REBELLING AGAINST FEMININITY: A Rhetorical Critique on the Nerf Rebelle Campaign

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Abstract

While there has been extensive research that has examined the pressure young girls feel to fit into social norms (Paechter, & Lafky & Duffy), this study is unique because it investigates society’s anxiety in response to the threat young girls pose to dominant masculinity. Through a feminist critique of the Hasbro Nerf Rebelle campaign, this study analyzes the feminization of typically masculine toys and asks whether the results of the toys and their marketing are empowering, disempowering, or some combination of the two. Drawing on the work of previous scholars and the discussion of the different waves of feminism, Title IX, and more references such as the Hunger Games and the feminization of the NFL, this study will illustrate how the Nerf Rebelle campaign inherently reinforces gender barriers while simultaneously challenging dominant masculinity.

Introduction

Young American girls struggle with their gender identities: Should they be a girly-girl? A tomboy? A feminized tomboy? These possibilities plague young girls in part because of society’s incessant need to frame how girls see themselves based on the activities they participate in. Tomboy and girly-girl identities tend to be polarized, for instance, “tomboy identities can be constructed not so much in relation to masculinity, but through a rejection of femininity” (Paechter, p. 228). Girls are conditioned to play dress-up, with dolls, and value collaborative relationships whereas boys are conditioned to play war, sports, and compete. Girls and women construct their femininity through the available “ways of being, attitudes, and behaviors” (Paetcher, 221) and society is constantly reframing the activities that are acceptable for young girls. The current cultural moment encourages girls to play sports, become sports fans, and participate in more masculine activities. However the nature of participation in these
contemporary activities has been modified and constrained to meet the dominant public’s expectations of females.

This study investigates society’s anxiety concerning young girls’ threat to dominant masculinity, due to the “brand” of femininity that is prevalent in this particular cultural moment. These anxieties are considered through the examination of the Hasbro© Nerf Rebelle campaign and the question of whether the feminization of typically masculine toys is empowering, disempowering, or a combination of the two.

The dominant public’s expectations of femininity are based on perceptions of what dominant masculinity should be. In the United States, hegemonic masculinity is the societal standard and benchmark of acceptable male behavior and men are expected to perform the roles and behaviors that accompany it. According to Addis and Mahalik, “themes of dominant masculinity include such aspects as emotional control, homophobia, risk taking, autonomy, power over women, competitiveness, aggression, and a host of other factors (Kahn, Holmes, & Brett, p. 31). Women’s idea of femininity is constructed in part as a result of the widely accepted perception of masculinity.

The idea of a new “brand” of femininity is breaching societal standards and challenging the social norms that have been instilled in American culture for decades. Although women experience a greater amount of freedom in the United States than in many countries such as India and the Middle East, gender expectations still are instilled in girls at a young age and these expectations limit girls. In one study, both the boys and girls stated that at school, boys were identified with “not accepting sporting losses graciously,” in addition to being more dominant and aggressive (Paetcher, 229). This study supports the generalization that girls are perceived as more nurturing, and boys as more dominant. Yet, the current cultural changes in gender
expectations also encourage boys to be nurturing, and for girls to take control and become more independent. For example, we have celebrity icons such as Ryan Gosling and Beyoncé taking on these different roles. Ryan Gosling’s “Hey Girl” memes on the Internet trend feminist blurbs and gushy sayings and he has chosen to embrace it. In 2010 he commented on the “Hey girl” memes saying, “they’ve nailed it…I’m going to make a movie about ‘Hey Girl’” (Clements, 2013). Beyoncé, on the other hand, has songs such as “Independent Woman” which promotes independence and contains the lines, “The shoes on my feet; I bought it. The clothes I’m wearing; I’ve bought it. The rock I’m rockin’; ‘Cause I depend on me.” This song encourages women to be independent and not depend on anyone else, which consequently does not let male dominance define them. These reversals of gender roles in celebrities have the potential to change society’s perception of what’s acceptable.

The Nerf Rebelle campaign is significant because it is responsible for challenging young girls to embrace playing with Nerf toys while simultaneously instilling some of the gender norms feminist advocates have been fighting against for years.

**Literature Review**

There are four major themes relevant to this study: gender in advertising, feminist waves with a focus on third wave feminism, dominant masculinity’s impact on women, and the presence of the tomboy. I explore each theme through a review of feminist and gender roles to focus on the question of how young girls can be empowered or disempowered.

**Gender in Advertising**

Significant research suggests that the different portrayals of gender in advertising immensely impact how individuals see themselves and others. Sandra Bem, for example, discusses the “lenses of gender” and how it “influences the ways individuals socially construct
reality and produce…gender traits” as well as how it “helps to shape gender-based inequalities” (as cited in Lafky & Duffy, 380). The “lenses of gender” provide a way of seeing one’s identity; in this case, based on advertisements and how gender is portrayed in the media. Advertisements create a sense of reality for the audience that does not account for equality among genders – instead they focus on making products attractive to the consumer. In regards to femininity, “research suggests that while stereotypical representations may not [always] induce product purchase, they do encourage viewers to internalize the social constructed image of femininity in advertising, thus helping to define femininity and acceptable female roles” (Lafky & Duffy, 381). This is significant because it means that the media and advertisements are responsible for creating specific gender norms and shaping the roles of women despite the variety amongst femininity that actually exists.

This internalized construction of femininity applies to both male and female individuals. When men see an advertisement that places women in a negative stereotype, they tend to internalize it and place themselves in a more dominant position. In a specific study of U.S. advertising, Beverly A. Browne concluded that “males are projected as wiser, more active, aggressive, and instrumental than females, and also that non-verbal conduct in males implied greater control and dominance than in females” (189). While Browne’s study aligns with Sandra Bem’s idea that advertising structures gender-based inequalities, studies also set precedents for improvements in advertising for women. Women continue to advocate for equal rights and Furnham and Mark, as well as Sharits and Lammers, suggest that, “role portrayals in commercials are more representative of contemporary women [who] are gradually becoming equal to men” (as cited in Eisend). These optimistic studies are possible because of the work of feminist movements and their impact on gender portrayal which in turn supports the claim that
there is significant work being done (for instance, in Nerf Rebelle) to counter popular beliefs about dominant masculinity.

**Feminist Movements**

Gender norms in modern culture are constantly being challenged due to the work of feminist movements in the past and even today. These feminist movements can be split into three waves, including the most recent: third-wave feminism. The first movement in the United States to break down barriers and push for equal rights among gender is called first wave feminism. The first wave began around 1850 (Banks, p. 46). In 1860, Samuel Longfellow, an American clergyman, expressed a fundamental goal of feminism during his time that is still indispensable to the efforts of women today: “whatever any human being can do well, that being has a right to do, and the ability of any person marks the sphere of that person” (Campbell, 101). Although there were many aspects of the first wave that were beneficial to the overall success of women’s movements, the suffrage movement was the most memorable. Olive Banks, a professor in the history of feminism, claims that gaining the right to vote for women was “the key to all the other reforms women wanted to achieve for themselves and for others” (Banks, p. 46). Women achieved this right in 1920, fifty years after African American males, and it opened up opportunities for women that had never been available before.

The next movement in the United States is termed the second wave of feminism. It began in the 1960s as a result of the baby boom from post-WWII and came to a close around 1980 (Gamble, p. 25). Women who felt pressured into domesticity decided they could offer more to the world than child rearing and maintaining the household. Betty Freidan’s *The Feminine Critique* was perhaps one of the most influential pieces of feminist work introduced during this time in response to this dissatisfaction. Although it applied mainly to white, middle class women,
it still gave women an example to follow and set the stage to demand more. Friedan described it as “the problem that has no name” which represents the lack of voice women felt and their inability to pinpoint their inherent unhappiness (Friedan, p. 16). Women were expected to “devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children” (Friedan, p. 16). There was little expectation for women to do anything else and they were becoming restless – hoping to get outside of the home and make a difference in the world. Friedan’s literary work encouraged women to “listen to [their] inner voice to find [their] identity in this changing world” (Friedan, p. 338); to create “a new life plan, fitting in the love and children and home that have defined femininity in the past with the work toward a greater purpose that shapes the future” (Friedan, p. 338). Her book was groundbreaking and influential for American, white women during this time. However, in the 1990s a third wave of feminism arose, and new perspectives were desired challenging what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Lastly, third wave feminism has goals that fight for more than just equal opportunity between men and women and encourage creating their own definition of femininity. For instance, females rally to “enjoy varied performances of gender, including femininity and masculinity, [which is now] available to them in contemporary culture” (Scanlon, p. 128). Women mesh together different aspects of their gendered identities because there is currently greater acceptance for girls who participate in more masculine activities; they are known as “feminized tomboys” due to their ability to synthesize their gendered identities. For instance, this might look like a woman who is independent, adventurous, and plays sports but simultaneously wears lipstick and a bow in her hair. The mixture of these feminist theories allows for different women to interpret feminism in a way that fits their individual needs and desires. Regardless of a woman’s ability to reject and accept different perspectives, “femininity calls young women to
agency, for example suggesting them to be equally ‘free’ as men…” (Jackson & Lyons, p. 228). This provides them with the opportunity to create their own sense of femininity, which in itself is empowering. Women have broken down barriers and worked hard and despite not being completely equal to men their “tenacity” has earned them the “right to exist in what had [previously] been a rather masculine space” (Orr, p. 10). One result of these effects is the introduction of the federal law, Title IX in 1972 that “guarantees girls and young women the same access to scholastic sports as their male counterparts” (Hardin, Simpson, Whiteside, & Garris, p. 212). Before Title IX was passed, opportunities were not equal for males and females; “only 1 in 27 girls played high school sports [and] there were virtually no college sports for female athletes” (The MARGARET Fund). Because of these daunting statistics it took a lot of perseverance and determination on the part of feminists to get Title IX recognized and passed.

