MedieKultur | Journal of media and communication research | ISSN 1901-9726

Article – Open issue

Playing with Fandom

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MedieKultur 2019, 66, 18-36

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | www.smid.dk

The online version of this text can be found open access at https://tidsskrift.dk/mediekultur

Abstract

This article addresses fandom from the perspective of LEGO Fans. Building on data from a large study of the LEGO Ideas platform, we investigate fandom as material narratives of play, nostalgia, and intertextuality. LEGO Ideas is a platform that allows users to submit ideas for future LEGO products, and based on the support of other users in the form of votes and comments on issues such as suggested price and target market, LEGO decides whether or not to produce a suggested product. As such, LEGO Ideas is an online community for fans of LEGO, but a surprising number of projects employ other fan narratives such as Star Wars, Marvel, Gilmore Girls, Beatles, and Doctor Who to name a few. When analysing the number of projects submitted to the platform, as many as 69% build on popular texts, brands and celebrities. Further, two thirds of the approved projects build on popular texts and celebrities with established fan cultures.

In this article we argue that fandom becomes a way to create bridges between a variety of users and corporate interests. Although all the active participants on LEGO Ideas self-identify as AFOLS (adult fans of LEGO), they do not necessarily agree about what constitutes an interesting LEGO Ideas project. One way to reach out and draw attention to a project, however, seems to be by employing fandom in general as leverage; that is, materialising fans' narratives in LEGO is a driving force – not just for social interaction among the users – but also in getting their

ideas considered for production by LEGO. Thus, when AFOLs bridge the apparent gap between toys and (often) adult fan cultures, they facilitate multiple ways of engaging with both, in ways that underline the play and intertextuality of popular culture.

Keywords
Multiple fandoms, LEGO fans, co-creation, nostalgia, play

Disclaimer
This research project is related to a longitudinal research collaboration with the LEGO Group. The data set was anonymized and did not contain any personally sensitive data.

Update: *1 November 2019: Minor changes have been made to this version of the article compared to the original published version as requested by the author.*

Introduction

This article extends Poul Booth's (2015) ideas about 'Playing Fans' which describes the increased mainstreaming of fan practices in relation to the heightened convergence of popular media. Booth builds on Fiske's concept of the enunciative fan to develop the perspective that nostalgia is a driving force in fandom itself (Booth, 2015). We develop the mainstreaming perspective further through our argument that fandom itself can be a driving force as a way of understanding others. Inspired by our data, where multiple fandoms intersect in almost 70% of the successful projects, we ask how to understand fandom, when seemingly disparate fandoms converge on the LEGO Ideas platform? We argue that fandom is a leverage with a variety of purposes beyond the social connectivity and identity of sharing a passion. The argument we forward is that fandom is more than a form of socialising, where we see evidence of fandom as a social activity, we suggest that fandom is also a way to communicate the self as a passionate person and someone who is credible as such, because they are a fan with all the investment that entails; knowing the language, and the details of the narrative and production. In other words, being a fan in itself qualifies a person as credible in other fan cultures, because a fan is dedicated and passionate.

Our study builds on a longitudinal study of users of the LEGO Ideas platform. The study itself began in 2015, however, the data from the platform dates as far back as 2011, when LEGO took over the platform. The LEGO Ideas platform is a space where users can suggest new LEGO projects for production. The platform is a co-creation platform where 1,098,262 (March 15, 2019) users are currently present. Not all users participate actively to suggest products; many are present to support projects (incl. expired projects), or be part

of discussions, and we also suggest that many users are not particularly active. To have your project considered for production, 10,000 users must vote for it within a two-year timeline, with specific milestones such as 100 votes, 1,000 votes, and 5,000 votes. At the moment, the platform hosts 27,701 (March 15, 2019) projects. Our study examines the interaction and communication between users with projects that relate to other types of fandom beyond LEGO. Although it would be a stretch to consider all users on the LEGO Ideas platform LEGO fans, in the sense that they would all consider themselves devotees (Duffett, 2013) of LEGO, we do consider the users submitting projects and attracting high number of votes as invested LEGO fans, because they demonstrate a higher level of commitment than most users on the platform.

From fan-freaks to mainstream devotees

The definition of fans has come a long way since Jenson discussed the ways in which fandom was pathologised as both passive and extreme in psychological research and popular descriptions (1992). With definitions such as 'A fan is a devotee or follower of a particular media genre, text, person or activity' (Duffett, 2013, 293) and a fandom is 'the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text (Click and Scott, 2018, 124), later research developed less value-laden definitions that account for more aspects of fans and fandom, beyond the psychological and psychoanalytical perspectives. Yet, the above definitions do not delve into another important dichotomy in the conceptualisations of fans and fandom. Several authors have offered perspectives on fans discussing their roles as situated between consumers and producers, who perform marketplace resistance or are 'enmeshed within market rationalisations' (Hills, 2002, 12). For example, previously Kozinets (2001, 85) has discussed fans as cultural entrepreneurs with their own agendas of market resistance and practices of bracketing commercialisation. Addressing the same dichotomy, Hills takes a somewhat different perspective. He discusses the way that fans are an ingrained part of the market and a segment that media industries consider and try to cater to with particular merchandise and other targeted activities (Hills, 2002, 45). He tries to resolve the dichotomy between resistance and consumption by seeing the contradictions in fan behaviour as a type of both resistance and consumption. From a somewhat different perspective authors such as Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) and Lessig (2008) discuss how fans' involvement with texts and brands poses a challenge for companies trying to control and protect copyright and intellectual property. The issue at stake is the lack of concern that fans sometimes demonstrate for ownership, rights of distribution, and control over narratives, and Jenkins, Ford and Green, as well as Lessig, argue that fans do not necessarily understand themselves within this dichotomy of resistance and consumption. Instead, fans play along and they are not concerned in the first place about whether or not the direction they take is in line with commercial interests (Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013, 56).

