



INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING 23/24

LEGO

INTERNATIONALIZATION, MARKETING & SUSTAINABILITY

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INTRODUCTION

This essay analyses the multifaceted journey of the LEGO Group. The whole structure is divided into three chapters, which tackle the exploration of its strategies for internationalization and market entries, its diverse marketing approaches and services, and finally, its commitment to sustainability.

By examining these aspects alongside a comparative analysis of its competitors, this work offers insights into how the LEGO Group has navigated the complexities of the global market while upholding its core values of creativity, imagination, and quality.

The paper is dated May, 2024.

1 - HISTORY AND INTERNATIONALIZATION

The LEGO Group first started in 1932, when Ole Kirk Kristiansen founded his carpentry business with the name ‘*Billund Maskinsnedkeri*’. Later, with an understanding of the potential of focusing on toys, he transformed his business into a toy manufacturing company, changing its name to LEGO, a combination of the two Danish words ‘*Leg Godt*’, meaning *Play Well*. It was in 1949 when the forerunners of today’s LEGO bricks were launched, laying the foundation for the vast LEGO empire we know today [1, 2].

The following provides a broad view of the main points of LEGO’s internationalization.

1.1 EARLY EXPANSION

LEGO made its first moves into foreign markets in the 1950s, focusing on Nordic countries first. The owner’s attention then turned to Germany, the center of global toy production, thinking that it would be the key to conquering the whole world. Despite initial difficulties, the company persuaded toy shops in Northern Germany to stock the LEGO product, adopting a special strategy to convince German consumers: LEGO products would be sold only to those retailers which were willing to display the bricks in the shop, so that customers could be directly introduced to the products. Together with a campaign concentrated on the city of Hamburg and supported by the commercial ‘*Wir bauen eine Stadt*’ (‘We’re building a city’), the strategy proved to be effective in conquering the nation.

In turn, the success in Germany permitted the company to set up sales offices in many other European nations in the late 1950s. Furthering its expansion into foreign markets, in the 1960s LEGO entered into a licensing agreement with the American luggage company, Samsonite, to manufacture and sell LEGO products in the US and Canada.

Under the agreement the LEGO Group supplied machinery, moulds and other equipment, while Samsonite dealt with production and sales. Subsequent efforts included expansion in Asia, regarded as a future core market for the LEGO Group, with a continuous growth which led LEGO to be elected ‘Toy of the Century’ in 1999. Nevertheless, in 2004, the LEGO Group faced an economic crisis and established a survival and turnaround plan. The plan was to focus mostly on the core businesses: the bricks and the LEGO System in Play. The rescue plan also included an outsourcing strategy in partnership with Flextronics in order to cut costs. The termination of the partnership in 2009 resulted in LEGO’s ownership of 4 new factories in Europe and America [1, 2].

1.2 ENTRY STRATEGIES, INVESTMENTS ABROAD AND SUBJECT TO INTERNATIONALIZATION

LEGO launched itself with a clear intention and vision: ‘Only the best is good enough’. The company created toys to ‘inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow’. In order to achieve these objectives worldwide, the Danish firm has employed various entry strategies throughout its history, and continues to the present day. Since the start of LEGO’s internationalization, for Godtfred Kirk it was fundamental that its products were not marketed as specifically Danish for them to achieve international success. Instead, the goal was for consumers of different nations to perceive the products in a way that aligned with their own cultural preferences [3].

From the outset, one relevant example is the exclusive Italian brand Minitalia, which was created in the 1970s alongside its main product line, in order to expand its business in the country. This line featured cheaper, lower-quality plastic and a variation in the colours typically used, among other cost-saving measures, such as omitting the LEGO name on the studs. But despite the bricks looking different, they were still compatible with the main line of LEGO [4].

The same can be said about another regional exclusive brand, which was produced in Japan in the 1970s with the name OLO. The bricks were similar to the Minitalia ones, but made with the same material as the main product line (ABS). As detailed in paragraph 1.1, this remains an ongoing practice for the company.