Women’s existence in this masculine space has created anxiety for men due to the fear that women will surpass men in fields typically male-dominated, such as sports. This fear supports the idea that men are seen as the dominant gender and essentially “breaks the rules” of gender norms. Regardless, Helen Gurley Brown promotes a feminism that includes “an embrace of compromise, an honesty about less than perfect behaviors, and a promotion of rule breaking…” (as cited in Scanlon, p. 137). Men have always displayed these behaviors, but the newfound presence of women demonstrating them has created a sense of anxiety that questions women’s threat to dominant masculinity. In the article “Is this the end of men or the beginning of women?” some of these anxieties are expressed. For instance, with 57 percent of college students as women, and women infiltrating “a wide variety of lucrative careers” the threat of women becoming as dominant as men seems to be a real threat (Sohn).

**Dominant Masculinity and it’s Impact**
To understand women’s threat to dominant masculinity, it is first important to understand the dominant definition of masculinity in mainstream society and the impact it has on the development of both men and women. While definitions of masculinity “differ across time, culture, and among individuals” (Kahn, Holmes, & Brett, p. 30), the dominant masculinity I am referring to is the overarching theme of dominant masculinity across all races and classes. This universal idea has a more static identity based on the relevant dominant social groups’ “values, beliefs, and attitudes” in regard to “maleness” (Kahn, Holmes, & Brett, p. 31). These ideals are normalized and therefore have become the expectation for the western world’s idea of the appropriate form of masculinity. Cultures have “a systematic process in which masculinity is negotiated and reinforced in order to keep current social constructions of masculinity homeostatic” (Kahn, Holmes, & Brett, p. 31), that depend on the conformation of men and women. One central theme of dominant masculinity is “power over women” which implies that women that become too independent may threaten men’s ability to fulfill this idea of masculinity.

Despite women’s triumphs in sports, the workplace, and personal life some women tend to accept this “power over women” ideology because of society’s constant effort to counteract this threat to their masculinity. Within a patriarchal historic moment, feminists believe that women “look to [the] glossy public image to decide every detail of their lives” (Friedan, p. 72). Magazines and television commercials with men in power portray women in a certain way in order to ensure their power-over status. One video that highlights these barriers to women’s equality is “Codes of Gender.” In this video, the writers introduce the term “commercial realism,” which describes a method that advertisers use to portray models and the scenarios they are placed in so that average person will accept these representations as normal (Media
Education Foundation & Jhally). Women are regularly positioned lying down and they are
sexualized, subjected to the male gaze through the use of actual male models. Designers such as,
Paul Marciano of Guess, for instance, is quoted as admitting in “Codes of Gender” that he
wanted to go back to the old sense of femininity in which men dominated women (Media
Education Foundation & Jhally).

Despite these obvious sexist depictions, some trends show that women tend to continue to
purchase from these companies and contribute to diminishing women’s challenges to dominant
masculinity. There is one way that women continue to threaten dominant masculinity and that is
with a tomboy identity.

**Tomboys**

The concept of a tomboy identity emerged in the United States after the Civil War and
around the time *Little Women* was written (Russel), though the identity wasn’t accepted and
embraced until the last few decades. Due to feminist movements and Title IX, “increasing
opportunities for girls and women…have created new visibility for tomboys (in both popular
culture and lived reality) that simply did not exist even thirty years ago” (Skerski, p. 470).
During youth, girls are accepted and even encouraged to take on the tomboy identity. Carr has
cited that:

> “Several scholars have theorized that tomboys are granted more social and
parental acceptance than their “sissy” counterparts because of the ‘more
rigid…role construction’ of masculinity than of femininity (Kimmel, 2004, p.
132), and because tomboys display socially rewarded ‘masculine’ traits or
behaviors (Burn, O’Neil, & Nederend, 1996; Devor, 1989; Martin, 1995, p. 440).
Its important to recognize that girls are encouraged to be tomboys because the masculine performances they deliver are perceived as positive. Conversely, boys are ostracized for being a “sissy” because feminine traits are still unjustly seen as inferior. This social encouragement for tomboy behavior ceases quickly after puberty hits for girls because “the fear of adult female masculinity underlies the pervasive encouragement of young tomboys to embrace femininity (and its implications) as she reaches adulthood” (Skerski, p. 467). Society seems to allow women to be more active and take part in more masculine activities when she is younger and as long as she maintains the proper amount of femininity expected by those around her when she matures. While tomboy-ism usually stops once society steps in and discourages it, there are heterosexual women that persist beyond puberty and maintain a tomboy identity without violating society’s fear of adult female masculinity. This extension is typically because of “their love of sports and the outdoors…” which is accepted (Carr, p. 446). The idea that women are initially accepted for their tomboy identity and then forcefully shaped into more typically feminine roles ultimately is disempowering. Young girls and women should be free to develop their identities individually without limits created through the prevalence of advertising and society’s expectations.

**Cultural Context for the Hasbro Nerf Rebelle Campaign**

The Hasbro Nerf Rebelle campaign has begun to saturate the consumer market during a time that is historically appropriate due to the introduction of movies such as The Hunger Games, as well as the NFL’s effort to feminize football to attract a wider variety of fans. This campaign’s effort to feminize typically masculine toys is entirely relevant.

**Hunger Games**

With the recent craze of the Hunger Games and heroine, Katniss Everdeen at the forefront, women’s empowerment is on the rise. Katniss, who dons a bow and arrow, seems to be
instrumental in the success of the Hasbro Nerf Rebelle Campaign. In the movies, Katniss Everdeen supports her family, and in a game of strength and honor beats out 22 other boys and girls between 11-18 years of age. Not only has the movie encouraged archery and athletic feminine prowess, it has encouraged independence, strength and determination in young women. In the movie and in real life she has become a new face to look up to because of her ability to overcome her fear of her death and the death of her family.

According to Tessa Iaconi, a spokeswoman for USA Archery, the Hunger Games has given “archery the hip factor it’s just never had before” (Rubin). Classes fill up overnight and waitlists span over six months. The New York Times article, The Odds Are Ever in Their Favor mentions that since December of 2011 “individual membership in USA Archery has jumped 25 percent, while the number of clubs has nearly doubled, to 540 from 270” (Rubin). While in the past there have been stints of popularity in archery, the sport has never seen such a large and sustained rise as it has from the Hunger Games – especially from young girls. The Victory Archers, of Staten Island, have had to accommodate Girl Scout troops and tween birthday parties weekly (Rubin).

It is no wonder that girls are flocking to learn archery with Katniss Everdeen as their inspiration. Kelly Oliver, a professor in philosophy at Vanderbilt University, describes the recent craze of girls who hunt. She describes the character of Katniss Everdeen as “beautiful, innocent, and dangerous” (K. Oliver, personal communication, October 9, 2013) while also acknowledging the fact that in the movie she is able to take care of herself and her Hunger Games competitor Peeta, who needs her as much as she needs him. While she undermines the typical ideals of femininity because Katniss can take care of herself, Oliver still acknowledges that the film presents Katniss Everdeen as caring more about hunting and her family than any romantic
interest, but also as being forced to fulfill society’s patriarchal fantasy when Peeta mentions to the audience of the Hunger Games that he is in love with Katniss and she suddenly is deemed “desirable” (K. Oliver, personal communication, October 9, 2013). Though she is not in love with Peeta, she must pretend to be in order to survive the games. She is then seen as a victim rather than the warrior she truly is. Despite the complicated femininity presented in the movie, it seems obvious that the recent popularity of Katniss Everdeen has impacted young girls’ interest in archery and therefore Nerf Rebelle. This leads us into discussing the recent popularization of football for women.

**Feminizing the NFL**

Football has typically been seen as a masculine interest. Sundays are for watching football with the guys. But recently women’s participation and interest in football has increased tremendously. Men are no longer the only ones with Fantasy Football teams or who spend their Sundays watching the games – women are right there with them (Dosh). The NFL, specifically, has taken numerous steps to try to continue to increase women’s participation (Dosh). Whether these efforts are meant for the benefit of women, men, or for mere profit remains an open question.

