“GIRLS WITH A PASSION FOR FASHION”
The Bratz Brand as integrated spectacular consumption

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One of the most popular and controversial brands targeted at “tween” girls since the 2000s has been Bratz, a globally distributed line of dolls, playsets, clothing, accessories, licensed merchandise, and media tie-ins. Whether as dolls or media characters, Bratz are sassy young females with provocatively stylish—some even say “street-walker” (Macpherson, 2005, p. 1)—clothes, faces characterized by large anime-like eyes, full mega-lips, and virtually no nose, and the catchphrase, “Girls with a Passion for Fashion!” With 150 million dolls and five million DVDs sold in its first 5 years (Magiera, 2007; Talbot, 2006), Bratz has attracted much attention, including criticism of the brand and its manufacturer, MGA Entertainment. Critics of Bratz mainly focus on the brand’s overly sexual appearance given its young target market and seeming celebration of adult activities such as alcohol consumption via their pool-side or dance-club play sets, at least one of which came with champagne-style glasses (Goldman, 2003; Linn, 2004; Schor, 2005). One anti-Bratz commentator described their “lush butts and melon-sized breasts” (Linn, 2004, p. 143); another asked, “What next? Beer for the dolls? A mirror, some fake cocaine?” (Beckham, 2005, p. 7).

The implications of Bratz’ sexual images may be more fully understood by an examination of the hyperconsumption orientation of the brand. Bratz reflects and amplifies the association of young girls’ self-identity with commodities, and the joy many in this group experience while shopping and buying. Such a connection is certainly not new to young girls’ clothing (Cook, 2004), dolls (especially in the widely discussed case of Barbie), or games (such the electronic board game Mall Madness). However, the depth and breadth given to this consumption orientation in Bratz is particularly striking, and has implications for the social linkages of consumption and self-worth in youth culture.

This article examines the consumption ethos in the Bratz brand and its implications for tween girl identity, arguing that it is an example of a theoretical concept labeled by the article as integrated spectacular consumption. After developing this concept, a brief review of the consumption orientation in girls’ commodities, especially dolls, will be presented, followed by a description of the Bratz brand and the article’s method. The analysis focuses on Bratz positioning as a consumption-based “lifestyle” brand through an emphasis on brand appearance, promotionally based media, and group consumption. It concludes by discussing some of the larger social implications of the Bratz brand for tween identity.

Integrated Spectacular Consumption as Theoretical Framework

A concept that offers insights for understanding the commercial scope and nature of Bratz is that of integrated spectacular consumption, adapted from the work of Debord and
other scholars applying a Debordian framework to cultural trends. Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/1995) applied a profoundly Marxist orientation to the growing importance of image-oriented communication forms such as television, arguing that the concept of the spectacle was an increasingly essentializing element in modern life. Although his writing is often abstract (Compton, 2004), key characteristics of a Debordian modern spectacle include its image/appearance emphasis, large scope, foundation in commodity logic, artificiality, and ultimately its distracting and depoliticizing effects. The spectacle is thus a centrally hegemonic phenomenon that alters social relations and masks the realities of modern capitalist societies by naturalizing and celebrating the manufactured, large-scale image. Later Debord (1990) contended that modern spectacle integrates two forms of spectacle that arose from the Cold War and that combines capitalist and state power in new and even more totalizing ways.

Scholars have subsequently attempted to concretize Debordian concepts and apply them to recent media and commercial tendencies that, if anything, have extended Debord’s dire analysis. As Kellner (2003) argues, “the culture industries have multiplied media spectacles in novel spaces and sites, and spectacle itself is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life” (p. 1). Writers have applied the idea of the spectacle to such phenomena as sports culture, celebrity culture, digital media, higher education, globalized news, and special effects-laden blockbuster films (Chang & Osborn, 2005; Compton, 2004; Kellner, 2003; Terrill, 2000). The integrated spectacle has been compared to trends in “integrated marketing campaigns” and especially “media synergy,” the latter involving large-scale media corporations coordinating promotional and licensing efforts across different subsidiaries (Compton, 2004; for a non-Debordian critique of synergy, see Meehan, 1991). Spectacular phenomena become a multi-media, coordinated event—a “commodity inter-text” (Meehan, 1991)—designed to maximize corporate profits and reach.

For Debord, consumption and the Marxian concept of commodity fetishism are key elements in modern spectacle. He argues that the emphasis on consumption and the sociocultural powers attributed to mass-produced and marketed goods in a spectacularized society serve to blunt the profound alienation of labor realities. Workers in capitalism, according to Debord,

> find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers. The *humanity of the commodity* finally attends to the workers’ “leisure and humanity” for the simple reason that political economy as such now can—and must—bring these spheres under its sway. (1967/1995, p. 30, emphasis in original)

It should not be surprising, then, that scholars have applied spectacle to consumption-specific venues and activities, such as large-scale, high-tech retail outlets (Penaloza, 1998), and advertising campaigns (Watts & Orbe, 2002). Focusing on Watts and Orbe’s conceptualization of Debord, “spectacular consumption” occurs when an advertising campaign—the promotion of the “humanity of the commodity”—reaches such a mediated and popular breadth that it transcends the confines of the traditional 30-second television commercial, even as that commercial already appears during highly visible venues, such as the Super Bowl. In spectacular ads, the slogans, visual icons, performers, and other commercial symbols of the campaign become integrated into the larger culture through other media forms and found throughout everyday life. The
promotional messages are covered as newsworthy by journalistic media and referenced in
tertainment media. They become widely sold licenses on their own and part of people’s
conversational capital; they are thus granted a cultural status that usually is only reserved
for the most beloved of popular culture. Watts and Orbe’s application of Debord to
popular advertising campaigns is also valuable for understanding coordinated merchan-
dising and licensing campaigns which aggressively use a combination of media to
disseminate large-scale and strategically integrated selling messages, hence the term
“integrated spectacular consumption.”

