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Digital Affordances and the Structuring of User Participation: A Case Study of LEGO's Digital Platforms

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Abstract

Digital brand communication offers opportunities for action alongside information. This article examines how LEGO Ideas, LEGO Builder and BrickLink, including Studio, organise user participation. Drawing on relational affordance theory, it analyses eight official documents and a supplementary announcement on creator rewards, distinguishing platform features, documented action possibilities, and documented procedures and constraints. The comparison identifies three participation arrangements: submitting designs for company review, using digital guidance for physical assembly, and linking digital design with parts procurement and transaction feedback. These arrangements offer task-specific opportunities rather than a single progression towards deeper engagement. Action cues communicate these opportunities, task relevance explains their potential usefulness, and governance defines who can participate and who controls the results.

Keywords

Digital Communication; Media Affordances; User Participation; Platform Governance; Case Analysis; LEGO

1. Introduction

Digital brand platforms do more than deliver messages. They help users complete tasks, present designs and access resources for creative projects. These activities organise relationships among users, products, companies and other participants. Understanding digital communication therefore requires attention to users' opportunities for action alongside brand messages. LEGO offers a useful case because its selected digital services support distinct activities. LEGO Ideas connects fan proposals with product review(D1,in Appendix), LEGO Builder guides physical assembly(D2-D3), and BrickLink combines a marketplace, design tools and community functions(D4-D6).These services are examined as contrasting parts of LEGO's broader digital presence, without assuming that they represent all users or

communication activities.

Previous research has examined value co-creation in virtual communities, including complementarities and trade-offs [1], while affordance-based studies of brand relations highlight how platform arrangements shape user engagement [2]. Building on these insights, this article adopts a relational affordance perspective to examine how participation opportunities arise between users and technology, relate to particular tasks and remain bounded by rules. This perspective moves beyond treating platforms as neutral channels while distinguishing technical features, affordances and outcomes[3,4]. These distinctions are essential because providing a feature does not establish its effects: a submission tool offers an opportunity to contribute, but does not demonstrate actual contribution or greater loyalty.

Specifically, this article asks how LEGO's selected platforms organise participation opportunities and what their differences reveal about the conditions and limits of digital brand communication. It argues that these platforms offer a repertoire of task-specific opportunities rather than a necessary progression from consumer to creator to community leader. The comparison addresses three questions: how are actions made understandable, when might they be useful, and who controls access and participation outcomes? Drawing on publicly documented features and procedures, the analysis develops conclusions about the organisation of participation. Actual user responses remain a subject for further research, keeping the article's claims within the scope of its evidence.

2. Theoretical perspective

2.1. Affordances as Possibilities for Action

An affordance is understood here as a possibility for action arising from the relationship between an actor and a technical arrangement. This relational view recognises that technology enables and constrains action without determining behaviour.[5] Sun and Han (2020) similarly emphasise embodiment, materiality and subject–object relations in discussing the concept's translation and disciplinary use.[6] The analysis therefore distinguishes features, affordances and outcomes. A feature is a technical element, such as a rotation control or export command; an affordance concerns what a person with relevant capacities and access can do with it, such as inspect a connection from another angle or use a model to plan parts procurement. An outcome is a realised result, such as a completed build, submitted proposal or purchase. These levels are related, but evidence at one does not establish the next.[3]

This distinction provides a consistent basis for comparing platforms. Labels such as productive, mobile and social [4] refer to different dimensions—activity, access and relationships—rather than equivalent categories.. The present analysis instead specifies the actor, possible action and object of participation, allowing each platform to be examined in terms of the opportunities it offers. Established

affordances such as visibility, editability, persistence and association remain useful points of reference, but are not imposed as a universal typology across services with different purposes.[7]

2.2. Action cues, Task relevance and Governance

Three dimensions guide the analysis of how platform provision relates to potential use: action cues, task relevance and governance. Action cues indicate what users can do and what follows from acting. Guides and visible milestones may clarify procedures, although their presence in documentation does not establish whether users recognise the opportunity. Task relevance concerns how an available action relates to a user's current goal. A three-dimensional view may help someone understand a difficult connection, while a parts list may support the physical construction of a virtual model. The same user may therefore find different services useful in different situations. Governance concerns the rules and decision rights shaping access, contribution eligibility and the use of contributions. These dimensions draw on established research into perception, practical capacities and institutional conditions, as well as the role of policies in shaping action possibilities, and are applied here to compare brand services.[8,9]

