2011). Because gender is not something that has been or will be consistent. The meaning of gender is changing and so must society also change with it. But when a person's identity is under threat it is possible to see that people avoid environments where their desired identity is not supported and immerse themselves in social environments where they are (Avery, 2012). One way to express a gender identity is through appropriate consumption that is reflecting the gender identity (Avery, 2012; Sandhu, 2017). So already when adults purchase toys they start the process for the children to create a gender identity.

Gender stereotypes are shaped among parents from beliefs and behaviors of men and women (Endendijk et al., 2013). And parents are role models for children and the gender-typed behavior

of themselves will be passed on to the children since parents tend to reward children for engaging in gender-typed activities (Fisher-Thompson, 1993). Studies about this suggest that parents' differences in gender-typed behavior may influence their parenting in many ways (Endendijk et al., 2013). Thus, research also shows that children use gender stereotypes in their play with toys to identify gender-roles and to form ways to look, act, and think (Reich et al., 2018). So, what we do know is that segregation of gender among children starts mainly with parents at a low age and remains until adulthood (Fine & Rush, 2018).

### 2.1.1 Toys Importance

Toys have great importance for children and their development, including the development of gender roles and gender identity. They are part of shaping their experiences, affecting their behaviors, and enhancing their imagination (Yilmaz, 2016). And special attention has been given to the toys used in the family environment since it has been shown that they affect children during the period of their early development. Playing is an essential part of children's development and toys can be used for educational aims as well (Yilmaz, 2016). Because the ideal learning experience comes from a combination of virtual content, physical experience, and imagination (Yilmaz, 2016).

The differences in toy choices may support activities that have an impact on the development of sex-linked cognitive abilities and sex-linked personality traits (Alexander, Wilcox & Woods, 2009). And one way for children to meet the gendered world is through toys and playing since the play is a way for the children to connect with the gender roles and stereotypes (Weisgram & Brunn, 2018). Also, social experiences develop gender schemas, like a cognitive network of associations between gender and activities, in this case, play, and beliefs prescribed by society to that gender (Alexander et al., 2009).

## 2.2 Retailers Influence on Gender-segregation

When it comes to retailers, their purpose is to become part of consumers individual and group identity creation (Borghini, Diamond, Kozinets, McGrath, Muniz & Sherry, 2009). And retail spaces are seen as cultural resources where consumers can create and practice their identities (Varman & Belk, 2012), including gender identities. The fact that retailers are an important aspect to consider in this study is because they have a great influence on customers who buy

toys, in this case parents. So, it is of relevance to understand how retail is working on gender-segregation and in that way might have an impact on parents' perception and discussion about gender and toys. Because it is not a secret that retailers have been and still segregate their stores and products after gender. Companies separate departments, sections, and shelves in feminine and masculine, and their products are targeted to the gender of the consumer, meaning they are seen to be suitable for either women or men rather than both (Sandhu, 2017). A lot of brands are gendered in which they have masculine and feminine dimensions, yet managers are struggling to maximize their sales to both genders (Azar et al., 2018). Some argue that segregation can lead to missed sale opportunities and that gender-neutral marketing is broadening the appeal of the product by another 50 percent of the target. This rather implies that marketers for toys would immediately double the potential market for all children, instead of just boys and just girls (Fine & Rush, 2018). However, it has been argued that a move to gender-neutral would be ineffective, given other sources of reinforcement of gender stereotypes (Fine & Rush, 2018).

The clearest way to segregate through gender in store and to lead consumers in their purchasing process is in the sense of colors. By taking a gender-neutral product and making it in the colors pink or blue it is automatically labeled for girls or boys (Reich et al., 2018). Gender differences regarding color preferences have been found in several studies, but it has also been stated that the perceived differences are not fully understood (Cohen, 2013). It is however influencing human performance and it is shown that changes in color can affect shopping intentions through cognitive and affective reactions (Babin, Hardesty, & Suter, 2003). Regarding color preferences, research presents results of no gender differences in infants where most of the children preferred reddish colors (Cohen, 2013). But when it comes to adults it is shown that women show a greater preference for pink and purple while men prefer blue (Bonnardel et al., 2018; Cohen, 2013; Fornazarič & Toroš, 2018), which then support studies saying that parents tend to buy toys that reflect their own interest, in this case colors. Beyond this however, other results indicate that females had blue and green as their favorite colors and that males prefer red more often (Sliburyte & Skeryte, 2014). There are no identified significant differences associated with black, white, or gray since both genders have shown the same preference for these tones (Fornazarič & Toroš, 2018). Interesting is though that at the beginning of the 20th century, pink was described as a stronger color that was appropriate for boys compared to blue which was more delicate (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Cohen, 2013). But something has changed since pink is now a gender maker for girls (Auster & Mansbach, 2012) which we can see in the

consumption of for example toys among parents. Social learning is a likely determinant of color preferences, but the preference usually starts with the parents who do the segregation for their children and shape the color preference according to gender for them (Cohen, 2013). So, parents teach their children that pink is for females and blue is for males (Hess & Melnyk, 2016) because these colors automatically activate our association of masculinity and femininity (Fine & Rush, 2018).

Marketers are however expanding the spectrum of gender by going from gendered brands to bringing women into the male customer base on male products and vice versa (Sandhu, 2017). Meaning that the separation between feminine and masculine products is becoming blurrier and the conception of “unisex” and gender-neutral products are increasing (Sandhu, 2017). Companies are thereby, to some extent, gender-bending their brands and are taking products that have been targeted for one sex and start targeting them to the other (Avery, 2012). Though, it might be difficult to attract the opposite gender when the brand itself is associated with one specific gender (Avery, 2012). Both women and men are engaged in gender-bending consumption, but despite the increase of gender-bending consumption, gender remains an important organizing construct (Avery, 2012). Gender-bending seems to be both theoretically and managerially relevant for companies since it influences, among others, purchase intentions in a positive way (Azar et al., 2018). Despite this, parents seem to choose toys according to gender, which will be further explored in the next section.

### 2.3 Parents Choosing Toys

Building on the concept that retail has an impact in various ways on how parents perceive gender in stores we further need to investigate how the actual choosing is performed according to gender. Parents, and other adults, are the ones purchasing toys for children, and when it comes to choosing toys there is a difference in the shopping behavior between men and women (Bihagen & Katz-Gerro, 2000; Tifferet & Herstein, 2012). Women are seen to make a more thought through purchases than men regarding gender consumption (Tifferet & Herstein, 2012). However, both men and women do prefer brands and products that express their own gender identity, but women tend to purchase more masculine and gender crossing brands than men purchase feminine ones (Avery, 2012; Wolin, 2003). Men also tend to avoid gender-neutral brands more than women (Avery, 2012). This means that women have a less traditional view on gender stereotypes than men (Endendijk et al., 2013). One study shows that there is a difference in purchasing for older and younger children where parents seem to buy more gender

stereotyped toys for older children, in this case over 3 years, and less gender stereotyped toys for the younger children (Fisher-Thompson, 1993). In contrast there is also a study that indicates that adults buy less gendered toys for their own children compared to adults that buy for other children (Fisher-Thompson, 1993). Despite this, we can see that parents spend a lot of time playing with gender-typed toys where girls are encouraged to play with more feminine toys like dolls and beauty products, and boys with stereotypical masculine toys such as trucks and guns, etc. (Boe & Woods, 2018; Weisgram & Brunn, 2018). And feminine toys are often more stereotyped by adults than masculine toys (Weisgram & Brunn, 2018). Research also shows that parents of boys tend to discourage their sons from engaging in feminine activities but rather to traditional masculine activities (Auster & Mansbach, 2012).

There are individual differences in the degree to which parents endorse gender stereotypes, where parents who weakly endorse gender stereotypes may choose fewer gender-typed toys for their children as well as more gender-neutral toys (Weisgram & Brunn, 2018). However, parents are not always consistent in what they preach and practice (Kollmayer et al., 2018), since they often tend to match the gender of the child to the cultural gender associations of toys, even if they preach that the gender of the toys does not matter (Weisgram & Brunn, 2018). And this becomes an important factor regarding how parents discuss the subject of gender and toys.

It is also important to understand that parent's practices such as reinforcement, modeling, and direct tuition, are influenced by society's view of masculinity and femininity and the construction of gender (Boe & Woods, 2018). And research has also found that caregivers and educators provide gendered toys that are stereotypical masculine or feminine to children as well as they encourage or discourage different types of play depending on the child's sex (Reich et al., 2018). So, we see that to a greater extent parents are involved in the issue of gender-segregation among toys since they mostly choose according to gender for their children. However, even if a parent tries to give more gender-neutral toys to their child, other adults in the child's surroundings can still reinforce the stereotypes. With or without the parents' awareness.

## 2.4 Children Choosing Toys

During the childhood years, parents are able to control their children's purchases (Brusdal & Berg, 2010). While the choice of toys may be individual, it is as mentioned before, at the same time shaped by society's expectations, even for children (Reich et al., 2018). And it is known



that children tend to prefer toys that are stereotypically identified with their gender (Kollmayer et al., 2018). The social and cognitive development of the play is important for children, but toys are not equal in the developmental opportunities they afford (Fine & Rush, 2018). And the focus for children will lie on the visual attributes, such as color, on toys (Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, Smink, Van Noort, & Buijzen, 2017).

While choosing a toy there are differences between boys and girls and their choosing (Brusdal & Berg, 2010). Boys hold more clear gender stereotypes than girls (Endendijk et al., 2013), because girls are more flexible and likely to find gender-neutral toys more appealing and can play with both pink and blue toys (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Fine & Rush, 2018). Research presents that boys tend to choose toys more after characteristics including active bodies while girls use their bodies more like a display for example with fashion and style (Brusdal & Berg, 2010). When the children are older and handle their own money, we can see that girls tend to spend their money on clothes while boys consume more electrical products like computers (Brusdal & Berg, 2010). Both girls and boys spend the same amount of money on candy and mobile phones (Brusdal & Berg, 2010). However, it is important to note that further research shows that gender segregation influences children's perception of what play is appropriate for their gender (Reich et al., 2018). It also guides children's way of playing by making and strengthening the social roles of gender for them, giving them the direction of how to choose (Reich et al., 2018).

