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Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter looks at political consumerism in the toy sector, offering a brief history of consumer concerns and distinguishing among four strands of political consumerist research in this sector. A primary factor facilitating political consumerism of toys is that toy companies are extremely concerned about their reputation. Manufacturers cannot assume that parents and other carers do their usual risk-benefit analysis with the same level of risk acceptance concerning toys. Factors constraining political consumerism in this sector include long product chains and difficulties in discovering unethical practices and dangerous substances. Actors involved in the political consumerism of toys come from all societal spheres, including retailers. Regulators take action when risks have been discovered by civil society actors or scientists, but international divergence in regulation constitutes an obstacle to concerted action. Future research needs to examine synergies and trade-offs among various risks in toy products.

Keywords: political consumerism, toys, children, marketing regulation

Bruce Lund, an innovator and maker of toys in the United States, has made what he calls “The Toymaker’s Pledge.” It reads like this:

I will make no bad toys. I will endeavour to create products with great value to the consumer and user. I will use my efforts to developing toys and children’s products that excite, delight, inspire, and entertain. So help me Santa.

(Lund, 2011, p. 1)

Lund’s idea is that every toy designer, toy inventor, ad agency, and toy company should make this pledge, just like physicians take the Hippocratic Oath, “To do no harm” (Lund,

2011). This is all well, of course. Still, when analysing political consumerist perspectives on toys, it soon becomes apparent how the ambition stated above only addresses a fraction of the many concerns that various members and spheres of society have with toys.

This chapter aims to give the reader an overview of the range of political consumerist concerns and practices to which toys have given rise. Two questions will lie in the background. The first one regards why toys have turned out to be more easily framed in political and ethical terms than many other types of products. The explanation must take into account the main characteristics of toys: that the end users are children; and that those who purchase toys are usually parents, close relatives, and other caretakers with all that this means concerning responsibility and emotional attachment. At the same time, the ease with which toys can be framed in political and ethical terms is no guarantee that such concerns will be translated into political consumerist action that takes the wide range of social, environmental, and health-oriented issues into account and that has a substantial effect on the market. This characteristic of toys is also necessary for answering the other question: What political, ethical, and environmental factors are easier or harder to react to through different forms of political consumerism?

The chapter is structured as follows. After a categorization of four strands of literature on political consumerism in the toy sector, a brief history is provided of consumer reactions to ethical and political dimensions of toys. This leads the chapter to present an overview of supply and demand side factors that facilitate or constrain such engagement. The major players and important forms of political consumerism in the toy sector are the subjects of the following two sections. Before the chapter's concluding section, it examines challenges and opportunities for political consumer engagement in redirecting the toy sector towards sustainable development.

Previous Literature

The toy industry is subject to a broad array of political consumerist reactions. A spontaneous reflection when examining political consumerism of toys is that this category of products appears to raise worries—and relief when certain risks have been eased—to such a strong extent that the food sector might be the only comparable one (see Halkier, this volume). A primary reason that toys seem to trigger strong political consumerist sentiments is that toys have a particular consumer and user group: children (Stenborg, 2013). However, this does not mean that many factors of concern necessarily converge and support each other. It is difficult for consumer groups or environmental groups to cover all elements of one political consumerist campaign, protest, or media hype. Therefore, such activities usually have one or two problematic aspects of toys in focus at a time, instead of addressing every factor that actors who initiate campaigns find

Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

problematic (Crane & Kazmi, 2010). This is true also when scholarly texts address political consumerist concerns with toys. Four streams of academic literature are central.

Firstly, there is the research examining marketing of toys. Some of this research emphasises the pressure that toy marketing puts on parents and other adults. Another part scrutinises marketing directed directly at children (Hogan, 2007; Schor, 2005). Such studies sometimes cover political consumerist reactions concerning whether children should be directly addressed by toy marketing. Countries vary as to whether it is legally permitted to address children directly through marketing. There are several shades of grey here, enabling companies to address children in indirect or subtle ways. An example is toys “given” to children in certain fast food chains (Jacobson MF, 2010). Such marketing strategies have entailed political consumerist protests in several parts of the world.

