

Globalization in the world of toys and cultural tradition. A critical reflection

Globalizacja w świecie zabawek i tradycji kulturowych. Refleksja krytyczna

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Toys are play objects that accompany a child at different stages of development. Increasingly, they are also an object dedicated to adults for leisure entertainment. Jan Bujak writes that it is

A material object specially made for play, which contains the cultural content of its proper era or eras past from the field of material, spiritual or social culture and conveys it in a way that awakens certain ludic attitudes, and through them shapes physical, mental or emotional development (Bujak 1988, p. 15).

Toys are everyday objects, commonly available in our environment, that once were not necessarily given due attention. However, they are increasingly being noticed by researchers because of the content that can be read from them.

Relatively recently (since the 1970s), children's toys have become an important research problem for representatives of many scientific fields – educators, psychologists, sociologists, ethnographers and historians of education (Socha, Kielbasa 2019, p. 7).

Toys bear witness to changes in the development of culture, industry, pedagogical currents and styles of education. The content that can be “read” from them tells us a lot about the lives of people, both in centuries past and in modern times.

Toys prepare, teach and support the development of competence to perform certain social roles.

So what is play in today's globalized world?

Play, as Tadeusz Paleczny writes

[...] is an element of every culture, a peculiar, local, endogenous, peculiar and distinct culture, as well as culture per se, as a way of life model for every human being.

Play becomes the glue, the glue, the connective tissue that unites different cultures in the new space of a unified, globalizing mass culture (Paleczny 2011, p. 1, 4).

Globalization, as well as excessive consumerism, is affecting all areas of our lives. This also applies to toys.

In a consumer society, an individual defines his or her identity through the possession of material goods. The mass culture of consumerism creates an image of an ideal life through material possessions, and as a result, people are becoming more like each other on a global scale. Everyone strives to possess the same objects to satisfy their dreams, ambitions and aspirations.

“In highly developed consumer societies (sometimes called post-consumption societies), consuming becomes a tool for people to create identity and personal self-expression” (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2011, p. 11).

Nowadays, childhood, the child’s place in society, as well as the outlook on child rearing, have been transformed. In a consumer society, childhood has also become a time to plan and create the best possible future for the child. Providing him with all the material goods and space to develop his talents. This is an important time to invest in a child’s future.

“The children’s room in a society of consumer success acts as an incubator for the child’s intellect and creativity” (Lisowska-Magdziarz 2011, p. 71).

The toy industry, or rather the toys that are available on the market, is also a reflection of these changes. “The impact of globalization is pervasive and touches our lives, including the toys we choose for our children. The toy industry, childhood has been transformed as borders blur and cultures converge” (<http://dailymind.co.uk>).

The toy market is a thriving industry, and the value of the global toy market continues to grow.

According to the forecasts of Euromotor International (a research institution, engaged in many types of research and publication of global trends based on analysis and studies), in 2024 the value of the global toy market was expected to exceed 145 billion US. An increase of about 4% over 2023 was noted. In Poland, based on GFK Polonia data, in 2023 the value of the toy market exceeded PLN 5 billion. This was an annual increase of 4–5%. There are mainly three factors contributing to such dynamic growth in the industry: the purchasing power of parents, the rich offerings of manufacturers, and the influence of the media and pop culture in shaping the tastes of the youngest (<https://ramiz.pl>).

The toy industry is one of the most dynamic. “It is often said that the toy market is almost always stable and is one of the rarest segments that is not threatened by the global financial crisis” (Šmit and Šmit 2016, p. 999).

Since the mid-1950s, the toy industry has undergone major changes. Over the decades, the way toys are made has changed, both in terms of the technology used to make them and the materials used.

Industrial production of toys moved from Europe (Germany, Scandinavian countries) to the United States. In addition, in the 1970s, production facilities gradually moved across the Asian continent; first to Japan, then to South Korea and Taiwan, and then to China, where the largest number of toys are now produced (Šmit and Šmit 2016, p. 1001).

The global toy market is dominated by several major players in the industry. In first place are Mattel (American manufacturer of Barbie dolls) and Lego (Danish manufacturer of building blocks). These toys are dedicated to both children and adults.

In a global perspective, toy companies are fighting a tough battle for survival. They are engaged in an unequal battle with the movie and computer game industries, which are taking an increasing share of the entertainment of choice for children in the Western world (Andersen 2022, p. 364).

For years, the most popular toys have been licensed – associated with characters from movies, fairy tales, games with which children identify. With the digital revolution and the development of digital and electronic games, children have become experts in this sphere. They are often the ones who decide on parents' shopping choices. Advertising aimed directly at children also has a huge influence on these choices.

In the last decade, children have been identified as subjects who not only have greater purchasing power themselves but also exert greater (or even undue) influence over adult decisions about consumer products, mainly through what is still called “bullying power” (O'Connor 2012, p. 183).

Among the current trends, there are several leading groups/areas of manufactured toys.

The first is organic and eco-friendly toys. That is, both educating about ecology and made of natural and biodegradable materials.