Together, these dimensions address how an opportunity is communicated, why it may matter to a task and under what rules it can be pursued. They provide an analytical framework rather than a tested causal sequence. A user may understand a function and have a reason to use it but lack access, while an experienced user may need little guidance. Recognising or needing an opportunity therefore does not ensure that it will be acted upon. Affordance actualisation—the enactment of an action possibility—must be distinguished from both the availability of that possibility and its longer-term effects.[10]

3. Research Approach

3.1. Case Selection and Scope

This study adopts an exploratory single-case design, with LEGO Ideas, LEGO Builder and BrickLink, including Studio, as three embedded units. The services were selected purposively to compare distinct activities within a shared brand setting, without treating LEGO as representative or a least-likely case. The company's commercial success provides context rather than evidence of platform effects.[11]

The analysis examines publicly documented participation arrangements consulted on 18 October 2026. Eight official documents form the core corpus: an Ideas review explanation, two Builder pages, LEGO's BrickLink acquisition announcement, Studio documentation, a Wanted List guide, a feedback guide and a marketplace access notice. Appendix records each source and its analytical use. A dated LEGO Ideas announcement, accessible through indexed text, supplements the corpus with an example of creator rewards; it is not treated as a complete account of current

platform terms.

3.2. Documentary Comparison and Limits of Inference

Materials were located through targeted searches of official LEGO and BrickLink domains and inspection of retrievable text. Selection focused on relevant functions, participation procedures and constraints. Duplicate regional pages, general navigation and inaccessible full guidelines were excluded. The corpus is therefore purposive rather than exhaustive.

Following a structured documentary comparison informed by Bowen (2009), each source was examined for the documented arrangement, relevant actor and possible action, supported task and limiting conditions.[12] The analysis first compared participation opportunities across platforms, then examined constraints that qualify an account of expanding participation. The source register maintains these links between evidence and interpretation.

The unit of analysis is the documented participation opportunity rather than individual behaviour. Official pages describe formal functions and procedures but do not independently establish user experience. No interviews, app testing or user tracking were undertaken. The analysis therefore distinguishes documented arrangements from their potential uses, without claiming to measure conversion, eliminate competing explanations or reconstruct longitudinal user journeys.

4. Participation Opportunities across the Three Platforms

4.1. LEGO Ideas and the Separation of Contribution from Selection

LEGO Ideas connects fan proposals with formal product review. Its official help page states that ideas reaching 10,000 supporters enter review and may be selected for production, with further design information and legal documentation required at this stage (D1; LEGO Group, n.d.-c). This milestone provides access to evaluation without guaranteeing commercialisation. The arrangement assigns distinct roles: designers submit proposals, other participants support them, and LEGO decides which proceed to production. The relevant affordance is thus an opportunity to present a design for public support and possible company consideration. It connects user contributions with product development while leaving selection authority with LEGO, showing how co-creation and company control can coexist.

Rewards make the potential commercial outcome more concrete. A 2025 official challenge announcement specifies 1% of total net sales, complimentary sets and designer credit for the relevant winning idea (S1; LEGO Ideas, 2025). These programme-specific terms do not establish that all contributions receive rewards or that identical conditions apply across submission routes. Recognition remains a possibility alongside selection uncertainty and the effort required to prepare a proposal.

Ideas is therefore interpreted as a route to selective participation in product

development. The documentation establishes this route and its limits, but does not show how designers weigh effort, recognition and uncertainty, or whether rejection encourages further participation or withdrawal.

4.2. LEGO Builder and Participation through Product Use

LEGO Builder supports physical assembly through digital instructions, viewpoint manipulation, progress saving and shared-building functions. Users can scan a booklet QR code or search for a set, although available building modes vary by set (D2–D3; LEGO Group, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Rotation and zoom allow users to inspect unclear steps, while progress saving supports interruption and resumption. The relevant affordance concerns understanding and managing assembly, with the booklet QR code providing a documented connection between the physical task and digital assistance.

This participation need not involve public expression: users can follow instructions or coordinate a build without publishing designs or joining a community. Communication takes the form of guidance embedded in product use, extending the analysis beyond posts, votes and comments. Builder therefore challenges the assumption that deeper participation necessarily involves content production. A completed build may be an appropriate outcome even without subsequent app use, while resuming an unfinished task differs from continued engagement after completion. Neither automatically demonstrates loyalty.