Secondly, previous research has examined political consumerist reactions to the themes and the values promoted to children via toys and games. For example, Goossen (2013) has investigated the promotion of war toys and the like. The concern that some toy producers implicitly indoctrinate norms of violence and war in children, mainly boys, is among the issues that have triggered the highest number of consumer protests throughout history (see the next section). Salter (2014) has studied violence in toys from a gender perspective, connecting such toys to a wider political consumerist concern with gender stereotypes. A notable characteristic of consumer activism regarding the indoctrination of violence and stereotypical values through toys is that such activism generates counterprotests. Cause and effect between violent games and a child’s ditto behaviour are notoriously hard to prove. This uncertainty is typically emphasised by those who claim that the burden of proof should lie on those criticising the games and toys. One of the loudest sets of protests, initiated by Jack Thompson, who called himself an outraged father and activist lawyer (Thompson, 2005), was met with comparable levels of outrage. It contended that adverse effects of violent games and toys on children’s behaviour have yet to be proven unanimously by science (Kushner, 2006). Still, at least one large meta-analysis strongly supports the claims of consumer activists who believe there is such a causal relationship (Anderson et al., 2010). Controversies also abound concerning the effect of gender-stereotypical toys in general on gender values and behaviour. Consumer campaigns, such as “Let Toys Be Toys,” “Pink Stinks,” and “Play Unlimited” are highly visible in media (Fine & Rush, 2016). At the same time, studies on the gendered toy marketing debate show how politicians sometimes express more traditional gender values to benefit politically. An example is when the prime minister of Australia commented on the “No Gender December” campaign about toys by saying, “Let boys be boys and girls be girls” (Dearden, 2014).

Third, there is the literature on how chemical or other health hazards related to toys have triggered political consumer activism of various kinds. Campaigns confronting particular companies have been a focus of research regarding soft plastics and hazardous paint/colouring of toys (Becker, Edwards, & Massey, 2010). The case of the world’s largest producer of toys is the most well-known one since it sheds light on the sheer volumes of

Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

goods that can be subject to consumer protests. In 2006 and 2007, Mattel had to recall almost fourteen million toys (Fisher-Price, Barbie, Batman, American Girl jewellery, etc.). The reason was, among other things, their high lead content as well as small, loosely attached magnets that could cause suffocation (U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission [<http://www.cpsc.gov>], in Gilbert & Wisner, 2010). Toys are a textbook example of products that are part of our “flat world” (Friedman, 2006). They are manufactured and sold in complicated steps by various subcontractors and are shipped as well as sold globally with limited potential for consumers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and retailers to overlook the process. Still, the cases that are scrutinised by NGOs, consumer groups, and others often entail massive efforts of manufacturers to regain consumer trust. Mattel spent at least 50,000 hours of labour investigating their recalls of toys. In 2007, the company had spent around \$40 million on these activities (Farrell, 2007). As Emelie Stenborg shows in her dissertation on media attention to chemical risks in toys, paint, and textiles, toys are a product group where the eyes of consumers and NGOs are particularly strongly focused on chemical risks to end users (Stenborg, 2013). Perhaps the fact that toys are used by children, whose brain development is highly sensitive to hazardous chemicals, overshadows other aspects that would otherwise be subject to a greater extent of political consumerism in the toy sector. Critical consumer attention to the health risks to workers due to hazardous chemicals where the toys are produced has been less intensive than that concerning the risks to end users. Examples of research on consumer reaction to labour conditions in the industry include Pun & Yu (2008). Risks that concern working conditions in this industry have typically been analysed alongside working hours and salary (Williams, 2006).

The fourth category of political consumerism research investigates consumer reactions to environmental problems caused by toy production and disposal (Glynn, 2012; McEvoy, 2011). Compared with chemical health risks, which demand scientific assessments, consumer concerns with (other) environmental aspects of toys are shown in the literature to be more common-sense oriented. Consumer campaigns about the environmental impact of toys focus on the great travel distances of toys, usually from Asian countries such as China to the rest of the world, has also aggravated consumers into mobilising. Moreover, consumer campaigns have addressed the “short life” of many toys made from low-quality plastics as well as the vast amounts of packaging waste and battery dependency (Benady, 2012). Along with consumer protests about the intuitive, negative environmental impact of the factors mentioned above, research has seen consumer concerns about a reverse issue: The counterintuitive and confusing character of various sorts of plastics. Studies indicate that multiple prefixes of plastics—biodegradable, recycled, recyclable, bioplastics, ecocyclic—particularly in the packaging of toys cause much consumer frustration of a classic political-consumerist kind: they have a formal correctness yet lack clarity on consumer information (ReCoup, 2017).