## 2.5 Discourse

The literature presented above is mostly oriented towards finding casualties and reasons, however, there are other ways of researching this. We can understand this phenomenon through discourse and ask how we can understand these differences by analyzing the language. By approaching the subject in terms of discourse we can look at how the subject is discussed and performed in a concrete setting and expand the view of social worlds (Kozinets, 2011). And by using another analysis method the studies can complement each other and add to the missing part of the research gap. Discourse is according to Strauss and Feiz (2013) seen as a social and cognitive process of putting the world into words, and Bryman (2012) suggests that discourse analysis of language is not about understanding the world as most quantitative and qualitative research methods. Discourse in general means transforming perceptions, experiences, emotions, and understandings into a common medium for expression and communication through language (Strauss & Feiz, 2013). And a discourse analysis can emphasize the way

versions of society, of the world, events, and inner psychological worlds are produced (Bryman, 2012). It is about what is being said about a subject, by whom, and how (Pryke et al., 2003) which is argued to be helpful in this research.

One approach in discourse is critical discourse analysis (CDA) which centers on discourse as social practice and uses a micro-level analysis of discourse (Strauss & Feiz, 2013). CDA aims to analyze text, speech, advertisement or books etc., by exposing strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface but may have the tendency to shape representation of events and persons (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 2008). It is about uncovering the process of how power abuse, control, injustice, and inequality are created or re-created in social life (Strauss & Feiz, 2013). So, CDA is used to uncover these practices and processes and make them clear by explaining them (Strauss & Feiz, 2013).

Power has a great part in many researcher's use of discourse and Howarth (2007) suggests that the construction of discourse is, among others, about expressing power and structuring of relations between different social agents. Howarth (2007) refers to Foucault (1993) in this sense and explains that the language within the subjects has the power for people to make serious claims of truth because of their education, their institutional place, and their way of speaking. Even though power is used by many researchers using discourse it will not be the main focus of this study.

Language is part of the discourse and seen as an action and not as an abstract system filled with rules, even if many researchers using discourse also analyze things such as grammar. Yet language is also a way to perform actions and can affect our way to feel, see, experience, and think (Svensson, 2019). Beyond this, however, discourse is much more than just language (Bryman, 2012; Strauss & Feiz, 2013; Svensson, 2019). It reaches out further as well as creates meaning that can be the focus of analysis because nothing in discourse is natural (Strauss & Feiz, 2013). Every time people express something in words or symbols they reveal something about how they perceive the world, they understand something about how others perceive the world and they guide others to see the world in various ways (Strauss & Feiz, 2013; Svensson, 2019). It is a way of getting deeper into comprehension and what meaning language and other symbols play for people's perception of the world and how they act against other people (Svensson, 2019).

According to Svensson (2019) discourse analysis means that the social reality and our knowledge about the world are created by humans. This rather implies that the only world that is existing is the world that we perceive, so the question of how the reality “really” is constituted is irrelevant in people's lives since they are living their lives through experiences (Svensson, 2019).

## 2.6 Using discourse to understand gender and toys

As the paper aims to explore parents' perceptions about gender-segregation when it comes to toys for children, discourse will be used not to understand the world but rather to connect perceptions to the discussion about gender and toys. This since it is about trying to understand the meaning of actions and their context in an absent social world (Kozinets, 2011). And parents are active through discursive resources to interpret their children (Nichols, 2002).

Discourse is playing a great part in parenting practices (Nichols, 2002), which strengthen the use of it in this study. When an analysis is made of parents' descriptions of their children, the categories they create tell us a lot about the groups they assign their children and what activities that are appropriate for these groups (Nichols, 2002). With the discourse it will be possible to connect relations and structures in the conversations about gender and toys and to go beyond only the words used. There are also practices that are associated with the normative aspect of discourse (Nichols, 2002) telling us that the approach of discourse analysis as a framework is interesting in the sense of gender and toys and the way parents discuss the subject. So, discourse will be used to explore these parents' perceptions of gender and toys and how they perceive other perceptions through discourse. When people express something, spoken or written, they tell us how they see the world (Paltridge, 2012), and it is through the discourse it will become recognizable how they see it within the subject of gender-segregated toys. We talk and act in one way in a certain activity and we talk and act in another way in another activity (Gee, 2014).

## 3. Methodology

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In the method chapter, the choice of approach and method is presented and motivated. Thereafter, the way the study was executed and how the material was analyzed is described.

### 3.1 Research Approach

The study is taking a qualitative approach using netnography, online research, as a data collection method to study the research question. As this research aims to explore parents' perceptions about gender-segregated toys and how the subject is discussed it was chosen to use netnography as a method and study the discussions online. This since netnography has been found to be useful in the work to uncover, among others, discursive- and interaction styles (Kozinets, 2015). It is also right in time to investigate through online communities as it has an endless range of material to work with. The internet has changed the conditions on relations between people and the rhythm that characterizes the movement in and between time and space, which makes it an interesting platform to study (Berg, 2015). And according to Bryman (2012) ethnographies (which can be seen as the mother of netnography) have in more recent years increasingly come to focus on online communities. Connected to this study and the investigation of an online platform is online environments seen as a place where consumers often participate with the attempt to inform or try to impact other consumers about a subject of interest (Kozinets, 2015). Many researchers have also used netnography to study online communities (Kozinets, 2015) which then promote the choice of the method. It is also well understood since the method usually is more economical in terms of time and money since it is possible to reach and collect data quickly as well as a large number of data can be found (Berg, 2015; Bryman, 2012). So, the problem with netnography is not to find material, instead, the challenge is to find relevant material (Berg, 2015). And this is according to Berg (2015) mostly clear in studies of discussion platforms where you can find an endless range of threads and comments.

Bryman (2012) describes four types of online interaction where the researcher's participation is measured. According to these types, number two is considered the most suitable to describe this study. This type Bryman (2012) describes as study of online interaction with some participation. This means that the study is typically examining blogs or discussion groups where the researcher is not passive but instead are intervening (overtly or covertly) to some extent in ongoing postings and discussions (Bryman, 2012). For this study, this means that the researcher

mostly has collected and analyzed the data in the form of “lurking”, meaning without the users of the platform being aware of the researcher's presence, but also that the researcher became a member on the platform and covertly created and have been participating in a thread discussing the subject. This will be closely described in the upcoming section.

## 3.2 Data Collection

To study how gender-segregated toys are discussed among parents with a netnographic approach, the platform Familjeliv.se (translated to familylife.se) was chosen since it is a platform for parents. Familjeliv.se is a platform aimed for parents, future parents, or others who are in some way affected by parenting. The platform consists of different discussion forums but also blogs and magazines and various online tools where parents can find all sorts of information. The site started in 2003 and has been rewarded with the title “Sweden’s best community” twice (Familjeliv.se, n.d.). It is also ranked as Sweden’s second-biggest online platform (<http://www.svenskaforum.com/>).

On the website there are endless threads with all kinds of discussion boards regarding anything when it comes to family life, parenting, health, pregnancy, etc. So, to narrow it all down to find threads that had the characteristics needed for this study the search function was used to make it easier to find threads that discussed the subject of toys and gender. Searches were made with these following words: *leksaker*, *leksaker*, *kön*, *flickleksaker*, *pojkleksak*, *segregering*, *leksaksbutik*, *könssegregering* and *könsuppdelade leksaker* (in English: *toy*, *toys*, *gender*, *girl’s toy’s*, *boy’s toy’s*, *segregation*, *toyshop*, *gender-segregation* and *gender-segregated toys*). From these search words all the threads that included some of these words were saved. After saving the links to the threads an investigation was made where all the original posts/questions were read. After this all the threads that did not include gender and toys in the original post/question were deleted. The use of the search function does not guarantee that the thread showing actually includes the words in the original post. The threads that were then chosen had to have the characteristics of including discussions about toys and gender and not just toys in general. It was considered that if the original post was asking about something else which then evolved into gender and toys it was not seen as relevant for this study since the discussions would not handle the subject of interest from the beginning. Using these characteristics, threads from 2004 to 2018 were found and from that a decision was made to focus on threads that were no older than 10 years since they seemed to be too outdated to be studied. So, from 2010 all threads

found that were within the characteristics described above, in this case nine, were analyzed and used in the study.

In addition to these already existing threads I decided to also create a thread. This decision was made since it would give data from the present which was seen as valuable data. To be able to create a thread it was then necessary to create an account on Familjeliv.se. The account was created with a fiction name and had no presentation or information on the profile. With my own created thread, it was also possible to form the question in a suitable way for this study. I was participating covertly since the other users were not aware that this thread was made for research purposes. In the discussion that took place the comments made by me were formulated as neutral as I could so that I could maintain as objective a role as possible. Thereby comments by me were mainly made by following up questions in an attempt to get as many opinions out of the people who commented as possible. This thread is seen as a good complement to the study.

All quotes from the threads presented in the results section are freely translated into English by me. The emphasis has not been to translate word by word, although it has been done to the greatest extent possible, but rather to convey the essence of the comments. The comments are then being written in the same way as in the threads regarding start, end, full stop, capital letters and extensions of words, etc. However, it is with an understanding that the translation could have weaknesses since English is not the author's native language. Yet there is not seen to be another way to handle the translation within the frames of this paper.

### 3.2.1 Threads

Since the platform is in Swedish will the titles and, further on in the thesis, comments be freely translated by the author. The chosen threads are:

#### **No 1. Toys**

(Swedish title: Leksaker)

This thread contains 191 comments, has been read 16 571 times, and was posted 28th of April 2010. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix A1)

#### **No 2. What research says about children's gender roles**

(Swedish title: Vad forskningen säger om barnens könsroller).

