

Best friends forever – really? The group of friends as the ideal model of sociability in children’s animations

European Journal of Cultural Studies

1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/13675494231175066

journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Laura Saarenmaa** 

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Abstract

This article explores the intensifying friendship ideal current in children’s media culture. The article argues that children’s animations, such as *Lego Friends*, educate children about a desirable model of sociability, namely that of the closed group of friends. While the recent research on friendship has focused on the technological mechanisms of friendship in specific textual practices and platforms, the concept of friendship itself and its cultural re-significances has received less attention. In this analysis, *Lego Friends* is approached from the perspective of popular cultural meaning making: how and in relation to what are friendships represented as not only *valuable* but also *necessary* social relationships. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation, the article suggests that the intensifying friendship ideal reflects the contemporary adult concern of social exclusion, rooted in neoliberal economic insecurities.

Keywords

Children’s animation, friendship, *Lego Friends*, multiplatform television, neoliberalism, post-feminism

In recent decades, we have witnessed a turn in children’s media culture from heteronormative romances towards independent heroines and girlfriend groups that celebrate eternal friendship with each other. In the children’s media research literature, female friendships have been discussed in terms of a reconceptualisation of girlhood through girl power and girl empowerment (e.g. Banet-Weiser, 2004; Harris, 2004; Kearney,

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2002; Riordan, 2001). This article explores the popular multiplatform girlfriend animation *Lego Friends* (2012–) to examine the intensifying friendship discourse in contemporary children's media culture.

Lego Friends follows the style of narration of similar executions of human girl-shaped friendship animations, such as *My Little Pony: Equestria Girls* (2013–2020) and *Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse* (2012–2015), which are multiplatform television series similarly based on global toy brands for girls. *Lego Friends* also follows the superhero and girl-power animation traditions, represented by fantasy figures such as unicorns (*My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, 2010; *My Little Pony Tales*, 1992), fairies (*Winx-club*, 2004) and little girls with superpowers (*The Powerpuff Girls*, 1998; *Sailor Moon*, 1992).

In her book *Internet Playground* (2005), children's television scholar Ellen Seiter characterises the Internet as a powerful pedagogical tool but also a stealthier marketer to children than television ever was (p. 100). Today, the differentiation of television and the Internet has lost some of its relevance, as television content is increasingly available and recirculated through YouTube and similar streaming platforms and is consumed via portable devices. Not least because of this broad availability of content and the repetitive style of consumption, claims about the efficient marketing of ideas to children on the part of web-based content is ever more convincing. This article argues that the *Lego Friends* multiplatform TV series markets a desirable model of sociability to children, namely, that of the closed group of friends. Moreover, this article suggests that the intensifying friendship ideal seen in children's animations reflects the contemporary adult-world fear of exclusion rooted in neoliberal economic insecurities (cf. Greeley, 2018).

The definition of neoliberalism here draws on Maurizio Lazzarato's (2009) conception of a neoliberal enterprise society, which in turn draws on Foucault's formulation of the 'individual as entrepreneur of oneself' in relation to contemporary labour markets that are characterised by permanent insecurity and precarity. Uncertainties about work bring economic and existential precarity into the lives of individuals and shape their social relationships. The pull towards closed collectives and a cultural revaluation of friendship can be seen as reactions to these uncertainties.

In global children's animation and toy production, the shift from the individual to the collective was previously seen in the Bratz Pack doll collection produced by MGA Entertainment in 2001 (Paasonen, 2009). In *Lego Friends*, the very concepts of friendship and 'friend' itself are commodities, purchasable products and objects of desire. In a similar manner to earlier friendship animation franchises, each *Lego Friends* animation figure has a particular skill, interest area or passion that brings action and agency to the plotlines. The master narrative of *Lego Friends*, however, tends to focus on confirming and maintaining the social commitment and everlasting bond within a group of five high-school girls: Andrea, Mia, Olivia, Emma and Stephanie.

A similar emphasis on friend groups and the celebration of friendship can be seen in popular television from the 1990s onwards. The most successful American television comedies and comedy dramas of the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as *Sex and the City*, *Friends*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *New Girl*, *Girls* and more, celebrate living together and socialising with a closed group of friends as the ideal life-style for young urban professionals. These shows and the like have often been discussed

within the frames of post-feminism and the neoliberal economy (e.g. Chen, 2013; Ewen, 2018; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Winch, 2013). In the television comedy genre, friendship collectives are replacing married couples and nuclear families with children, at the same time that the neoliberal precarious labour market insists on flexibility in terms of income, habitation and social ties (Ewen, 2018; see also Illouz, 2007).