A Short History

Having previously been accessible to the upper classes only, toys became mass produced by the turn of the twentieth century. This was a time when wages were rising, and industrial techniques had made it less expensive to produce toys (Brewer, 1980). Through the millennia archaeologists have discovered toys, and it has been clear that a fair share has not been “innocent” in the sense of merely recreational or educational as separate from the values of their societies at large. Many, if not most, toys have been—and are—political in the sense that they reflect the norms of the day, of what are considered productive tasks and interests suitable for women and men respectively. Unsurprisingly, the history of political consumerist activities related to toys follows to a large extent the history of public concerns in society as a whole. For instance, in the years after World War I, antiviolence activists and peace organisations protested against war toys in Europe and the United States. In light of women’s traditional role as caretakers of children, it is not farfetched to assume that these activists were usually women, mobilised in peace organisations such as Women Strike for Peace, Voices of Women, and, in a religious context, such groups as Christian Peacemaker Teams (Goossen, 2013). The aim was to put pressure on manufacturers, retailers, and parents to avoid producing, selling, and purchasing war toys. During the following decades and up until now, women’s groups have been active in protesting against allegedly unethical “messages” to children from toys. Such protests led to a temporary reduction of gender-separated toys 1970s. Still, there has always seemed to be temptations for toy producers to increase gender-stereotypical toys and messages. For instance, there was the Teen Talk Barbie, who kept repeating the phrase, “Math class is hard!” In 1992, the American Association of University Women led consumer protests of this product due to the risk of reproducing low self-esteem among girls in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) (American Psychological Association, 2005). Consumer protesters have waged several battles in the gender area. Although some scholars show signs that toys, at least those sold by Disney, are more gendered today than half a decade ago (Auster & Mansbach, 2012; see also Micheletti and Oral, this volume), others highlight a dramatic change taking place as a result of consumer pressure. On their websites, the major players “Toys R Us, Disney Store, Playmobil, Lego and many others have since 2014 either removed the gender filter on toys or do not organise their sub-brands by gender anymore” (Let toys be toys, 2016).

In addition to the gender aspect, some critical social thinkers raised concerns in the 1950–1970s about what they perceived as the social downsides of mass consumption and its “ideology.” Campaigns were initiated with toys and children in focus. The idea behind these reactions was that children were the most vulnerable to the cultural expressions of mass consumption (Cohen, 2008). In order to avoid or reduce what was perceived as the culturally unhealthy phenomena that the social analyst Herbert Marcuse had tied directly to mass consumption—“euphoric unhappiness” and “moronization of society” (Marcuse, 1964)—children were the group most at risk as well as the group through which things

could change for the better. Although mass consumption of toys had taken place for decades, it was not until the 1970s that toys became subject to extensive economic and cultural globalisation. Larger shares of the world's toy products started to be produced in Japan and Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by South Korea and other Southeast Asian countries, most notably China, in the ensuing decades (Cross & Smits, 2005). This globalisation of toy production, along with increasing consumer awareness about the politically challenging side effect of toy production, have created much material for the mobilisation of civil society protests and consumer reactions for health-related, environmental (Becker et al., 2010), and, in several other respects, political and ethical reasons. As in all other sectors, however, there are factors that strengthen, and others that hinder, political consumerist activities in the toy sector.

Supply and Demand Side Factors Facilitating or Constraining Political Consumerism

A few factors on the supply and demand side are especially noteworthy for promoting or limiting political consumerist activities in this sector. These factors are not necessarily unique to toys. Still, the following section will point to features where the toy sector varies in degrees from other sectors.

A main, facilitating supply factor is the large dependence that toy companies have on their reputation. Reputation is key to all areas, but toys—along with other products intended for children—seem to raise consumer concerns to an unusually high extent (Stenborg, 2013). This is tied to the fact that scandals related to children's products (such as the Mattel case) fit very well within the media logic of attracting attention (Crane & Kazmi, 2010).