This interpretation remains bounded by the service's purpose and availability. Functions vary across sets, and Builder's guided assembly differs from Studio's open-ended digital modelling. These differences provide a basis for comparison without treating the platforms as functionally equivalent.

4.3. BrickLink and the Connection between Design and Exchange

LEGO's 2019 acquisition announcement describes BrickLink as a marketplace and fan community with digital building software, intended to strengthen engagement with adult fans (D4; LEGO Group, 2019). This provides historical context and a stated rationale, rather than evidence of increased engagement.

Studio documentation describes designing with virtual parts and using BrickLink catalogue information, while a separate guide explains how to upload a model or submodel as a Wanted List to locate the required physical components (D5–D6; BrickLink, n.d.-b, n.d.-c). The relevant affordance connects design with procurement: a model specifies material requirements and supports a project's continuation beyond the modelling environment. This links creative and commercial activities through parts sourcing, without establishing that the design itself becomes a tradable digital asset.

BrickLink also provides reputation signals and defines access conditions. Buyers and sellers can report transaction experiences through feedback profiles and ratings

(D7; BrickLink, n.d.-a), although their effects on trust or lasting relationships require user evidence. An official notice updated in January 2026 lists locations where Marketplace access would end from 31 January 2026 (D8; BrickLink, 2026). Participation opportunities can therefore be formally withdrawn regardless of users' skills or interests. The notice concerns Marketplace and does not establish equivalent restrictions on Studio.

4.4. What the Comparison Establishes

The platforms organise participation around different objects and relationships (Table 1). Ideas connects proposals with collective support and company review; Builder links physical assembly with digital guidance; and BrickLink connects design information with procurement and transaction histories. These arrangements remain distinct even when one person uses several services.

The comparison supports potential complementarity between tasks without establishing user flows across platforms. Buyers may remain buyers, designers may seek review without selling components, and experienced builders may use digital guidance without becoming publicly active. These possibilities challenge a necessary progression towards deeper engagement; they do not establish how frequently particular user journeys occur.

Table 1. Participation opportunities and their documented limits

Platform	Object and possible action	Relevant task	Authority or access condition
LEGO Ideas	Present a design for support and possible review	Seek consideration for product development	LEGO retains production selection
LEGO Builder	Inspect instructions and manage assembly	Understand or coordinate a physical build	Available modes depend on the set
BrickLink and Studio	Use design information for parts sourcing and inspect feedback	Obtain components or assess trading histories	Account procedures and marketplace access rules apply

5. Discussion

5.1. From Channels to Arrangements for Participation

Channel labels alone reveal little about how participation is organised. Describing a service as digital or social does not specify what users can contribute, which resources they need or who controls the result. An affordance analysis becomes more informative by identifying the actor, action and task, alongside the rules governing participation. This approach builds on research linking brand relations to platform architecture and participatory culture.[2] It complements Rodríguez-López's (2021) analysis of LEGO communities by comparing formal action opportunities across services extending beyond community platforms.[1] The contribution lies in distinguishing design proposals, guided building and coordinated exchange, together with their respective authority and access conditions.

5.2. Task Relevance and the Limits of Scenario-based Explanation

A platform function becomes potentially useful in relation to a task, such as seeking review, resolving a building problem or obtaining components. This perspective avoids assigning platforms fixed user types: one person may undertake all three tasks, while equally committed enthusiasts may choose different services because their goals differ. Action cues and task relevance therefore require separate consideration. Clear instructions explain how to act without necessarily providing a reason to do so, while an urgent problem may lead experienced users to a familiar tool without prompting. Builder's booklet entry route illustrates a designed connection between an activity and digital access. Other scenarios indicate possible usefulness, rather than demonstrating that LEGO reaches users at their moment of greatest need.

The claim is therefore limited to how situations help identify relevant action opportunities. Establishing that scenario adaptation improves reach, or that relevance leads to use, would require evidence of users' recognition, available alternatives and actual behaviour.

5.3. Participation and Control Coexist

Participation can coexist with company control. Ideas invites proposals while retaining production selection, and BrickLink connects users with resources while maintaining access restrictions. These arrangements show how platforms can enable action while limiting its consequences, making governance part of the participation opportunity itself. This interpretation accords with affordance research on enabling and constraining relations and institutional conditions.[5,8,9] It also encourages a more precise account of co-creation by asking how much influence participants have, which resources are exchanged and which decisions remain beyond their control.