The second thread was posted 9th of November 2010, has been read 11 171 times, and has 120 comments. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix A2)

**No 3. The gender hysteric people in for a new attack - LEGO the next target** (Swedish title: Könshysterikerna till ny attack - LEGO nästa mål)

Post from 6th of March 2012 that has been read 13 620 times with 389 comments. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix B1)

**No 4. Why can't boys be boys and girls be girls anymore???**

(Swedish title: varför får inte pojkar vara pojkar och flickor vara flickor längre???)

This thread was posted 31 of March 2012 and contains 428 comments and has been read 16 416 times. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix B2)

**No 5. Is Lego a gender-neutral toy?**

(Swedish title: Är lego en könsneutral leksak?)

This was posted on the 12th of March in 2013 and has been read 16 759 times with a total of 286 comments. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix C)

**No 6. How important do you think it is to give a gender-neutral childhood to the children?**

(Swedish title: Hur viktigt tycker du det är att ge en könsneutral uppväxt till barnen?)

The sixth post was conducted 10th of March 2014 with 31 comments. It has been read 2 407 times. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix D)

**No 7. Never again mcdonalds!**

(Swedish title: Aldrig mer mcdonalds!).

Thread written 9th of November 2015. It has been read 3 511 times and includes 150 comments. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix E1)

**No 8. The grandmother did not allow the son to buy Barbie!**

(Swedish title: Sonen fick inte köpa Barbie för sin farmor!).

Posted 25th of August 2015 and read 19 178 times with 140 comments. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix E2)

### **No 9. Tips on how to cope with the princess age**

(Swedish title: Tips på hur bemöta prinsessåldern).

This thread was posted on the 27th July 2018 and has 99 comments. The thread has been read 14 704 times. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix F)

### **No 10. Gender-segregated toys?**

(Swedish title: Könnssegregerade leksaker?)

This thread was created by me on 23 of March 2020 and had by the date of the 20th of April 45 comments. (See the translated post and link to the original thread in appendix G)

With these threads have in total 1 834 comments been read and analyzed.

## 3.3 Data Analysis

Researchers using netnography on online communities need to be strategic in the way of choosing material and the analytical work needs to be done parallel to the data collection (Berg, 2015). Using discourse as an analysis method is according to Svensson (2019) suitable when a researcher is interested in the language and its meaning in people's everyday life. Therefore, discourse analysis has been conducted as an analysis method in this research.

A brief plan was created before collecting the data at Familjeliv.se, however, it was important to keep an open mind to what could come as the analysis process started. The original plan included the following aspects in the discourse analysis conducted; *get knowledge about what is important and less important focus areas, the formation of groups, how and by what means communication in this context takes place including language and symbolism, investigate how the discussion evolves, study hierarchy and how research is used to strengthen people's opinions*. Profiles were also at the beginning of interest and the idea was to check the people behind the comments to be able to analyze which gender is more representative in the comments. However, while starting to view the material it was soon understood it would be difficult to investigate people behind the comments since a lot of the profiles no longer existed or did not have anything written on their presentations. Some users also commented anonymously which made it problematic to investigate who was writing. Although, a lot of the profiles are still active users and some of them have a presentation about themselves and their family.



Field notes were kept during the analysis work, in this case, field notes mean that notes about the threads and the comments were made during the reading process. Notes were at the beginning including the aspects of the plan made, presented above, but as the analysis went on other things that drew my attention in various ways were added. After analyzing the comments an analysis of the notes started. The first part was to search for similarities and differences among them. Some aspects were noticed first after analyzing a few threads, which meant that I had to go back to threads I already analyzed to see if the phenomenon found existed even in those. In this case, the search function within the threads was used at Familjeliv.se since it is possible to search for a specific word and only see comments including this word. Meaning that if I needed to see if a specific subject were discussed in the thread, I could search for it without having to read all the comments again.

From the analysis, themes have been created. Themes are seen in many qualitative methods (Bryman, 2012) and have been useful also in this study. It was necessary in the analysis process to break down the material, in this case the field notes, into more themes than expected from the plan for a clearer separation of the different aspects within the discussions. However, the themes are not seen as an analysis method but rather as a helpful framework in the analysis process. A thematic use for the material can help an author to manage the data but it does not necessarily tell them how to identify it (Bryman, 2012). A researcher can analyze and sort the material in many different ways to see what people are talking, or in this case writing, about. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) emphasize the importance of “socializing” with the data to be able to see it more clearly since it can be sorted differently and depends on how you look at it. This has also been helpful in the analysis since I had to go back to material already analyzed to look at it with a different perspective to see the phenomenon that earlier was not noticed. In this way the analyzer then pays attention to both *what* and *how* in the material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015).

Within the discourse analysis there has not been a focus on the written language but rather acknowledge it as a part of the analysis. Since that e.g. grammar is not seen as important in the study of discussions online. However, discourse is often connected to language and especially grammar and word use, but in this analysis the underlying issues and values in the discourse were of more interest. A discourse analysis is also about the usage of the relationship between the language and context (Paltridge, 2012). So, the discourse analysis has rather been focusing on how opinions and perceptions have been communicated and what has been seen as an important discussion base for the members of Familjeliv.se. The discourse analysis has also

been used to see how values and beliefs are communicated and how the language use relates to its social context. It has also been important in the discourse analysis to examine how language functions and how meaning is created in this social context of an online forum. How the parents understand gender and toys. The development and how a conversation is organized has also been important in discourse analysis and how people interpret what someone else is saying in that particular situation (Paltridge, 2012). This rather implies that the evolution of the conversations and the interaction between the members has been analyzed. As discourse analysis focuses on social aspects of communication (Machin & Mayr, 2012) it has further been used to investigate the ways in which people use language to achieve specific effects.

### 3.4 Limitations

Considering limitations this thesis is not an exception. A challenge with a netnographic study can be to know the amount of data that is needed to make a valid research, but Silverman (2007) means that the quality of the empirical data largely depends on the skills of the researcher. In this study were 10 threads with 1 834 comments considered to be enough data. Another approach is the fact that it is impossible to know if all the users commenting on the posts are parents. This since, as mentioned before, a lot of the profiles are still not active or anonymous. It is also, because of this, impossible to know the gender of the users which means that the results may or may not be heterogeneous. Connected to the anonymous comments there is also a risk that so-called *internet trolls* have been entering the discussions, in other words people who write on internet forums with the purpose of provoking emotional responses, arguments, or misunderstandings. This would then have an impact on the discussion in general and so affect the analysis and results of the study.

Lastly, the ambition is often to be able to generalize results in a study (Alvehus, 2019). But the qualitative research approach as well as the methods used affect the generalizability of the research (Silverman, 2007). There is however a difference between empirical and theoretical generalizability (Alvehus, 2019). This thesis has focused on one specific platform active in Sweden and is therefore not able to generalize the empirical results. It is questionable whether the results fit into other similar social platforms in other parts of the world. However, a theoretical generalization might be possible since it is about showing that the paper can be used to explore a bigger phenomenon (Alvehus, 2019). The reader will not get generalized statements (in this case about parents' perceptions about gender-segregated toys) but rather

concepts that will help to understand the bigger phenomenon (Alvehus, 2019). So, it is considered that the study will provide a first piece of this kind on the Swedish market and give an understanding about the subject. It will provide a suggestion of how parents view gender and toys. The results of the study cannot however be transferable to other countries. But the same netnographic and discourse analysis method can be used to study how parents discuss the subject on other similar platforms like Familjeliv.se.

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

Throughout the process of conducting this study ethical considerations have been under discussion. To maintain the ethics in the study it is important that the participants get the full information of the study they participate in (Bryman, 2012). However, in this study that has not been the case. Because netnography differs from traditional face-to-face methods such as ethnography, interviews, and focus groups by using material that has not been specifically and confidentially provided to the researcher (Kozinets, 2011). So, the biggest ethical issue here is the fact that the users have not been giving their consent to be studied. Even though some of the users who have been active in the threads are not fundable anymore, are there still some profiles that contain some information about the person and their family. Although, when registering on Familjeliv.se it is up to every person how much information they want to give about themselves. They are also very aware that people can enter their profiles and read the presentation, with or without an account. Some have chosen just age and if they have children, while others have a little more information in the presentation, however, none of the profiles read during this study used their real name. The platform and all the threads are also open for the public to read, also here with or without an account on the site, which means that the users commenting know that their comments might be read by a lot of people. However, regarding this, is there some ethical issues that might be up for discussion. According to Bryman (2012) has there been some debates in recent years about the “lurking” in online communities since it is disliked by the members of the platforms. And Kozinets (2011) argues that even if the users of these communities know that their comments can be public does it not automatically mean that they want academics or scholars to use the data as they want. With respect to the members on the platform and to overcome the ethical issues is it in the result chapter not possible to see who was writing the comments. The comments are also translated which will make it harder to search for the exact comment among the threads who are in Swedish. And since the few members who have a presentation do not use any real name of themselves or their family members it is not seen to be problematic since the people behind the presentations cannot be

identified. In the study I also do not investigate individual people but rather the members, in this case parents, as a whole. The platform is open for anyone and this research is only putting the comments in context and is not interested in the individual people. The greatest ethical issue is though the fact that there is a covertly participation in one thread. However, to overcome these issues is it in the result also not possible to know from which thread the comments are from. The comments presented in the result are mixed from all the threads and are not presented one by one. Within the interaction with the members I also answered comments with questions and did not argue or comment on the person's opinions or perceptions. With this it is seen as all the measures possible is taken into account in the study to protect the members of the platform. Despite the ethical issues this method is considered as a better option for the study since it is argued to provide a more valid view of the group studied.

## 4. Results and Analysis

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This part includes a presentation and analysis of the results of the study. It starts with a general description about how the threads are build up and used, to give the reader a better understanding of how the platform is used, it then continues with how the language is used in threads. Following this is the results of the content of the discussions and its different side subjects that they include. The section ends with a concluding analysis of the results.