Building on this acknowledgment of contradiction, this article goes on to consider the ways in which fan productivity (Fiske, 1992) has been incorporated into commercial enterprises. Fan productivity has been theorised as valuable and important to media industries, because fans help facilitate attention through their work, and drive, for example, online marketing in new directions (Jenkins et al., 2013). Fans are partners in co-creation (Kozinets et al., 2008) where the collective imagination is facilitated by processes of '*help seeking, help giving, reflective reframing, and reinforcing behavior*' (Kozinets et al., 2008, 341). Further, fans contribute as an imaginary audience (Perren and Felschow, 2018, 313) with whom creatives can engage, reach out to, or just imagine in the creative process. There has been a spill-over of fans turning professional through fan activities that have been co-opted by media industries (Perren and Felschow, 2018, 315; Gray, 2010, 137). We see similar behaviour and interactions between fans, and between fans and professionals on the LEGO Ideas platform. For example, fans will help each other with project suggestions and the development of projects as described by Kozinets et al. (2008), or community managers will engage with the fan community in a variety of ways such as by monitoring projects, sending out surveys, or initiating competitions in the community. Research into consumer communities has discussed this collaborative behaviour as consumer longing for trust and reciprocity (Couldry, 2004), but also the need to build social capital (Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter, 2008). Jeppesen and Frederiksen (2006) discuss the way in which specialised communities also collaborate to gain recognition from peers, and in particular from professionals. A key point here is that the continued interaction between the AFOLs and the LEGO Ideas community managers is part of the motivation for users to return to the platform. Overall, LEGO provides the platform that 'accommodate fans, even curating fan transformative works like fan art' (Chin, 2016, 8). The LEGO fans on the platform more or less self-identify as Adult Fans of LEGO (AFOLs), and they are invested in producing ideas for new products that LEGO could potentially develop into commercial products. The fans thus also collaborate to drive the market in a direction that they find interesting (Martin and Schouten, 2014). A remarkable aspect of the fan behaviour on the LEGO Ideas platform, therefore, is that it is not limited to LEGO fandom. Many of the users are also fans of other brands or media texts. Their respective other fan engagements come through in their product ideas, where LEGO is used to create models or scenes that portray other brands or texts, such as Star Wars, the Beatles' Yellow Submarine or the Golden Girls' kitchen. Where most research on collective fan behaviour focuses on the one text or brand to which the community shares a commitment, our study takes a different direction because it investigates how fans of a variety of texts or brands navigate these diverging passions and how LEGO, as the shared fandom, becomes a translating language that allows the users to materialise their other fandoms in new forms.

Although much research into fans describes them as a subculture within the larger dominant culture (Booth, 2015, 9), where fans are a smaller subsection of an audience, we argue that the type of fan behaviour in our data is different from, for example, the

branching out behaviour described by Perren and Felschow (2018). They discuss the way that comic book fans will branch out from Batman to other works by the same author, and then perhaps move on to other Justice League characters (2018, 311). As such, the behaviour described by Perren and Felschow (2018) suggests that fans also include more aspects of the texts as they acquire more knowledge of them, and eventually also branch out to other texts by the same author or other characters related to the initial text. Conversely, the behaviour we address involves disparate fandoms relating to play (LEGO), music (e.g. Beatles), television shows and films (e.g. Star Wars and Golden Girls), brands (e.g. NASA or Mustang) that converge as the LEGO Ideas users suggest ideas for new products building on both their engagement with LEGO and often some other text. We argue that the behaviour we address is strategic rather than branching out, because brands and media texts are used in the fan projects as a form of peer to peer marketing and a way to address specific segments within the LEGO Ideas platform. We suggest that overlapping fandoms relate to fandom as a mode of behaviour as outlined by Booth (2016), where the meta-knowledge of fandom is utilised by those fans in their attempts to achieve support for their LEGO projects. In his book *Playing Fans* (2016), Booth argues that fandom is becoming a mainstream mode of behaviour, where performance as a fan is the rewarding part of fan behaviour, because it is validated within a particular community. We build on this perspective to demonstrate how fandom as a mode of behaviour is recognisable in itself to other fans and thereby creates legitimacy on the LEGO Ideas platform, because being a fan of something makes a user credible within a fan-driven community. Being a fan is thus a trait that makes a user stand out to other fans.