The NFL Corporation has increased the apparel line over the last few years to include more options for women. The corporation recognizes that according to ESPN Sports Poll and the U.S. Census women are now 44 percent of all football fans (Dosh). Due to this rising statistic, women have become a huge target for sales. NFL marketers see this as a way to make more money. Meghann Malone, a marketing manager for marketing, advertising, and public relations at the firm IMRE says, “A female consumer is a consumer for life” (Dosh). Not only that but Indiana University’s Kelley School of Business discovered that “70 percent of ‘important family
decisions’ are made by women” (Dosh). By pinpointing women in marketing, the NFL Corporation is able to create more sales while also fostering women’s desire to become more involved in football.

One would think that this drive in women’s involvement in sports is strictly empowering to women but it also raises questions. The apparel line for women, for instance, has a section that promotes “home gating” – a form of tailgating in the home that plays into domesticity. This feeds into the gender expectations placed on women to stay at home while also fulfilling a man’s desire to see women who are interested in their interests as a sign of loyalty and identification.

The NFLshop.com commercial plays into this male patriarchal fantasy by featuring women in slim-fitting jerseys and shirts with their hair down, short skirts on, and makeup done. A man’s voice narrates the commercial showing through the male point of view and voice, the dominance that men still have over women in this sport. At one point during the commercial they show a woman kissing her baby and holding her baby on her hip (NFL Shop). Although the NFL is trying to include women in football and encourage them to become more involved with football, they are still portraying the female stereotypes of maternity and responsibility for child raising. The theme “we make football together” is nice in theory, but the commercial debunks its message with the man over-voice and the women being portrayed sexually and maternally (NFL Shop). Instead of showing the women in the NFL apparel at a football game, they show them as if they are walking down a runway.

The NFL commercial is extremely relevant to a recent fad in fashion magazines because they use the same methods of advertising. The NFL apparel line has been showcased in magazines such as Marie Claire, Vogue, and Cosmopolitan Magazine. The women wearing the jerseys are on runways in heavy makeup and revealing clothing. This is a great example of society
feminizing the tomboy. In the Nerf Rebelle campaign, items are pink and purple, and in these
NFL advertisements, the football jerseys and accessories have been altered to be revealing and to
stay within the constraints of society’s expectations for femininity.

Marie Claire published a “16-page insert called ‘The Savvy Girl’s Guide to Football’ in their
September issue. In the insert the focus is on “NFL women’s apparel, tips for hosting a Super
Bowl party, and a guide to ‘quarterback bromances’” (Sebastian). The addition of the tips for a
Super Bowl party constrains femininity but Tracey Bleczinsk, VP for consumer products at the
NFL, acknowledges that they “have female fans who know the game better than guys” and that
the appropriate approach to attracting women is no longer to “shrink it and pink it” (Sebastian)
but instead to provide the same jerseys as men but in more feminine cuts. Women fans are being
given more respect and although the NFL still feminizes its products and advertisements, it is a
step in the right direction.

Methods

The methodology I chose for the Nerf Rebelle campaign consists of feminist rhetorical
critique, content analysis, and comparing and contrasting. I chose a feminist method because the
toys, website, and videos under the Nerf Rebelle brand have been overtly feminized through
different aspects of physical appearance and language. While the use of weapons for play for
young girls is outside the norm and may challenge dominant masculinity and empower them, the
colors and terminology can be considered disempowering to the social and mental development
of young girls.

A feminist rhetorical analysis employs the principles of rhetoric to examine the interactions
between a text, an author, and an audience, which in this instance addresses the text of the Nerf
Rebelle campaign’s impact on the audience of young girls I question. I question what the impact
of these toys are, particularly whether they are empowering, disempowering, or some combination of the two through the analysis of different aspects of this Hasbro campaign and the deeper meaning behind these toys catered to young girls. The way in which I did was to go through every aspect of the campaign, by gathering data on the toys, and by examining the website. I then proceeded to map them out on large pieces of paper according to feminization of colors, uses of language, the location of toys in the store, and the campaign imaging. From the data mapping I determined common themes. The themes of feminization of language, visual style, and inclusivity appeared consistently across artifacts and texts and provided the framework for analysis.

The website, physical toys, and commentary are seen by the consumers most frequently, and therefore was chosen as the data set. It was important to include the website in my research because we live in a world driven by technology. Within the website I looked at each of the pages – “home”, “toys”, “shop”, “games”, and “videos” – and discovered an abundance of evidence to support the themes of gendered language, visual style, and inclusivity including, the color schemes, phrases, font, and characters portrayed, the names of the toys, the spelling of certain words, graphics, and presentation.

Children are now familiar with the World Wide Web at a significantly younger age, therefore advertising has focused its efforts on television and the Internet, even resorting to putting their unique commercials on their website to gain more exposure, and this makes the analysis of the website significant. The main Hasbro Nerf website contains all of the Nerf campaigns and links to separate websites including Nerf Rebelle, Zombie Strike, N-Strike Elite, Vortex, Super Soaker and N Sports. All of the other campaigns on the site target males. I looked at the site and the Nerf section in Toys R Us through an analytic lens of compare and contrast to account for similarities
and differences in the campaigns’ toys and found that more masculine words such as “products” versus “toys” were used. This is significant because it implies that the boys’ Nerf products are taken more seriously than the girls’ Nerf toys.

I then took a trip to the Toys ‘R’ Us of Westminster, Colorado to view the Nerf Rebelle toys in their original packaging as well as the consumer setting so that I could understand the marketing effects and impression that Nerf Rebelle offers to consumers first hand. I looked at location in the store as well as the size of the display, structure of the box and the wording, and colors and themes in order to understand the relative presence of Nerf Rebelle and its aesthetics, in comparison to the other Nerf brands that target males. Looking at the physical toys was important because the consumer must understand that the way a toy is presented is strategic and influences perception.

Last, popular commentary about specially feminized products also was essential to data collection because it is important to recognize the point of views of consumers and critics. I included a satirical video of Ellen Degeneres highlighting the absurdities of a “Bic For Her” pen because it showed her dissatisfaction with feminized products. I also included commentary from a woman purchasing the Nerf Rebelle Heartbreaker Bow and individuals’ opinions on the YouTube commercial video. These commentaries are essential because they highlight the opinions of dissent and assent of the average person (versus a celebrity) who come into contact with feminized products. I gathered other commentary on Nerf Rebelle toys via Twitter, YouTube, and through personal correspondence. Analysis can be done time and time again, but unless commentary from those experiencing these products is taken into account, the full range of responses are not accountable. Advertising campaigns attempt to create an impression and
experience for their consumers. Without the opinion and feedback of the consumer, the advertisers cannot understand how the message was actually received and interpreted.

I considered whether or not these toys are empowering, disempowering or both by looking at the facets of the Nerf Rebelle campaign that I have listed. The three central themes I identified are (1) feminization of language (direct commands, naming, and spelling), (2) visual style (colors, script, and dress), and (3) inclusivity. The feminist critique was most appropriate for this analysis because content analysis of the campaign using this framework allowed me to gain better perspective to what adolescent girls were being exposed. Another method such as the quantitative or qualitative approach would not have been as effective as the feminist critique because while I mention numbers in my data set, the quantitative method focuses primarily on an empirical investigation via statistical or mathematical data. The qualitative method also would not have been as effective because it attempts to gain an in-depth understanding of human behavior and why that behavior exists. In my research I did not concentrate the majority of my efforts on gaining the perspectives of consumers of Nerf Rebelle, but instead interpreted the content presented to these consumers and the implications for gender it provides.

**RQ1: Does the Nerf Rebelle campaign pose a threat to dominant masculinity?**

**RQ2: To young girls, is the Nerf Rebelle campaign seen as empowering, disempowering, or both?**

**Data**

It’s surprising how much insight can be gained from content analysis. When you look at a product initially, you take it at face value, but through content analysis you can discover implications and implicit messages that are surprising and include the depictions of stereotypes and social norms and presumptions conveyed about the target audience. From these implicit
messages I gathered that the Nerf Rebelle campaign’s most important elements were its website, physical toys, and commentary throughout which the themes of the feminization of language, visual style, and inclusivity emerged.

