

Diana King UCLA Library

Introduction

"You want to change the toy industry? Then go change the world."
--Marvin Glass, toy designer

Rakstris, Tod J. "The Happiness Merchants." Chicago Tribune Oct. 22, 1967: H26.

This poster highlights initial findings from a literature review conducted on the intersection of gender and the design, manufacturing, marketing, dissemination, and cultural understandings of action figures. It maps the multi-disciplinary routes through which current systems of knowledge about action figures and related popular culture merchandising reside and intersect.

Literature consulted includes:

- Monographs and particularly monographic chapters
- Dissertations and M.A. theses
- Industry trade publications and reports
- Collectors' news sites and blogs
- Scholarly articles across multiple humanities and social sciences databases
- New media content from podcasts, Twitter, and Tumblr

Defining Action Figures

There is actually no standard definition of an "action figure," but it has since inception been a gendered object.

- Until 1964 and the creation of Hasbro's G.I. Joe, the term "action figure" didn't exist. It was created as a way to market a doll to boys without calling it a "doll." The G.I. Joe figure later inspired comics, cartoons, films, and video games. Particularly since the 1970s and *Star Wars*, action figure tie-ins have served as an integral part of the merchandising strategy for cross-platform multimedia entertainment in fantasy, science fiction, superhero/comics, and related genres. While initially designed for and marketed to boys, many figures are now geared just as often to adult collectors, and the demands of female consumers have become more visible in the public sphere.

So what is an action figure? Do you know it when you see it?

- The NAICS code includes action figures as a thinly defined category in the 339930 category with dolls, toys, and game manufacturing.
- According to U.S. tariff regulations, an action figure is a toy that depicts "non-human creatures," while a doll depicts a human figure. Dolls have much higher tariff rates, causing some companies to go to court arguing that their characters aren't human.
- Collectors, however, have established a number of broad definitions (with inevitable exceptions) over time to distinguish among types of figures:

ACTION FIGURES:

- Have a certain amount of "poseability" with moving parts and joint articulation
- Usually come with interchangeable accessories and weapons
- Are usually between 3 in. to 11 in. in height, although the original G.I. Joe action figure was 12 inches in height
- Are usually made primarily from molded plastic, with few removable pieces of clothing

DOLLS:

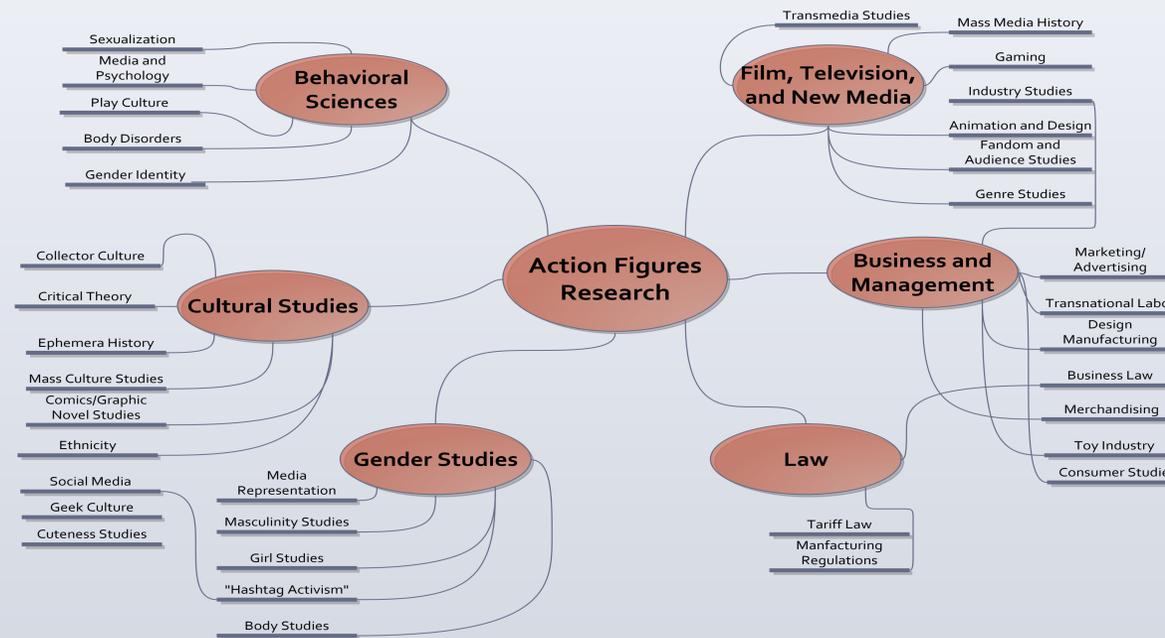
- Are usually 12 inches and over in height
- Usually come with clothing that can be removed, and have outfits that can be purchased separately (for example, Barbie)
- Poseability is less important than "aesthetics"

FIGURINES:

- Are extremely small, usually up to 6 inches. "Statues" can be much larger, and made from ceramic or higher quality components, but have other similarities to figurines
- Have no moving parts or poseability
- Are molded permanently to a base so they can stand upright (for example, plastic green soldiers)