### 4.1 The threads

The threads are built up with an original post with or without a question that initiates discussion. Then it is free for members to comment their opinions about the subject. One function on the platform is that when you want to add a comment in the thread you can either just post a regular comment or you can choose another person's comment and answer directly to them, which makes it easier to have discussions. There is a like or dislike function in the threads with a symbol of thumbs up or thumbs down, but when using this it is not possible to see who liked or disliked the comments. In this way you can give credit to a person without having to comment yourself. But it also means that you can reject a person's comments without having to take responsibility for it or to explain yourself. This function is however not frequently used but you can see an increase in the use of it from 2015. Although it is very seldom used.

While analyzing the data I could see a lot of similarities between the different threads. The way of writing, the way to intensify some words to make the comment and the argument stronger, and the way the discussions evolved was the same over the years. The people commenting in the threads are making a lot of generalizations about every subject mentioned and it can be hard to follow the discussions. This since there often are two or three people who have more intense discussions in the thread and then new people start to comment on either their discussion or just answer to the original post/question. This also makes it more difficult to follow a straight line in the thread. But it is also why the discussions can be exceptionally long. Because new people are constantly adding to already active discussions even if they were not in it from the beginning. In that way can also the people who started the discussion disappear after a while and new people have continued the same discussion.

Similar is also the way the original post/question is answered. Most of the threads, including the one created by me, get quite aggressive comments about their opinions. Even if the person wants to know other's opinions, people tend to comment on that person's opinions instead of

giving their own. Although two threads stand out in this case. One because the answers are more aggressive and one because they are the opposite. And noticed is that threads with more controversial opinions about gender and toys get more intense discussions. There are also different answers in the threads. There are the ones who are described above that do not give their own opinions but rather just comment on the original posters' opinions. Then there are the people who describe their children or what they do without answering the question, and there are those who just write what they think and explain how their children do it.

## 4.2 Use of language

As mentioned earlier in the paper will grammar not be the focus in the analysis of the data, however, it will be acknowledged. The threads are sharing a common way of writing the comments. Generally, you can see a great number of spelling mistakes and shortening of words. Other mistakes seen are the placement or the missing of the full stop and the missing capital letter at the beginning of a new sentence. You could also see a greater amount of “talking language” in the way people were writing since a lot also tended to write like you usually speak. For instance, spelling some words as you pronounce them instead of how they are correctly spelled. These writing formalities do not have to mean that the people writing are bad at grammar but rather might imply that the person writing is putting their arguments out in affection which could indicate that they are not thinking about correct writing.

When it comes to the use of language it has been analyzed that a great number of people tend to use words trying to convince that the other(s) are wrong. While reading all these comments a lot of them included an “I am right, and you are wrong” attitude. Comments including this could, for example, have this start:

*“YOU are wrong...”*

Or:

*“Wrong, that's not how it is...”*

Another way to express this is by stating that what you are saying is obvious. One example of that is how a person was commenting:

*“Obviously, it is like this...”*

The usage of these words indicate confidence in the statements but also a way for the people to teach others what is right and what is not. This since language contributes to the production of for instance: everyday knowledge, facts, norms, patterns of action, and habits (Svensson, 2019). So, by starting their comments with these words they seem to try to show power in their knowledge. In contrast to that is the use of emojis which often seem to be used to make the comment more friendly, or to make sure that people are not being mad about the person's opinion. This phenomenon could be connected to hedging which Machin and Mayr (2012) describe as a way to avoid directness in the communication and to make a distance from our opinions by trying to reduce the risk of unwelcome answers. This is also shown by people who at the end of a comment wrote for example:

*“I don't know, this is just my opinion.”*

This can also be a way to avoid being part of a more intense discussion. There are however people who do the opposite by wanting to show their commitment to the discussion. Because the way we use language in everyday life is a way of expressing levels of involvement which is more important for others (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Further on is the “you are wrong” attitude also analyzed to be a way to show power in communication. Because a battle of experiences can evolve to a fight about language (Howarth, 2007). It is analyzed how members in the use of language also blame others for misinterpreting their comments which can be seen as a way of protecting themselves and putting blame on others. Yet, this is incorrect since individuals are aware of how words can be interpreted differently and that words potentially can have many meanings (Machin & Mayr, 2012). However, it can be easier for the members to blame others for not reading or interpret it the right way instead of analyzing how they could have written it differently to get people to understand them better.

In general, it was considered to be a good language used (good language meaning not using bad or offensive words) in the threads even though there in some cases evolved into more heavy discussions. Even if some users were having quite an intense discussion and did not agree with one another, not many of them did use bad language like swearing. This with one exception. In the thread about toys at McDonald's, there was a lot of swearing and bad language throughout most parts of the thread, and the commenting members were not friendly to each other.

While the discussion evolved in the threads there was also a tendency to create own words to strengthen opinions regarding gender and toys. Especially about gender, some new made-up

words started to appear. Some examples are; gender parents, gender muppets, gender feminists, gender pedagogue, gender madness, gender thinking, and gender supporters. Showing that everything that includes the work with gender has their name for some people. These words were thus mainly made by people who had a more traditional way to look at gender and seemed to be quite upset in the discussions.

### 4.3 Gender and toys

*“Gee, are there really people with such opinions?”*

So, what are the arguments and perception about gender-segregation among toys? Like mentioned before there are a lot of similarities between the threads and while reading it is not possible to see if the comments were made 2010 or 2020 since the discussions are the same throughout the years. And a constant discussion in all the threads about gender and toys is whether boys and girls or women and men are different or not. Some make the statements that yes, we are different, and *“why is that so hard to understand?”*, while others say that there is no difference, *“we are just humans”*. Some also argue that there is a difference between the genders and that is why there is a difference among toys.

*“Of course, boys and girls are born with different characteristics, it’s called evolution...”*

*“Why take feminists myths into account and ignore the fact that girls and boys are different?”*

So, the arguments about differences in gender have its base in the fact that toys are segregated because of these gender differences. But on the other hand, a lot of people think that parents who buy stereotypical toys for their children and only see the difference in them have outdated values and opinions. One person even compared an outdated vision on stereotypical toys to believing the earth is flat.

*“Most young people in Sweden are sufficiently illuminated to understand that stereotypical toys are an outdated opinion. Almost like saying that the earth is flat : )”*

The segregation between the genders is also clear in the language since the members use words like “boy’s toys” and “girl’s toys”. And some of the toys that are particularly mentioned throughout the years are dolls for girls and cars for boys which correspond to the segregation presented under theory. Along with the comments about boy’s toys and girl’s toys there is a



discussion about whether some toys should or should not be gender-neutral and what effects it can have on the children. And here you can see that this is something that upset people.

*“I think that trying to make the children sexless by dressing them neutral or giving them neutral toys are ridiculous, and it is not the problem. We should just take us time to raise them to be equal.”*

*“It sounds like a lot of parents want to raise their children to be sexless robots... terrifying.”*

In this discussion some members demonstrate a fear against gender-neutral toys and argue that such toys will exclude the gendered toys. It seems like the discussion about having toys without the label *girl* or *boy* makes them think that their children cannot have a gender but must become sexless or seen as a non-binary. The values are black or white and there cannot be something in between. Arguments about this show that either you have gendered toys for boys and girls or there will be gender-neutral toys that will create children without gender. Even if they seem okay with the idea of boys playing with girls' toys or the opposite, they still connect it with people being sexless.

*“A future with androgyny creatures is terrifying, but a world with equal worth and rights for both genders sounds pleasing. Let us go that way instead when we raise our kids!”*

An overall approach is that discussions are shattered where some argue that segregation of toys is good and that it does not affect them since they let and want their children to play with what they want, despite colors. While others argue that the segregation of toys means that children are limited in their choices, that a child then only gets to choose between toys for girls or for boys instead of just playing with toys in general. Additional is some parents' own experiences where they argue that they have not been affected by gender segregation and neither will their children. But on the other hand, some parents have their own bad experiences with segregation and do not want their children to experience the same.

#### 4.4 The act of gender and toys

Further on is it then interesting to see the discussion about purchasing and choosing when it comes to gender-segregated toys. The arguments are also here shattered when one part means that they do not think about gender while buying or that it does not matter what their children are playing with, whether it is a pink doll or a blue car.

*“I have never thought about gender. I have thought, “fun toy, I need to buy that””*

However, there is a tendency among comments that the parents’ say that the color or the type of toy does not matter, while they in the same comment also say that they would not buy for example a doll for their boy. One example is a parent with children in both genders:

*“...I buy all the colors for my children except for pink for my boys, for my daughter, I bought all the colors, a lot of purple and pink.... For us, the colors don't matter on clothes or toys.”*

This reveals a contradiction. The person seems to intend the attitude that the colors do not matter since that is what is being said. But on the other hand does the same person state that she/he will not buy pink for the boys and at the same time mention that the colors for the daughter were a lot of pink and purple. Which is seen as stereotypical colors for girls. So, the idea is probably that the colors do not matter while the action shows something else. It is in the comments demonstrated that, as research shows, parents tend to not always be consistent in what they preach and practice (Kollmayer et al., 2018). Commonly, parents match the toys with the gender of the child even if they argue that the gender or the color of the toy does not matter (Weisgram & Brunn, 2018).

*“...I would never allow my son to buy girl’s toys, it is for girls and that’s just how it is.”*

This might then have to do with the fact that companies through colors and packages reinforce boys to compete and achieve while girls should nurture and collaborate (Fine & Rush, 2018), which for parents’ here indicates that the nurture characteristics by playing with dolls are not suitable for boys. Another way the contradiction is showed:

*“I would never buy pink clothes for my son if I had one, and not for myself either because I think that pink is a color for girls and not for grown-up women, boys or men. But if my son would like pink clothes himself, he should of course have it, but nothing I would choose to dress him in myself.”*

This kind of comment is common where parents state that they will not buy pink and girly things for their sons, but if they would like to have it, they will be allowed. Parents also prefer to buy gender-segregated toys and clothes for their children when they are small but want to let them choose when they are old enough. One approach to this is how the children would consider wanting things that are stereotypical for the other gender when the child has never been exposed to it or encouraged to play with it before. And as mentioned earlier do boys often choose not to

play with “girly” things just because it is labeled for girls, even if they desire to play with them (Weisgram & Dinella, 2018). Also if something has been banned from home and the child has not been allowed to have for example dolls like a small child, it might not be easy to choose it when the child is older, even if it then is allowed.