**Feminization of Language**

The feminization of language was prominent on the website as well as on the physical packaging of the Nerf Rebelle products. This included but was not limited to the spelling of Rebelle, the naming of products and the different toys, and the use of direct commands or declarations through advertising. The most recognizable thing about Nerf Rebelle is the addition of “Rebelle” on the original Hasbro Nerf brand. This is important because throughout the rest of the toy campaign, spelling is not feminized – Hasbro just decided to alter the spelling of this word, which is by far the most exposed due to its inclusion in the brand name and emblem. The intriguing implications of this addition though are that “Rebelle” is not spelled like the typically used version “rebel” but has a feminine twist on it. In fact “rebelled” is not even in the Webster’s dictionary and when typed into Google, instead the word “rebel” pops up. This use of feminized language raises a question of the validity of a girl as a rebel. The blogger, boundandgaggedbybooks, offers commentary to this point claiming, “the very name Rebelle (not to mention the heartbreaker bow and diva dart) is an annoying and unnecessary attempt to keep toys gendered, girly, and unintimidating. What? Was “rebel” not feminine enough?” This bloggers commentary supports the claim that young girls’ own line of Nerf toys is not expected or necessarily accepted; therefore it is feminized in order to avoid challenging the masculine (or original) version of rebel. With such an alteration in the name of the campaign, I question Hasbro’s intended effect in creating something to make young girls feel like they have their own version of Nerf products. It is interesting that Hasbro finds the need to supplement the Nerf’
brand with the word “rebelle”; why not just make pink and purple options under the already existing Nerf campaign? The reason seems to be that the existing Nerf brands are directed towards males and the word; “rebelle” differentiates these products and allows it to be directed towards females.

This realization leads us to a subset of the feminization of language: naming, which impacts the entirety of the product and how people view it. For instance, Nerf Rebelle is accepted as a female brand of Nerf because of the feminization of its name. This ties in the commentary of the overtly feminized naming of the product, “Bic For Her”. Ellen Degeneres, a well-known comedian and talk show host, did a satire on this product on her show, Ellen. Not only did she simply address the addition of “for her” to the previously existing Bic pen but she also made a mockery of it. After introducing the pen to her live audience she exclaims, “Can you believe this? We’ve been using man pens all these years!” and also points out that on the packaging it says, “designed to fit a woman’s hand” (Degeneres). She highlights the absurdity of naming a pen “Bic For Her” because of its pink and purple features. This absurdity is found in the fact that adding “for her” is completely unnecessary and implies that previous Bic pens were intended for males’ use only. She proceeds to support this claim with a satirical commercial she made. In the commercial she states to her “daughter” that the pens are meant to be used to write down an opinion but due to her status as woman after recording that opinion “crumple it up and throw it away because no one wants to know our opinions sweetheart” (Degeneres). With this exaggeration, the unnecessary nature of the creation of an entirely new line within the Bic brand is asserted.
The tweet above is in line with Ellen DeGeneres’ frustration with the Bic For Her pens. This twitter user is voicing her frustration about an entirely new brand of Nerf for girls. She mentions putting girls in already existing Nerf advertisements and how that would satisfy the desires of young girls looking to play with Nerf guns as well as the sexist implications that Nerf is an exclusively boy brand. In addition to this, another option for the Nerf brand would be to include more typically feminine colors in the already existing Nerf brands. Instead of just having, orange, red, and green products Nerf could implement the more “feminine” colors of purple and pink products into the already existing line so that consumers have options without feeling like they are being constrained to an entirely new brand.

Other forms of naming prevalent in the Nerf Rebelle campaign included the naming of the toys and their references to emotions typically viewed as feminine, feeding into the stereotypes that already exist about women being overly emotional, dependent, and irrational. Due to the newness of this brand, there are only five main toys that are referred to as “Blasters” and twenty-two items overall versus the 161 items on the original Nerf website. This tally is significant in themselves because they highlight the abundance of Nerf toys dedicated to males and the lack of focus on female branded Nerf toys. In addition, not one of the products on the Nerf Rebelle site is referred to as a gun or has violent connotation. In contrast, the Nerf’s brands named “N-Strike”, “Vortex”, and “Zombie Strike” reference aggression supporting the expectations of women to refrain from violence and the acceptance of men to participate in it, which supports society’s concept of dominant masculinity.
The feminization of language is explicitly shown in the naming of Nerf Rebelle’s five main blasters, “Heartbreaker Bow Phoenix”, “Guardian Crossbow”, “Power Pair Pack”, and “Sweet Revenge”. The only name that slightly references aggression is “Sweet Revenge” but it still contains the more feminized word, “sweet” in it. The word “revenge” is also significant because while it implies aggression, it still positions females in a weaker position in which they are forced to react to something they have been faced with. The act of revenge puts women in a position of victimization and illustrates their aggressors as the dominant figure in the relationship. Aggression is an important concept to understand in this study because although girls are encouraged to use these Nerf weapons they are implicitly discouraged from using aggression whereas the male-dedicated Nerf brands reference aggression and asserting dominance with names such as “N-Strike Elite Rough”, that play into the ideal of dominant masculinity. These names reference the female possessor’s male counterpart, implying women are dependent on men. Heartbreaker, Crush, and Revenge acknowledge a reaction to a male’s treatment of a woman. The “Heartbreaker Bow” implies that before its use the females’ heart was broken or that female power is only achieved through sexuality when the female takes on the role of being a heartbreaker. Meanwhile, “Pink Crush” also acknowledges a female’s emotion towards a male and their ultimate dependence on them. Despite creating a brand only for women to encourage independence and stepping out of their comfort zone, the Hasbro company suggests that women cannot exist without the influence of men, leading to a boundless cycle that keeps women stuck in the stereotypes of the past.

The Nerf website aims its advertising efforts towards boys with typically male colors and only boys in the imaging. Not one of the names for toys on the Nerf website references a relationship with a female implying that men are completely independent of women and are not
influenced by their relationship with them. Instead they have names like “Super Soaker Alphafire Blaster”, “Zombie Strike Crossfire Bow”, and “N-Strike Elite Strongarm Blaster” that reinforce dominant masculinity’s expectation for men to be a strong, aggressive, alpha-male.

Another comparison in naming is the page being named “Toys” on the Nerf Rebelle website versus “Products” on the other Nerf brand websites. The word toys create an association with games and play and are taken less seriously then using the word products. The Nerf Rebelle website unlike the other Nerf brands also refer to some of their toys as accessories. Accessories are an addition to something to make it more useful and attractive and tend to be associated with more feminine products like jewelry or fashion. The use of these terms, although discrete, suggests that the toys under the Nerf Rebelle brand are less significant and more concerned with attractiveness and dawdling than professionalism and competition.

In addition to the inherent referencing of men in numerous Nerf Rebelle products, the naming of the “Guardian Crossbow” is also significantly constraining in a different sense. Women are stereotyped to have a maternal instinct and the identification as “Guardian” plays into that expectation. Studies have been done that consider “maternal love” as a “hereditary trait” and acknowledge “the bond connecting its primary emotions, and of the end which the whole system pursues, namely, the preservation of offspring” (Shields, 749). While these studies have been countered and argued, there is still an expectation for women to remain motivated and to adhere to their expectations as a “guardian”. Some of the names of accessories include more obvious feminine references and naming. Some of these feminine adaptations include, Angel Aim Mini Blaster, Femme Fire Mini Blaster, Pretty Paisley Mini Blaster, and Dart Diva Bag and Belt. Names with angel, pretty, and diva do not pose a real threat to dominant masculinity because they still uphold a female’s expectation to be gentle, sweet, and attractive and the male’s
desire for a woman to remain overtly feminine, as expressed by these toys and the Hasbro Global
Chief Marketing Officer John Frascotti’s impression that these toys are what girls want (Staff
Writer).

Another form of feminine naming is seen in the phrases written on the physical packaging of
the toys in Toys R Us. The boxes are labeled with the Nerf Rebelle emblem and overly feminine
toy names but also have messages placed on the box that play into a more relaxed, feminine
experience. The Pink Crush toy says,

“Show everyone that being charming, unexpected, and powerful is the perfect
combination. This cool mini-crossbow easily converts to a mini-blaster. Don’t let
it’s size fool you – you may be sweet and petite, but you can show extreme power
with every shot. Now you can take on even the biggest challenges with just a little
pink crush!”

This excerpt from the Nerf Rebelle toy box exemplifies society’s expectations for girls to
be “charming” as well as “sweet and petite.” These expectations are influencing young
girls to behave in a certain way while encouraging them to maintain a certain body
image. These physical expectations are degrading because they implement the idea that
any body type except “sweet and petite” is not normal or acceptable. It innately creates a
sense of insecurity among women due to society’s belief that women should look a
certain way.

In addition to this phrase, there is a motto placed on the sides of all the physical
packaging under the Nerf Rebelle brand. The motto is: “The beauty of strength and
power. That’s you, inside and out. Armed for action. Teaming up with friends to play
together. Making the rules. Defining the style. Showing the world what you love to do.
Give every shot your best shot. It’s time to Step Up and Stand Out.” This excerpt is also feminized because it mentions beauty and style as if those two concepts are highly important to all young females. It successfully generalizes the interests of young girls and highlights the necessity of young girls to focus on issues like beauty and style even when playing with Nerf guns. These implications reinforce that young girls fulfill female stereotypes of superficiality and interest in activities such as shopping and beauty maintenance. It discourages girls from fostering their personality and individuality if they do not live up to these conjectures.