If the conspicuous and emotion-triggering dimension of toy supply were the only one operating, political consumerism in the toy sector would have been an immensely powerful force for controlling and minimising risks in this area, a force only counterweighted by limits in consumers' willingness to pay extra for less harmful products. However, there are complications. A supply factor constraining political consumerism of toys is the long supply chains. The supply of toys involves a long chain of contractors—and subcontractors of subcontractors. The uses of materials, disposal of hazardous chemicals, and working conditions along the entire chain are tough to keep track of, even for toy companies with high, ethical ambitions. Several links in the extended supply chain are often not very transparent in a globalised economy, something that also entails an obstacle to regulation that comprises the whole chain (Glynn, 2012). For consumers and NGOs it is even more challenging (Teagarden & Hinrichs, 2009). Thus, political consumerism of toys is often confined to many campaigns based on nonsystematically selected examinations of the supply chain of a particular product, leading to battles on that particular issue: campaigns focusing on a certain set of

Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

chemicals, a particular type of questionable marketing strategy, or the like. On the other hand, there are signs that the apparent randomness and unpredictable character of political consumerism campaigns confronting toy companies may still be effective. Studies of toy companies indicate that this has triggered those not yet scrutinised to try to prevent the risk of negative publicity by getting better insights and “cleaning up” unsustainable practices higher up in the supply chain (Crane & Kazmi, 2010).

The financial incentives for subcontractors along the supply chain to use cheaper and riskier substances and processes ought to make ecolabelling and certification schemes popular among toy manufacturers and retail chains. Yet, such comprehensive ecoschemes seem to be less common in the toy sector than in several other areas. There are a few schemes, such as the UL Standard for Sustainability for Toys.¹ Moreover, on textile toys, it is possible to find various organic cotton labels. In many toy stores, Fairtrade labelling is easier to find than ecolabels. Small and medium toy manufacturers often use Fairtrade as a marketing advantage. Still, it is probably fair to say that the number of comprehensive, ethical, and environmental labelling schemes for toys is limited. There are a few possible reasons for this. One is that several of the things toy consumers worry about have been institutionalised into formal regulation, often in response to consumer protests and campaigns. For instance, the chemical compounds PVC and phthalates are banned from the toy sector in several countries. This means that it is illegal to promote these already regulated environmental improvements on voluntary ecolabels (Klintman, 2015). Another possible reason is that low environmental impact along the entire production chain is tough to verify. Instead, one often finds a couple of accurate, verifiable environmental statements on many toys. Still another reason could be that if a producer has a few toys promoted with an ecolabel, this may cause worries about the environmental and health-oriented features of nonlabelled products from the same manufacturer or retailer. In general, toy manufacturers strive towards broad consumer trust in the entire brand, in all of the manufacturer’s products, and not just in a share of them (Boström & Klintman, 2011). From the perspective of ecolabelling actors, all of the above might be seen as an obstacle to political consumerism in the form of boycotting. At the same time, the sometimes short distance from consumer protests to hard regulation might also be considered an opportunity for political consumerism in the toy sector.

One demand factor that facilitates political consumerism of toys stems from the classical institutional economist Thorstein Veblen’s notion of “conspicuous consumption.” For Veblen, this term refers to the human inclination to prefer goods and services that impress, and even trigger envy, among others. Veblen, who wrote his works around the turn of the twentieth century, exemplified this mainly with costly and apparently wasteful consumption, such as products that the family could barely afford or extensive time spent on learning skills with no prospects at being useful or financially profitable (e.g., to learn Latin or Ancient Greek). A century later, in our times, consumer scholars have suggested that some political consumerist preferences can be explained in the same terms used by Veblen (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010). A demand factor facilitating political consumption of toys is the drive towards conspicuous consumption, which sometimes converges with interest in handmade, nonplastic, solid, wooden, and fair trade

Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

toys (Brown, 2013). To make political consumerist choices in the toy sector often requires extensive knowledge acquisition and typically also the resources to pay premiums for toy brands promoted as superior in various political respects.

The concept of what is “political” should here be understood in a broad sense, including ethical, educational, and strengthening children as citizens beyond entertainment. From this broad perspective, conspicuous consumption of toys may include “politically” motivated decisions of adults based on the function of toys. Consumers’ inclinations serve to show not just others, but also themselves, that they make intelligent choices for their children. For instance, the Danish toy maker, Lego, has long enjoyed high status among consumers for the stimulation of children’s unique abilities, concentration, creativity, and ability to cooperate with other children (see Director, 2016). But what happens when such political factors—highly positive ones—are countered by one or more politically questionable factors? This is what happened to Lego. Its reputation as a politically correct toy producer was challenged when the environmental NGO Greenpeace highlighted that Lego was about to renew its marketing collaboration with the big oil company Shell. The Shell logo and name used to be placed on all “relevant” Lego products, such as toy petrol stations, and Lego was ready to renew its contract with Shell. Greenpeace initiated highly media-savvy campaigns outside the toy maker’s headquarters. They built Arctic environments where a Lego ice bear was drowning as the tide of oil was rising. After three months in 2014, the campaign led Lego to abandon its plans to renew its marketing contract with Shell, and Greenpeace announced that the result was “awesome” (Duckett, 2014).