As the company started to attain international success, it also started facing urgent challenges in order to meet the burgeoning demand for LEGO products. Among these challenges was the need for higher productivity, improved quality, and compliance with new environmental and safety standards. This encouraged the adoption of mass production techniques. For instance, in the early 1970s, the LEGO Group encountered a decrease in packaging capacity for LEGO DUPLO in Billund. This necessitated the establishment of a new packing facility in Denmark, showcasing their adaptability to meet production demands. Recently, faced with the increased demand and in order to develop its positioning, the LEGO Group has strategically established its manufacturing sites near its largest markets to optimize distribution efficiency. There are currently five manufacturing sites in three continents: Denmark, Czech Republic, Hungary, Mexico and China. Additionally, the company's commitment to meeting its growing demand and expanding its global footprint, was shown in the construction of two new facilities in Virginia (USA), and in Vietnam, set to open in 2025 [5, 6, 7].

Investments in property, plants, and equipment amounted to DKK 5.9 billion in 2022, compared to DKK 3.1 billion in the previous year or even DKK 2.8 billion in 2015.

In addition to LEGO’s own manufacturing facilities, its global supply chain provides the firm with the raw materials, parts, and finished goods, with suppliers predominantly located in Europe, Mexico and China.

With over 27,000 employees worldwide, the LEGO Group maintains a robust global presence. The LEGO Group has continued to invest in its retail footprint globally. By the end of 2023, the company boasted 1031 stores worldwide [12]. In 2023 the company opened 147 new LEGO stores, also expanding its presence in China with 81 new stores. Investments have also been made in refurbishing flagship stores and enhancing the online shopping experience through LEGO.com.

By diversifying their manufacturing sites and enhancing their retail presence, the LEGO Group has ensured its ability to cater to diverse markets and customer preferences. The customer preferences are well studied and respected in order to propose toys that best fit national or international trends, to enhance customer engagement and to exceed the customers' expectations in creating innovative toys. In 2021, almost half of the portfolio of LEGO was composed of new products.

Among the different strategies employed by LEGO to reach new customers and expand its market presence, one has proven to be particularly effective.

LEGO has strategically collaborated with popular franchises and brands like Star Wars, Harry Potter and Disney, creating sets featuring iconic characters and scenes. Through this strategy, LEGO has successfully entered markets where its presence was less established, leveraging the familiarity of partnered franchises to introduce its products to diverse audiences worldwide.

The company achieved a similar result by venturing in the world of movies. The LEGO Movie, released in 2014 in collaboration with Warner Bros., was a huge success, attracting audiences of all ages and nationalities.

In addition, the LEGO Group intensified its investments in digital capabilities, as evidenced by products like LEGO Fortnite, a collaboration with the famous video game[13]. Furthermore, the expansion of digital teams in key locations like Billund, London, Shanghai, and Copenhagen facilitated the acceleration of digital transformation efforts, thanks to which the LEGO Builder App and LEGO Life app witnessed significant growth in downloads[8, 9].

The expansion of LEGO beyond its physical products does not stop here. LEGO has created multiple experiences for its community, such as theme parks, hotels, and magazines. LEGO's brand building and marketing strategy includes an affiliate program, providing partners with official banners, text, and product links for their websites. Affiliates have the opportunity to earn commissions on sales, track their performance through LEGO's affiliate network, and receive exclusive newsletters and updates.

2 - LEGO's BRAND IDENTITY: BRANDING, PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

One of LEGO's main focuses while expanding their global presence is their brand identity which is aimed at being homogeneous and durable across markets, countries and cultures. The firm believes that by meeting these aims, they will be able to create long lasting brand value in consumers' minds, build trust and loyalty, expand into target markets, reach target audiences and enhance the customers' experience. These objectives are deeply intertwined with LEGO's core values: imagination, creativity, fun, learning and community [14,15].

2.1 BRANDING ANALYSIS

LEGO's commitment to these values is evident in every aspect of its branding and product offerings. Its logo is a primary example. The vibrant color palette of red, yellow and white is meant to serve as a visual invitation to play, and to inspire creativity in builders of all ages. The playful typography of the logo, coupled with its large size and bold design, ensures high visibility on retail shelves, reinforcing LEGO's reputation as a trusted and recognizable brand.