Method

This research project builds on a collaboration with the LEGO Group. We have been granted access to anonymized data from the LEGO Ideas platform and performed a multitude of analyses on this data with a variety of foci such as correlations between project themes and subgroups on the platform, popular themes over time, and group dynamics.

Data selection: This part of the project, however, focuses solely on the connections between being an AFOL and a fan of other texts and brands. The data reveals that a staggering number of projects were tapping into other fandoms, such as those from films, television shows, cars, games and others. To look more deeply into this phenomenon, we isolated a subset within the data pertaining only to the projects that reach the 10,000 votes needed to be considered for commercial production. We wanted to understand the interactions of a variety of fandoms with the LEGO fandom, which is the foundation for the platform. A variety of fandoms help us understand how a larger group of LEGO fans incorporate and play with intersecting fandoms. Examining successful projects means that we can identify how these types of fandom play together in the voting process. If we were looking into unsuccessful projects, we would be unable to determine whether they

were unsuccessful because of their relationship with other fandoms or merely because they were not representing strong ideas. This article builds on data from 140 successful projects in the sense that these projects all reached the 10,000 votes necessary for commercial consideration. Only a fraction of the projects, 21, are approved for production, and this is a limited proportion of the successful projects and probably more indicative of the LEGO Group's commercial considerations than of AFOL engagements. When the voting process is completed with the attainment of 10,000 votes, the project is taken over by the LEGO developers and the AFOLs no longer play any part in whether or not an idea will be produced as a LEGO set.

The data encompassed both qualitative and quantitative aspects, and for this part of the project more emphasis was put on the qualitative aspects, since the aim was to understand how users came to terms with the many converging fandoms visible in the submitted project ideas.

Analytical strategies: although the main focus in the analysis is on the qualitative data, we still employed both qualitative and quantitative analytical perspectives in order to understand more aspects of the data (Gobo and Molle, 2017, 32). Where several types of analyses were conducted on the data set, for the fandom part of the data, the re-contextualisation of the data dump from the platform perspective was important in order to establish not just data patterns, but also that these patterns mainly make sense from the perspective of the platform and in connection to the social structures there. Previous research has demonstrated that fan cultures develop intricate hierarchies (Hills, 2002; Abbott, 2001) and without a careful re-contextualisation of the datasets it would be virtually impossible to understand how hierarchies and cultural signifiers play into the voting processes. As detailed below, we thus used thick descriptions of selected projects to recontextualise and understand the deeper qualitative aspects of the projects.

The data was split into two main datasets, that concerning the projects and that concerning the users. The initial analytical perspective was a form of adapted cross-validation.

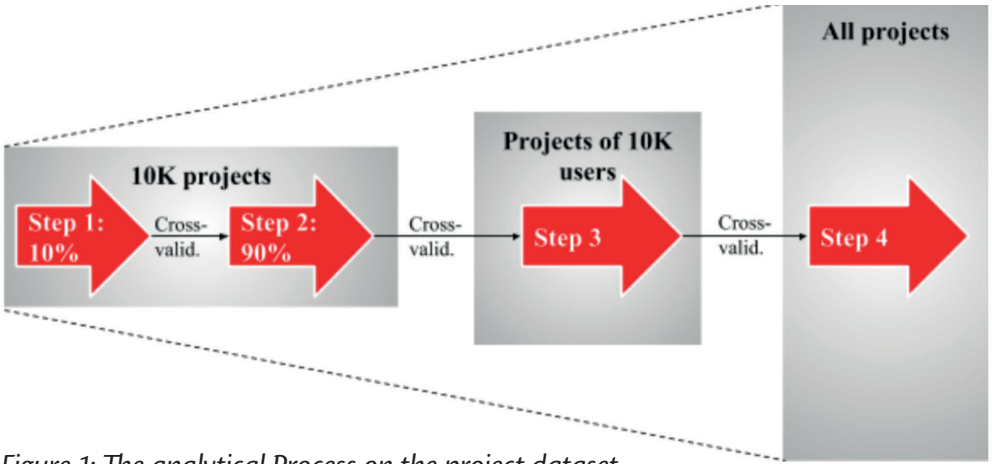

Figure 1: The analytical Process on the project dataset.

Although cross-validation in general works by validating patterns across similar sized, but mutually exclusive subsets of a dataset (Kohavi, 1995, 2), we used a different strategy when dividing the datasets. In the project dataset, we investigate themes and keywords in the subset of the projects reaching 10,000 votes, then in all 10,000 vote projects, then in the projects of users with 10,000 votes and finally in all projects. See Figure 1 of the analytical process above.

To supplement the themes and to understand the user response to these projects in more depth, context descriptions were developed for the first subset, inspired by Geertz' (1973) thick description. Detailing the development of ideas, the responses to, and interactions surrounding ideas helped us understand the dynamics related to project support and how fandom was playing into the voting patterns.