The result illustrates what seems to be a common trait in political consumerist activities in the toy sector. One issue is “resolved”—from a political consumerist perspective—whereas several other apparently problematic factors remain. This does not have to be a Pyrrhic victory. It is possible to interpret it as one small victory that may make a later success easier. Still, concerning Lego, it is premature to conclude that the latter is the case. After all, the core material of Lego’s bricks and other toys is conventional plastic, in the sense that it is—at least so far—made from oil. This means that several sustainability challenges persist, although the political issue of what should be signalled to children on their toys has been resolved by removing the image of a harmonious presence of a big oil company from the landscape that children are encouraged to build (Marketing, 2014). By this relatively small, benevolent response to NGOs’ and consumers’ pressure, Lego has restored its high reputation. After this gesture, few consumers can be expected to be “politically embarrassed.” Most of them will probably continue to purchase Lego products, despite the material of which the bricks are made (Duckett, 2014).

Finally, there is a demand factor that both facilitates and constrains political consumerism of toys: the fact that children are particularly susceptible to marketing, which makes them vulnerable. Children are arguably at the centre of pressure from mass consumerist society, as marketing strategies make use of the insecurities, identity challenges, and dreams of young people (see Boström & Klintman, this volume). On the one hand, this makes toy companies succeed in having children attracted to certain

products, which in turn make the kids convince adults that they should buy them (Horovitz, 2006; Schor, 2005). On the other hand, this is what makes many parents, consumer organisations, and so forth react particularly strongly to seemingly unethical methods for marketing toys to children. Moreover, there is something special with products that are purchased as gifts. Whereas consumers can sometimes live with compromises inherent in products they purchase for themselves, the gifts they buy—toys are typically gifts—raise consumers' expectations that the products should be free from any bad associations and implications. Toys, like other gifts, are often given as an exposure of the thoughtfulness—including political thoughtfulness—of the giver (see Konow, 2010). In the abovementioned historical overview of political consumerism of toys, several examples of this are highlighted.

Key Actors Involved

Key players that consumers are dependent on for putting political consumerist pressure in the toy sectors can be summarised as follows. First, there are children, their parents, and other adults directly concerned with risks associated with toys. To be sure, it can be debated whether parental concerns and actions to reduce risks only to their children belong to the category of political consumerism. It could be argued that such concerns are more aptly analysed regarding traditional self-interests of *Homo economicus*. On the other hand, the distinction is often not clear-cut between the self-interest of an individual household and citizen-oriented interests for the common good (Klintman, 2012). The first trigger of political consumerism may stem from parents and other closely related adults directly perceiving risks that they associate with specific toys that children near them use. An example of this is when parents or kindergarten teachers have noticed risk to children's health with certain toys and then acted by contacting the toy company, the media, or political authorities about their concerns.

Still, most of the political consumerist themes of toys are difficult or impossible for consumers to assess directly. For instance, chemical risks—to children, workers, or the environment—demand expert examination, translation, and communication in order to generate consumer awareness and ditto political mobilisation (Boström & Klintman, 2011). As to communication with consumers, the key role of the media is the most obvious one, for instance concerning chemical risks of toys (Stenborg, 2013). It is very common that the media have received input from NGOs about environmental or ethical problems stemming from the toy industry. For instance, there is the case discussed above where environmental NGO Greenpeace made Lego not renew their marketing contract with Shell. Also, peace groups and women's groups have throughout the modern history of toys been particularly influential nongovernmental organisations raising consumer awareness and activism (Goossen, 2013). More recently, NGOs have expanded the palette of political consumerist toy issues to include the risk that companies collect big data from children's play. For example, the U.S. Consumers Union, the Swedish Consumers'

Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

Association, and consumer NGOs in several other countries have sent formal complaints about the interactive toys “My Friend Cayla” and the robot “i-Que” to the governmental agencies in their respective countries (e.g., US Federal Trade Commission [FTC], 2016). The reason is that the toys may register via the internet what the children and nearby adults say in the room where the toy is placed. The toy producer may sell this data to other companies or use it in their marketing.