The last aspect of the feminization of language to focus on is the uses of direct commands to both encourage girls to become independent and contradictorily also connect these toys to the implications that females using these toys are still dependent on the male influence. Under the home, games, and videos pages, one would notice numerous direct commands. These commands are not domineering and critical but encourage the young girls using Nerf Rebelle products to break out of their comfort zone, take risks, and protect themselves through action. The commands LAST STAND, STEP UP, SHOOT SHARP, and NEVER FORGET are also the names of the games available on the Nerf Rebelle website. Through further reflection these commands correspond with the naming of the toys featured and imply a sense of dependence on masculine influence. For instance, both LAST STAND and STEP UP encourage girls to stick up for oneself against someone or something else but only in response to the implications set forth by the naming of the toys. The LAST STAND game features the Heartbreaker Bow and insinuates that the stand that will finally be taken is in response to having their heart broken by the more domineering male. This offensive implication no longer simply encourages girls to rise up and be proactive, but instead to react to the painful emotions the male influence has created.
The STEP UP game featuring the Sweet Revenge toy implies rising to the challenge of pursuing revenge on someone or something, which yet again affirms society’s insulting assumption that women are overly emotional and irrational, validating the need for revenge. The next command/game NEVER FORGET is tied to the Pink Crush toy. The use of the color pink makes the toy seem “girly” and the term “crush” relates to males and a young girl’s infatuation for a boy. The command NEVER FORGET implements the idea in young girls’ heads that boys and their crushes on them should not be forgotten even amidst a computer Nerf battle. These toys would be exponentially more empowering without references to a female’s relationship to a male. The feminization of the previously mentioned commands are innately connected to men and dominant masculinity – the references to masculine influence indicate a society in which men are inherently powerful and influential to women. The last command is SHOOT SHARP featuring the Guardian Crossbow. The Guardian Crossbow toy’s name implies a sense of gentleness and nurturance endorsing another feminine conventional image that constrains variety among females’ personalities. Each of these commands has literal meanings but also has meanings that imply expectations for femininity. In comparison, the original Nerf website has commands with expectations for masculinity. For example, in comparison the commands featured on the home page of this site are BATTLE TEAM ZOMBIE STRIKE and SHOWOFF MIND-BLOWING GAME STUNTS. These are commands that require young boys to show their strength and competitive nature and have nothing to do with the plight of young girls and their influence on them.

Another instance in which commands are used in an overly feminized sense is on the actual packaging of every Nerf Rebelle toy in the Toys R Us store. Every box has a form of instructions on how to use the toys. It says, “How it works” with the words, “Ready. Aim. Fire!” under it.
This command is demeaning to the young girls purchasing the toys because it oversimplifies the already simple instructions. It suggests that young girls do not know how to use the Nerf toys and need a simple reminder on every toy. It is interesting to highlight these commands because on other Nerf brand toys in Toys R Us, no such instructions are provided, implying that boys do not need a reminder for something so simple.

The feminization of commands is seen deeply in the videos on the website. The first video/commercial begins with a girl declaring, “I am strong,” then a different girl declaring, “Confident,” and a third girl declaring, “I am powerful.” These declarations are considered feminized because they are said in a way in which they are trying to convince the audience of the video to agree with them. While these commands are essentially empowering, it is still necessary to recognize that these commands need to be said because society typically does not see girls as strong, confident, and powerful.

Another set of commands seen in the second video also seem to be overly feminized. The girls featured declare, “We’re pretty…Pretty tough…Pretty powerful.” These commands are worth recognizing because they begin with the phrase “We’re pretty” then flash to a montage of girls smiling, before the next command “Pretty tough” is proclaimed. The pause between and flash to the girls are important because they make it so the viewers don’t know they are going to continue with another command. It makes it seem as the girls are referencing their appearances, which is what is expected of women due to the high standards women are held to to be aesthetically pleasing.

Later in the video there is a command that seems to be more empowering. A girl says, “Some people say I play like a girl…” and she confidently continues saying, “You bet I do!” This portrays an image of pride in her femininity defying the common conception that “playing like a
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girl” is a massive insult. Instead she confidently owns her female identity, influencing other girls and consumers to be proud of their identities and to take ownership in it.

Visual Style

Visual style was seen in every aspect of the Nerf Rebelle campaign including the website and physical toys and consequently successfully challenged and sustained society’s presumption of dominant masculinity. In order to really understand the visual style of the Nerf Rebelle campaign it was looked at in the elements of color, location, script, and dress. The colors seen on the website, packaging, and in the commercials (video section of the website) are pink, purple, white, and baby blue. The emblem featured on the website and products keeps the word “Nerf” in its original yellow with the word “Rebelle” fading from white to baby blue. Behind the emblem is what looks like angel wings in a pinkish-purple shade. The top of the website’s home page is dark purple with the Hasbro logo as well as a search box in contrasting white. The further down the page the emblem is centered with the page names to its left in purple with white now as the background. The larger background of the home page is white that fades into purple (left to right). Two characters, one human and the other cartoon, are featured largely in the center of the page wearing forest green, pink, purple, and blue attire with pink streaks in their hair.

The “toys” page as well as the videos page follows the same basic theme with the centered emblem and pink, purple, and white color scheme. The toys page also features the products within the Nerf Rebelle line.
Observing the physical products at Toys R Us was also beneficial in recognizing the color scheme of the toys. The five main blasters I mentioned previously – Heartbreaker Bow, Guardian Crossbow, Pink Crush, Power Pair Pack, and Sweet Revenge all have a white base with light pink and dark purple highlights and a black handle and trigger. The darts are also pink, purple, and white with Rebelle written on them. Some of the other accessories provide more of a variety in color. For instance, baby blue is incorporated into the Heartbreaker Bow Vine, Dolphina Bow Blaster, Angel Aim Mini Blaster, and Blue Crush Soaker. The “games” page also has themed colors for each of the four games. The baby blue lettered “LAST STAND” game contained a blue and purple forest with pink ground, and purple and lime green targets. The purple lettered “STEP UP” game is themed with a purple tower with teal trees, pink sky, and purple and pink targets. Next, the yellow lettered “SHOOT SHARP” game has a multi-shaded pink desert and sunset with purple targets. Last, the purple lettered “NEVER FORGET” game features a purple background with yellow, pink, light blue, and lime green spotlights, which doubled as targets.
While the colors used for these toys are seen as typically feminine hues, there are many women that realize the sexist implications that are ties to genderizing these toys. Not all girls are interested in using pink and purple guns and are insulted by the assumption that they are stereotyped in that way. In Tweet A, @AtHomePundit explicitly expresses her frustration with Nerf and the gendering of their toys. Tweet B’s content compliments Tweet A by complaining about the coloring of the toys as pink. Women are not pleased with the stereotypes associated with making these weapons pink. In Tweet C though, the @LizBraswell takes on the contrasting viewpoint – that the coloring of Nerf Rebelle adds to the “awesomeness” of the toys. She says, “Normally I loathe toys targeted at girls just by being pink/purple…” but goes on to say that doesn’t apply to her opinion on Nerf Rebelle. This is significant because this user claims she wouldn’t normally appreciate the use of colors to genderize toys but in this case it is acceptable. It is interesting that there are so many contrasting views commenting on the use of color to feminize these toys. It really highlights the importance a color can have on interpretation and the impact it can make on women’s view of it – positive or negative.
Going into the Toys R Us was important to understanding the visual style of the Nerf Rebelle brand’s location in the store and on the shelves. As I walked into the store one of the first displays featured water guns and was labeled, “Just add sunshine”. There were thirteen Nerf products overall on the shelf, with only one being Nerf Rebelle. This is significant to visual style because it was difficult to notice the Nerf Rebelle toy amidst the other toys, despite its contrasting colors. The Nerf Rebelle water gun, Blue Crush, was on the second shelf down, towards the middle of the shelves, which does not create a sense of importance in the product – it was just jumbled among the rest of the Nerf toys.

The next display of Nerf Rebelle was further back in the store though at the forefront of the girls’ toys section. It was not in its own aisle but in one of the displays facing the main aisles. This is important because it represents a sense of importance because amongst the rest of the girls’ toys. It has enough popularity and appeal to be placed in a highly visible position. The
tower consisted of five and was filled with Nerf Rebelle products. The main blasters were placed in the middle three rows while the accessories were positioned on the top and bottom rows – fostering less visibility. One of the shelves was empty and appears to have once been stocked with the toy, Nerf Rebelle Gold Rush Bow. This implies the high demand for this specific Nerf Rebelle toy. Girls appear to desire this weapon so much that they cannot keep it in stock consistently. Another interesting aspect of the tower is it is located in between the brands, “totally me!”, “easy bake”, “maxie girls”, and “little mismatched” dolls. This location places the Nerf Rebelle brand among dolls, implying girls who play with dolls are also likely to play with Nerf Rebelle and vice versa. Again, the supports the expectation that girls growing up should play with dolls and use easy bake ovens which resemble child-raising and cooking – two typically feminine responsibilities. It inadvertently implants an idea in girls’ heads that while they can play with Nerf Rebelle they must not forget about their supposedly inherent interests in dolls and baking.