The analytical approach taken to the users and their activity was the reverse. We first analysed the entire user base to understand the structures of the most active and connected users. The starting point in identifying the most active and connected users is Clutch Power, a metric that encourages community contribution and activity. We analysed connectivity by adding the followership of users and projects. Finally, we compared levels of support between the most active and connected users and the users with successful 10,000 vote projects.

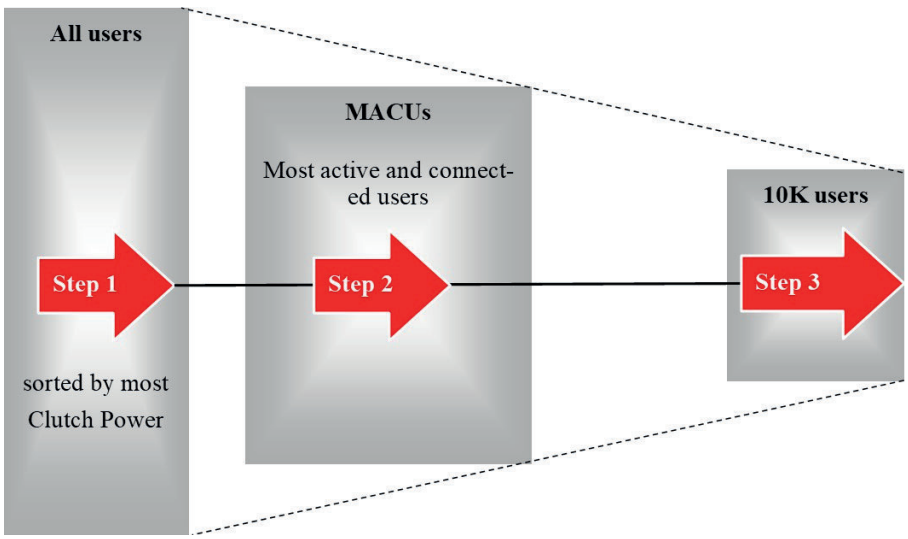

Figure 2: The analytical process on the user dataset.

Using this analytical strategy, we hope to understand the connection between projects with fan themes, and connectivity between the users.

These initial analyses provide the foundation for coding and re-contextualising the data within the platform. On a practical level, Tableau was used to filter the datasets and reduce data complexity. Next, we utilised the automated word frequency software JFreq and an automated language categorising tool, Yoshikoder, for keyword analysis (Lowe,

Project based perspective	User based perspective
Official LEGO Ideas comments and user comments (dates, types, descriptions)	Badges and points (types, numbers, dates)
Project descriptions, publishing dates, views count, support count, comment count, update date, image upload date (dates, users and descriptions)	Followers and following (dates, users)
Project supports (dates, users)	Profiles and logins (ie. user ID's, dates of profile creation or updates..)

Table 1: Overview of data in the two datasets.

2011). The keyword analysis was developed based on the context descriptions, and then JFreq was used to establish frequency in the data. This process runs the risk of eradicating nuance in the data (Bernard, 2011), but clustering and grouping is a valuable tool in order to identify patterns and commonalities (Belk et al., 2013, 97). Nuances, however, are important analytically to understand the relationships and differences between the fans, their preferences and behaviour, and thus we used thick descriptions to deepen the level of nuance on specific projects.

Ethics: in order to navigate the text data in an ethical way, we have removed the main focus from the users and instead focus the analysis on the projects. Where we do cite users, they have been anonymised and we have removed any link to other social media, where people may be identifiable (Markham and Buchanan, 2012, 7). Although users do not necessarily use their birth names, many of them include personal information in their profiles and in project descriptions. Finally, we do not relate comments to projects to the specific projects so as not to expose users unnecessarily. The aim of the article is not related to particular users or their perspectives on fandom, rather we are interested in how fandoms are negotiated within the LEGO fandom and therefore the analytical focus remains primarily on the project level. The methodological point we want to make is that patterns of behaviour are more important than an individual user's behaviour on a platform where ideas and trends are what users meet around. This theme-based focus on the data omits particular aspects of diversity or lack of diversity among the users, hierarchies, and other problematical cultural and interactional aspects of user behaviour. We are aware that the data could provide details about the users and their interaction on a deeper level, however, that is not the focus of this particular article.

Analysis

The notion of fan communities and fandoms is omnipresent on LEGO Ideas. For example, when an AFOL uploads a project like the *Rolling BB-8*, the user demonstrates an engagement with *Star Wars* but materialises it in LEGO. Both forms of engagement can be cate-

Category	Movies (55), Transportation (14), Games (13), Space (5), Science (4), Music (3), Commercial (2), Book (1)
Types	Displays (24), Vehicles (21), Buildings (12), Spaceships (9), Robots (6), Ships (6), Airplanes (5), Machines (5), Characters (4), Space (2), Bird (1), Analog games, Trains (1), Weapons (1)
Fandom	Star Wars (9), NASA (7), Zelda (4), Ghostbusters (4), Jurassic Park (3), CERN (3), Marvel (3)
Approved fandoms	Adventure Time, Big Bang Theory, Caterham, Doctor Who, Ghostbusters, Minecraft, NASA (3), Wall-E, The Beatles, Tron, Voltron, Back to the Future

Table 2: Overview of data. The table lists the categorisation, types of project, the fandom texts and brands, and finally the fandom ideas approved for production. The table is sorted by frequency in the data.

gorised as fandom, since both brands and texts matter enough for the user to combine the two in a product suggestion for LEGO.