*“Right now, when they are little, I like to choose gender clothes. But when they can choose more, I will let them wear what they want. If the boy would like to use his sisters very pink sweater to kindergarten, be my guest”*

There is a fear shown in the discussions that other people will look at their children and use the wrong pronoun for them, which could be a reason to dress them in stereotypical clothes and buy stereotypical toys. But as mentioned above it also shows that many of the parents are contradictory. However, it is interesting why it is intimidating to have someone calling their child with the wrong pronoun. And what parents believe could harm the children if they did. Here it seems like it is more offensive for the parents if this situation would occur then it would for the children. And thereby do a lot of them argue that the use of gender segregated toys will save the children from this type of situation.

The results indicate that a great number of parents do not want to buy “girly” things, like dolls or pink toys for their boys, while the opposite is not even mentioned unless the parents themselves write about how they used things that stereotypically were made for the opposite gender. Reading this, discussions does not show that any of the parents would not buy a blue toy or a car for their girls. More likely the opposite. But there is also another group that means that the color or the type of toy does not matter for them while choosing a toy for their child. However, there is one concern that almost all the parents are agreeing on. The analysis shows that the majority of the members commenting just want the children to choose what they want. Even the people who would not buy pink things for the boys still believe that it is important that the children get to play with what they like. However, the perceptions are sometimes contradicted and seem to depend on the situation and the context. Because adults' choices are based on what is available to them in a particular context that takes place within a specific context of a situation where both are influenced by the language of the text (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In this particular context and within this culture that appears online in these discussions, do parents have one attitude on this platform while perhaps expressing it differently in reality in other contexts? While taking in what opinions others have about the issue, one can be

affected, and the beliefs strengthened in one way or the other. Hence, some might express their beliefs more extremely just on these forums.

## 4.5 Developments in the discussions

Gender-segregated toys bring up a lot of feelings and opinions as we can see in previous sections. As this rather implies other aspects also come into the discussions. In general, colors are included in every way possible in the discussions and will therefore not be dealt with in this part. However, below are the most common side subjects that the discussions evolved into presented. These are *equality, norms, biology, raising children, homosexuality, and research.*

### 4.5.1 Equality

*“I am strongly against feminism but very much for total equality...”*

While discussing gender and the segregation that exists among toys, do a lot of the parents connect it to gender equality. The discussions evolve into what prerequisites the children get because of segregation later in life. Words used to describe this are often that boys are tough, and girls are soft, and some are questioning why it has to be a difference between the characteristics of the children depending on gender. In some threads is the argument that men are more violent appearing. Comments saying that men are more criminal, that they can be violent in the sense of fighting and hitting others, that they are emotionless and aggressive. Talking about dolls, there are also people who argue that if boys do not connect with dolls during childhood, they will not develop the sense of taking care of people which will make them poor fathers. This is not an odd comparison even though the perceptions sound extreme. And it becomes interesting since research does show a connection between toys and violence. Stereotypes do have an impact on children and contribute to inequality in the long term, including domestic violence (Fine and Rush, 2018). These words then also brought up a discussion about men being oppressed.

*“Women... Always hysteric to the max.*

*Men are so oppressed.*

*All the time we should be so strong and tough and play with the right things.*

*Equality, my ass!”*

The Swedish word *hen* (a gender-neutral pronoun instead of she or he) is then also mentioned a lot and some are arguing that if there is no segregation everyone will become sexless and have a gender-neutral pronoun. And the ones who use this argument tend to be the people who believe that gender-segregation is something good, at least to some extent.

There are also a lot of comments where women like to assert themselves by saying that when they were children they played with typically toys made for boys, did not like pink, or did some sport that was considered to be a boys sport. This may be used to prove a point that even if you do not fit into the norms in society and do not follow the stereotypical play you can still be a good person. However, it seems like these people most of the time want to stand out and assert themselves. This since many of these comments are coming out of nowhere.

Within the discussion about equality connected to gender and toys is the subject of work and salary.

*“Sure, equality is good in some cases, like with pay gaps, etc. But a man cannot do the same as women can and vice versa. Humans are made like that. Just go out and see how it is among animals. We are also animals!!!”*

The discussion about salary and equality is nearly expected since the pay gap discussion is common in general while speaking about equality.

*“... Statistics show that women receive a lower starting salary than men, etc., etc. Your argument is old, but it is probably because of people like you that society does not reach equality... “*

*“Did you find any support for women being paid less and being discriminated against? Not? surprised.”*

#### 4.5.2 Norms in society

*“No, without norms girls are not necessarily drawn to "girly toys" (what is that?)”*

Connected to equality is the discussion about norms in society and what is being expected from people depending on their gender. Some parents are giving personal stories about not fitting into the norms when they were children and that they do not want it for today's children. Others

are saying that society's norms are good for the children and that it will make them less confused.

*“To make sure children adapt to functioning norms is a prerequisite for them to have choices in the future.”*

But norms are argued to be the reason why girls for example are drawn to the girly toys and vice versa. And this might cause problems for people who do not feel like they belong in the norms where they are supposed to be. Many people have the opinion that gender is in our nature. Although some also say that gender is constructed and that the children do not have a choice but to form from the already existing norms. But the socially constructed gender does include norms where there are specific expectations on females and males (Hyde et al., 2019). And the construction of gender and gender-roles might also exclude many people who have identities outside of the gender norms (McKeage et al., 2018) which some people also prove with their comments. But even if you have a gender identity within the norms it can be a negative experience growing up if you do not fit into feminine and masculine norms:

*“Yes, the roles both were and are clear. It has made me confused because I have never fit into the template that is suitable for girls / women according to the norms. Society has also not been late to point out when I chose wrong. I fall outside the norm, simply.”*

A person's identity can be under threat which means that a person can avoid environments where the identity is not supported. Further on can this cause children to be in environments which they are not comfortable with because of the norms. (Avery, 2012).

Another way to meet this discussion about norms is by humor which some people tend to do. It seems to be a way of getting the opinion out and answering to a discussion without having the intention to start, or continue, the fight about it. Because the discussion about gender and toys seems to make people have intense discussions, which some rather prefer to avoid.

*“I'M at least very happy to be born female. Thanks to the code in my double X chromosomes, I have an incurable interest in rags and thus always have a nice and clean home”*

Included in this conversation is also bullying. It is stated that if you go against the norms there is a possibility to get bullied as a kid. Some examples are brought up, e.g. that one boy (it is not mentioned who's) got a pink bike and then got bullied for it. However, it is also clear that this is nothing more than a perception that is written since no one commenting expresses they have

experience from it, themselves, or their children. But the parents express their concerns about their children getting bullied because of the choice of toys. The “wrong choice”, in this case non-stereotypical choice of toys. On the contrary, some argue that even if children do not seem to be affected by the norms when they are small there is a chance that they will be affected when friends' opinions start to matter. Some say that when the children are older and all the sudden does not want to play with the favorite toys, it might be because some friends told them that it is a toy for the other sex. This proves that even if parents are trying to not be gender-segregated and not push their children towards the stereotypical norms people around the child and society, in general, can still have an impact, so the parents cannot protect the child from the norms.

#### 4.5.3 Is gender in our biology?

*“You are the one who talks about the sexes being different and that it has to do with biology, so now I wonder what is it in biology that says that the girl-LEGO must have purple tools while the originals are black. What makes girls have a biological resistance to black screwdrivers?”*

Within the discussion about gendered toys it is impossible for the parents to not talk about biology. It has been mentioned in every thread with different aspects. Here is the discussion about whether the boys choose cars and blue colors, the girls pink and dolls, and whether it is biologically in their nature or not. And the people who believe that gender-neutral toys are not good, tend to have the opinion that gender is in our nature.

*“Me and my husband are discussing this sometimes. Me and my husband believe that girls for example like pink and dolls because it is in their “nature” and that boys like blue and cars. I think that children are born like this so why work against it by giving children something that is not “natural” for their sex. But of course there are exceptions like with everything else.”*

Another is writing this about stereotypical preference with toys:

*“We can predict the interest in this kind of play among boys and girls already when they are fetuses by measuring the levels of hormones in the amniotic fluid”*

But there are many people who say the opposite and do not believe that it is in our nature. One parent is answering this about evolution and nature in the stereotypical gender play:

*“Evolution has worked pretty damn fast if it managed to evoke a biological interest in cars and changed horses from being a toy for boys to be a typical girl toy in less than a hundred years ...”*

Comments about that gender is in our nature might be a way to hide behind opinions that can be seen as conservative. By telling others that it is against nature they create a reason to believe that gender-segregation is something good.

*“So, denying biology (what the kids want) can have the opposite effect.*

*There is nothing wrong with a child playing with what they want. Forcing the child, avoiding "sex-coded" toys (or other nonsense) can endanger the child's mental health. The child wants something, but you want something different.”*

This person above is talking about the people who want their children to play with toys for both genders and during the analysis I can see an attitude about “what has always been”. Parents are arguing that if this is what nature created and if it is in our biology it is not up to us to change it. They believe that if boys do like blue adults should not force them to like something else since it is within their biology and is therefore a natural behavior.

*“Yes, it may seem strange, but it is what it is. We as humans should not believe that our everyday logic is sufficient to understand the laws of nature. Evolution is not stupid.”*

#### 4.5.4 Gendered toys as an aspect of raising children

*“Our behavior is determined by three factors:*

*Biology*

*Social construction*

*Coincidence”*

The question of how to raise children is a common sidetrack in the threads. And here is the discussion mostly about that even if you give your child the opportunity to play with all kinds of toys, including both stereotypical toys for boys and girls, the child can still be affected by others. Especially daycare. So, the parents are separating what the children do at home and in daycare. And this goes for both sides in the discussion since the people who for example do not want to give their sons dolls and pink things to play with at home cannot influence what the child is playing with in the daycare. Which means that the child might play with dolls there.