A category of actors that might not be immediately associated with being on the same side as political consumers are retailers (Klintman, 2017). Still, in the Mattel toy scandal discussed above, it was in fact actors in the retail sector that first identified a substantial lead problem. And it was retailers who discovered that some Mattel toys on the European market had high lead content (Story, 2007). In addition to strong reactions of anger from consumers all over the world, the identification of elevated levels of lead in Mattel products led Mattel to investigate the paint of their toys, ultimately recalling nearly a million toys that had been produced since 2003 (Choi & Lin, 2009; Gilbert & Wisner, 2010).

Academia is a sector that is sometimes forgotten in its role as a catalyst for political consumerism. Most obviously, examinations by the natural sciences are often indispensable for assessing chemical and ecological risks associated with certain kinds of toy production and products. Although the natural sciences often hold an image as value-neutral, scientific findings indicate that enhanced risks of certain toys to health or the environment—when translated and communicated effectively—constitute potentially powerful triggers of political consumerism (Becker et al., 2010). Moreover, the social sciences have occasionally provided findings—for instance of labour conditions in toy factories—that may be used as a basis for consumer protests and boycotts (Holzer, 2010). Although the overview of the major players surrounding political consumerism may give the impression of a number of proactive groups and sectors and a predominantly reactive toy industry, there is ample evidence of toy companies engaged in many active endeavours to reduce the reasons for consumer criticism. As discussed in several chapters of this *Handbook*, there are various environmental or ethical certificates and standards at hand through which many toy companies scrutinise their production chains. In addition, toy makers construct schemes to increase their goodwill in the eyes of consumers. Donations by toy companies to children’s hospitals or children in regions of war are particularly common ways of stimulating buycotting of the products of these enterprises. Finally, it is important to mention a societal sphere whose role is downplayed in parts of the political consumerist literature: governmental agencies. Several political consumerist concerns related to toys are connected to environmental and health-oriented risks that can no longer be voluntarily managed by the toy industry and retailers. As with several risks in other sectors, consumer activism serves to highlight these risks to policymakers. This, in turn, may help political consumerist concerns become institutionalised into formal regulation (Glynn, 2012; McEvoy, 2011). And although far from all risks associated with the entire supply chain of toys can be subject to formal

Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

regulation, the very “risk” of future regulation, and not only the risk of boycotts, may constitute a motivating factor for toy companies to swiftly manage the issues addressed in political consumerism campaigns.

What Forms of Political Consumerism Are Dominant?

As discussed earlier in this chapter, political consumerism takes several different forms in the toy sector. Here, it is important to expand on a topic of the dynamics of political consumerism and regulation. In the toy sector, tension seems to prevail between political consumerist framings and regulatory framings of how to manage risks. Chemical risks associated with plastics in toys may serve as an example. When consumer groups lobbied against toymakers for their use of hazardous chemicals (phthalates), this led to rather rapid bans on six of these compounds from several toys in the European Union (ENDS Report, 2004). As regards certain consumer products, such as clothes for adults, nonorganically produced wine, and energy sources, consumer boycotts might be perceived by governments as an appropriate and sufficient solution. If governments only ensure that consumer information is correct, clear, and not misleading, there should be a space for consumers to be free to make responsible decisions since governments cannot regulate everything. This view underlies, for example, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's efforts to make public policies for environmental product information converge internationally (Klintman, 2015). Toys, which by definition are associated with children, are in several countries framed as more of a regulatory issue. There are frequently strict product regulations intended to protect children. The logic behind this particular status ascribed to children is that, accordingly, it should not be up to the consumer whether a child should be harmed or not. At the same time, countries differ in how strictly they regulate toys, chemicals, and other factors related to toy production. This can be both an obstacle and a facilitating factor for concerted, international political consumerist action in a globalised economy. An obstacle is when the political consumerist concerns about toys are fragmented due to nation-specific regulatory conditions. For countries lagging behind in toy regulation, it is possible for consumer groups to point to foreign role models to make their case.