The next are high-tech toys (integrating modern AI and VR technologies) that make play more and more interactive. These include all sorts of educational robots that support learning programming, interactive educational gadgets, applications that combine VR (virtual reality) with physical toys (e.g., Lego),

as well as educational toys with artificial intelligence elements (e.g., language learning robots).

There is growing interest in toys that combine education and play. Parents are increasingly investing in educational toys that develop children's creativity and imagination. DIY (do-it-yourself) kits that promote the expansion of manual skills, such as building, model-gluing and sewing, are popular (<https://ramiz.pl>).

Children are heavily influenced by branding developed by big brands, behind which are huge financial and human resources and specialized research and analysis of the market in terms of needs, sales and trends. According to these, a new product – a toy – is constructed.

“The huge expansion of such standardized systems internationally is one of the signs of cultural imperialism” (Ritzer 2003, p. 295).

Despite global trends in the world of toys and their accessibility in every corner of the world, it is noteworthy that it is still possible to observe in toys the existence of cultural codes – the preservation of individual characteristics, which are particularly evident in Europe. They also result from different approaches to raising children and traditional approaches to play. Toy manufacturers and distributors take into account the tastes and habits of potential customers in different corners of the world. The prioritization of education, development of creativity and physical activity is also significant.

In the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway), parents focus on children's independence, activities and play in nature. The most popular toys are those inspired by nature and made of ecological materials. In France and Italy, there is a strong emphasis on creativity and all creative activities. Creative sets and building blocks are popular. In Germany and Switzerland, toys are meant not only to entertain but also to teach. Programming robots and experimentation toys help with this. In Eastern Europe, a toy is seen as a form of reward or used to emphasize a family's material status. Therefore, toys with international licenses and recognized big brands are popular (<https://ramiz.pl>).

When analyzing the toy market, one should also mention, the increasingly common phenomenon of “kidult”¹ – that is, the segment of toys dedicated to

¹ Kidult – “a term from Kid – child + adult – associated with postmodernity to describe a middle-aged (possibly older) consumer who actively participates in the widely understood youth culture and prefers a hedonistic attitude to reality, while negating the responsibility and stability characteristic of traditionally understood adulthood. [...] The kidult segment (found primarily in highly developed and affluent countries) is desirable from the point of view of providers of consumer goods and services due to

adults. This phenomenon is quite strongly created by the Lego company. Lego sets dedicated to adults. Figures-cult cinema characters from their childhood, but also creative sets (arranging block-floral compositions, creating replicas of paintings by master painters, architectural buildings). Playing with them is supposed to support tranquility, rest and promote relaxation. It is intended to be an analog entertainment and a break from the virtual world.

The segment of toys dedicated to adults is also a response to declining demographics, i.e. the number of children's toy buyers, and the creation of a new market for the future.

In addition to large global brands, the toy market also includes a large group of smaller entrepreneurs who are an important part of it and its voice. While they cannot compete with the world leaders, they fill a very important gap in the area of education through play.

Toys that have cultural codes specific to the place they come from (e.g., dolls in folk costumes) help children learn about the local culture, build identity, but also enable them to learn about other cultures. They teach empathy and understanding, important qualities for compatible functioning in society, and especially important today in view of the ever-increasing scale of population migration in the world.

The projected future of the toy market is drawn under the influence of two strong and, at first association, mutually exclusive directions of development: further globalization, but also strong personalization with reference to locality. It will be important to balance global trends while respecting the specificity of local cultural features.

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the generally high purchasing power of people in this age bracket. [...] Fun becomes a kind of duty and marker of success for kidults”, <https://pl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kidult> (access: 13.05.2025).

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SUMMARY

The article discusses the globalization of the toy market and the toy industry in a consumer society in which the child and his childhood have become an important project defining his future. One of the first elements of a child's fullest development is selecting appropriate toys, which have undergone global unification. The children's industry, including the toy industry. It is one of the fastest-growing industries, strongly influenced by several global toy manufacturers who dominate the global market. This article discusses the latest trends in the toy industry, as well as two strongly opposing trends: the globalization of the toy market and personalization in relation to local cultural codes.

KEYWORDS: play, toy, toy as a subject of research, consumerism in the world of toys, globalization of the toy market and industry

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł omawia globalizację rynku zabawek i przemysłu zabawkarskiego w społeczeństwie konsumpcyjnym, w którym dziecko i jego dzieciństwo stały się ważnym projektem definiującym jego przyszłość. Jednym z pierwszych elementów pełnego rozwoju

dziecka jest wybór odpowiednich zabawek, które uległy globalnej unifikacji. Branża dziecięca, w tym branża zabawkarska, jest jedną z najszybciej rozwijających się branż, silnie uwarunkowaną działalnością wielu globalnych producentów zabawek, którzy dominują na rynku globalnym. W artykule omówiono najnowsze trendy w branży zabawkarskiej, a także dwa silnie przeciwstawne trendy: globalizację rynku zabawek i personalizację w odniesieniu do lokalnych kodów kulturowych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: zabawa, zabawka, zabawka jako przedmiot badań, konsumpcjonizm w świecie zabawek, globalizacja rynku i przemysłu zabawek