The same colors of the logo are also used in their retail stores, which are cleverly and carefully designed as immersive and engaging spaces, thus providing other ways of representing the brand's identity. Displays of towering sculptures constructed entirely from the bricks are deliberately located at the store entrance, showcasing the potential of LEGO and immediately captivating the customers. Interactive play areas are used to invite children (and adults) to try out the products. The layout of the stores themselves are meticulously designed, not just to showcase products, but to create a sense of discovery. This approach transforms the shopping experience into an imaginary world which the customers are drawn into.

The LEGO Group has also made significant investments to expand and innovate its digital retail channels in recent years. From 2020, the company experienced a substantial growth of sales across its own and partners' digital retail platforms, indicating a continuing shift to online sales.

The company achieved these outstanding results by trying to provide consumers with the same engaging experience of the physical stores, but in digital.

For instance, the LEGO minifigure factory, which permits fans to design personalized LEGO characters, can be found in selected retail stores but has now become available online.

In addition, LEGO cultivated a large online community through platforms such as LEGO Ideas, where fans can submit their own designs for potential LEGO sets. This crowdsourcing approach also

enables LEGO to tap into the collective imagination of its fan base, thus ensuring that new product offerings resonate with consumers [19, 8].

Both LEGO's retail stores and digital platforms are designed to cater to a diverse age range, reflecting the brand's commitment to inspiring creativity in individuals of all ages.

The toy company also offers a range of products tailored to adults. These sets, often referred to as "LEGO for Grown-ups," include intricate and detailed models of iconic buildings, vehicles, and landscapes that are aimed at attracting adult builders. They not only serve as a creative outlet but also as a display of craftsmanship and attention to detail, thus also targeting collectors and enthusiasts.

This is backed up by marketing campaigns such as "Adults are welcome" which showcased a series of adults returning to their homes after work to play with LEGO. Through these advertisements, LEGO was able to reinforce the idea that adults, too, can find relaxation and satisfaction in building with LEGO bricks, thus escaping the stress of working life and the adult world [15,16].

LEGO also includes young children among their target consumers, by selling a wide selection of Duplo products, which are designed specifically for young infants with larger bricks and simpler designs. LEGO promotes this range by highlighting how it can foster creativity, fine motor skills, and cognitive development.

Catering to a wide range of ages reinforces the brand's identity as a platform for inspiration and creativity, encouraging all ages to build, create, and imagine.

LEGO continues to promote its values also in its advertising campaigns, where children are often seen proudly holding their completed build, promoting the joy and sense of accomplishment that comes with finishing a creation. This imagery not only appeals to children but also targets adults, but this time in a different way. The aim is to evoke a sense of pride and fulfilment in adults, knowing that purchasing a LEGO set for their child means that they are contributing to the child's education and development, whilst at the same time providing them with opportunities for growth and happiness.

2.2 LEGO'S BRAND CONSISTENCY AND LOCAL ADAPTATION

"We offer what I would call a very timeless but also very universal brand. You put LEGO bricks in the hands of children in China, Afghanistan, South Africa, America, or Germany, the play is the same, the idea is the same.

Every human being has the creative urge, the desire to make something. It's great that you're creating something that's your own. It's exciting. You're proud. You have achieved something. You can show it. You can feel inner satisfaction, and that's something that applies to all cultures."

Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, former CEO of the LEGO Group, stated in a 2017 interview with BCG [20].

LEGO's strong commitment to its brand identity did not impede the company's effective expansion into international markets.

As the former CEO stated, the brand itself is a very universal one, but the LEGO group still tried to tailor it to different cultures, with the goal to find a balance between its core brand values and the diverse realities of various markets.

2.2.1 Product Localization: LEGO Regional Exclusives

Product localization is a crucial aspect of LEGO's international marketing strategy, but not a new one. As we've previously mentioned, since its early internationalization efforts, LEGO recognized the potential of adapting its products to the cultures of its target markets.

LEGO's founder believed that marketing products to make them align with different cultures, would be the key to international success. Even today, despite its worldwide relevance, LEGO has not stopped its production of sets specific for some countries. Instead, it continues to create a range of exclusive playsets which, despite their limited availability, attract attention far beyond their intended markets. Some of the most interesting examples of sets that reflect the diversity of cultures all around the globe are: "Monkey Kid" in China; "La Vespa" in Italy, "Ndebele Village" in South Africa and "Himeji Castle" in Japan.