Referring to comedy dramas like *Sex and the City* and *Lipstick Jungle*, Alison Winch (2013) points to the intimate female group of friends as a signifier of postfeminist normativity. According to Winch, groups of female friends mirror the essential part of the postfeminist having-it-all lifestyle. Shows like *Sex and the City* claim that it is 'impossible to succeed without one's girlfriends' (Winch, 2013: 66). Through the concept of 'strategic friendship', Winch discusses the commodity value of girlfriends and female friendships as valuable social relationships. This article takes Winch's argument further to argue for a more comprehensive reevaluation of friendship as seen in both adult and children's media that depicts friendship as not only a *valuable* but also a *necessary* model of sociability.

In media and communication studies, recent analyses of friendship discourses have been focused on the organisation of online friendships. Kanai (2017) has written about female friendships on blogs, Schwarz (2010) and Lewis and West (2009) about collecting and cataloguing friends on social media platforms, and Bucher (2012) and Van Dijck (2012) about the intimate relationship with digital platforms themselves. Friendship networks have also been addressed in a growing body of literature on algorithms that monitor our tastes, choices and even political opinions (e.g. Beer, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018; Chambers 2017).

While the technological mechanisms of friendship have been studied empirically in specific textual practices and platforms, the concept of friendship itself and its cultural re-significances have received less attention. In this article, *Lego Friends* is approached from the perspective of popular cultural meaning making: it analyses how, and in relation to what, friendships are represented in the animation as not only valuable but also necessary social relationships. The theoretical framework used draws on Stuart Hall's theory of articulation. For Hall, articulation means a connection that joins, under specific circumstances, two separate ideas or concepts together. This connection is not pre-determined or inevitable but always temporary, partial and subject to chance. According to Hall, ideologies are not based on united ideas but on compilations of separate concepts and ideas that are joined together to mean something fixed and inseparable in a particular historical situation (Grossberg, 1986: 9). Articulation is, therefore, a theoretical term for struggle over ideological common sense. It is a theory about how ideas and understandings seen as self-evident and natural in a certain time are shaped by contiguous mechanisms of dearticulation (from one thing) and rearticulation (to the other; Hall, 1980, 1985: 113).

Using articulation theory as a textual analytical framework, I investigate the verbal and visual rearticulations of friendship in *Lego Friends*. Alongside Hall, I use Angela McRobbie's works on the new gender regime (2007), creativity (2016), the perfect (2015) and resilience (2020) to take closer look at how friendship, in *Lego Friends*, is intertwined with neoliberal notions of valuable (feminine) subjectivity.

Materials and methods

The research material for this study consists of the complete seasons of the *Lego Friends* TV series (2013–2017). The show ran for four seasons; all together there are 19 episodes of 22–25 minutes available on the YouTube Lego Channel and on Netflix (in the author's country). In addition, *Lego Friends: The Power of Friendship* (2016), consisting of four 25-minute episodes, is available on Netflix (in the author's country).¹ The latest series, *Lego Friends: Girls on a Mission* (2018), develops more straightforward action storylines and includes fewer references to friendship relationships, and therefore is less important here. Instead, I include in the material the 3-minute *Lego Friends* webisodes (seasons 1–4, all together 141 episodes) available on YouTube posted by the YouTube Lego Channel in 2012–2016.² The time span of the research subject thus stretches from the launching of the first series to the circulation and recirculation of *Lego Friends* episodes on YouTube and similar streaming platforms in the 2020s. Regardless of the time of the production or the reincarnation of the series, the basic argument about the significance of friendship remains the same throughout each series.

In my analysis of the selected material, I have paid attention to the story content, narration and plot structure, as well as the verbal and visual claims about friendship. At the level of narration and plot structure, I have paid particular attention to narrative closure and the final scenes, in which concluding claims about friendship are typically made. At the level of story content, I have identified several main themes and subthemes. This stage of analysis resulted in three main theme categories: work, competition and confirmation of friendship. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of articulation, referring to non-necessary linkages between different elements, I discuss these themes one by one to shed light on how these themes of work, competition and confirmation of friendship are linked with friendship in *Lego Friends*.

Production context

Lego Friends, a multiplatform television series produced by Danish production company M2 Entertainment and Picture This Studio for the The LEGO Group, was originally aired in the United States in 2013. Thereafter, the show was delivered to over 118 countries and translated into over 36 languages.³ In addition to TV broadcasts, the show is available on Netflix, YouTube, and various national and regional children's channels and platform television services, and is often consumed through portable devices.