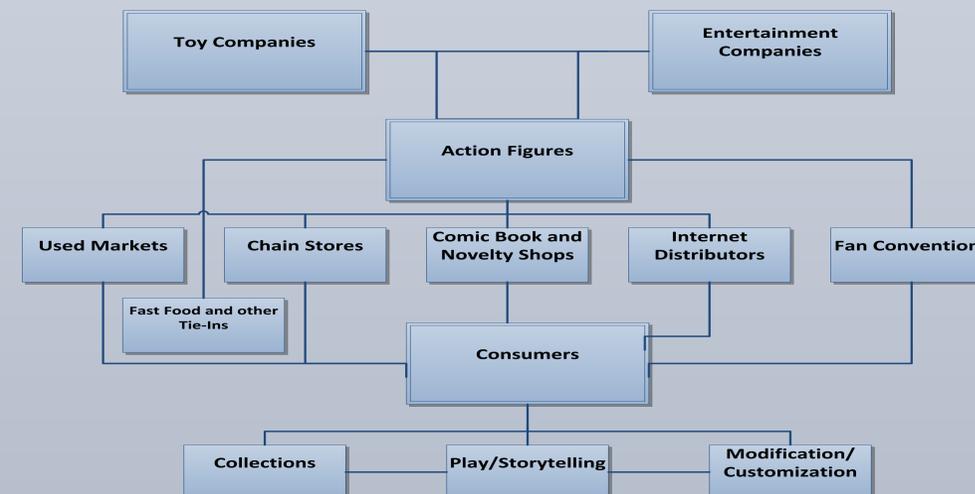
Action Figure Research: A Multi-Disciplinary Map

Like other cultural commodities, action figures cannot be fully studied in a traditional disciplinary vacuum. A multi-disciplinary approach is necessary for understanding how they are produced, disseminated, and interpreted. However, differing vocabularies and philosophical approaches complicate research, and currently neither popular nor scholarly publications tend to engage substantively outside of their own contexts.



Action Figures: Modes of Distribution

The acquisition of action figures has long ceased to be a singular process of purchase at a store or second-hand trading. Online collector sites, fan-based conventions and events, and other venues have increased visibility far beyond the "boys" section of a typical chain store's toy aisles.



Gaps in Current Research

- While many books and articles mention or briefly discuss action figures, few consider them historically with any breadth or rigor. There are published histories of *G.I. Joe*, but no attempt at a definitive critical history of them as toys, collectibles, and/or franchise commodities.
- The bulk of scholarly work on gender and action figures skews toward the social sciences and focuses on (1) masculinity and the role of popular culture (including toys and dolls) on body dysmorphia; and (2) differences in play and toy choice among different genders. There is very little on female collectors, girls' relationship to action figures (as opposed to Barbie and other dolls), or the actual design work, manufacturing processes, and distribution decision-making tied to action figures. Cultural and gender studies research tends to instead "read" the finished product or its observed impact on society.
- New scholarship on transmedia and story worlds points toward something often missing in existing literature on action figures: the agency and reception of consumers. Far more in-depth research needs to be done in the form of interviews and interaction with fans, figure designers, female collectors, and bloggers, many of whom write and talk on this topic extensively, but through less traditional forums.
- Action figures are the product of transnational labor and consumption, usually designed in the U.S. but manufactured in China and other Asian countries. However, little scholarship in English is available on international action figure tie-ins, particularly for non-Hollywood properties.

Other Conclusions

- "Shortpacking" and other sales practices have created a dual economy for many female action figures. They are manufactured and distributed in far smaller numbers, under the stated justification that "female characters don't sell." Conversely, they are purchased rapidly and sold at a high price by the collector's market because of rarity.
- Social media activism has been moderately successful in changing some corporate decision-making about female representation in action figures and toys, as well as in challenging long-standing misogyny in "geek culture."
- Online information sharing and D.I.Y. culture, including increased accessibility to 3-D printers, has increased the individual manufacture of custom action figures, allowing audiences to create gender and ethnic representation often missing from media franchise-based corporate toys.
- Action figures exist in a space between competing and problematic binaries: male/female, representation/exclusion, childhood/adult, artistry/commodity, and passive collector/active play. As Jonathan Gray notes, however, individual consumers have adapted, reinterpreted, and even physically transformed these toys in ways that corporations never initially envisioned:

"[W]e should criticize the self-serving hypocrisy of media firms that hype their licensed toy lines, only to clamp down on multiple other forms of paratextual play . . . we as media analysts should regard toy lines as more than hypercommercialized cash-grabs, and I have argued that toys contribute to the storyworld, offering audiences the prospect of stepping into that world and contributing to it."
--Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, p. 187

Bibliography and Contact

Access the bibliography online via Zotero:

<https://www.zotero.org/diking/items/collectionKey/4EJFPN3S>

Contact:

Diana King

Librarian for Film, Television and Theater | World Arts and Cultures/Dance | Gender and LGBT Studies

UCLA Library

diking@library.ucla.edu