A sign of this character of how society handles risks related to toys is the high frequency—and efficiency—of discursive, political consumerism in the toy sector. Whereas monetary political consumerism—boycotting and buycotting—is where much of consumer activism takes place in several product areas geared towards adult use (Micheletti, Stolle, & Follesdal, 2003), risks from toys often appear to move directly from discursive political consumerism (protests on the internet, media scopes, etc.) to deliberations about regulation. For instance, in the Mattel case with chemically dangerous toys, discursive political consumerism, rather than boycotting, was the dominant political consumerist tool. Many consumers reacted discursively once they had bought toys and feared that their children would become sick. This immediately entailed regulatory bodies to move the issue from a political consumerist one into scientific investigations, in turn leading to regulatory framings of the issue.

Sustainability Aspects of Toys

When examining political consumerist activities, it is often in sustainability issues that some of the most recent developments can be found. What does the research show regarding the potential for toys to enable change towards sustainable development? Looking at the sheer volume of toys today, it is easy to see some factors that speak strongly against a transition into sustainable development in the toy sector. The variety of prices is one such factor. Many toys are, from a working- or middle-class perspective of the West, fairly inexpensive. The dominant norm in mass consumption society is that children should get several new toys for their birthdays, for several other holidays, and in between. Whereas the changing focus from goods to services has come quite far in other sectors, the new, physical toy—quickly replaced with another—is still the dominant norm (see also Boström & Klintman on mass consumption, this volume).

At the same time, there are a few factors and tendencies that seem to point in the direction towards such a development. In an extensive survey conducted in 2012–2013, asking Swedish parents about their toy purchases, Micheletti & Stolle found that almost half of the respondents claimed that “environmental consequences of toy production” would be a factor that made them choose one toy over another (Micheletti & Stolle, 2017). Because of the well-known value-action gap, this result cannot be translated into the share of consumers who make use of this environmental factor in actual purchasing situations. Still, adding the full range of studies about toy consumption examined for this chapter, it is highly likely that sustainable development is a significant factor for a large share of consumers. And if we use the term “sustainability” in its original, broad sense—that includes social and economic sustainability—toys certainly seem to be a type of product that raises such concerns. Toys promoted as ethical, organic, and Fairtrade are a common sight on markets run by nonprofit organisations or companies that profile themselves as an alternative. This can be seen as a reaction to the mass consumption of toys in the leading toy chains that some consumer groups conceive of as irresponsible.

Another political consumerist tendency where toys belong to the main types of products is secondhand markets. This trend has been facilitated extensively by the many internet companies where consumers can buy and sell products to each other directly. To be sure, there is an apparent economic rationality tied to buying toys secondhand, which involves borrowing and sharing toys. Still, at least concerning other product areas, consumers state that sustainability concerns are a motivating factor for them (Gullstrand Edbring, Lehner, & Mont, 2016). Do increased secondhand practices reduce environmental harm? The intuitive answer might be a yes. However, there are worries among consumer groups that specifically refer to toys that are bought and sold secondhand. The reason is that old plastic toys on the secondhand market have turned out to still contain hazardous chemicals that have been banned from newer products. This has led, for instance, to a major environmental NGO in Sweden recommending that consumers purchase secondhand products except in the toy sector (Swedish Society for Nature Conservation

Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

[SSNC], 2017). There is also a more scientifically challenging question here. What if consumer awareness of a widely available secondhand market for toys makes them inclined to purchase more, rather than less, products, since they know that they can easily sell the toys later and thus reduce some environmental harm along with reducing some of their guilty conscience? From a perspective of environmental consequences, it remains to be examined to what extent this entails reduced overall amounts of environmentally harmful substances. To answer this question, extensive longitudinal studies of both consumer behaviour and life-cycle analysis (LCA) of toys would need to be conducted. This may provide surprising results. Many surprising results are already available about environmental consequences of toys. Only to mention one here, LCA studies indicate that the batteries in toys are at least as damaging as the toy itself, for instance as regards electric teddy bears (Muñoz, Gazulla, Bala, Puig, & Fullana, 2009). An additional aspect that would need to be investigated about toy consumption and sustainability concerns consumer perceptions of recycling. Recycling schemes that become more detailed and sophisticated raise the question of how recycling—in tandem with its environmental benefits—might reduce political consumerist concerns about massive consumption of plastic toys as environmentally problematic. Do recycling schemes give consumers the illusion (to the extent that it is an illusion) that all is well if they only recycle?