The original function of the *Lego Friends* TV series and webisodes was to advertise the primary product, the *Lego Friends* toy set. Launched in 2012, the toy set was designed to reach girls as the target group. A market-share analysis executed by The LEGO Group indicated that girls did not like Lego products and that girls appreciate psychological depth and affective engagement in their playing.⁴ In the *Lego Friends* TV series, these qualities are emphasised through highlighting the personalities of the Lego-doll individuals that form the group of five girls: ambitious Stephanie, loquacious Andrea, intellectual Olivia, athletic Mia and artistic Emma. While the *Lego Friends* toy set was designed to offer girls physically more attractive toys to play with, the *Lego Friends* TV series and webisodes were designed to introduce, develop and strengthen the personalities and the

social dynamics of the girl collective and thereby make the primary product, the *Lego Friends* toy set, more desirable.⁵

Soon after its launch in 2012, the *Lego Friends* toy set faced public criticism due to its traditional take on femininity and feminine gender roles.⁶ The central settings of play, including the Heartlake City shopping mall, veterinary clinic, horse stables, high school and cafeteria, were seen as representing traditional arenas for femininity, and the skills and interest areas, such as baking, singing, dancing and party planning, were seen as representing traditionally feminine interest areas. This issue has been highlighted in recent academic research on the *Lego Friends* toy sets (Black et al., 2014; Gutwald, 2017; Reich et al., 2018). There are also repetitious references to these prominent forms of feminine labour in the *Lego Friends* TV series and webisodes. The *Lego Friends* characters cook, clean, shop, plan events, prepare parties and send cards and gifts to one another. Through these social activities, the friendship of the *Lego Friends* intertwines with utterly material forms of consumption.

The producers of the series responded rapidly to the presented criticism and strengthened themes of environmentalism, wildlife activism and scientific problem solving. The *Lego Friends* were reconfigured as intelligent, ingenious problem solvers and possessors of traditionally masculine skills, such as archery, karate, basketball, mathematics, physics and chemistry. Intellectual skills and capacities are highlighted as early as the first season of the *Lego Friends* TV series storylines. In ‘Dolphin Cruise’,⁷ the *Lego Friends* plan and design a soundwave echo solution that repels dolphins from fishnets. In ‘Kate’s Island’,⁸ the *Lego Friends* make a remarkable archaeological fossil discovery. In ‘Jungle Rescue’,⁹ the *Lego Friends* fix the broken closing mechanism of a bridge by using a log as a lifting lever. The characters’ intellectual capacities are highlighted even more in the latest series, *Girls on a Mission* (2018), in which the *Lego Friends* characters have grown from high school kids into college girls who set out to solve the serious problems that threaten the Heartlake City community.

In terms of gender representation, *Lego Friends* therefore challenges the basic stereotypes of girlhood, in which the transition from adolescence to adulthood is generally expressed mainly through style and consumer choices (Driscoll, 2002; Kennedy, 2019; Paasonen, 2009). However, as is argued in this article, girlhood is not the emphasised identity of *Lego Friends*; instead, membership in a group of friends is. In this way, the series reflects a broader discursive turn: the rearticulation of friendship as a necessary social relationship. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation, which refers to linkages that make a unity of two different elements (Grossberg, 1986: 53), the following sections analyse the linkages made to friendship in the *Lego Friends* storylines. First, I analyse the linkages of friendship to the theme of work.

Friends with a passion for work

Despite its Danish production origins, *Lego Friends* is situated in an imaginary American high school context. Visually, Heartlake City resembles a Southern California small-town idyll, with sunny harbours, beach houses, palm islands and ice cream bars. Responding to neoliberal working world requirements, Heartlake High School encourages its students to constantly engage in the development of ‘ideas’, projects and

problem solving. Student creativity is put on public display via digital platforms, video diaries and online streaming. One of the major endeavours of Emma, Olivia, Andrea, Mia and Stephanie is editing the high school newspaper and online news channel.

Due to the high school context, economic benefit is not desired or reached for. Profits are used for good causes, indicating that the *Lego Friends*, regardless of their independence, are not responsible for their subsistence. Philanthropy guides the sharing of profits. In 'Olivia's Science Show',¹⁰ the profits from Mia's lemonade sales go to a charity 'such as the homeless hedgehogs'. In 'Jungle Rescue',¹¹ the money earned from the precious diamond are used for a wild animal rescue centre.

Work, in all its forms, is a pleasure, entangled with the individual identities, interests and passions of the friends themselves. Andrea has a passion for performance, and there is no way of keeping her away from the stage whenever she can talk, host, report, sing or entertain. Stephanie cannot stop herself from baking, cleaning, party planning and organising. Emma is artistic, creative and full of visual ideas, while Olivia is enthusiastic about the natural sciences. Mia has a passion for animals, and she works steadily at the horse stables.

In addition to school-related activities, the *Lego Friends* have spare time for wage work. A substantial number of *Lego Friends* episodes are situated in after-school workplaces and working-life situations that require creative solutions and problem solving. In 'Andrea's First Day',¹² Andrea accidentally deep freezes all the fruits in a juice bar at which she has started working. Using her verbal talent, she manages to save the situation to the benefit of the business by launching a new delicious product made of the deep-frozen fruits. Similarly, a pizza restaurant turns into a tremendous success because of Emma's creatively shaped pizzas ('Perfectly Planned Pizza'¹³). In 'There's no Business like Froyo Business',¹⁴ Stephanie gets her dream-come-true opportunity to act as a marketing executive for a frozen yoghurt shop, and she works passionately round the clock to reorganise the entire business before opening time.