Also, for the people who want to prevent the stereotypical playing by having more gender-neutral toys at home cannot influence their children if they play stereotypical in the daycare.

*“Since she is in daycare, she has been taught what is for girls and what is for boys”*

Many argue that daycare has a big impact on the children in these questions. They believe that there are groups of boys and groups of girls in daycare and that it can prevent the children from playing with what they want. Some parents are showing concern about their boys in daycare and that they are not engaging in the girl’s groups to get the chance to play with the more “girly” toys. And then there are the opposite.

*“...If my son wants to play with dolls in kindergarten or at friends’ houses that is fine, but I will not buy a doll for our house...”*

These arguments do correspond to research since it is proven that other caregivers, other than a child's parents, do have an impact on the child (Reich et al., 2018). Caregivers at daycare can influence the children to play with stereotypically gendered toys and encourage them to play suitable for the child’s sex (Reich et al., 2018). Here I want to argue that it also can be the opposite. Like the comment above, this person does not want her child to play with dolls and she has in many comments mentioned that she will never buy dolls or pink things for the child. However, she is allowing the child to play with dolls in daycare, even if this is not something that she can control. The caregivers usually have guidelines when it comes to working with gender and toys and it can be argued here that the situation also depends on what caregiver the child has. Because even though there are guidelines some may follow them, and some may not which means that the children have different opportunities to play with or without stereotypically gendered toys at daycare.

Another approach in the question of raising children is that a lot of parents in the threads are saying that they believe in raising the children freely. This is mostly connected to letting the children choose toys for themselves and let them play how and with what they like. But as a contrary, some people are saying that it is impossible to give freedom to children and make up arguments that the children would choose to have candy for lunch every day and when they are older just would like to party and have alcohol and drugs. This is also an example of how many people tend to exaggerate in the comments. The phenomenon is common. A person mentions her or his arguments and someone will take that argument further and exaggerate in a way that can make the other person look stupid. These members may do it because they cannot take the

argument seriously, but it can also indicate some sort of power in an attempt to reduce someone's argument.

One thread is standing out when it comes to the discussion about raising children, and that is thread number seven. Here is the member who started the thread putting her opinion and a question regarding changing the toy at McDonald's since the staff did not want to change it for her. This was because her daughter became very upset and started to scream and cry and did not want to eat. So, she is asking a question but instead, people start to make comments about how she has raised her child since she became so angry about the situation and, according to some parents, behaved very badly at a restaurant. People are also instead of answering the question asking why she would even go to McDonald's and give her child that kind of food which according to them does not have any nutrition in it. Even if others commenting are mentioning their experience of McDonald's it is only the person who started the post that gets bad comments about taking her child to this restaurant. Interesting here is that the parents are not just focusing on the actual question about gender and toy, but rather see other aspects in the post and choose to comment on the things that are important or interesting for them. So, the focus while giving comments to threads might not be to answer the question regarding gender-segregated toys but rather to have a discussion about what they believe is interesting. And this behavior is seen in every thread.

#### 4.5.5 Playing with pink toys will make my son gay

*“... It is possible to see that gay boys play more typically girly and with girl's toys.”*

In one way or another is the subject of homosexuals mentioned in almost all the threads. People here tend to connect the discussion about gender and toys to homosexuality. Thus, it is here also just boys that are mentioned and their possibility to be gay. Except for a few comments where transgender girls are mentioned are otherwise no one else within the LGBTQ+ mentioned at all.

*“So, I think it can be bad and that children are harmed in their development of gender identity - and maybe even their sexuality - if we dress them gender-neutrally or in the opposite sex clothes....”*

It is a little unclear how the connection to being gay is made. However, arguments are often about boys playing with dolls, and people also seem to connect boys being bullied because of playing with girly things.

*“I think this is ridiculous! Of course, everyone is different, and I am happy about that. how boring our world would be if everyone were the same, But apparently that’s where we are heading. That boys must play with barbies and dress in pink. If my son did that, he would be bullied and called a fag.”*

There are arguments about homosexual boys playing “girly” even if they are treated like boys. And also, here is the conversation evolving to biology and evolution, and some state that we are created man and woman to be able to have children. There are also arguments with people being okay with homosexuals in general but do not want their children to be. However, some believe that playing with dolls does not have an impact on children's sexuality.

*“You don’t become gay by playing with dolls.”*

*“Shouldn’t a boy be able to play with dolls without getting bullied or called fag?”*

And then there are those who do not have so much of an argument but rather just want to express their opinion:

*“Of course boys should be boys. No fucking fag nonsense!”*

The connection to homosexuals seems to come from the consideration of colors, mostly discussed pink, and the fact that some boys like to play with dolls. There are some stereotypes in the way people think about gay men where they believe that all gay men are more feminine in their behavior and like pink and enjoyed dolls when they were children. So, by engaging in more feminine stereotypes is there a possibility that the child will be homosexual according to some parents. This shows that the discussion about gender and toys also include a discussion about identity and then further on sexuality and the fact that many people see a connection between these.

#### 4.5.6 Using research to prove a point

*“The tests are from Harvard's university.”*

An interesting part of the threads is the parents' use of research and their way of presenting their own but also others' knowledge about gender and toys. Because it seems to be important for many people to show that what they are saying about the subject is right. It is also seen to be a way of approaching a disagreement by trying to present facts to prove that your statements are the truth. However, there is a lack of presentation of the research that the parents are referring to and there are not so many that are source-critical. Only a few are asking for the source of the research statements. This raises a question about if the people then believe the fact without a source or if they ignore the part with fact in the comments.

*“Now you draw conclusions based on interpretations and generalizations. You say that something IS in a certain way, present it as facts, based on some research (source, thank you!) That can equally easily be interpreted differently, with a different point of view.”*

However, many people present these facts like they have all the knowledge about it.

*“Moreover, biologists have proven that toys that children are drawn to are in our biology. Tests have been done and show that boys are more interested in technology toys and girls' dolls.”*

Another example is a person who highly believes that the persons he or she is discussing with should take the fact seriously because the presented fact is from Harvard:

*“Wrong. Biology affects how we behave, and this has been a fact for several years. The latest research was just from Harvard. If you do not believe this, then can you explain why they have found causal links between "boy" and "girl" toys?”*

So many of the parents seem to have the perception that one scientific article is enough fact to prove their point and that if someone just has an opinion without fact it is not enough for the discussion.

*“I refer to research, and you are just sitting on your chair thinking out a reality saying that I'm wrong?”*

Interesting is also that none of the parents mentions that they actually have any education, within the subject or not, but it is just assumed that these are people who have a worldview that they think is right and want to take down others who do not think the same. Many also seem to know when others are wrong, even if they present some kind of facts about the subject.

*“You are wrong, there is no support in what you say...”*

On the other hand, the same person does not provide any source for its statements. Otherwise it is also easy for some people to talk about what the majority wants and needs. Also, this without any source.

*“Although most people obviously do not even want to remove sex-coded toys, so why adapt it to what a minority wants?”*

This comment was answered back with a question if this was the person's own opinion or if it was the fact that she or he had a source to. However, the response did not answer the question and the person still claimed what most people wanted:

*“Yes, most people have more important things to think about in life than that some toys are divided in gender, the fact that toys are divided in general shows that the majority do not care and do not think it is important.”*

This is one of many comments where it seems to be easy to talk for the whole society and what people care about. And a lot of the parents seem to have knowledge about the majority. Such representation is used in many cases to avoid the specifications and details of an argument (Machin & Mayr, 2012). By making their ideas sound like it is “ours” can the text producer create their positions of ideas and make it sound more trustworthy (Machin & Mayr, 2012), which explains why this kind of comments are common in the threads. Parents here make claims of truth in their comments about gender and toys. This can be a way of using power since the language used by claiming truth can indicate education or their institutional place and affect the way that they are speaking (Howarth, 2007). I can also see *deontic modality* in the comments when some people tend to tell others how to do things, regarding both the purchasing of toys and also how to raise children. Because deontic modality is about how people instruct others (Machin & Mayr, 2012). One type of comments, especially the ones regarding facts and research seems to be from people who like to show off how much they know about the subject, and it is possible to see another type of confidence in the way that these people write. This can

be described as showing up the knowledge to educate or to educate to be able to show up knowledge (Kozinets, 2011).

## 4.6 Concluding analysis

Interesting in these results is that most of the parents want the same thing. They want their children to feel good about themselves, not get bullied, grow up to become good people. They want to give their children some freedom to be and express themselves and be able to choose any toy they want to play with, and they want equality between the sexes. However, the perception of all these things differ and they put a focus on different things and from different perspectives which then create conflicts and discussions. But a summary shows that the discussion about gender and toys are striving toward the same directions. Just with some slightly different world perceptions. However, it is not possible for everyone to agree that the same words should be used in the same way and mean the same thing (Paltridge, 2012). This means that even if the parents in the discussion mean the same thing or actually have the same opinion, the interpretation of the words differ from each other rather than be similar in the context of the subject or phenomena (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Extending this approach does the interpretations vary from every individual which I as the analyzer also experienced.

Parents also tend to express opinions about subjects that have not even been mentioned. And sometimes is the perception that these forums are made for people to just speak their mind and be able to say whatever they like, with or without an interest or contribution to the subject discussed. An example is the thread that I created where I am asking about people's opinions regarding the phenomenon of gender-segregated toys where someone decides to ask me why I even care and that there are more important things in the world. Another person stated:

*“You don't seem to have a lot to do during the days if you get so upset from such a trifle as segregated toys. There are people for everything these days...”*

So, it is easy for some parents to create a perception of you as a person, which also was demonstrated in thread number seven where the same things happen to the person who started the thread. These people show no interest in sharing their opinions about gender and toys but rather just want to provoke. The people who enter a discussion provocatively might like to create a conflict. Maybe if they get the chance to write their opinions and reduce other arguments and feelings, they create a feeling of satisfaction? Because it is within the discourse that knowledge and power are linked (Kozinets, 2011), which is possible to see here within the

platform and the way people communicate in the threads. The fight is partly about who knows the best and who is right rather than exchange perceptions about gender and toys. Which means that the focus often is shifting.