In fact, 69% of the projects that successfully collect 10,000 votes can be considered fandom projects. Of course, from a LEGO perspective, all projects on the LEGO Ideas platform could be considered fandom projects, however in this analysis we are interested in the projects where the LEGO fandom converges with another fandom. We have thus taken the analytical step of removing LEGO as a keyword in the data; not doing so would mean that the analysis became meaningless as it would be impossible the identify distinctive markers in the data.

Films and television shows represent by far the largest source of fandom projects, with 60% of the successful projects, and popular cultural texts such as Star Wars, Doctor Who, Tron, Ghostbusters and Batman. The same pattern can be found within the approved product ideas, where the same texts as well as Adventure Time, Big Bang Theory, and Back to the Future are represented. As discussed by Gray (2010), these film and television brands are serials and remakes, where the brands have gained a pervasive presence in popular culture not only through the texts, but in particular through the extensive marketing of those texts through merchandise, trailers, blurbs, and mentions in other media content. Films and television shows are special in the sense that they become a kind of popular vernacular that has a widespread legibility (Kenney and Scott, 2003). Usually, users will recreate scenes, a sequence or locations. Building on Harrington and Bielby (2010), we argue that this form of recreating a popular text in LEGO helps users reflect on the meaning these texts take on in relation to their lives. Thus, for example when recreating the iconic living room from Big Bang Theory, the users get to share their detailed knowledge and intimate understanding of the space where their favourite show takes place. As such, LEGO Ideas become a platform not just for sharing ideas but materialising and actualising

Figure 3: User project proposal SEGA Out Run Arcade Machine on the LEGO Ideas platform.

texts that matter in the individual lives of the users through LEGO bricks. In this analysis, we argue that LEGO bricks become a common language that all the users share.

Similarly, when a user writes "*As a longtime Sega and LEGO fan, this would be a dream come true to see this produced as a real set!*" The user connects their project idea with their personal life story of being a fan – of both LEGO and Sega. As Harrington and Bielby (2010, 444) observe, the fans use the media text to create meaning by connecting life stories with popular texts to "*construct, give meaning to and guide the relationship between the two*".

This type of comment also chimes with nostalgia for a past, where more forms of play were present in the user's life. The Sega project involves the arcade game machines from the mid-1980s, and therefore represents a nostalgic view of the past life of the AFOL.

Sega continues to be a market player in the gaming industry, and in this case using Sega's brand has resulted in Sega participating in the promotion of this project. Although it is unusual to see this type of commercial interference and collaboration with market players other than LEGO, users will often try to mobilise support through the converging fandom, and we return to this point further below.

Nostalgia for childhood and other memories of the past are omnipresent in the dataset; the above film series and television show brands are mostly those that have been revived and thus speak to particular generations that grew up with, for example, the first Star Wars films and the original version of Ghostbusters, but the suggested projects also

involve a large proportion of anniversaries (13% of the projects reaching 10,000 votes were motivated by anniversaries), such as the anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic or the moon landing. As one user observed: anniversaries are *a perfect time to present* an idea.

Before we return to how fandom becomes a leverage for support, we will elaborate on the aspect of nostalgia in these types of fandom projects. Another example of nostalgia comes from the transportation category, to which almost 22% of the successful projects belong. This category is a combination of cars, planes, trains, ships and fictional vehicles such as the Bat-mobile, and it is thus rather broad. A closer look at the data reveals that most of the ideas in this category consist almost exclusively of *cult* or *iconic* cars – as defined by the users in the project descriptions. Again nostalgia plays an important role, when the users create their project ideas. Although transportation as a category is not commonly associated with fans in the fan studies literature, they represent a rather large portion of brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Brand communities share strong similarities with fan communities right down to having 'secret' gestures for those in the know. Where one might suspect that brand communities were less in opposition to the marketplace and the commercialisation of their text, consumer culture studies have contradicted this (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004). Consumers also differentiate between the over-commercialisation of brands or brand narratives and long for more innocent times, when a brand was, for example, considered more authentic (Leigh, Peters and Shelton, 2006).

Marketplace resistance does not seem to play an important role on the LEGO Ideas Platform. In fact, marketing their projects seems to be a particular task where fandom becomes a catalyst for project support and something that users will collaborate on, as this comment demonstrates: *renowned user XX takes care of promotion work in his BLOG and via other means*. Where marketing might seem like an overly professional term for the sharing practices in which users engage, many of them comment on the arduous work they take on, when they see their project support take off:

> I'm getting awfully busy and it's quite possible I won't have the time to work on such new submissions nor tend them during the 12 months not to mention the time to focus on promotion efforts.