The *Lego Friends* act, in the labour market, as embodiments of neoliberal order. To be employable, one must conduct oneself and have a lifestyle that is in harmony with the market (Lazzarato, 2009: 127). In her study of the new creative industries, Angela McRobbie (2016) has criticised the 'ethos of love your work', which tends to justify wage stagnation among young people. According to McRobbie, constantly 'working' blurs the concept of class and class-defined existence. Instead of class-based necessity, passionate work becomes a mark of feminine intelligibility and success. Thus, by positioning young women as enthusiastic workers, popular media counterpoises passionate versus precarious labour, construing passionate labour as a willingness to work long hours for very little pay (McRobbie, 2016: 88; see also Tasker, 1998). McRobbie's argument fits the wage-work fantasies in *Lego Friends*. The tasks and duties performed at work are not done out of desire for a paycheck but out of passion for the work itself.

Distinctive in the *Lego Friends* stories situated in the wage-work context is the fact that work is a constant field of chaos, risk, crisis and misconduct. The repeated conclusion is that one's individual skills and capacities are seldom enough to make it in working life. In order to manage at work, good friends are needed. In 'Perfectly Planned Pizza', artistic Emma is not actually employed at the pizzeria. She only comes to help Stephanie for the rush hour. In 'There's No Business like Froyo Business', Stephanie,

drunk with power from her temporary executive position, over-manages the shop into chaos and needs her friends to return everything to the way it was before. When the manager of the shop returns to see everything working smoothly and praises Stephanie for her good work, she admits that it is her friends who should be thanked.

A common theme in these work challenges is the disappearance of responsible adults from the picture. Over and over, the adults walk away and leave their young employees to take care of things by themselves, with the help of their friends. In the children's animation context, the underlying master narrative is both a scary and a comic one. The repeated message is that working life is chaotic and full of risks and that it may be difficult to manage even basic tasks and duties. Moreover, the fact that the young employees are constantly abandoned by their adult employers creates the message that a young employee is not safe, the management cannot be trusted and the only people the young employee can turn to are her trusted friends.

The absence of adults is a classic fantasy in children's literature, but the working-world context and the absence of a responsible adults and employers resonates more with the contemporary working-life concerns of precarity, zero-hour contracts and rental labour. In the context of neoliberal moral conduct, getting fired and ending employment are among normal work-related risks. As stated by Stephanie who fires her friend Mia in 'My Boss, My Friend',¹⁵ 'we both knew this would not work'. Through its representation of workplaces, *Lego Friends* can be seen to reflect the ongoing discursive shift around the dearticulation of wage work from secure income. Lauren Berlant (2011: 10–11) describes this shift as a form of 'cruel optimism', of investing in and living the fantasy of a good life in a time of class bifurcation, downwards mobility and social and political brittleness. As representatives of the millennial generation growing up under the conditions of cruel optimism (Harris, 2017), the *Lego Friends* know that hard work does not necessarily link to secure income and that work challenges necessitate having plenty of good friends.

The connection of work and friends is not necessary in all contexts. Rather, it is relevant under certain historical conditions, as in times of growing work insecurity caused by neoliberal economic policies. Stuart Hall's theory of articulation indicates precisely these kinds of non-necessary connections between different practices, ideas or concepts. In Hall's words, articulation theory 'enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense of their historical situation' (Grossberg, 1986: 53). Through repetitious narratives of solving work catastrophes together, *Lego Friends* empowers its young audience by demonstrating how friends can function as a resource for work and that inevitable work challenges can be manageable – when they are solved with friends.

Culture of competition

For the *Lego Friends*, life is an endless flow of competitions, tasks and challenges in school, as well as work and leisure time. There is constantly some form of success, trophy, prize or award to win. The *Lego Friends* do not hesitate to compete. They are skilful, capable, and openly competitive. 'Prepare to lose', Mia says to her male rival, Martin, at the archery competition ('Camp Wild Hearts'¹⁶). Because Martin is also the object of her

romantic attraction, Mia is advised to let Martin win: 'If you want him to like you, maybe you want to let him win sometimes'. The importance of each individual competition is relative. This is because, in the *Lego Friends* world, competitions are not exceptional situations but a basic condition of living. Rather than focusing on winning or losing, the stories provide means to live by and cope with the culture of competition in circumstances in which not participating is not an option. In the UK context, British film scholar Sarah Hill (2021: 67–110) points to Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron's call for an 'aspiration nation', reflected in the girl-centred sport films and competitive girl identity.

