20 Questions
about Youth & the Media

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Bratz are big! Beginning in 2001, Bratz became a cultural sensation, at least for a certain demographic in the United States and Europe. If you don’t know Bratz, you were not an eight-year-old girl in the early 2000s. In their original form, they are dolls (marketed to ten-year-old “tween” girls and even younger) with stylish—some might say slutty—clothes, large anime-like eyes, Angelina Jolie-esque mega-lips, and the catchphrase “Girls with a Passion for Fashion!” How big are Bratz? They sold $2.5 billion in global merchandise in 2004, and their marketing success led the advertising trade press to declare about their “old-school” competition, “Barbie hits the skids” (Stanley, 2005).

Bratz are also controversial. Critics have attacked Bratz for being too sexual given their young target market and for even promoting alcohol consumption through their poolside or dance-club play sets, at least one of which came with champagne-style glasses (Linn, 2004; Schor, 2005); one anti-Bratz commentator asked, “What next? Beer for the dolls? A mirror, some fake cocaine?” (Beckham, 2005, p. 7).

But, above all, Bratz are commercialized. At first glance, this is pretty obvious: they are, after all, dolls that are sold and advertised. But they also are dolls with an unapologetic consumer orientation. Their “passion for fashion” is explicitly about consumption in a way that’s
even greater than the Queen of All Dolls, Barbie. Barbie was about collecting Barbies, and maybe someday having things like Barbie does (Cross, 1997; Kline, 1993; Rogers, 1999). Since the Bratz dolls are closer in age to the girls who play with them than Barbie, girls are not just encouraged to dress and accessorize the dolls, but they are encouraged to dress and accessorize like the dolls (more on this below). In addition to the dolls, the Bratz line also offers a huge range of product merchandise: in February 2006, Amazon.com listed 360 different Bratz items in the “Toy and Games” category alone. Besides the dolls, clothes for the dolls, and play sets, one can also buy Bratz bedding, shoes, sleeping bags, makeup kits, a digital camera, and an MP3 player (the last in the shape of a lipstick). Of course, ads for these products may be found throughout much of children’s television.

Finally, though, and perhaps most central to this chapter, Bratz, beyond the toys and other products, are also a media brand. There are scores of Bratz books. There are Bratz DVDs, Bratz video games (customize their virtual outfits!), and a Bratz CD (featuring the music of the Bratz Rock Angelz). There’s a Bratz magazine, which has many pictures of the dolls but also, like a weird-kiddie version of Vogue, offers kids specific clothing tips to copy the look of Bratz. There’s a Saturday-morning Bratz TV show on the Fox broadcast network, co-produced by 4Kids Entertainment (a children’s television production company) and MGA Entertainment, the Bratz company. And these media forms—media forms that are de facto ads for the toys—do not just encourage girls to buy Bratz dolls and merchandise. Nor do they just encourage kids to buy the look of Bratz for themselves. In the Bratz media stories, shopping and buying are celebrated. Bratz media bring, then, a commercial mentality—the ideology of advertising—to the programming. One Bratz book is entitled Bratz: All Night Mall Party. Another book aimed at an even younger demographic (four to eight years old) is Lil’ Bratz Lil’ Shopping Adventures!

Enough with Bratz (for now). Bratz may seem extreme, but they actually are fairly indicative of the current state of children’s media and culture, in which the logic of licensing and selling is fundamental to the creation—and often the messages—of high-profile cultural texts for kids, cultural texts that are also surrounded by explicit product commercials and media promotions. So let’s now answer the title question of this chapter: kids’ culture in the United States is pretty darned commercialized. By “commercialized” I mean the involvement of advertising or product promotion in the creation or funding (direct or indirect) of media and cultural phenomena (see the discussion in Mosco, 1996). Of course, much of our culture—kids’ and adults’—is commercialized: we see ads everywhere, and nearly all of our media are funded and influenced by advertising. But to say that children’s culture is commercialized doesn’t quite get at the extreme level of commercial involvement. Again like a lot of adult culture, kids’ culture is really hypercommercialized (to use a term from McChesney, 1999). Advertising, marketing, and selling pervade nearly all elements of modern kids’ culture. The claim that modern children’s culture is commercialized (even when using the hyper prefix) is not in much dispute: just about everyone agrees on this. In dispute are the differences this may make, and the ways commercialism may harm or help (or both) kids and society generally.
This chapter will try to do several things. First, it will offer a brief history of commercialism in children's culture. Then, it will discuss some of the recent factors that seem to increase, or at least encourage in new ways, commercialism in modern kids' media. Finally, some of the relevant issues and debates of commercialization in modern kids' culture will be touched upon. Just to make things manageable, the discussion here will focus on the U.S. experience, arguably the most commercialized of all countries in terms of its media.