Some users set up Twitter accounts with the sole purpose of sharing and distributing updates on their projects, similarly users have professional photos taken of their models to demonstrate the qualities of their projects. Sharing the fandom thus becomes a way to engage with other users on the LEGO Ideas platform in a way that is very similar to marketing practices. Mobilising other fans within the LEGO Ideas platform is done simply through the articulation of a particular convergence of fandoms. For example, the Sega/LEGO fan rallied other users with the same passion with comments such as "*Remember to keep sharing the project on social media and Sega Related forums!*" The user was successful to the degree that Sega decided to join the cause and now has a devoted site outside of LEGO Ideas that promotes the project and encourages Sega fans to register to

LEGO Ideas and vote for the project. In this case, the users embrace the market logic of promoting their project and mobilising outside networks to become successful and similarly, and Sega acknowledges the users' enthusiasm through their support and attention to the individual project.

The *Caterham Super Seven* project is a similar case, where the Caterham brand became involved in the promotion of the LEGO Ideas project. In this case, the brand's involvement is seen as another opportunity to promote and leverage the converging fandom:

> Caterham now confirm they are 100% behind this ☺.... A HUGE "Thank You" to all at Caterham for supporting this project, lets [Sic] hope the extra interest generated will be what we need to get this to the review stage and 10,000 votes.

The quote is related to a project update and the user communicates that the car manufacturer now supports the project. The user uses the opportunity to draw attention to the project and to create credibility through the articulated support from the brand text, that in this case represents the converging fandom. The post is longer and very celebratory in tone, using phrases such as *Stunning News… Directly from Caterham*. In this way, the user manages to underline their direct connection with Caterham to generate credibility, however, research has also demonstrated that user participation on co-creation platforms is often motivated by recognition from professionals such as brand owners (Jeppesen and Frederiksen, 2006). Brand recognition is employed in the comment to motivate other users to support the project and generate the final support needed for the project to be considered for production. The user in the quote thus demonstrates a familiar aspect of co-creation platforms, because they underline their relationship with the brand and thereby position themselves as high-status brand fans (Füller, 2010).

Other users employ other tactics to mobilise similar fan networks within and outside the LEGO Ideas platform: "Please continue to spread the news of our project across the holonet (via LEGO Ideas and social media). Your support is appreciated. You are our only hope."

In the above quote, the user utilises typical fandom-related words and expressions. In the first part they acknowledge the need for support from the Star Wars fan community through their appeal to help spread the awareness of the project. They then appeal to the specific community through the use of Star Wars language tropes such as 'holonet' and 'You are our only hope' to create a strong connection to other fans who share the Star Wars fandom and to motivate sharing. Using the Star Wars vocabulary and phrases is a way to reach out directly to other Star Wars fans and at the same time demonstrate that the user is a credible and knowledgeable person with a strong connection to the Star Wars fandom. Even if this comment reaches a non-Star Wars fan, the intertextual understanding of fandom means that other users will recognise the playfulness in the comment, and as a fan of something else, will also understand, if not the meaning of the words in the quote, what the user is trying to accomplish with it.

Another way to motivate other users to share and promote a project is to keep them informed and demonstrate that the user is paying attention to the work that other users put into promoting a project:

> The set had coverage in various fandom blogs, magazines, and news outlets such as Gizmodo, Action Figure Insider, Popular Science, Tech Crunch, Slash Gear, Popular Mechanics, Nerdist, a few dozen others and even an interview from Rebel Scum and Aggressive Comix.

Through the iteration of all the media coverage, the user is adding legitimacy to the project. Being promoted in platforms for science, science fiction, and technology brings attention and credibility to the project and could impact the dynamics within the LEGO Ideas platform, because the media attention provides a form of recognition of the project. We were not able to cross correlate the news coverage and the voting pattern, however, due to the form of the data. More detailed timelines and links out of the platform are necessary to understand whether or not such media attention affects voting behaviour on the platform.

Everyone on the LEGO Ideas platform is a fan – at least of LEGO toys. However, with the pervasiveness of fandom in itself, the platform is home to many fandoms other than LEGO. This can be seen in the many projects that combine the LEGO Brand and other texts or brands. In this article, we argue that being a fan is a recognisable trait in other users that makes them credible and supportive of each other even if they are not fans of the same text. Building on Booth's idea of fan-practice as a mainstream mode of behaviour on intersecting digital platforms, where the differences between fan-groups are lessened (Booth, 2016, 103), we argue that on the LEGO Ideas platform the users are less concerned with their particular fandoms, but rather involved in the broader understanding that LEGO bricks can translate fandoms into playful experiences for more people. Combined with Bury's (2018) discussion of fan participation as a continuum, we suggest that fans themselves also have an understanding that, for example, on a LEGO co-creation platform, users are invested in a variety of fandoms and on a variety of emotional levels. Inter-fandom and intra-fandom antagonism (Booth, 2016, 104) is downplayed, because the users' shared project is a about collaboration and co-creation, not about the fan-activity itself.