In her book on the competitive culture of contemporary American primary schools, Hilary Levey Friedman (2013) explores the increase of children's participation in activities outside the home, an area that is structured and monitored by their parents. In the hyper-individualist American frame of reference, competitive after-school activities related to sports, art and science are seen as the essential proving ground that will clear a path to Ivy League schools or similar institutions. Being part of the team and developing friendships is one aspect of the competitive experience. According to Friedman, friendship is a strategy that children develop not only to cope with losing but also to cope with the reality of competing at a young age. Peers understand what competitive life is like, which helps them to develop strong bonds of friendship (Friedman, 2013: 199–200). Friedman's ethnography is a convincing description of a competitive children's culture and the life politics of their parents. More recent educational and pedagogical literature emphasises the importance of childhood friendships as a precondition for social wellbeing and success later in life (e.g. Carter and Nutbrown, 2015).

In their scrutiny of friendship discourses in contemporary business literature, Mallory et al. (2021) identify a transformation towards the 'new social spirit of capitalism', in which friendship is recognised as an emerging mode of valuable sociability. The new spirit of capitalism, as defined by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), reflects the abandonment of a Fordist work structure and the rise of network-based forms of organisation. 'In an era of networked or liquid sociality, the informality of friendships is well suited to a world where bonds cut across institutional contexts and embody qualities that are both public and private, personal and professional, instrumental and expressive' (Mallory et al., 2021: 485). While the traditional definitions of friendship have been shaped by the opposition of friendship to market relations, in the era of this 'new spirit', caring about friendships is a precondition for a profitable business relationship. Genuine friendships are revalued not only as a network resource but also as an assurance of character in building and maintaining long-term business relationships. In order to be successful, the friendship relationships must be genuine (Mallory et al., 2021: 2).

In *Lego Friends*, the genuineness of friendship is assured through unconditional, long-term commitment and support for one another's endeavours. As in many friendship fantasies, the *Lego Friends* do not compete against one another. They are not teammates or work colleagues but rather a group of individuals with distinct interests, passions and hobbies. Therefore, parallel to the wage-work stories discussed above, the *Lego Friends* collective functions through supporting each member of the collective in her separate fights and challenges.

In 'Andrea's Big Moment',¹⁷ the *Lego Friends* all attend a talent competition where they perform their distinctive talents. Stephanie bakes cupcakes, Mia trains dogs, Emma

paints and Olivia programmes a robot light show. Talented singer Andrea does not practice and forgets her lyrics on stage but makes it to the finals after all. Ashamed of her bad performance, Andrea decides to deal with the situation by herself and turns down her friends' offers of help. In the actual performance, her friends appear on the stage with their practised dance routine anyway, and Andrea's bland performance turns into a success. A single individual skill becomes triumphant with the support of the collective and thus it is transformed into a collective victory.

This talent competition triumph means, once again, a victory of the *Lego Friends* over their common rival, Tanya, who also made it into the finals, irritatingly wearing the same dress that Stephanie was supposed to wear. As stated by Winch (2013), to be feminine is to have an edge over the other women in the marketplace. In a neoliberal culture in which subjectivities are increasingly recognised as brands, it is essential for the entrepreneurial self to be better than others: 'Neoliberal postfeminist culture prizes a competitive edge . . . It encourages comparison and aggression among women in order to normalise the drive for hypervisibility in the quest for the distinctive self-brand' (Winch, 2013: 195–196). This aggression is derived from the paradox of normative femininity, which is still defined through the foreclosure of competition. As Tanenbaum (2003) argues, femininity is a game of being competitive but pretending that one is not. While competitiveness is not included in the framework of normative femininity, female contestants are drawn to an aggressive format in which the most normatively feminine wins. Tanya, as a frenemy character, is needed in the story to justify constant competition for the girls. In order to compete within the frame of normative femininity, the *Lego Friends* need a rival who breaks the rules by copycatting, plagiarising, stalking, eavesdropping or otherwise cheating. Tanya's cheating justifies competition and aggression within the frame of legitimate femininity. Once again, the genuine talent, honesty and righteousness of the *Lego Friends* defeats Tanya's unruly femininity.

Occasionally, the challenge is too big for peer-to-peer competition. In 'Emma's Dilemma',¹⁸ the *Lego Friends* participate in a competition for the best parade stand related to the upcoming 200th anniversary festivities of Heartlake City. After separate failed attempts, the *Lego Friends* collective joins forces with Tanya's group. Collaboration turns to success, and the joint venture wins the competition. In the end, Tanya and Stephanie congratulate each other, admitting that 'they are not best friends but not enemies either'. The episode ends with the original group of five girls heading towards the beach with their surfboards. Despite the strategic cooperation, the group remains closed, and the Proppian hero/antagonist setting remains unchanged.

In a similar episode, 'Tale of Two Parties',¹⁹ Tanya and Stephanie accidentally decide to throw a beach party on the same day. The venue, decoration, entertainment, music, food and drinks all become competitive weapons in the contest to throw the best party. The situation is resolved when the invited singer joins the parties together through her song and dance performance. According to the guests, the joint party is the best party ever, and Stephanie and Tanya make the most perfect party host team.