Finally, on the topic of sustainability, a theme that frequently emerges in the news and research about toys is China. Political consumerist criticism of “made in China” is often delivered using arguments of sustainability and health (Teagarden & Hinrichs, 2009). Without getting into comparing sustainability challenges in China with those of other countries, it is relevant to pose the following question for future research: To what extent is the sustainability criticism of China’s toy production rooted in worries about the social and economic sustainability of the home region, as China currently produces a vast majority of the world’s toys? A hypothesis to be scrutinised would be whether a sense of an economic and social threat from China may spill over to a general scepticism using other political consumerist arguments.

Conclusions

Perhaps more than in some other sectors, an overview of the toy sector from a political consumerist perspective shows the following: Toys are anything but innocent. They are rarely just recreational or educational in separation from the values of the cultures where children use them. To the contrary, if people in the future would seek to understand the dominant and competing values of our time, the toy sector and the political consumerist efforts to revise it would be an excellent place to look.

One value type is found when examining the material dimension of toy production and toys. It includes, for instance, consumer concerns about materials, chemical content, amount and materials in packaging, battery-dependence, (short) duration, and obstacles to recycling of the toys. We find an additional value type that is based less on material properties and more on social and cultural ones. These include political consumerist activities with a focus on the messages the toys send, often implicitly, to children. Norms about violence, gender stereotypes, mass consumerism, and fossil-based society are only a few of these. More lately, the wider public debate about privacy and integrity has been raised in the toy sector. Some toys have been shown to conduct ICT-recordings available to the manufacturer of conversations between parents and adults, do not exhaust the factors of consumer concerns about toys.

Still, as wide-ranging as these issues are, a critical remark could be made on the basis of The Toymaker's Pledge, presented in the introduction to this chapter. This pledge calls for producers to give "great value to the [individual] consumer and user." Looking at the proportion of various political consumerist activities in the toy sector, much of it seems to be confined to this traditional realm of consumer interests. In addition to price and "quality," the interest in the health and safety of one's child lies within this realm. Health aspects of chemicals and risks of suffocation are the most obvious ones. Still, when individual consumers unite with their personal concerns, the problems—and solutions—become public, and may move far beyond the interests of the individuals who are protesting. Bans of certain chemicals and hazardous toys are examples of this.

It would be unfair, however, to claim that all political consumerist activities in the toy sector are based on individual interests. Among the political consumerist activities that have been most prominent in moving beyond the well-being of the individual child (typically one's child) are the consumer-led (most often women-led) campaigns against toys promoting violence and gender stereotypes. Here is an underlying vision that goes beyond sparing one's child from norms of violence and gender stereotypes. The ambition is far higher: a future that is better for all, with less violence and with freedom from gender imperatives.

The chapter has indicated a few obstacles to increased effects of political consumerist activities in the toy sector. One is the combination of low cost, low durability, and cultural insistence on physical products as being more attractive than nonmaterial products as

Toy Consumption as Political: Challenges for Making Dreams Come True

gifts to children. Another is the long product chains in a global market, which makes transparency limited and financial incentives high for subcontractors that compromise the issues concerning political consumerism.

Nonetheless, there are reasons for believing that political consumerism can be strengthened in this sector. What was stated as a limitation in the toy sector, the individual concern for one's child or children close to home, is of course also an immense driver for consumers to engage in the toy sector. Moreover, the extraordinary power of reputation in the toy sector is shown to make many consumers motivated to mobilise and for producers that risk being scrutinised to comply in order to maintain or strengthen a high reputation. To further enhance political consumerist activities, it would help if NGOs, consumer groups, and retailers would clarify the often logical link between individual interests in the well-being of end-users of toys to other political, ethical, and environmental benefits. That the worker producing the toy should not be exposed to excessive risks should be more clearly framed as united with the demand for toys safe to the end-user. The policy realm could also strengthen political consumerism in this sector by being more alert as NGOs and consumer groups identify problems and risks in the toy sector, and—where needed—by introducing semihard and hard regulation (e.g., requirements for mandatory information, fees, taxes, moratoria, and bans). If the relationship between political consumerist activities and regulation becomes closer and more visible, more consumers in the toy sector are likely to mobilise, with higher hopes that their dreams come true.

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ See https://standardscatalog.ul.com/standards/en/standard_172_2). The Blue Angel (<https://www.blauer-engel.de/en/products/home-living/spielzeug>) as well as the Nordic Swan, the official Ecolabel in the Nordic countries (<http://www.nordic-ecolabel.org/about/>).

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