The location of the other Nerf brands is on the other side of the store, in the boys’ toys section. The other Nerf brands have their own tower as well as an entire side of an aisle to showcase their products. Obviously the other Nerf brands have been in existence longer than Nerf Rebelle but the abundance of space for these brands imply more importance and appeal than the Nerf Rebelle brand.

Another aspect of the visual style theme is the script. The script is feminized initially due to its colors of pink and purple but also because of its designed font. “Rebelle” in the logo is in a gothic styled font with feathered wings behind it. The pages also have swirls that lightly in the cover the background of the web page. The physical toys also demonstrate script on the packaging and products. The box in which they are placed follows the same theme that the
website does. “Rebelle” has the same scripted font with angel wings and the background of the box has swirly designs throughout it. The names of the toys are also displayed in the same uppercased, block font on the upper right corner of the box. The toys themselves have varying scripts. The five main blasters have the same angel-winged script covering the blaster that lies behind the “Nerf Rebelle” emblem, while the water toys are branded with a wave-like image. The toys that don’t fall directly under these themes of angel wings and wave scripts are the mini blasters. The Pretty Paisley Mini Blaster that is paisley flowered, the Femme Fire Mini Blaster that is flowered as well, and the Angel Aim Mini Blaster that is decorated with stars. These scripts give the brand, packaging, and toys a feminine touch. They are no longer seen as fierce Nerf weapons but Nerf toys decorated with angel wings, flowers, and stars. The softening of these toys no longer make them seem threatening to their competitors. This contrasts the products on the Nerf website greatly. Their products are either solid colors, branded with flames, or a famous basketball player. It can be argued that a boy or girl holding a red and black Nerf gun will be taken more seriously than a girl or boy holding a pink and purple Nerf gun with angel wings. Actual gender of the possessor does not necessarily matter, but the feminization of the gun does have an impact on perception. The scripting really makes an impact on the appearance of the weapons, the packaging, and the emblem itself, therefore impacting the influence, or lack there of, on other people.

In the video/commercials dress is seen most vividly. While similar dress is seen in imaging on the website and physical packaging, the most variety is seen in the videos. Recognizing the attire that was worn by these young girls is important because it supports the assumption that the makers of Nerf Rebelle created a product that encourages independence and strength while simultaneously constraining these girls to a certain appearance. Furthermore, throughout the two
videos, three girls were most frequently featured, therefore we will focus on the dress they were in.

The first girl was Caucasian with blonde hair. She was in a pink sweatshirt with a dark gray vest. She also had a blue streak in her long, straight blonde hair and her ears were adorned with blue feather earrings. The second girl was a Caucasian brunette with her hair in a low ponytail. She wore a pink shirt with a jean jacket over it. Last, there was a darker skinned girl with brunette hair, wearing a light gray shirt, green cargo jacket, and pink jeans. The fact that all of these girls had some pink feature in their outfit highlights the desire for the Nerf Rebelle brand to attract girl consumers who still want to remain feminine and “girly” despite playing with Nerf toys.

Instances of feminized dress are seen on all of the products but a specific instance worth recognizing is on the home page of the website. The girl advertised is wearing a royal blue shirt with a forest green cargo jacket over it, and bright pink pants. She also has her hair down with a pink feathery streak in it and pink and black bracelets on her wrist. There is also a cartoon character on the home page of the website. She is dressed in forest green cargo pants, a purple shirt, gray cargo jacket, and has a belt fashioned with a large pink buckle and white angel wings. This character also has purple streaks in her hair, which is tied back in a braid. Addressing the style of dress on the home page of the website is just as important as the girls in the videos because these images create a first impression on website viewers. This impression is based on the assumption that girls using these Nerf toys will still adhere to the expectations of young girls to remain feminine as they grow. The cargo jacket and braids that many of these characters are dressed in are significant because they tie in the historical significance of the heroine of the Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen. While the argument is being made that the accessories,
adornments in their hair, and “girly” colored clothing are disempowering, the opposite argument is being made for the imitation of Katniss Everdeen’s attire in the trilogy. Katniss is the main character whom wins a competition to the death despite facing twelve boys aged 12-18 as competition. She was portrayed as a strong, resourceful, independent heroine and defied a majority of the female stereotypes that typecast women as weak, gentle, and dependent on men. This small feature of the dress encourages girls to be like Katniss and therefore empowers them to step up and stand out against all odds. I propose that the challenges the influence of Katniss Everdeen helps these girls overcome are the very stereotypes that are put forth through other aspects of dress in the Nerf Rebelle brand.

**Inclusivity**

The theme of inclusivity emerged during data collection among the Nerf Rebelle brand. It is seen in the website’s games page, in the videos on the website through language and physical grouping, and on the packaging of the toys. This inclusivity is among young girls but interestingly tends to exclude males and less feminine females.

On the website there is a games page where you can choose to play “STEP UP”, “NEVER FORGET”, “SHOOT SHARP”, and “LAST STAND”. The first sense of inclusivity is in the fact that you are encouraged to join a team. The options are Team Pink Crush, Team Guardian, Team Sweet Revenge, or Team Heartbreaker. By giving users the option to join a team, Nerf Rebelle is refraining from encouraging individual success and promotes working together and interconnectedness. This is important because those values are typically associated with the behavior of women and fails to challenge gender stereotypes.

The next instance of inclusivity lies in the feedback users receive from the game. After playing the game a page pops up that says, “Which coach will pick you?” While this does not
seem inclusive at first glance, I argue that it is in fact inclusive. I played the game but
purposefully refrained from scoring any points to see whether the automated coaches would
comment or be affected by my lack of a score. Instead of receiving criticism, the coaches of each
of the teams had commentary that included, “great score”, “that was a pretty shot”, then after
pressing the next button it was narrowed down to two coaches that had commentary like, “come
play with me”, “not bad, we could use you on our team”, “you’d be a perfect fit for us”, “we
need your help”, and “charming, unexpected, and powerful…just like Team Pink Crush”.
Despite my awful score of a zero, the Nerf Rebelle website is programmed to automatically
give positive feedback and promote teamwork using terms like “us” and “we”. This sense of
inclusivity allows for a strong sense of competition but does create a fun environment that is
inclusive to all skill levels. Young girls do not have to feel pressure or insecurity during these
online games and by joining a team are likely to feel empowered.

Inclusivity is also seen in the videos and commercials posted on the website in the
language and as well as imaging of girls working together. Throughout the videos, language is
used to promote togetherness and inclusivity. At the end of the first video the three girls featured
are filmed separately saying, “I am” then in unison saying “Nerf Rebelle”. This sequence
symbolizes the coming together of different girls to bond over the Nerf Rebelle toy. Other
inclusive language that is used in the second video is when the girls say in unison, “We’re
pretty” and “We’re ready”. The use of the word “we’re” is the most obvious utilization of
language to promote inclusivity. By using these words girls can feel a sense of community under
the Nerf Rebelle brand, leading to finding empowerment within each other.

The visuals in the videos/commercials that seem to endorse a sense of inclusivity are
prevalent. There are clips throughout both videos that flash young girls using the Nerf toys and
running together. With smiles on their faces, it is hard to imagine these scenes as instances of fierce competition. It seems to be team activities in which the girls filmed are working together to achieve a common goal. The significance behind this lies in the contrasting environment of the other male-dominated Nerf brands that allow an environment rich with competition and exclusivity. Other clips that feature inclusivity are in the second video when it flashes montages of girls participating in other activities such as bringing it in for a huddle in soccer. This imaging instills something greater in the audiences viewing this Nerf Rebelle commercial. It encourages girls to be inclusive in everything they do and supports the belief that we are connected and can gain more success from working with each other and utilizing one anothers’ strengths to supplement our own.

Inclusivity is also seen rampantly throughout the Nerf Rebelle packaging. On the boxes there are multiple girls featured versus just one individual pictured with the toy like on other male Nerf brands. These girls are smiling and excited to be playing with these toys. There is even one toy named “Power Pair” that pictures to girls who are perceived as good friends leaning on each other back to back. These girls are smiling and working as a team, which supports the sense of inclusivity and teamwork Nerf Rebelle seems to be attempting to instill in its consumers. On that same packaging is a phrase that overtly expresses the desire for inclusivity. It says, “Equip your BFF with a blaster and TEAM UP to take on your secret target! Take aim, hide out, and let the darts fly! Each blaster is small enough to STASH IN A POCKET OR PURSE, and has room for double-dart storage, so back up is never too far away.” With the words “team up” in all capitals differentiating it from the rest of the wording, focus is to be placed there. The creators are hoping to create a collaborative atmosphere for young girls that promote
inclusivity. This is empowering to young girls because through bonding with others and learning from their expertise, you can become a better, more well-rounded individual.