In her essay on the perfect, Angela McRobbie (2015) discusses perfection as a neoliberal feminine common sense, or a *leitmotif* of contemporary femininity. Perfection, defined as a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to the good life, is a new practice dividing women. The perfect replaces the idea of domestic labour, with its

negative connotations, with the fantasy pleasure of a ‘gleaming kitchen and a landscape garden’ (McRobbie, 2015: 9). For McRobbie, the compulsion to compete for perfection is an antifeminist form of violence masked by meritocratic ideals that reflects new practices of gendered governmentality (McRobbie, 2015: 16–17).

Constant competition does not mean that the *Lego Friends* will always win or reach perfection. On the contrary, continuous competition means inevitable failures, losses and disappointments. Kanai (2017) underlines the importance of failure in girlfriend fictions as a point of attachment for the audience. Through the circulation of the small missteps and disappointments that show the feminine self continually failing, audiences are able to feel connected (Kanai, 2017: 9). In *Lego Friends*, it is the moments of disappointment that highlight the value of friendship and the membership in a closed group of friends. In ‘New Girl in Town’,²⁰ Mia, defeated by Lacey in a show jumping competition, congratulates her rival:

–Aren’t you sorry that you lost?
–No, because I have won friends.

In ‘Andrea’s Big Moment’, Andrea leaves the competition before hearing the winner declared to hang out with her friends on the beach instead:

–Don’t you want to know if you won or not?
–I have already won a lot more than I deserve.

Alongside winning, *Lego Friends* educates audiences on resilience and the art of losing. While, in the series, the competitions are basic conditions of living rather than exceptional situations, friendship is a more valuable asset than a single victory in a single contest. In her latest book, Angela McRobbie (2020) directs attention to the politics of resilience as a form of cultural compromise for women living in neoliberal conditions. In *Lego Friends*, the true victory is membership in an exclusive group of friends, which provides social comfort and protection in the neoliberal culture of competition the *Lego Friends* are shown to live in.

Competitions are not a novel topic in children’s media culture. However, the emphasis on the importance of friends in a culture of competition points to a discursive shift that highlights the importance of social capital and genuine, long-term friend relationships. Moreover, highlighting the importance of friendships *over* competition could be seen as reflecting neoliberal fears of isolation and loneliness that the culture of competition increases (e.g. Lazzarato, 2009; Wilkins, 2012). For Hall, rearticulation is cultural transformation that is not towards something totally new and not from a straight line of continuity with the past. It is transformation through a recognition of elements and the ways those elements are organised together in a new discursive formation (Grossberg, 1986: 54–55). Linkage between competition and friendship is neither something new nor something old. Rather, it is something relevant under the conditions of competition culture in which the young viewers of *Lego Friends* could also be understood to live.

Confirmation of friendship

In *Lego Friends*, friendship is manifested by acts and expressions of empathy, comfort and compassion. Friends provide one another with support at work and in competitions, balancing one another's ambitions and conforming and adjusting to one another's needs. In 'What an Interesting Ice Cream',²¹ the *Lego Friends* decide to disguise themselves and play customers who buy all the awful tasting celery-cherry ice cream that Mia, working in the ice cream bar, has created, so that Mia will not be sad. The group deems it necessary to sacrifice for the sake of friendship:

- We have to do it for Mia.
- Sometimes, I wish we weren't such amazing friends.

In addition to sacrificing for the others' sakes, friendship means tolerating each other's dislikeable traits. In 'Kate's Island',²² the entire group participates in an archaeology weekend, even though only one of them, Olivia, is actually interested in archaeology. In 'Change of Address',²³ Stephanie is characterised as a control freak and cleaning maniac, who insists on 'vacuum cleaning the hamsters' and 'washing the water'. Andrea, again, is described as having such a strong drive to perform that she becomes over-dramatic, 'especially when she is in front of the camera' ('Keepin' it Real'²⁴). High tolerance for each other's personality flaws functions as expressions of intimacy. The characters are shown to know each other so intimately that they can be themselves without fear of rejection.

Sociologists Pahl and Spencer (2004) have categorised friendships as either 'fun friendships', based on common activities and interests, or 'close friendships', based on strong moral regimes, intense intersubjective ties and matters of duty. Smart et al. (2012) complement this conception by analysing the emotional burdens of 'difficult friendships'. Difficult friendships are as intimate and burdensome as romantic relationships and, perhaps, more challenging to regulate. Within the frame of comic hyperbole, the friendship of the *Lego Friends* could be situated in the category of difficult friendship, considering all the emotional burdens, worries and discomfort their friendship generates. Stephanie is especially competitive, demanding and bossy towards the others (e.g. in 'All We Need is Juice'²⁵), and the distinctive interests of the girls tend to cause constant misunderstandings and dissonance (e.g. in 'Making the Band'²⁶).