LEGO bricks have become a way to materialise the importance of particular texts in the lives of the users, and thus the shared language that unites the otherwise disparate fandoms on the platform. Since these disparate fandoms have been translated into LEGO bricks, the fandoms become legitimate as LEGO Ideas projects and gain traction within the community. More than being just a translation and materialisation, however, the converging fandom becomes a form of leverage for promoting the project both within the platform and outside. Within the LEGO Ideas platform, speaking the language of a particular fandom other than LEGO becomes a way to mobilise the subgroups within the platform. Being a fan in and of itself is a qualification on the LEGO Ideas platform, because it means that as a user someone understands the investment it takes to be a

fan. Recognising another user as a fan means recognising and valuing the other user's engagement and investment as such – even though you might be fan of something else. Whereas the converging fandom might be more important than the LEGO fandom outside the platform, promoting the LEGO Ideas project as converging with another fandom also works as a promotion of LEGO Ideas and as a way to attract new users to the platform. There are thus several ways in which the LEGO fandom converging with other fandoms becomes a way for the users to leverage and play with market forces, and to create their own space in the market.

Discussion

Almost 70% of the successful projects on LEGO Ideas are projects that relate to fandoms other than LEGO, if fandom is defined as a continuous investment in a text, brand, genre or person (Duffett, 2013; Click and Scott, 2018). Looking at the successful projects on LEGO Ideas, we could speculate that fandom itself gives more users a reason to vote for a project, and therefore creating a fan-based project could be a calculated activity to secure the necessary votes for being reviewed for potential production by the LEGO Group. Yet, looking into the qualitative aspects of the communication surrounding these projects, such as project descriptions and updates, we argue that a genuine passion and engagement underlie these fan-projects, and thus these projects also represent a higher investment from the user and are more carefully developed as ideas. Where we see no direct examples of users discouraging voting for particular projects, users might be smitten with fan enthusiasm or simply recognise the higher investment in a fan-based project, and therefore these projects might attract a higher number of votes. As with fanfiction, a certain amount of recreation and intertextuality goes into the new fan-made creation (Booth, 2017), however, where fanfiction takes the text further and creates new developments and changes to characters and thereby intertextual relationships with the fan-text, the LEGO Ideas projects are to a large extent, recreations of, for example, scenes. When looking at the project data with the lens of recreation of not just fan-texts but also old buildings, planes, and cars, 79% of all the successful projects and 76% of all approved projects are recreating narratives and object through scenes or replicas of objects. Although these recreations work by creating similarity to the existing objects or narratives, the transformational aspect of recreating them in LEGO is what adds a new and playful dimension to these fan-made projects.

The comments to projects in particular demonstrate how fandom projects motivate users to interact and participate (Hutchins and Tindall, 2016) on the platform. Although the LEGO models are often trying to get as close to the modelled originals as they can, the re-interpretation is visible in the texts connected to the projects rather than in the models. We argue that the translation of a fandom into LEGO bricks in itself is a re-interpretation, and that to be considered meaningful they need to relate closely to the

fan-text in order to be recognisable as such. The playfulness that comes from intertextuality and re-imaging a text, however, is then utilised in the communication between fan, fan community, other LEGO Ideas users and the LEGO Group as a way to contextualise the cultural meanings of the fandom, but also of being a fan in and of itself. Fiske's (1987) perspective that users activate the fan-text in particular ways to create polysemy and thereby create relevance for the text in new ways, also becomes a way to understand fandom itself on the LEGO Ideas platform. For example, the user who built the Caterham car professes to be a fan *of both fast cars and LEGO* and had initially made the LEGO model for other purposes, but *after many requests to add this here and conversations with fans and designers* have decided to propose the car on LEGO ideas. Intersecting fandoms operate not only at the level of the individual user, but also as a collective awareness of other fans' activities in- and outside the LEGO Ideas platform.

Although not all users share the same fandoms beyond LEGO, they can understand the intertextual play that goes into activating a text in LEGO and can thus on a meta level understand that the recreation is a fan activity with particular meanings to particular users' lives (Harrington and Bielby, 2010). So, when, for example, one user comments as below on another user's idea, they demonstrate an awareness of the other person as someone with particular passions, but also as person with a professional life that contributes to their fan activities:

> Your background as a physicist really brings a lot of credibility to your model and project as a whole through which one can also see your passion for your work in the sciences and surely this is what many of your 10,000 supporters have felt too.

As such, being a fan of something demonstrates investment and passion and thereby becomes a hallmark of enthusiasm. A related aspect of this is also connected with the users' ages and the ageing of fans (Harrington and Bielby, 2010), where the many nostalgic projects in the LEGO Ideas pool demonstrate one way that fandoms age with their fans. By recreating objects or texts from their youth, the fans also reinterpret them in a nostalgic and playful way that both reiterates the meaning that the fan-texts had in their lives and also finds a new playful re-enactment of the fan-text in LEGO bricks.

A final aspect of converging fandoms that play out on the LEGO Ideas platform is fandom as leverage between users and in relation to the LEGO brand. Fandoms of particular texts and brands are used to promote projects both within and outside the LEGO Ideas Platform. As such, new fans of a given fandom are drawn into the LEGO Ideas platform to support a fan-project. Activating fan narratives within the LEGO Ideas Platform becomes a way to distinguish projects on a platform which at the moment includes 27,701 active projects. Demonstrating a shared interest in the language of LEGO is thus a way to draw attention and show the other LEGO Ideas users how interests and identities are shared (Hutchins and Tindall, 2016). When a user successfully articulates a common theme in LEGO bricks, they underline the shared understanding by communicating in

fandom-specific language; we exemplified this with the Star Wars example in the analysis, but this is a common trait in the fan projects.