Despite many in the community appreciating the regional identity offered by these sets, regional exclusive sets have sparked a debate in the LEGO community. LEGO first introduced its regional sets by making them exclusively available in stores within the specific area. This caused significant discontent among Adult Fans of LEGO (AFOLs), as it made obtaining these amazing sets and unique figures quite complicated and pricey. The company responded to community feedback in 2019, when it announced that former region-locked products would be region exclusive for just 3 to 6 months, and then go on sale for the rest of the world.

"Dear AFOL Community,

It has become apparent to us at the LEGO Group that you are dissatisfied with the recent launches of regional exclusive products.... Because of this feedback and concerns from you, our dedicated and most loyal fans, we have decided that regional exclusives launched after May 1, 2019 will become widely available via LEGO Brand Retail stores and LEGO Shop at Home after a limited period of time (3-6 months) of the initial launch." [21].

Still some doubts and mixed opinions surround the topic in the animated LEGO community and the system is not perfect (yet), but it allows LEGO to reward regional territories with their very own LEGO sets, still allowing other countries to have a shot at those sets at a later date.

Furthermore, the decision highlights LEGO's commitment to responsiveness, showcasing the company's ability to listen to feedback and take quick action.

2.2.2 Minifigures: inclusivity and representation

LEGO's yellow skin toned "people" have characterized the toy company since 1978, and still stand as iconic symbols of the brand.

The decision to adopt bright yellow figures was a carefully planned one. As the company once stated on its website: "We chose yellow to avoid assigning a specific ethnicity in sets that don't include any specific characters. With this neutral color, fans can assign their own individual roles to LEGO minifigures." [22].

Initially, this choice served to promote inclusivity, permitting children from all backgrounds to see themselves in their LEGO creations. However, as LEGO started introducing more targeted sets, it also started to include more realistic skin toned minifigures. The change started in 2003, when black characters in themes such as Star Wars and NBA became the first minifigures with natural skin tones. This decision was not without controversy, sparking debate among the LEGO community: introducing black characters suggested that the rest of the yellow minifigures actually represented white skin tones, unlike what the company had stated.

LEGO has since then made progress, expanding the range of natural skin tones, to ensure that all children feel represented in their toys. However, LEGO has not abandoned its classic yellow figures, which remain a beloved trademark of the company. Even the Minifigure factory currently offers only the original yellow skin tone. However, the company has acknowledged this limitation on their website, attributing it to the service being brand new. LEGO's approach to inclusivity and representation in its minifigures is not only limited to their skin tones. LEGO has made efforts to represent different cultures and beliefs in their minifigures. There have been numerous themes and sets where minifigures are explicitly created to represent individuals of a specific culture or region. A recent example is the new Monkie Kid set, the first theme inspired by a Chinese local legend, which also became the main character of LEGO-branded TV series [7].

2.2.3 Retail stores: LEGO retail experience around the world

As reported in their most recent financial declarations, there are a total of 1031 LEGO branded stores all over the world. We have already highlighted how the brand's identity and values are maintained in all LEGO's retail stores, but even in this case LEGO has found a balance between global brand consistency and local adaptation. Every LEGO store anywhere in the world displays its own localized elements, mainly in the form of major installations representing iconic elements of the region, of course made of LEGO bricks.

A particular showcase of LEGO retailing worldwide is the LEGO flagship store in Beijing. The GM of LEGO China, Paul Huang stated, people in China did not grow up with LEGO bricks, so a connection needed to be established in order to expand into the Chinese market. To do so, LEGO

focused on in-store experiences, with its store in Beijing representing the pinnacle of the balance between LEGO identity and Chinese culture. With the store, LEGO created a strong bond with local traditions through 3D models of symbols of the region, and a variety of Chinese-themed engaging experiences [23].

2.3 ADDITIONAL SERVICES

LEGO's activity and image are supported by a variety of supplementary services, which help the company emphasize its core values of imagination, creativity, fun, learning and community on a global scale.