**Historical Precedents**

Historical reviews of children's culture argue that commercialization and licensing have been a part of this culture since virtually the beginnings of the modern industrialized age (see, for example, Cross, 2004; Kline, 1993). The Yellow Kid, one of the first regularly appearing characters in a U.S. newspaper comic strip, in the late 1800s, for example, spun off a large number of authorized and bootleg merchandise. This precedent led the way for even heavier commercial integration of later popular characters such as Buster Brown, originally a comic-strip character that later became so commercialized that its enduring legacy was as a children's shoe mascot (Cross, 2004; Gordon, 1998). Popular characters were licensed to different media. Superman appeared in comic books, newspaper comic strips, film serials, radio (and later television) programs, and even a novel. In the same vein, icons that were originally created for advertising could also be licensed as toys or other products, such as the Campbell Soup kids (Cross, 2004).

One trend that has developed is the gradual use of children's culture to sell products directly to children. Early industrialized toys and games tended to target parents as the market more than children themselves. There were exceptions to this, even in the early 1900s, however. Children's magazines were economically designed to sell to children early on; beginning in the 1930s and '40s, comic books and radio also produced content for kids that was advertising supported (Cross, 2004). Sometimes, of course, the advertising would bleed over into the content, such as a Superman comic-book story that featured a real tie-in licensed toy—the Krypto-Ray Gun—as a plot device (Gordon, 1998). Radio, as a sponsored medium in which advertisers often acted as program producers, would even more fundamentally blur the commercial into the program as a way to sell to kids. This is why Ralphie, in the 1983 movie *A Christmas Story*, experiences such a crushing loss of innocence when decoding a secret message from the radio program *Little Orphan Annie*, prompting him to exclaim, "Be sure to drink your Ovaltine. 'Ovaltine? A crummy commercial? Son of a bitch!"

These dynamics increased dramatically with the rise of broadcast television. When looking at the history of kids' TV programming, the level of commercialism has ebbed and flowed with both the regulatory environment of the time as well as industrial and technological trends. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many early kids' television programs were "sustaining," meaning that they had no advertising or sponsor. However, even this noncommercial strategy had a commercial purpose: early television companies saw children's
programming as a way to entice parents to buy television sets (Pecora, 1998). Such very early nonadvertised programming may also have been designed as a tactic to convince (or, perhaps, con) the FCC and other regulators into thinking that this new medium—a federally licensed medium—would be “responsible” to the public interest.

This promotional coyness did not last long, and as the sponsorship model grabbed hold of children’s programming, viewers saw a level of commercial-program integration that was crude both in its explicitness and in its lack of coherent marketing strategy. Techniques such as “host selling”—where human or puppet hosts of programs would tout their sponsor’s product—and “integrated commercials”—skits or other program segments featuring sponsors’ products—were commonplace (Alexander et al., 1998; Samuel, 2001). Kids would soon get used to selling as part of the show, such as Howdy Doody’s Buffalo Bob Smith touting Wonder Bread (Samuel, 2001).

With the 1955 debut of The Mickey Mouse Club on ABC and the various toy merchandise that followed, the links between toys and children’s programming strengthened. Companies such as Mattel used kids’ shows to sell directly and year-round to children, and increased the number of licensed products based upon children’s programming as well as visually oriented toys that looked good on television (Cross, 2004; Kline, 1993). Although the 1960s saw the single-sponsorship model gradually erode, the migration of children’s network programming to Saturday morning was primarily in response to kids marketers’ need to efficiently reach specialized niche audiences (Mittell, 2004). A potentially more activist stance by the Federal Communications Commission and Federal Trade Commission in the late 1960s and ’70s helped somewhat to keep growing commercialism in check, but a movement toward free-market ideologies in the late 1970s—reinforced by the election of Ronald Reagan as president—ended any significant federal challenges (Cross, 2004). Beginning in the early 1980s, even modest industry self-regulation of children’s TV programming was virtually eliminated (Johnson & Young, 2003; Kunkel, 2001). (See chapter 2 for a complete history of the regulation of children’s media and chapter 7 for a discussion of the role and effects of advertising in children’s media.)