The inner dissonance is balanced through constant confirmation of friendship. Through performative acts and gestures of friendship, the viewer of the show is convinced that the *Lego Friends*, despite their momentary differences, are magnetically drawn together (as in 'Drawn Together'²⁷) and that their natural drive for friendship is so strong that 'even their pets become friends' ('Olivia's Friendship Experiment'²⁸).

A notable amount of story content on *Lego Friends* consists of performative acts and utterances of friendship, including gifts and cards, parties, surprises and pranks between the friends. In 'Stephanie's Surprise Party',²⁹ Olivia, Emma, Mia and Andrea plan a surprise party for Stephanie and, in doing so, tend to avoid Stephanie, who then feels rejected and hurt. The surprise party organisation becomes so intense that Olivia, Emma, Mia and Andrea forget to invite Stephanie herself to the party. The melancholy resolves

in the final scene at the swimming pool, which is decorated with lights and banners that congratulate Stephanie on her birthday. Stephanie is moved and grateful to have such amazing friends.

In addition to the constant confirmation of their friendship in the storylines, friendship is confirmed by constructing shared history for the group. In 'Greetings from the Past',³⁰ the *Lego Friends* are watching old videos of themselves when they were younger. Nostalgia about this shared past of 'old friends' is notable considering the young age of the *Lego Friends* characters. Olivia, who moved to the neighbourhood later, is sad because she is not part of the shared history of the group:

–Olivia, are you OK?

–Of course! I am glad that the four of you are old friends and have great memories . . . and videos. (Sighs sadly.)

–Oh, you weren't in the video . . . Hey, it's only because we didn't know you. You hadn't moved here yet.

Constructing and narrating shared history is generally considered characteristic to romantic love and commitment rather than friendship relations (e.g. Delaney, 1996). In *Lego Friends*, participation in a shared past is a loss that necessitates compensation. The episode concludes with a new video-recording session, in which all five girls sing 'we'll be friends forever', confirming Olivia's part in the history of the group and in their shared future.

In addition to songs, the girls' everlasting friendship is continually confirmed verbally in final conclusions and statements regarding their friendship:

–A great lunch, plus the best friends in the whole world. That's way better than any treasure. ('Look High and Low'³¹)

–You know, I learned something today. A bad score is not the end of the world. As fun as getting a great test score was, it wasn't great when it almost cost us our friendship.

–Tests are important, but so are friends. ('A Test of the Heart'³²)

Finally, friendship is constantly confirmed through nonverbal, spatial and bodily statements: group hugs, high-fives, shouts and rehearsed dance routines. Almost every webisode ends in relieved laughter between the *Lego Friends*. Laughing together is a powerful expression of collectivity and togetherness. In a social context, socially acceptable out-loud laughter necessitates someone with whom to share the laughter. Laughing together with others is a social privilege, a way for a group to share an understanding of a situation in a certain physical time and space. Vociferous laughter is also a physical marker of social inclusion and exclusion – of those who are in and those who are out.

In the literature, women's vociferous laughter has been interpreted as an expression of feminine rebelliousness, unruliness and power (Parvulesku, 2010; Rowe, 1995). In *Lego Friends*, however, laughter is not an expression of feminine rebelliousness but rather the performative gesture of a collective. In the series, vociferous laughter does not signal

breaking free from social norms. Rather, it functions as a confirmation of norms that serve the inner and outer coherence and the permanence of the group, drawing clear lines between those who belong and those who do not.

Laughter and other visual, verbal and nonverbal articulations of friendship in *Lego Friends* underscore the political power of articulation as utterance. As discussed by Hall, articulation has a double meaning. First, it means to join, connect or link separate, not-necessarily-belonging parts together. Second, it refers to utterance itself – to express, to speak forth (Grossberg, 1986: 53). The visual and verbal articulations of friendship in *Lego Friends* underline the particularity of friendship over other social relationships. Moreover, the explicit articulations refer to friendships as relationships that necessitate constant confirmation, addressed not only to the parties of that relationship but also to those left on the outside.

Conclusion

The recent intensification of friendship themes can be seen not only in contemporary popular television and film but also in current public debates around school, work and national healthcare. This article has studied the intensifying friendship ideal in children's media culture by analysing how the themes of work, competition and confirmation of friendship are used to rearticulate friendship in *Lego Friends*. Articulation is a theoretical term that describes the processual nature of cultural meaning making; it points out how the non-necessary linkages of separate concepts or ideas unite to create a new discursive form through the contiguous mechanisms of dearticulation and rearticulation. *Lego Friends* reflects a dearticulation of nuclear families structured around heterosexual coupling and a rearticulation of friendship relationships and the exclusive group of friends.

Lego Friends is a singular example of a broad range of contemporary popular media narratives about female friendships. Recent analyses have pointed to the emergence of female underachievers and 'anti-heroines' as reactions to the exhausting perfectness of neoliberal femininity (e.g. Dobson and Kanai, 2019; Hagelin and Silverman, 2022; McRobbie, 2020). In a similar spirit, *Lego Friends* points to a revaluation of the female collective over invincible individual heroines. In *Lego Friends*, rather than championing individual success, an exclusive group of girlfriends is seen as an intrinsically valuable space of belonging. Adopting Angela McRobbie's (2020) feminist critique of neoliberalism, this revaluation can be seen as relating to the intensifying polarisation among women invoked by neoliberal economic insecurities.