2.3.1 LEGO EDUCATION service

Another way LEGO tries to promote the idea that adults can use LEGO to help with children's learning is through LEGO Education. This is a branch of the LEGO Group that specifically focuses on creating learning experiences for children of all ages and across 90 countries. LEGO Education offers a variety of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) oriented learning kits and resources for schools and home-schooling environments. These kits combine the building with LEGO bricks with curriculum-based activities which encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration [24].

Similar to the sense of accomplishment a child feels after completing a LEGO build, LEGO Education experiences aim to instil a love of learning beyond textbooks and classrooms. By making learning fun and engaging, LEGO Education aims to help children develop a positive association with education, thus helping to set them up for success in school and beyond.

LEGO Education has been used in various developing countries around the world to enhance educational experiences. Some examples include: Brazil, Kenya, India, Mexico and South Africa where the LEGO foundation has allocated USD 92.6 million to education in schools, with a focus on specific topics and skills. For example, in Mexico, the use of LEGO bricks is targeted specifically at mathematics, science, and technology which were the main requirements needed to boost the Mexican economy [17].

2.3.2 LEGOLAND

The last of the values that serves as a pillar of LEGO's identity is its strong community building. This is demonstrated through initiatives such as LEGOLAND parks which serve as a physical manifestation of the LEGO community. These theme parks provide spaces where fans of all ages can have immersive experiences such as rides, attractions, interactive activities, and opportunities for creativity and play. Through these experiences and attractions variety, LEGO aims to unite fans from

all over the world that share the same passion and let them experience a first-person feel of what the community represents. LEGOLANDS not only attract fans from all over the world but are also located in many areas around the globe including Denmark, England, USA, Germany, Japan, Dubai, Malaysia.

Each of them is adapted according to the culture and nation where it is located, incorporating elements that resonate with local visitors while maintaining the core LEGO experience. For example in Denmark they have incorporated Danish landmarks (such as a life sized model of the Little Mermaid built out of LEGO bricks) and cultural references into its attractions and exhibits [18].

3 - A SUSTAINABLE INITIATIVE: LEGO REPLAY

Being sustainable means meeting our needs without harming the same ability of future generations [32].

As noted in the third chapter of Luthans & Doh, complying with social and environmental sustainability is now something MNCs cannot avoid without a cost: economic sustainability is not enough anymore [33].

This chapter exposes how LEGO is dealing with this issue by briefly describing its approach and then focusing on an example of a sustainable service the company offers.

3.1 LEGO'S SUSTAINABILITY APPROACH

LEGO has to face a greater problem compared to other firms, which is producing and selling little plastic bricks, something that is in a big contrast with sustainable practices. Therefore, how is LEGO handling its situation?

Contrary to the nature of its toys, LEGO is putting major efforts into sustainability, balancing the whole picture. Its approach is described as divided into three frontiers: 'Children', 'Environment' and 'People', which altogether serve the commitment to 2 of the 17 Sustainable development goals of the United Nations: goal 4, 'inclusive and equitable quality and education', and goal 12, 'responsible consumption and production' [34, 35, 36].

Theory should be articulated in practice, and so it is with LEGO's approach. The company puts in action all its goals by undertaking 10 sustainability ambitions, with each presenting some concrete initiatives. These ambitions are: 'sustainable materials', 'sustainable packaging', 'reducing waste', 'CO2 impact', 'diversity and inclusion', 'work in local communities', 'responsible engagement with children', 'family friendly workplace', 'help families through play', 'responsible supply chain' [35].

It will take a further step towards its 'zero waste' ambition, by providing a related service.

3.2 LEGO REPLAY

Two of the major qualities that LEGO claims about its products are durability and safety, to the extent that the bricks can be passed down from generation to generation over decades and continue the corporation's mission to "inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow" [42].

According to research carried out on behalf of the LEGO Groups involving more than 1400 respondents, 96% of families in the UK, Germany and France are likely to give, pass on, or resell to family, friends, charities and local school LEGO products that they no longer use [40]. These elements,

with the growing necessity to be more environmentally friendly but also to respect the promises made in the “Planet Promise”, represent the perfect assumptions to implement a sustainable and socially impactful project like LEGO Replay. The program has the basic aim of reducing long lasting waste on earth by simplifying, controlling and incentivising the donation between common consumers and children in need [30, 27].