The counter-argument to Nerf Rebelle’s desire for inclusivity can be found in some of the same areas that seem to promote it. While the placement of multiple girls on one box is inclusive and contrasts the other Nerf brands that picture one serious, competitive looking boy, it is exclusive in the sense that it does not welcome boys, transgendered children, or girls that do not find interest in “girly” things. Only girls are pictured in advertisements, commercials, and on the boxes. Hasbro seems to be directing this new brand of Nerf toys exclusively to girls due to the previous Nerf brands being advertised exclusively to males. The true sense of exclusivity though is seen in the overly feminized colors, language, and imaging that discourage tomboys from taking interest in the Nerf Rebelle brand. This brand desires a consumer base that finds joy in wearing jewelry and wearing pink while also participating in adventure and action sports like Nerf battles. For instance, on the Power Pair packaging the phrase “each blaster is small enough to STASH IN A POCKET OR PURSE” implies that the user has a purse to stash it in. The assumption excludes young girls that are not interested in purses and “girly” things. This leads us to the third sense of exclusivity – transgendered children may feel constrained by the entire Hasbro Nerf brand because while they are not sure with which gender they identify with, these brands force them to decide between very feminine products under Nerf Rebelle and very masculine products under the other Nerf brands. There doesn’t seem to be a middle ground for the Nerf brand therefore excluding unsure transgendered children. It is interesting that this brand that focuses so much on promoting inclusivity can also have so many aspects that are intrinsically exclusive.

Discussion
The data collection and analysis done through a feminist rhetorical critique on the website, physical products, and commentary has implications for the arguments of whether this toy campaign is empowering or disempowering. I will be discussing the findings from four different points of view including a typical eight-year-old girl, a feminist, a Hasbro brand-advertising manager, and my own point of view. These points of view seem to be the most relevant because they represent a perspective from both sides of the argument of whether these toys are empowering or not. I finish with my perspective because I have created a synthesis of the research I’ve done, the insights I’ve made, and the implications I have challenged.

**Eight-year old point of view**

From a typical eight-year-old girl’s point of view, the Nerf Rebelle brand’s toys are a dream come true. After years of having to use the Nerf toys that were so obviously marketed for young boys, girls have toys just for them. One Twitter user tweeted, “#NERFRebelle is just what every girl needs to show the boys who’s boss!” As a young girl, unaware of the gender implications that are engrained in these products, a pink Nerf gun seems ideal. You are able to keep up with brothers or guy friends who already own Nerf weapons, while not giving up your interest in the colors pink and purple. It is the best of both worlds – a world in which you like the color pink but also love to play outside and compete with others. A woman was purchasing the Heartbreaker Bow in line behind me at Target in Boulder, so I asked her how her daughter felt about the Nerf Rebelle toys. She explained that her daughter saw it as a chance to prove her toughness and loved being able to do so while looking stylish. Although it is not what all young girls are interested in, it appeals to many because of its combination of typically masculine and feminine qualities. As an eight year old, you are also looking to popular culture and the media to find your inspirations. In this cultural moment Katniss Everdeen and Merida from Brave are seen as
powerful, independent heroines for young girls to look up to, and these heroines just so happen to be using a bow and arrow to protect themselves. At the ripe age of eight, you are too young to truly decipher the gendered messages being instilled within you, but instead recognize these toys as appealing due to their color, inspiring due to their association with heroines, and empowering due to their ability to keep up with the boys.

**Feminist point of view**

While an eight-year-old girl may not realize the implications surrounding the Nerf Rebelle brand, a feminist point of view acknowledges them and does not take them lightly. From a feminist perspective these toys are disempowering due to the societal stereotypes that they reinforce. The target age for this Nerf line is eight years and up. Recognizing the targeted age group is important because the years from roughly eight to fourteen years old are formative years of a young girl’s life. Their opinions are being formed, personalities created, and expectations molded by their interactions with others and the values society sets forth. This toy brand forces them to choose to conform to society’s expectation of femininity and that if they want to play with their own brand of Nerf toys, they must wear pink and appear feminine. Twitter user, @kidamy expressed it perfectly from a feminist perspective: “1 step forward, 2 steps back. We’ll get there eventually, I hope.” While @kidamy address that a step has been taken forward with the implementation of the first Nerf line just for women, two steps back have been taken as well because this line is not empowering – but insulting and stereotypical to any young girl not infatuated with the thought of pink butterflies. Tomboys are not given an option – there is not a gender-neutral brand for those who don’t necessarily identify with either extreme of gender identity. Because of this, young girls are dissuaded from following their heart and acting out the gender identity that feels most natural because they may seem abnormal if they don’t find
interest in this Nerf toy that has the same performance capabilities as the boy brands, just a more “appropriate” color for young girls. It is detrimental to the growth of young girls and compels them to conform to the gender expectations set forth by society rather than discover their own identities through self-discovery and exploration.

**Nerf creators’ point of view**

The third point of view is from the creators of Nerf Rebelle, the Hasbro brand representatives. Every advertisement that is put out to the public is meticulously thought out; focus groups are made, public opinion gaged, and the cultural moment accounted for. Therefore, from Hasbro’s point of view, Nerf Rebelle is not inherently sexist, it is what young girls in this age group want. Twitter user @ResourcefulMom supported Hasbro’s decisions in the coloring, naming, and ultimate gendering of these products with this tweet: “The NERF REBELLE toys were inspired by current pop culture trends and based on insight from girls. #HasbroGifts” While some people are upset with the implications that Nerf Rebelle insinuates about gender, others realize that the decisions made by Hasbro were not made blindly or ignorantly. It seems to be a lose-lose situation for Hasbro’s representatives. Without a line for girls, Nerf is seen as exclusive in only concentrating its creative abilities to bring fun, action toys to boys, but when they make products just for girls that feed into the desires for more feminine colors versus the already existing green, blue, and orange colored toys they are criticized for once again being sexist. These toys have the same power and capabilities as the already existing male Nerf brands and were not manipulated in any way to accommodate the supposed vulnerability of women. This is important to recognize because the Hasbro brand did not have any intention of discrediting little girls’ strength or abilities through the color scheme. Girls who do not like these toys can continue to play with the existing Nerf brands, but Hasbro has provided an alternative in which
young athletic girls can merge their desire to be adventurous and their desire to embrace their femininity. In addition to this, Hasbro has found success in addressing what the current market wants. With the popularity of strong female characters utilizing bows and arrows, Hasbro has produced a spin-off toy that empowers young girls to aspire to these powerful, influential characters. Freelance writer Toni Matthews El addresses the brilliance of Hasbro when she claims, “Nobody was giving toy weapons of any kind to little girls since the idea was that these things didn’t or shouldn’t appeal to little girls…But somebody out there made a connection. And if this toy does well, who’s to say that changes won’t be made in the future?” (Staff Writer).

Hasbro seems to be open to the opinions of its consumers, critics, and competitors and is looking to meet the needs of these groups – currently Nerf Rebelle is fulfilling that need.

**My point of view**

The last point of view that matters to me is my own one. Deciding how I truly feel about Nerf Rebelle has been a process – one in which I’ve altered my opinions and gone from perceiving this Nerf line as empowering, to disempowering, to a combination of the two. I initially went into this subject with no previous knowledge, assuming I would find the brand empowering. A Nerf brand for girls? …Something I’ve wanted since I was a young girl playing with my three older brothers’ Nerf guns. I was your typical “tomboy,” playing in mud and always tagging along with my older brothers to get into adventures and mischief, but all the while I was wearing a bow or a pink shirt. While the decision to wear more feminine clothing such as a bow was likely instilled in me by my parents and unbeknownst to me as genderizing, I am happy with the person I have become today. I am an athletic, adventurous, tough girl who enjoys embracing my femininity. I initially didn’t see a pink action toy as constraining, but as a creative solution to young girls like myself’s desire to combine two identities.
However, as I began to do content analysis and look into the intrinsic elements of these toys, I began to realize the demeaning implications that are ruffling the feathers of different consumers and critics. While the naming of the toys doesn’t seem to be an overt form of sexism, the wording on the sides of the boxes are what really perturbed me. The excerpt that stuck out the most and led to me to consider these toys disempowering was the excerpt from the Pink Crush toy’s packaging:

“Show everyone that being charming, unexpected, and powerful is the perfect combination. This cool mini-crossbow easily converts to a mini-blaster. Don’t let its size fool you – you may look sweet and petite, but you can show extreme power with every shot. Now you can take on even the biggest challenges with just a little pink crush!”