The non-necessary linkages between friendship and wage work, and friendship and competition made in the *Lego Friends* storylines can be seen as both symptoms of and reactions to neoliberal values. What is distinctly neoliberal in these linkages is, first, the focus on working-life uncertainties and the chaotic conditions of work itself. Second, there is a constant quest for competition in *Lego Friends*, across school, work and leisure time, which is characteristic of the neoliberal social order. In *Lego Friends*, the collective of five girls, Andrea, Emma, Olivia, Stephanie and Mia, are compelled to make it on their own in chaotic workplaces and the unescapable, ubiquitous culture of competition, just like adult employees in the neoliberal labour market. The storylines of the series assure viewers that the culture of competition necessitates passion, but also resilience. While a

race is always followed by another race, membership in a friendship collective is more valuable than a single victory in a single race.

In the context of a children's animation, the fear of social isolation built into the culture of competition is relative. Also relative are neoliberal working-life insecurities. Even if not explicitly stated in the series, the *Lego Friends* all seem to have financially secure middle-class backgrounds. They do not work to support themselves but for their passion for the work itself. The variety of different jobs introduced in the series is notable. For the *Lego Friends*, jobs are always available and interchangeable in the field of middle-class apprenticeship, experiment and play. An individual job is not important; what is important is working in general, as this formulates the moral conduct of legible adolescent femininity.

Chaotic workplace situations motivate action and bring elements of adult-world excitement into the storylines. However, the danger is only ever temporary and releases in comic relief – often expressed through vociferous laughter. The sense of safety is strengthened through visual and verbal confirmation of everlasting friendship between the girls. In making such claims, friendship fictions such as *Lego Friends* are no less ideological than romantic fantasies of eternal love. Arguing this is not to neglect the evidently empowering aspects of friendship fictions and the intensifying friendship ideal. It is definitely a welcome development that representations of girlhood have become more nuanced. Moreover, recognising friendships as meaningful social relationships means providing an actual alternative to a social order organised around the nuclear family and heteronormative romantic relationships. However, at least in the context of children's media, it is perhaps no less burdening to suggest that without an exclusive collective of friends, one has little chance of success. Nor is it any less burdening to suggest that childhood friendships will and should always last forever.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. The *Lego Friends* TV series and webisodes were produced for the Danish company The LEGO Group by M2 Entertainment, Duckling A/S and Picture This Studio. See <https://m2animation.com/work/lego-friends-TV-series/>.
2. M2 Entertainment does not provide information on episode titles, episode numbers, original release dates or channels of distribution for the *Lego Friends* TV series and webisodes. I used IMDB and the *Lego Friends* Wiki Fandom discord to locate the webisode seasons and titles of individual episodes. See https://legofriends.fandom.com/wiki/LEGO_Friends_Wiki.
3. Information provided by production company M2 Entertainment. See <https://m2animation.com/work/lego-friends-TV-series/>.
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lego_Friends
5. Throughout, I use italics when referring to the *Lego Friends* TV series and webisodes, and plain text to discuss the Lego Friend toy set and the animated *Lego Friends* characters of the TV-series.

6. On the critical reception of the *Lego Friends* toy set, see Gutwald (2017) and Adrienne LaFrance (2016).
7. *Lego Friends* S1, E3.
8. *Lego Friends* S3, E3.
9. *Lego Friends* (Netflix) S2, E3.
10. *Lego Friends* Webisode S1, E4.
11. *Lego Friends* (Netflix) S2, E3.
12. *Lego Friends* Webisode S1, E1.
13. *Lego Friends* Webisode S2, E45.
14. *Lego Friends* Webisode S4, E24.
15. *Lego Friends* Webisode S4, E28.
16. *Lego Friends: The Power of Friendship* (Netflix) S1, E1.
17. *Lego Friends* S2, E2.
18. *Lego Friends* S1, E5.
19. *Lego Friends* Webisode S2, E43.
20. *Lego Friends* S1, E1.
21. *Lego Friends* Webisode S2, E4.
22. *Lego Friends* S2, E3.
23. *Lego Friends* S4, E3.
24. *Lego Friends: The Power of Friendship* (Netflix) S2, E1.
25. *Lego Friends* Webisode S1, E7.
26. *Lego Friends* Webisode S2, E18.
27. *Lego Friends* Webisode S1, E11.
28. *Lego Friends* Webisode S4, E4.
29. *Lego Friends* S1, E2.
30. *Lego Friends* Webisode S3, E28.
31. *Lego Friends* Webisode S2, E10.
32. *Lego Friends* Webisode S4, E27.

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