The 1980s, then, saw a greater integration of toys and culture that influenced later legislation but also established models of strategic synergy that still exist today to perhaps an even greater extent (Pecora, 1998). Licensing activity in the film industry beginning in the late 1970s played a key role. The nature and success of Star Wars toys, according to historian Gary Cross, “helped to change the meaning of play” by offering not just Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader action figures, but practically everyone in that whole galaxy far, far away. The prolific Star Wars toy line promised near-complete duplication of characters and sets from the films such that “the child was invited to stage scenes from the movies, to play a god orchestrating a miniature world of high-tech adventure” (Cross, 2004, p. 158).

Other toy companies could not help notice the success of the Jedi. Some companies altered the formula by turning (1) from film to TV and (2) from a stance that was reactive to cultural trends to one that was profoundly proactive. Implementing what Thomas Engelhardt (1986) called “The Shortcake Strategy,” toy companies would develop toy lines that were created to be turned into television programs. The toys, then, come first, the TV
shows second. Such product lines—like Care Bears, Masters of the Universe, G.I. Joe (the post-Vietnam, Cobra-hating version) and of course Strawberry Shortcake—were comprised of multiple characters and emphasized the importance of teamwork, both illustrated by the plots of programs. The purpose of the TV show, then, was to promote the toys: they were “program-length commercials,” the small-fry version of infomercials. Product commercials for the toys also aired during the programs, just in case kids didn’t get the message. This era helped to legitimize the large amount of licensed-based programs we still see today, such as the video game–influenced Sonic X and the huge global phenomenon of the late 1990s, Pokémon (Tobin, 2004).

Another consequence was a regulatory backlash that, as explained in chapter 2, resulted in the Children’s Television Act of 1990. This legislation implemented or reasserted rules and applied to both cable and broadcast television for children. The act placed several restrictions on commercialism, including a limit on the amount of time devoted to product commercials, the mandated use of “bumpers” or program separators, designed to separate programs from commercials, and the elimination of “program-length commercials.” However, as a result of industry lobbying, the definition of this last concept is not nearly as restricted as it could be. Instead of being defined as TV shows based on toys (which would bump off shows like Bratz), the term is instead defined as “a program associated with a product in which commercials for that product are aired” (quoted in Kunkel, 2001). A show based on Bratz is okay, but no commercials for Bratz dolls during Bratz the show. Later in that decade and addressing the Internet, the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) restricted Web sites both in terms of collecting information about users under thirteen and therefore sharing such information to third-party marketers without explicit, verifiable parental consent.

So things have to be better than they were in the 1950s, right? The Children’s Television Act, after all, is a sweeping piece of regulation that applies to both ABC and Nickelodeon. We no longer see “host selling” on children’s television as a consequence. Online data collection about kids is also regulated. But if things should be better, then why do critics say that the single biggest change in consumer culture since the 1990s—at any level—has been marketers’ “imperative to target kids” (Schor, 2005, p. 12) or that we need to “protect our children from the onslaught of marketing and advertising” (Linn, 2004, cover)? Why do academics write that “[t]he explosive growth in the children’s market over the last two decades is responsible for a sea-change in the media” (Preston & White, 2004, p. 126)? Why did consumer advocates in 2006 feel the need to file a $2 billion lawsuit against Viacom and Kellogg’s for being too chummy and effective in their cross promotions (via such products as SpongeBob SquarePants Wild Bubble Berry Pop-Tarts), thereby perpetuating childhood obesity (Thompson, 2006)? It’s because, despite legislation like the Children’s Television Act or COPPA, the commercialization of children’s culture has increased dramatically since the 1980s. The next section explains a few of the reasons why this is so.
The Modern Context of Kids’ Commercialism

This section will focus on three elements that increase the pressure to blur differences between culture and commercial with children’s media: (1) recent incentives to create “aggressive” advertising, (2) the growth of synergistic, mega-media corporations, and (3) the proliferation of new media (creating new marketing and media-selling venues).