LEGO Replay was first developed in the US and, after three years of perfecting the project, it was implemented in 2019 by collaborating with no profit association like Give Back Box, Teach for America and Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston with the common belief that through play, children can refine their motor skills, enhance their creativity and learning problem solving by collaborating through teamwork [30].

Another important collaboration was with First Group’s educators in 2021 to develop learning resources that were engaging for students and efficient for teachers. Given the success of the pilot program in the US, LEGO Replay was also put in place in Canada and, at the start of 2024, LEGO’s management introduced the program in the European market by piloting the “*brick take-back service*” [43] in the UK with the support of partners such as In Kind Direct [43, 44].

As previously mentioned, European consumers are particularly concerned and attentive to sustainable solutions, so in the subsequent months it is likely that there will be a positive response to the program from the public. People may also be incentivised to get involved in LEGO Replay due to the extreme simplicity of the operations.

3.2.1 How it works

The website offers a clear platform to inform consumers about the three main steps of the procedure. After selecting the bricks or elements, even if they are not complete, the sets need to be taken apart as best as possible, eventually excluding the parts not accepted as indicated in its rules. Then, the consumer just has to box the toys, print the shipping label and ship it. Above all, the convenience of the service is guaranteed by the fact that LEGO and its partners are responsible for the control, preparation and conformity of the pieces and not the donor [27].

In terms of sustainability, LEGO replay seems to be one of the most effective solutions to achieve circularity, also considering that, as declared by the brand, the corporation is having difficulties in eliminating virgin fossil-based plastics from its production chain as current available alternatives carry a higher carbon footprint to deliver the same level of quality and durability as virgin materials [43].

However, this service is not the only outstanding one. There are some competitors offering similar solutions to recycling and reusing toys.

3.3 HASBRO TOY RECYCLING PROGRAM

Hasbro can be seen as an indirect competitor of LEGO, selling different products in their same industry (toys for children) [25].

Hasbro presents the closest example of a similar ‘sustainable service’: Hasbro Toy Recycling Program. This program provides a way for disposing of Hasbro toys without harming the environment, by returning them to be recycled in a second moment [26].

The whole service is made possible by the partnership with TerraCycle, a recycling company specialized in products that are ‘hard to be recycled’ [28, 37].

3.3.1 How it works

The program follows almost identical steps to the competitor’s Replay service:

- First of all, you have to create an account on TerraCycle website and join the program, then you have to collect the toys you want to return and put them into a closed box.
- Once the box is full (it has to have a weight equal or higher than 7 pounds), you can download and print the shipment label to be applied on the box from the TerraCycle account.
- The last step to seal the box and apply the label. Lastly it has to be shipped to the address indicated on the printed label [29, 31].

TerraCycle facilities then receive the toys and inspect them, in order to classify what can and can’t be recycled. After that it starts the recycling process, which results in stocks of raw materials the company will sell to manufacturing companies.

At the end of the journey, toys sent back through this initiative gain a second life, becoming part of some other end products and hence closing the recycling circle [37].

3.4 LEGO AND HASBRO SERVICES: A COMPARISON

The tables below show a brief analysis of the pros and cons of both LEGO Replay and Hasbro Toy Recycling Program [26, 27, 29, 31, 37, 39]:

Hasbro Toy Recycling Program	
Pros	Cons
• More precise instructions and information. • Larger list of accepted products. • The general process is well described. • Highly differentiated and focused partner. • All toys sent are processed (if they're Hasbro products on the acceptance list).	• The process is slightly more complex. • It cannot be known where the toys go. • Possibility of getting rid of an entire box even if accepted (<i>'can't be recycled'</i> parts are taken off). • Only over 7 pounds boxes are suitable (no possibility of smaller shipments). • The social impact cannot be assumed as well as the (precise) environmental one.

LEGO Replay	
Pros	Cons
• Ergonomic landing page • Efficiency and ease of the process • The sets do not need to be complete • The donor does not have to wash or check for deformities as LEGO and its partners will do the inspection • No shipment limits • It is both environmentally and socially sustainable.	• The donor has to spend time disassembling the parts • Not all toys are processed due to strict rules of the program • Available only in the US, Canada and the UK with only a pilot program. • It cannot be known precisely where the toys go and which partner will process them.

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