These distinctions also qualify progressive conversion. Creating content, completing builds, trading components and identifying with a community are different activities and outcomes. Ranking them on one scale requires explicit criteria and supporting evidence. The selected platforms are therefore better understood as offering a repertoire of roles, encompassing public and private, creative and practical participation.

5.4. Implications for Evaluating Digital Communication

For practitioners, evaluation should begin with the action a service supports, the task it addresses and the conditions for participation. Builder could be assessed through task completion and perceived effort, Ideas through contribution and review experiences, and BrickLink through sourcing and exchange. These are proposed criteria, not outcomes measured in this study.

This approach avoids treating more posts or longer app use as universal goals. Effective guidance may help users complete a task and leave, while commercial

participation need not involve community leadership. Communication strategies can accommodate these varied relationships without expecting every user to become a public creator.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This analysis draws on a small corpus of official documents describing formal functions and intended procedures, which users may interpret, adapt or reject. The sources vary in purpose and date, and undated pages may change. Without a historical interface archive or independent verification of implementation, the absence of a function from the documents cannot establish its nonexistence.

The main limitation is the gap between documented opportunities and actual participation. The analysis cannot establish whether users recognise cues, encounter the proposed scenarios or move between roles. Nor can it distinguish platform effects from prior enthusiasm, design skills, product characteristics or external networks. Its conclusions therefore concern participation arrangements, not causal explanations of commercial success or loyalty.

Future research could examine specific episodes of use and non-use. Interviews could explore how contributors, builders and buyers understand opportunities and constraints, while observations or dated activity records could trace actions and role changes. Including unsuccessful submissions, abandoned tasks and discontinued participation would strengthen the analysis beyond successful cases. Comparative studies could then examine how similar arrangements operate under different product and governance conditions.

7. Conclusion

LEGO's selected platforms organise participation around distinct objects and tasks. Ideas connects fan proposals with selective company review, Builder supports physical building through digital guidance, and BrickLink and Studio link design information with parts sourcing and transaction evaluation. The case supports a design-level conclusion: participation takes different forms according to the activity and remains bounded by rules. A relational affordance perspective clarifies these differences through action cues, task relevance and governance. These dimensions explain how opportunities are communicated, why they may be useful and what conditions govern access and influence. They provide a framework for comparing participation opportunities without equating platform features with actual engagement. The platforms are therefore understood as offering a set of possible roles rather than an inevitable progression towards deeper involvement. For digital brand communication, the central questions are what users can do, in which situations and with what control over the results.

Appendix Evidence Register

All items were consulted on 18 October 2026. The statements below are paraphrases, not direct quotations. The register records the public text inspected during revision; it is not a preserved historical snapshot of each live service. D1–D8 constitute the core documentary comparison. S1 is a supplementary indexed source with narrower evidential use. Reference-list URLs identify each source.

D1 Ideas review procedure

Source: LEGO Group (n.d.-c), What happens to my product idea after I reach 10,000 supporters?
URL: https://www.lego.com/en-us/service/help-topics/article/what-happens-to-my-product-idea-after-i-reach-10-000-supporters (accessed 18 October 2026). Substantive help text retrieved directly.
Documented arrangement: Reaching 10,000 supporters initiates review and possible selection; additional design information and legal documents are requested. Actor and possible action: A fan designer can qualify a proposal for company evaluation. Constraint: Qualification does not guarantee production. Analytical use: Sections 4.1, 5.3 and 7. Unverified: Acceptance probability, perceived fairness and effects on submission intentions.

D2 Builder platform description

Source: LEGO Group (n.d.-a), LEGO Builder app.
URL: https://www.lego.com/builder-app (accessed 18 October 2026). Public platform description and FAQ retrieved directly; page content may change.
Documented arrangement: Digital instructions include viewpoint manipulation, progress saving and shared-building functions. Actor and possible action: A builder can inspect steps and resume a building task. Constraint: Documentation does not establish individual task success. Analytical use: Sections 4.2 and 5.4. Unverified: Reduced cognitive load, retention and post-build redesign.