In the discussions about gender and toys, there is a strong connection to colors. Colors is the one thing that is following the discussion no matter which direction the discussion takes. And as research points out, the main colors discussed are pink for girls and blue for boys (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; Cohen, 2013). So, by understanding the subject of gender and toys do parents have to include colors, and it is mostly the start of the whole discussion. There is also a part in the analysis that points on who has the responsibility regarding the gender-segregated toys. And it seems like many of the parents want to have someone responsible for it. This since they rather understand that gender-segregation does have consequences. Analyzed is that the parents who have a stereotypical view of toys and play tend to have the perception that the retailers only offer what customers want and argue that consumers have the responsibility. This is also often connected to the discussions about what the majority wants and needs. While others argue that by gender-segregating stores in feminine and masculine, or pink and blue sections is it the retailers who reinforce the gender stereotypical roles to the consumers.

Regarding the developments in the discussions, is it interesting how and why these are the subjects that evolved in the discussions, and they all do not always seem to connect? Equality and norms are seen to be connected and the subjects have also been discussed in parallel and sometimes is research connected with biology. However, the side subject overall does not connect clearly. We find these categories, but they seem to refer to different things. Some seem to be more external like research and biology, while some are more experimental when parents talk about for example “my child”. The perceptions regarding the side subjects have different levels when saying that children have the right to develop their own gender identity is something different from saying that nature determines gender identity. Parents here seem to have various references to truth systems since they say it in different ways. One aspect is taking a moral approach while another a scientific approach of truth. So, truth might be a key word for these people while discussing perceptions about gender and toys. It is related to the side subject’s biology and research when parents are sharing their opinions and values about the subject with facts which are seen to be their truth. It is something that they chose to believe in. It is possible that parents in the discussion about gender and toys do argue after their own created truth about the subject, but also from facts that they believe are the truth and thereby cannot understand others' truths.

Another aspect is the contradiction shown in the results where parents present themselves like they, for example regarding the colors, do not care about gender but just focus on the child. While they in their comments present a stereotypical way of thinking and acting. Interesting here is if parents try to show an accepting personality towards others while they in reality have more stereotypical values. It is also possible that one personality is shown in these online forums while another is shown in other situations, which can be problematic. This since the opinions and arguments will be built up from a created perception and not from a real experienced perception.



## 5. Discussion

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The study aimed to explore parents' perceptions about gender segregation when it comes to toys for children and the research question was:

*How is the subject of gender and toys discussed among parents?*

It seems here that having a conversation about gender and toys that is not losing its focus is impossible and undoubtedly involves many feelings. Eventually all the threads blend, and the discussions evolve to the same subjects without a definite ending or with a winner in the fights. But even though there are fights within the threads and people try to win with their arguments is the social game and language game on these platforms without winners and losers (Kozinets, 2011). In the end no one knows who is right or wrong, even though that seems to be the aim in the intense discussions, and the conversations lead nowhere. So why even bother? The discussions are evolving into many different side subjects which is interesting since they in the end do not process the subject of gender-segregated toys but rather deals with great subjects and questions about *being* and *identity*. *What is the truth? What are aspects of society and who has the responsibility for these issues?*

Many of the parents think in one way while they seem to act in another which is shown in the contradiction in their comments on the platform analyzed (act in the sense of how they describe how they purchase or choose toys) together with earlier research. Parents tend to want to not care about gender when it comes to toys, but they do when they buy blue things for boys and pink for girls. The issue is besides this that we even call it “boy’s” and “girl’s” toys. It is possible that the need for gender-neutral toys will not even exist if consumers together with retailers stop categorizing. Some argue that gender-neutral toys are not necessary since they do not believe that there is an issue with having toys separated for boys and girls. While others then argue that there is a problem by just naming them separately. Which also have been proven in research since children can avoid both toys and environments that do not correspond to their gender. The way we see the world is not determined by the language we use but rather influenced by it (Machin & Mayr, 2012). So, by naming the toys depending on gender will, not because of the actual toy but because of the word we use, affect our perception about it. So, if the toys were labeled with another word would the discussion maybe look different, or would it even exist at all? And would the perceptions about gender also be different among parents?

As mentioned in the result section, a common attitude in the way of writing comments is the “*you are wrong, and I am right*” attitude. And this is reflected in the arguments where it looks like the only right way of thinking about this subject is that person's perception. The parents do have their own personal worldview and it is clear that we do not live in an objective world. Instead we see through the discussions analyzed in this study that the perception of the world is shaped in every person's way and how people express how the “*real world*” about gender and toys is. People are living out of experiences and are therefore not interested in the real worldview. Every time we express something, we reveal our perception of the world as well as there is an understanding of how others explain the world (Strauss & Feiz, 2013; Svensson, 2019). However, in many cases in this study it does not seem like the parents understand how others picture the world, but rather are interested in showing how they perceive it. Language is the main way to express how we see the world and society, and language is an important factor in how we describe it (Machin & Mayr, 2012). It is within the discourse we see how these perceptions are created and expressed and according to Svensson (2019) is our social reality and our knowledge about the world created by humans and not something that just *is*. This will then cause problems since it is the parents’ perceptions that then influence children in their socialization (Kollmayer et al., 2018). So, it is important to understand in what ways the children are exposed to gender-related beliefs and values and how it is discussed, and we can see a part of it in this study. And the perception and discussion about the world related to gender and toys can be seen as problematic when the children become products of the socialization of gender-segregated play.

Kozinets (2011) argues that personalities online and the fact that they differ from other social contexts is not seen as problematic. However, I would argue for something else. I argue that it is problematic since the people in these social contexts online leave a concrete world picture through the language, the discourse. Because discourse is creating the world as well as it is created by it (Paltridge, 2012). The polarized worldview is enabled by an abstract language that has left a concrete reality. Which here is seen as problematic in the way parents discuss gender-segregated toys. The consequences can be related to work with equality. If the subject is discussed in the same way as in this online platform it is not strange that the work with equality takes time. These forums are an arena for polarization, so by avoiding talking about specific things, you can also create an identity position, which can link to e.g. political ideologies, etc. Identities are here connected to the language since it gives people a chance to display who they are and how they want others to see them, it is part of our social identity (Paltridge, 2012). Thus,

the identity does not have to correspond with the identity in reality. Meaning that you do not have to take a stand within these forums but rather you have an opportunity to choose. The online forums then also give an opportunity to show that created identity.

With the results in the study conducted it is argued that parents discuss the subject of gender and toys in the way of expressing their world picture and by creating a discussion including more complex subjects. The study also indicates that the discussions rather become a fight about knowledge, experiences, and perceptions. This is probably because the subject of gender is a complex area in general and seems to engage people in many ways. In different ways. Gender includes various approaches and people can engage in many issues regarding it, which might be an explanation of the evolving discussions. However, the study has collected knowledge, ideas and experiences within this context. Gender is also something that can be personal, e.g. when you do not fit into the already existing stereotypical norms in society. The discussion might, therefore, continue with an understanding that we all perceive the world and the subject of gender and gender-segregated toys differently.

A discussion about it should not, however, be seen as a failure when it does not lead anywhere and with people misunderstanding each other. From a societal perspective I argue that the discussion itself is a success for equality. By discussing the issues, we reach a greater understanding of the subject which here is seen as the main purpose. Meaning that adults discussing gender and toys on social platforms give a greater achievement than no discussion at all. However, it is acknowledged that since the results show that there is no difference in how we communicate about the subject in ten years we might have to question ourselves: why?

## 6. Conclusion

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The overall approach of this research shows that there is gender-segregation among toys and that it in various ways can affect children in their development regarding gender roles and gender identity. And we can see that it has an impact also in the long term. Gender-segregation also has an impact on parents in the way they purchase and in their acting as role models. Parents have a great influence on their children when it comes to gender and toys which means that it is of interest to study.

The main conclusion of the study is that the discussion about gender-segregated toys on this platform never actually process gender and toys. Instead the discussion evolves into other questions which includes equality, norms, whether gender-segregation is in our biology or not, how gender-segregated toys can have an impact on sexuality and the impact it has on raising children. We can also see that reasonable truths are left out and the parents lose grip of the discussions. The discussions are often intense with many arguments and the parents' do not agree since their perceptions about the subject differ. Following this is that every individual has their own worldview which is reflected in the discourse in this online forum. So, through this research a second conclusion is that the discussion about gender-segregated toys are discussed through personal perceptions of the world. Gender becomes a base for how we see the world, how we see men and women, and the different expectations men and women have which are created by societal norms. However, no one knows what is wrong or right and perceptions and truths are presented with emotions and research alternately. The discussions studied can also therefore be seen as a giant recycling machine since it just runs in circles. No one really knows anything, research is used randomly and selectively while emotions outweigh arguments, so the discourse is always in motion, yet it stands completely still.

The contribution of this study is knowledge about how parents in Sweden discuss gender-segregated toys online, which have not yet been studied. Since, as mentioned before, the way we speak about things affect the way we act, the study adds to research by looking into discussions about the subject on online forums which then gives a base for studies further into the area. It also contributes with a greater understanding of parents' perceptions about the subject and how they build awareness and share knowledge among each other. And, how other actors in society also are responsible and have an impact on gender-segregation.

## 6.1 Future Research

Considering the study conducted it would have been giving an interesting aspect to the results if I would be able to know the gender of the people commenting to also see if and how the perceptions and arguments differ from each other. Kozinets (2011) means that in the online communities' men tend to lie more than women to exaggerate some aspects about themselves. Which would have been an interesting aspect of the analysis. The analysis would then have been different and there is an importance in knowing what age or gender the person we communicate with has (Kozinets, 2011). The data can be unilaterally and harder to analyze if it is only from one social networking site with a certain gender, social class, age, and ethnic groups (Kozinets, 2011).