The integration of the phrase “sweet and petite” is insulting and degrading to young girls. Individuals develop differently and the generalization of young girls as “sweet and petite” can hinder the confidence and growth of a girl who doesn’t satisfy these expectations. Our society puts an abundance of pressure on physical appearance and this reference reinforces that unjust standard.

At this point I was discouraged about the so-called empowering nature of the Nerf Rebelle products. However, the commentary on how Nerf Rebelle was inspired by heroines from both the Hunger Games and Brave also revitalized my belief in the empowerment of women through these toys. I am personally a Hunger Games fanatic, having binge-read the trilogy in just two days. Katniss Everdeen is a girl who does not let the pressure of the society consume or define her. She is an individual, who protects herself and her family, and stays true to herself despite the efforts of others to mold her
into something she isn’t. The obvious connection between Nerf Rebelle and Katniss Everdeen influences girls using these products to strive to be like her, to be themselves.

I have found that this Nerf line is a combination of empowering and disempowering. A woman I spoke to in Target buying her daughter a Heartbreaker Bow told me that her daughter finds these toys as empowering because while previously she used her brother’s Nerf guns, she now has her own. I also tried to delve deeper into the topic of implicit sexism by mentioning the gendered coloring of the toys and the names. She rebutted by saying that if a girl doesn’t want the pink and purple toys then they still have the option to use the brown ones as well as she views the names more as powerful, versus dependent on men. They are finally able to take things into their own hands and her girls love it.

This conversation was insightful into the mind of young girls and led me to solidify my opinion on Nerf Rebelle. I think it is empowering to girls who choose to seek out the Nerf line and find strength in embracing their femininity because they are too young to understand the adverse implications of some of the inherent aspects of Nerf Rebelle, but it is disempowering to those who are unsure of their femininity and are unable to find an alternative solution to the polarization of the Nerf brands. Hasbro needs to find a happy medium, with a gender-neutral option in order to provide outlets to females and males of all types.

**Further Research**

I believe that using a feminist critique, content analysis, and compare/contrast methodology was highly successful but there is always room for improvement and expanding on this topic. Nerf Rebelle is a fairly new brand, released in February of 2013, therefore I think it would be beneficial to revisit the topic of whether this toy campaign is empowering, disempowering, or a
combination of the two after it has had more time to saturate the market. If given the opportunity to expand my research, I think it would be interesting for researchers to explore the first hand opinions of girls aged 6-14 to gather their opinions on the toys, tie in the implications of transgender studies, and investigate Hasbro’s opinions and subject position, in order to understand three essential viewpoints on this toy campaign.

In my research I did not gather first hand experiences from Nerf Rebelle consumers. This is for a number of reasons: I began my thesis wanting to focus on the effect of general advertising on young children. I observed commercials during the prime after-school hours of 2-4 PM on Nickelodeon. I witnessed short 30-second commercials of food, gendered product advertising, and even commercials geared towards parents. This is where I discovered the Nerf Rebelle brand. I was so intrigued by the new Nerf brand and its focus on appealing primarily to young “girly” female consumers. This is when I decided to alter my thesis research topic to the gendered implications set forth by Nerf Rebelle. Unfortunately gathering first hand experiences through interviews requires the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to approve the inclusion of interviewing young children in my studies. Gaining IRB approval is a lengthy process and my timeline unfortunately didn’t allow for it. If I could suggest something to future researchers, I would recommend allowing enough time to go through the IRB process so that insight can be provided on the actual opinions and experiences of girls utilizing these toys.

While content analysis provided me with fairly clear evidence that the Nerf Rebelle products display detrimental female stereotypes and are subjected to the overwhelming influence of dominant masculinity, commentary on the toys tend to paint a different picture. Young girls are not aware of the implications set forth by Hasbro in naming their toys Heartbreaker Bow and Pink Crush as well as by designing them to be pink and purple. These constraints create
gendered expectations that deeply impact young girls’ growth as a female. Instead of realizing these implications it seems girls, as well as their parents, embrace them.

The four tweets above demonstrate the outpouring of positivity among the Nerf Rebelle brand. In tweets A and C, twitter users describe the emotions of toughness and ferocity that their daughters experience when using their toys, particularly the Heartbreaker Bow. There is a lack of these emotions associated with young girls and the strength and confidence in the ability the Nerf Rebelle toys provide to break down gender barriers that have been in place despite efforts to promote gender equality and free expression. Tweets B and D also mention upbeat commentary on Nerf Rebelle, comparing their daughters to popular culture heroines. The user from Tweet B compares her daughter to Katniss Everdeen while Tweet D mentions Merida from the Disney movie, Brave and the empowerment her girls feel from using the toys. Katniss and Merida are
heroines who defy gender stereotypes through ferocity, independence, and confidence – they do not conform to the expectations set before them but instead follow their own passions. It is frequently implied that the influence for the Nerf Rebelle line is the recent popularity of these leading ladies and their use of the bow and arrow to protect them, leading me to believe that many girls are influenced and shaped by the influences of these women rather than by the feminine coloring and names of the Nerf Rebelle toys.

I think it would be beneficial to be able to talk to the young girls using these Nerf toys and question whether they feel pressured into liking pink and purple, or feel less than empowered compared to the boys’ Nerf brands. I think there would be an interesting contrast and researchers would discover that most girls who don’t care for pink and purple are already using the original Nerf brands and aren’t bothered by the fact that girls are not featured on the girls’ boxes, whereas the girls targeted by Nerf Rebelle want to embrace their tomboy, athletic personality as well as their “girly” identity and would appreciate Nerf Rebelle toys as an outlet to do so.

Another area that would be very interesting to delve into for further research is the impact the Nerf brands have on transgender children. The predicament that Nerf Rebelle and the previously existing brands set forth are completely polarized toys in terms of gender. Nerf Rebelle is marketed towards young girls interested in “girly” things like pink, angels, and flowers whereas other Nerf brands are marketed towards young boys interested in zombies, sports, and soldiers in the colors of green, black, blue, and red. The Nerf brands do not offer a gender-neutral option. This is problematic for boys who are not overtly masculine and girls who identify as tomboys.

Even more conflicted, would be a transgendered children who are not sure with which gender to identify with. There is an article by Chuck Romano named, “Nerf Rebelle Crossbow: The gift that your little girl or boy will love you for”. This blog offers commentary on the supposed
versatility of Nerf Rebelle products, but does not provide actual evidence of young boys’ interest in the toys. It mentions that it is marketed towards girls but that there is likely “a sizeable audience amongst boys as well” (Romano). It concludes by posing the question, “what young boy would not get a kick out of a toy like this?” (Romano). I argue that most boys would not get a kick out of these toys due to the prevalence of gender stereotypes for not only for both women and men as well. Dominant masculinity dissuades young boys from taking part in more feminine activities and defying norms by using pink and purple toys. This commentary is significant to the further research of Nerf Rebelle and Nerf brands impact on transgender children because at the particular cultural moment dominant masculinity is pervasive and sustains a polarized view on gender differences. It would be interesting to find commentary from a transgendered perspective and determine a way to be more accommodating and culturally sensitive to this unique population.

The last aspect that I think would be beneficial to further research is investigating Hasbro’s opinions on the implications of the Nerf Rebelle brand. Speaking with top marketers and advertising experts would give researchers insight into the decisions of Hasbro to feminize every aspect of these toys which would explain whether Hasbro was intentionally perpetuating existing stereotypes or just responding to a desire for these types of toys from the consumer environment. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, the Hasbro Global Chief Marketing Officer, John Frascotti justified the design choices by claiming this is what girls want. He was quoted saying, “I think if anything, we went into this without any stereotypes and instead talked to young girls, found out what they wanted, and then designed a line of products that addressed that opportunity.” (Staff Writer) It would be interesting to find out the types of questions Hasbro used to gage the interests of focus groups, how they picked their focus groups, and whether there was
dissent among them. Understanding the position of the Hasbro came from in creating this line of Nerf products for girls can help further decipher whether these toys are truly disempowering or just interpreted that way through a feminist lens.

My ultimate suggestion for further research would be to further my findings with a qualitative approach and gather and in-depth understanding of human behavior – of the girls, transgendered children, and Hasbro representatives – in order to determine why, how, what, where, and when decisions, impressions, and reactions of the Nerf Rebelle brand are made.

**Conclusion**

The Nerf Rebelle campaign proved to be a complex, intriguing object of analysis with a variety of empowering as well as disempowering implications. In order to discover whether the concern of a threat to dominant masculinity by girls gaining too much empowerment through these toys, I employed a feminist rhetorical critique, content analysis, and compare/contrast to find insight in the products. In conclusion, while the toy displays signs of both explicit and implicit empowerment and disempowerment and dominant masculinity is challenged, there is still a lack of a genuine threat to society’s ideal perception of dominant masculinity. The freshness of the Nerf Rebelle line created flexibility in the direction of research, but also provides immense potential for further research that may unearth more tribulations or optimism in the Nerf Rebelle brand.

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