An additional aspect of leveraging converging fandoms on the LEGO Ideas platform is that of co-optation. Although one might say that LEGO Ideas is an example of the double exploitation of consumers (Zwick et al., 2008), where consumers first create the idea for the product, market it in the right networks to get it considered for production, and finally act as the target segment for the same product, however, acknowledging users' own agendas can be important in these processes (Knudsen & Grønning, under review) because, as acknowledged by Hills (2002), fans are not always in resistance to market logics. In fact, in this case, the users seem to reach out to companies themselves for recognition and support in order to gain legitimacy and credibility. As demonstrated by Jeppesen and Frederiksen (2006), the users on similar platforms value professional recognition even more than peer recognition. In this case, professional recognition is mobilised to achieve the users' own goals of harvesting support and getting the project to a position where the LEGO group will review the idea for potential production. When revisiting the debate on fans' resistance to market co-optation (Kozinets, 2002), we therefore argue that it is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of fan agendas and life projects. As shown in this data, many of the users also market their projects on platforms other than LEGO Ideas, and it seems that using the LEGO Ideas platform as well as other social media platforms is a way of marketing their own skills in the conceptualisation and promotion of LEGO products (Knudsen & Grønning, under review).

We argue that writing off a fan's labour of love as simply exploitation reflects a limited understanding of fans, their work and their market understandings. The LEGO Ideas platform was built by Cuusoo and has only been owned by the LEGO Group for the past ten years. This does not mean, of course, that the fans on the platform cannot be exploited, however, the fan activities also display the joy of playing with LEGO bricks and sharing their other fan affinities within the group, and so, even if the LEGO Group do obtain product ideas from the platform, they also provide a virtual space for the joy and interaction of these fans. In the past eight years of hosting the LEGO Ideas community, the LEGO Group has produced 21 ideas from that community, which seems like a rather expensive way to harvest user-generated ideas. In fact, the LEGO Group is carefully trying to manage expectations, because even if a user's idea reaches the mandatory 10,000 votes, they are not ensured production of their idea. As Scott argues, producing the work of some fans creates divisions and disappointment in the fan community (Scott, 2019) and so managing expectations and ensuring continued interest in participation on the platform is a continuous and important priority from the LEGO Group's perspective. There are no guarantee, even when users have marketed, developed and redeveloped their ideas, that they will be produced. There must be more to motivation for participation, therefore, than getting through to the production stage. There is no question that users come to think of their participation as labour, sometimes even to the degree that it competes

with their paid employment; however, the encouragement, interested suggestions and cheering by the community members drive projects and ideas along. The recognition and enthusiasm of other community members thus play an important part for the users. As noted by Stanfill (2019, 153), when fans love, they produce community: that is, the work of uploading, reworking, marketing, and sharing ideas in itself strengthens the community of which the users are part on the LEGO Ideas platform. We agree with Hills (2002) in arguing that fans in this case benefit not just from the social aspects of being part of an active and supportive community, but have an acute understanding of marketing and the benefits they derive both within and outside of the LEGO Ideas platform, when managing to leverage converging fandoms on and outside of the LEGO Ideas Platform.

Conclusion

We investigated fandom regarding the co-creation platform LEGO Ideas. Although it can be difficult to ascertain whether project quality, network ties or other priorities drive voting, it is clear that fandom works as a boost to voting behaviour on the platform, when users manage to leverage the shared understanding of being a fan, activating sub-groups within the community, and through the mobilisation of outside fan communities. As with other types of fandom, nostalgia and recreation work as motivation, because the nostalgia revived and played out through recreation accentuates how the fandom has had specific relevance to particular users. This relevance is then shared with the community, not just through the projects but also via language and fan tropes. The LEGO Ideas platform becomes a way to translate nostalgia into new playful forms via LEGO bricks.

Methodologically, this project builds on anonymized data provided by the LEGO group, however, because we have alternated between quantitative and qualitative analytical strategies, the recontextualisation of the data in relation to the platform as it works for the users has been an ongoing method of investigation. The advantage of undertaking a project-based investigation is that the individual user is less in focus and thus less vulnerable to exposure in unintended ways. We suggest that thinking in alternative terms when it comes to the methodological choices in fandom studies has the potential to generate insight relating more to the functions and themes of fandom and less to individual fan identities and meaning. Limitations to this process are of course that the individual fans become somewhat hidden in the process, and where this might be the preferred option in a research project, it might be counter to the agendas of the fans. It also makes it difficult to understand the way that desire drives particular fan agendas, and although this could also be an interesting study based on the current dataset, the individual users have not been the primary concern of this study. We suggest that acknowledging the fans' goals and agendas alongside the goal of research and publication must be an ongoing consideration of balance.

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