Part of the reason we’re seeing increased commercialization in children’s culture is that, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, we are seeing this accelerated movement in all of culture, not just kids’ (Andersen, 1995; Budd et al., 1999; Jacobson & Mazur, 1995; McAllister, 1996; McChesney, 1999). In the 1980s, we saw trends that have either frustrated or, conversely, delighted advertisers, with the result being more aggressive and, therefore, more intrusive promotional forms. Television technologies like the remote control and recording devices (VCRs and DVRs) have made it easier for television audiences to “escape” the traditional thirty-second spot advertisement. The growing amount of advertising in our society (often called “clutter”) also reduces the effectiveness of traditional advertising techniques, as one ad might be lost in an avalanche of modern advertising. New media like the Internet and cable television threaten to reduce advertising revenue of traditional media like newspapers, magazines, and network television. These traditional media, then, might be willing to strike permissive deals with advertisers given their desperation to avoid becoming mediated dinosaurs.

The above factors have led to many intrusive promotional trends by advertisers, either because they feel they have to do these things to counter trends (DVRs, clutter), or they now are allowed to do these things (traditional media desperation for ad dollars). We have seen over the last twenty years, then, an increase in such promotional techniques as sponsorship (like the Tostitos Fiesta Bowl). Product placement is routine in both film and television these days, even “plot-enhancing” product placements like FedEx in Castaway or the iPod in an 2005 episode of NBC’s The Office. Other techniques like “place-based advertising” in such locations as airports, medical facilities, and schools; and viral marketing—the use of manufactured word-of-mouth or chat-room conversations to promote products—would also be part of this promotional aggressiveness.

A trend that is strongly linked to this commercial push but also has its own promotional trajectory is the continued domination of corporate media synergy (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 1999). With the growth of media entertainment conglomerates sparked by such factors as deregulation, digital convergence, and globalization, larger media corporations have grown larger in their search for “synergistic efficiencies.” Synergy encourages media corporations to grow by acquiring different media outlets in which licensed products can be produced, distributed, and exhibited. From an entertainment point of view, then, a synergistically pure media conglomerate would own different subsidiaries dealing with books, comic books, film, recorded music, television, video games, and Web sites. Such corporations, then, are promotionally oriented, with one subsidiary, through shared licensing, promoting the other subsidiaries (and often the corporate brand as a whole). While Star Wars may have shown the economic value of prolific toy and licensing output, it was 1989’s Batman
that showed how one corporation (at that time Warner Communications) can move a character license effectively through different internally owned media outlets, creating one massive, multimedia "commodity inter-text" (Meehan, 1991).

Synergistic companies that are especially relevant to children's culture are News Corp. (Kinder, 1999), Disney (Budd & Kirsch, 2005; Wasko, 2001), Time Warner (Sandler, 2003), and Viacom (Hendershot, 2004). This ownership pattern can be seen with children's television, given that Viacom owns both Nickelodeon and CBS's Saturday-morning lineup, Disney owns the Disney Channel and ABC's Saturday-morning lineup, News Corp. controls Fox's Saturday children's programming, and Time Warner is the parent corporation for both the Cartoon Network and the Kids WB. A key implication of this is that these conglomerates are simultaneously among the largest advertisers of media products in the world, and, as owners of media supported by advertising, they are also among the largest receivers of advertising revenue in the world.

A third factor in the enhanced commercial/promotional ethos of kids' culture is the use of new media technologies. Obviously, the media landscape has changed dramatically since the 1980s with the creation and diffusion of digital media such as the Internet, videogame systems, DVDs (now a bigger revenue generator than films released in theaters), and mobile media like MP3 players and cell phones with downloadable media options. These have all significantly influenced how product manufacturers and media corporations operate. These new media serve multiple functions. They can be integrated into the larger corporate synergy, promoting other properties. They themselves can be sold, generating direct sales revenue. They can be used to carry product commercials, generating indirect advertising revenue. And all of them are key players in the commercialization of children's culture.

Given these factors, what are some of the ways that we see children's culture being commercialized in the modern age?