Besides this there are several future research opportunities to continue the understanding of gender-segregated toys. One aspect of the findings of this thesis is the case that parents do not always seem to practice what they preach. This would allow for an investigation of to what extent parents purchase gendered toys for their children. This study has dealt with discussions online and it would be of interest to also understand in which degree the perceptions and arguments correspond to the actual practice. To see if the arguments communicated in these online forums are transferred into action while parents do the purchase. This could further also allow for an investigation of aspects of parents' gender-related attitude and its affection on children's gender-related behaviors.

Another aspect is the fact that the discussions have not changed in ten years. This might show concerns and studies may be done on investigating how and why we talk about the subject of gender and toys in the same way over these years. There is a possibility that an extension can be made on this study, to also analyze the threads made before 2010 to see if there has been a change in the discussions since the platform started. And if not, to investigate what the reasons can be for that phenomenon.

Lastly what should be considered here is that it is easier to present opinions, values, and perceptions on online forums, however, if the people are put in another context, then how would the discussion take place? If there is an investigation on how the discussion would take place in a regular discussion in a group would the discussions then evolve in the same way as it does online, or would it be easier to stick to the subject?

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## Appendix

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Links to all the threads on Familjeliv.se

A. 2010

A1:

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/52245047-leksaker/11>

*I have been reading in some magazines about children and their toys that a lot of people think that you should let your kids play with what they want and not put them into "gender-roles".*

*Girls with dolls and kitchen equipment and boys with cars etc. There is also a lot of talking about not letting the color decide, so boys can have girl-colors, so to speak.*

***Just wondering if that really is the truth out there; what do you think?***

*Me and my partner have talked about this since we are having our first child now and I personally think that boys should not play with dolls, barbies, etc.*

*That is my opinion and now I am wondering what others think or have done with their kids.*

*I also want to add that this is not an insult but just my opinion and a question of what you think.*

A2:

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/55519607-vad-forskningen-sager-om-barnens-konsroller/1>

The original post in this thread will be summarized to a shorter text since the original text otherwise will be 3 pages long.

*Studies are often coming up in conversations about gender, children, and pedagogy that are about giving boys cars and girls dolls. I am talking here in particular about two studies that have studied children between the ages of 1 and 3 who support norms by showing the results of boy's choosing boy's things and girl's girly things. This then becomes a hot discussion.*

*When I hear about such studies, the following questions come to mind immediately:*

- How old are the kids?***
- What do the observation situations look like?***
- What counts as a boy's toy / girl's toy and WHY?***

And finally:

**- How can a serious researcher claim to be able to study children's "free" choices, when everything we do from the day we are born till we die is influenced by the people we have around us?! Especially children who are pre-programmed to imitate learning!?**

Already from birth are girls and boys expected to have certain characteristics, for instance through the colors blue and pink.

It certainly happens completely unconsciously, **but reactions from adults differ considerably depending on the child's sex and what toy.** Toys selected for these experiments are usually balls, cars, teddy bears, and dolls in the colors pink and blue and are supposed to represent gender. But it is said that girls as infants already look at faces more than boys so that is perhaps why they are naturally drawn to dolls? I do not know what to believe because the studies are often narrow with about 100 children in each study, which indicates a fairly small statistical basis. And it is possible to twist them so that the results fit the expectations. Absolute truth is rarely verified with statistical surveys.

**So what do I really want?**

I want **children to be children, without having to BE girls or boys.** For adults to work with their prejudices and try to develop children's play and interests by **offering many alternatives!**

In any case, I know that my oldest son plays with both cars and dolls and **that most parents with something behind their foreheads observe the patterns** of their children and let them choose.

B. 2012

B1:

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/63858637-konshysterikerna-till-ny-attack-lego-nasta-mal>

*Yeah, what do you say about these self-satisfied totally confused gender hysteric people that do not let children be what they are ... children. Play with what they want to play with. They experiment and talk about gender-roles and impose barriers and ideals that gender theorists in their own confused brains set up for our poor children. One of our world's most beloved toys LEGO will now also be questioned about its harmful effects on children's so-called gender ideal?!?*

*Oh lord, where do these crazy maniacs come from?*

B2:

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/64241522-varfor-far-inte-pojkar-vara-pojkar-och-flickor-vara-flickor-langre/35>

*I think it is too much now.*

*Sure children should play with what they want, mine can, if they want to play with dolls I will let them, but if we are walking in a toy store they are never looking at the pink corner, they are not interested. They want Bakugan, vehicles, etc. (I have two sons).*

*I hate the word THEY/THEM (here is the person referring to a word for a gender-neutral pronoun which is *hen* in Swedish. The English translation for a gender-neutral pronoun is usually they/them) and I was not harmed by growing up with the words she and he!*

*I am not harmed just by liking "girly" things.*

C. 2013

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/69131649-ar-lego-en-konsneutral-leksak/>

*I think that's always been the case. Me, my sister and my brother had Lego when we were children, and my sons now have it.*

*Of course, I customize the Lego purchases according to their interests and therefore have none of the new pink Legos (which apparently are adapted for girls) been purchased. Previously it was Lego City they liked the most, but now Lego Creator (which is more about building models than playing with them) is becoming popular. My boys love to construct*

*Do you buy Lego for your children? Did you have a Lego yourself as a child?  
Why / why not?*

D. 2014

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/72722360-hur-viktigt-tycker-du-det-ar-att-ge-en-konsneutral-uppvaxt-till-barnen>

*When you read in the media about gender-neutral pronoun (*hen* in Swedish) debate, not to buy special boy or girl toys and clothes, etc. I wonder if it is really the right way. My daughter has had a "pink period" between 3-7 years. Everything would be pink and purple and girly ... I have let her choose such clothes and toys but at the same time I have never tried to control them. If she wanted to play with "boy's toys" I would never have come up with the idea to comment on it. The important thing is to let the children try everything possible and that the parents do not try to control them. We also have a lot of toys for boys since she has a little brother. My daughter also does "boy" activities:*

*climbing trees, rollerblades, playing pirate, etc. What do you think? Is equality really about the color of clothes? Should children be forced to be gender-neutral if they do not want to?*

E. 2015

E1:

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/75981629-aldrig-mer-mcdonalds>

*My daughter ordered a happy meal, and she got a **TOY FOR BOYS!!** She started to stomp on the floor and cried loudly and was very unhappy. I went to ask the staff if they would like to change to a girl toy, but they **refused** to exchange the toy for my daughter. My five-year-old daughter was screaming and crying all the time because she didn't want a boy's toy, she wanted a girl's toy. I understand that she wants a girl toy. She refused to eat the food, just stood and stomped angrily on the floor because she wanted a girl toy!! Now to the question: **Can McDonald's refuse to change toys?** Don't they have an obligation to change toys if the customer demands it?  
I got really upset at McDonald's and when we left the place, I did not remove our tray that we messed up because I wanted to show my dissatisfaction.*

E2:

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/75680499-sonen-fick-inte-kopa-barbie-for-sin-farmor>

*I'm so angry, sad, and frustrated.*

*Today, my 3-year-old son would accompany my mother-in-law to the toy store and get to choose a toy. He would have to choose exactly what he wanted because he became diaper-free night and day and his grandmother, and he does not meet so often.*

*He had been talking about this for a week and was exuberantly happy when she came to get him.*

*A few hours later she left him, we talked for a bit and then she went home.*

*With him, my son had a big excavator of some kind, which surprised me because he does not usually like cars and such toys. Usually, it is Lego and a lot of crafts he likes, but I thought he had to choose so it was probably exciting.*

*When I was going to put him to sleep, I asked if he had fun today. He answers "Yes", and I ask if he is happy with his new toy. Then he suddenly cried in complete despair and I understood nothing. He then tells me he wanted a nice girl but didn't get one because of grandma. I ask what he means by girl and he says, "the kind that is in kindergarten", so I ask if he means Barbie. He answers Yes and then becomes even sadder.*

*Why didn't grandma let you have it, I asked?! "Only girls may have such said grandmother". My heart broke because WE do not parent or learn this way. I promised him that tomorrow, we would go to the store and buy a Barbie because your grandmother has not really understood this.*

*Once he fell asleep, I called my mother-in-law just to double-check, so I understood it all right. I usually love her but now I feel I hardly want to see her again. She yelled at me and said that dolls and such are for girls. It is because of parents like ME that children get bullied, that no other boys' will want to play with him, and that I expose him to slow mental suffering if I buy him a barbie.*

*I was completely speechless, damned. I can't find the words. My husband, the son's dad, works so I haven't been able to talk to him about this, but I know he thinks just like me. I really don't want to have these people around my son, even if it is a grandmother or not. Don't really know why I write but I have to scream!*

F. 2018

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/78916603-tips-pa-hur-bemota-prinsessaldern/1/nick/78916603>

*Hello!*

*I have a daughter of 4.5 years who, a few months ago, began to enter the so-called princess age, i.e. suddenly changed her favorite color to pink, love princesses, fluffy things, glitter and would like to wear princess dresses and be? Nice? (which she seems to understand is important if you are a girl...). She also wants to look and play with e.g. my little pony, a series I am having split thoughts about, especially when I see very adult / human traits, such as appearance fixation, with these ponies, although the variation in personalities is good). Above all, I want her to be able to be a child for as long as possible, without thinking about her appearance or being introduced to girls / boys and behaving in special ways, not being friends, etc. I wonder if you have any concrete tips on how we as parents should respond to this? I want her to be able to choose and do what she is interested in, but I am split as she is at the same time being influenced and embedded in stereotypical values from different angles that I experience? feeds? the above-mentioned interests. I don't believe in "banning" or "release freely"? - so I wonder if you who may have experienced similar - and have a similar attitude in your parenting of the children - or do you have knowledge in the subject and concrete tips? I also like to take tips on good children's programs, films or series that are non-stereotypical if you have (here I find that there is more variation in books)!*

*Non-constructive tips or comments please!*

G. 2020 - Created thread

<https://www.familjeliv.se/forum/thread/80298082-konssegregerade-leksaker>

*Hello, I wonder what you think about toys and that they are gendered.*

*I find that stores to some extent have an influence by using colors such as blue and pink to signal which gender the toy fits.*

*What is your attitude to this? Do you buy sex-coded toys for your children or it does not matter?*