D3 Builder help and entry route

Source: LEGO Group (n.d.-b), LEGO Builder — 3D building instructions.
URL: https://www.lego.com/en-us/service/help-topics/article/lego-builder-app-3d-building-instructions (accessed 18 October 2026).Substantive help text retrieved directly.
Documented arrangement: Users can scan a booklet QR code or search for a set; available modes depend on the set. Actor and possible action: A set owner can locate relevant guidance. Constraint: Not all modes are available for all sets. Analytical use: Sections 4.2 and 5.2; documentary example of a connection between task setting and tool access. Unverified: QR discovery rate, moment-of-need use and completion effects.

D4 BrickLink acquisition announcement

Source: LEGO Group (2019), acquisition announcement dated 26 November 2019. URL: https://www.lego.com/aboutus/news/2019/november/lego-bricklink (accessed 18 October 2026). Public announcement retrieved directly.

Documented arrangement: BrickLink is described as a marketplace, community and digital design environment; LEGO states an intention to deepen adult-fan engagement. Actor and possible action: Fans have access to distinct forms of participation within the announced platform arrangement. Constraint: Strategic intention is not an observed outcome; historical membership figures are not current counts. Analytical use: Section 4.3 and case context. Unverified: Post-acquisition autonomy, current scale and engagement effects.

D5 Studio design and marketplace documentation

Source: BrickLink (n.d.-b), Studio help. URL: https://studio.bricklink.com/ (accessed 18 October 2026). Supplementary help centre: https://studiohelp.bricklink.com/hc/en-us/ (accessed 18 October 2026). Introduction and relevant upload/procurement guidance retrieved directly.

Documented arrangement: Studio supports virtual building, catalogue information, design publication and conversion of a model into a parts list. Actor and possible action: A designer can prepare a model and identify physical components. Constraint: Documentation of parts procurement does not establish a general market in design ownership. Analytical use: Section 4.3. Unverified: Actual sharing rates, creator income and social attachment.

D6 Studio Wanted List workflow

Source: BrickLink (n.d.-c), Upload as a Wanted List.

URL: https://studiohelp.bricklink.com/hc/en-us/articles/5705925898135-Upload-as-a-Wanted-List (accessed 18 October 2026). Substantive help text retrieved directly.

Documented arrangement: A model or submodel can be uploaded to a Wanted List after account sign-in and item verification. Actor and possible action: A designer can carry a parts specification from design into marketplace search. Constraint: Sign-in and verification are required; an export is not a completed purchase. Analytical use: Sections 4.3 and 5.1; evidence of a design-to-procurement connection. Unverified: Completion rates and reduction in sourcing effort.

D7 Transaction feedback

Source: BrickLink (n.d.-a), Feedback.

URL: https://www.bricklink.com/help.asp?helpID=248 (accessed 18 October 2026). Substantive help text retrieved directly.

Documented arrangement: Buyers and sellers can report transaction experiences;

feedback is displayed in profiles and summary measures. Actor and possible action: A prospective trading partner can inspect an account's transaction history. Constraint: A reputation signal does not establish its accuracy, interpretation or effect. Analytical use: Section 4.3. Unverified: Trust, tie strength, community identity and fraud reduction.

D8 Marketplace operations update

Source: BrickLink (2026), operations update last updated 26 January 2026.
URL: https://www.bricklink.com/help.asp?helpID=2687 (accessed 18 October 2026). Substantive notice retrieved directly.
Documented arrangement: Marketplace unavailability is announced for listed locations from 31 January 2026. Actor and possible action: Marketplace participation is formally restricted by location. Constraint: The notice concerns Marketplace; it does not establish identical restrictions on Studio. Analytical use: Sections 4.3 and 5.3; counterevidence to universal participation coverage. Unverified: Reasons for restriction, workarounds, enforcement and participant responses.

S1 Creator reward example

Source: LEGO Ideas (2025), Timeless Creations challenge announcement, dated 7 April 2025. Blog
URL: https://ideas.lego.com/blogs/a4ae09b6-0d4c-4307-9da8-3ee9f3d368d6/post/8e412098-1e56-4b2f-8b45-c61d4a948008 (accessed 18 October 2026). Challenge page: https://beta.ideas.lego.com/challenges/df18d29c-b883-4720-ad11-aa3ece34f63c?tab=info (accessed 18 October 2026). This item is excluded from the eight-document core.Documented example in the indexed text: The relevant winning product idea is associated with 1% of total net sales, complimentary sets and designer credit. Analytical use: A narrowly dated correction of profit-share wording in Section 4.1. Constraint: The example must not be generalised to every programme or treated as a complete statement of current contractual conditions. Established affordances such as visibility.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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