**Categories of Kids' Commercialization**

**The Commercial Logic of Media Systems**

Let's just start out with the basic one: unsurprisingly, sales are at the heart of children's culture. This is obvious to see when we're talking about "direct" sales—like kids buying, or influencing their parents to buy, DVDs, books, and CDs. But most children's media, in some way, is also supported by advertising sales. The history of broadcasting shows that commercial interests fundamentally shaped the development of radio and television (McChesney, 1993). When kids (or any audience members) watch TV, they are being sold to advertisers (Smythe, 1977). Child viewers are "hailed" as consumers by the system, not as children to be educated or publics to be engaged. Commercial interests, then, will do and say whatever is in their legal rights (and sometimes beyond such rights) to persuade kids to purchase or influence a purchase. Media companies are economically rewarded to support that commercial imperative; economically, programs are subordinate to the ads.
Given this, it is no surprise that commercials and programs look and sound alike, despite mandated separators, and often share similar kid-appealing themes of fun adventure, kid empowerment, and anti-adultism (McAllister & Giglio, 2005). Networks will often partner with product advertisers to give these advertisers more bang for their buck. For example, a cross-promotional commercial for the Green Slime flavor of Airheads candy aired repeatedly on Nickelodeon in 2003. Green Slime is a copyrighted phrase associated with the Nickelodeon brand, and the Nick logo was featured in the ad. The ads’ narrator orders, “Log on to Airheads.nick.com to vote in the Airheads Green Slime flavor poll.” The connection between advertiser and network is symbolized by the very Web address that combines the advertiser and the network name.

The Power of the Media Brand

As noted, children’s media companies do not just carry other companies’ advertising, they also have their own products to advertise and promote. In this case, media companies use children’s culture to “brand” themselves. They sell their own products with messages and appeals that, like commercials, exploit kids’ desires and need for autonomy (Preston & White, 2004; White & Preston, 2005; Sandler, 2003). This has several implications. First, many commercials for synergistic products (an ad for the DVD of Disney’s Bambi II) will air on subsidiary networks (ABC and ABC Family, both owned by Disney). But it will also mean that promotions for shows with Disney in the title will air—including promos for shows on other owned channels—and these promotions will not be counted as advertisements under the Children’s Television Act of 1990. So, for example, the television series based upon the movie Lilo & Stitch is officially titled Disney’s Lilo & Stitch. In this way, program separators can also integrate Disney iconography, making these separators part of the branding strategy rather than truly separating the commercial from, well, anything non-commercial (McAllister & Giglio, 2005).

Programs themselves on Saturday morning are extremely commodified, of course. The ABC and Disney Channel program That’s So Raven can be purchased as books, DVDs, CDs (with songs also heard on the Disney Radio Network), video games, calendars, a “cosmic cosmetic set,” cologne spray, and various other merchandise—all for sale at various outlets, including the Disney Store.

New Integration, Old Policy

Although such legislation as the Children’s Television Act and COPPA place some limits on some media, there are plenty of loopholes in the system, loopholes that are enacted by new technologies and new corporate trends. The branding of promos and separators are such loopholes. Similarly, while the FCC bans the narrowly defined “program-length commercials” on cable and broadcast TV, no such restriction exists on media like the Internet
and DVDs. This works both for licenses that were originally media oriented, and licenses that were also originally toys or even advertising mascots.

Web sites often combine media characters, product advertisers, and shopping opportunities in ways that virtually eradicate these differences. Web sites like that of the Cartoon Network, for instance, have a “Shop” link (although there is a nonenforceable disclaimer that says “You must be at least 18 years old to make a purchase”). This link allows visitors to either “Shop by [Product] Category,” or “Shop by Show,” so one can search for, say, Codename: Kids Next Door toys. Similarly, branded Web sites for product advertisers such as Postopia.com (for Post foods) features games such as the Kool-Aid “Skip and See Riddle Show.” If you click on the Kool-Aid Jammers icon, you can read about the latest Kool-Aid products. Ties with Time Warner characters are also found on this site, so that you see an ad for the latest DVD of the Flintstones.

And although there can legally be no commercials for Bratz products during the Bratz TV show, no such commercial restrictions exist for Bratz magazines or DVDs. On the Bratz Rock Angelz DVD, one can click on the “Bratz Rock Angelz Cross Sell Gallery” to see and read about other merchandise that’s for sale. One can also watch the “Bratz Rock Angelz CD TV spot” (a commercial that is billed, then, as a “DVD extra”).

Dangers and Dilemmas

Often, when I lecture about these issues to students, a question that may be asked is, “So what? Does it really hurt that kids are sold to, and that there’s a blurring of the commercial with the culture?” It is true, as we’ll see, that there is not complete agreement about this issue among scholars of society and culture. But many believe that these commercial characteristics are harmful, a position to which I am sympathetic.

The mix of the commercial and the cultural, adding in modern marketing research techniques, may make the construction of promotional messages especially manipulative and strategic, involving consistent messages that celebrate consumption in a variety of media. Some critics argue that heavy immersion in commercial/consumer culture can lead to the cultivation of commodity-influenced self-concepts that are fraught with potential social and economic division and insecurity, vulnerable to the commercial message, and therefore potentially harmful to well-being (Schor, 2004). The consistent “pro-kid, anti-adult” message found in children’s media and commercials, coupled with the “nag factor” commercialism encourages, may add stress to the household (Schor, 2004). The drive for ever more efficient niche marketing may entice media creators and marketers to target every younger potential consumers, even those less than a year old (Linn, 2004). Products that are sold on television may even be physically harmful, such as foods high in sugar and fat (Harrison & Marske, 2005). Commercially based culture like Postopia.com and The M&M’s Counting Board Book (recommended reading level: baby to preschool) again spreads such influence beyond the contained TV commercial. Another argument has to do with the potential effect of environmental waste on the planet that commodity culture encourages, especially when such values are inculcated at a young age (Jhally, 2000).
Some scholars dispute that a commodity-based children’s culture is all bad, however. While recognizing the ideological dilemmas of commodity culture, Ellen Seiter (1993) argues that niche marketing can open up spaces for some groups such as young girls, who otherwise may be undervalued or to a large degree ignored in a predominantly patriarchal culture. Both Seiter and David Buckingham (2000) note the critical stance kids may bring to commercialism, and even the creative power of play with licensed-driven toys and the shared community that kids can construct with them. Maya Götz, Dafna Lemish, Amy Aidman, and Hyesung Moon (2005) conclude from their international, ethnographic study of children’s play that commercially supported television viewing does not seem to significantly restrict children’s imagination, although such results may have been more clear outside of the United States. Buckingham (2000) further argues that critics of toy-based media content do not understand historical trends that have always blurred the toy-media connection in the industrial age or the complexities of the market.

What to do about the dangers of commercialism in kids’ culture is also complex and multidimensional. Critics such as Juliet Schor (2005) and Susan Linn (2004) suggest multifaceted approaches, including activist- and community-group alliances, media literacy programs, the support of alternative and children-created media, parental awareness and mediation, and increased lobbying for more assertive legislation for children’s consumer rights and against excessive commercialism. Although it’s likely that he would be in favor of many of these ideas, Buckingham (2000) warns against the “wag of the finger” approach to children and their culture, especially with media literacy programs. He argues that when adults bad-mouth to kids the commercial culture that kids take pleasure in, it reinforces the distance between kids and adults and becomes a self-defeating teaching tactic. In a “back-ata” response, though, Shirley Steinberg and Joe Kincheloe (2004, p. 10) argue that stances like Buckingham’s are too dismissive of media literacy efforts that reveal manipulative techniques and that such stances even encourage a “pedagogy of nihilism” that justifies educational apathy about commercialism and underplays the gross power discrepancy between corporate marketers and children.

Going back to our opening example, there is no doubt that many girls are very much into Bratz and have an accompanying passion for fashion. For some of them this attraction may amount to very little in terms of their lives. Others may benefit from the themes of girl power and friendship that accompany the consumption orientation in Bratz and the larger commercial culture that targets them. But make no doubt that there is a targeting, fueled by an increasingly elaborate and well-funded targeting system.

The resources of the children’s cultural industries—fed by and integrated with the children’s commercial industries—are formidable and, I believe, quite destructive on the whole. Scholars have argued that anti-commercial critics often seem engaged in unreasonable and emotional “moral panics” that blind complexities (Götz and colleagues [2005] make such charges against anti-TV critics, for instance). When I see the incredible level of commercialism that drives all of culture—not just for kids—I will admit that, yes, I’m a little bit worried, even sometimes panicked, about generations of people whose life passion is for fashion.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways are children's media content and the product advertising adjacent to this content similar in sounds, language, visual style, and themes?

2. How do large corporations that specialize in children's media try to brand themselves to children? What themes and symbols do they use in this branding?

3. What are recent examples of “cross promotions” between media companies and product advertisers in children's media? What messages do these cross promotions send to kids about the connection of advertising and media content?

4. What are some of the most important negative consequences of the commercialization of children's culture? What are some positive consequences?

EXERCISES

1. Find a schedule of Saturday-morning television programs targeted at children. How many of the programs are based upon licensed properties? Be sure to list programs based upon established media characters as well as programs based upon toys or other children's products.

2. Watch an hour of children's television, noting especially what Web sites are advertised or promoted during this time. Visit these Web sites and document the ways that media brands and children's products are further promoted and sold in virtual space.

REFERENCES