Like all forms of Debordian spectacle, spectacular consumption is intensely
ideological, elevating the commercial and the promotional as authentic popular culture,
which bleeds a consumption message over to less commercially oriented content forms. In
addition, other symbolic meanings and implied social relations that are integrated into the
campaign to enhance their popularity also are carried in these other forms. Watts and
Orbe’s (2002) case study, for instance (the Budweiser “Whassup?” campaign), did not just
sell Budweiser and celebrate beer drinking, but also brought with it contradictory notions
about race and white audience pleasure, especially in regards to cultural framings of
African American males.

Although Watts and Orbe (2002) addressed the interplay of commercialism and race
in their study, other social meanings may be connected to and altered by spectacularized
consumer products. Goldman (1992) makes a similar argument about gender and
commercialism in his delineation of “commodity feminism.” Noting advertising’s ability to
coop social movements, Goldman argues that advertising applies symbols of feminism in
its products to women, and often implies that commodities can provide feminist
achievement: purchasing products will empower women. In this appropriation process,
feminism is transformed or “dissolved” (Goldman, 1992, p. 8) by advertising discourse to a
personalized and apolitical commodity form that legitimizes rather than opposes larger
structures of oppression. Commodity feminism has been applied to messages in young
girls’ culture (Mazzarella, 1999) and, when combined with the broader concept of
integrated spectacular consumption, is especially apt in describing the coordinated and
consumerist form of girl power that is characteristic of Bratz.

**Bratz’ Commercial Precedents**

Neither the commercialization of children’s culture nor the social construction of
children as empowered consumers is new. In the US, starting at least with 1895s The
Yellow Kid, one of the first regularly appearing (if also racially problematic) comic strip
characters in newspapers, children’s culture has spun off vast amounts of licensed
merchandise (Cross, 2004; Gordon, 1998). Similarly, the clothing industry economically and
discursively framed children as consumers with agency since especially the 1930s (Cook,
2004). The use of radio, comic books, and most notably television to sell directly to
children cultivated them as a desirable and increasingly influential market (Cross, 2004;
Kline, 1993; Pecora, 1998). Marketing directly to young girls—known early as “sub-teens,”
now tweens—is also long established (Cook, 2004; Cook & Kaiser, 2004), as is the
associated celebration of consumption that often accompanies this targeting. Shopping
games that reward skill in retail consumption have existed at least since the 1950s (Klaffke,
2003). Baby and fashion dolls, often prescribing narrow gender and broad consumption
roles, similarly have a long history (Cross, 1997).
Influential in this latter category is the Barbie doll, debuting in the late 1950s and anointed as “the most popular toy in history” (qtd in Rogers, 1999, p. 88). Barbie’s similarity and difference to Bratz (a telling comparison, as will be returned to later) warrants an extended discussion. A combination of stereotypical Western beauty and hyperleisure, Barbie changed the notion of girls’ doll play from that of modeling motherhood to modeling consumption: the share of doll sales comprised by baby dolls dropped from 80 percent in 1959 to 38 percent in 1975 (Cross, 1997). One writer claimed that Mattel was by the mid-1980s “the world’s largest producer of women’s wear,” even if in pink-hued miniature (qtd in Rogers, 1999, p. 87).

Barbie’s ideology of consumption was at least partially circumscribed, however. Certainly the brand and its ads encouraged girls to consume Barbie and her products (an advertising slogan in the late 1980s was “We’re Into Barbie!”). In terms of enduring ideological lessons, Barbie presented consumption as adult, individual, and materialistic. Although Barbie was originally promoted as a “teen fashion model,” her later physicality and leisure- and occupational-themed merchandise connoted her as a youthful adult. Cross (1997) concludes about Barbie that she taught girls “to associate the freedom of being an adult with carefree consumption” (p. 173). Rogers (1999) also highlights the individualistic and independent nature of Barbie’s consumption practices. She notes that, contrasting with more familial and maternal notions of femininity, “Barbie has no husband, daughter or son; she has no boss, no teachers, no minister or rabbi or priest, no neighbors” (p. 3), and that “Barbie typically spends time with people only when she feels like it” (pp. 15–16). Various versions of Barbie did celebrate the act of shopping and consuming, especially in the form of specific cross-promotions such as “Wal-Mart Shopping Time Barbie” (Klaffke, 2003). However, Rogers comments that Barbie’s consumption is more typically equated with materialism: the act of having things, and the use of such things “to signal and ascribe individual essence” (p. 72). As will be argued, although Bratz offers similar messages, the newer brand’s take on consumption is at least as much about the process of acquiring as having.

Barbie also helped establish and legitimize the toy as media brand. Barbie was licensed in books, comic books, and magazines. The consumption and gender ideologies of the doll line would often accompany these mediated versions. *Barbie Magazine* from the early 1990s featured beauty guides, picture stories, child-model fashion spreads, and clothing ads for young girls, teaching young female readers “to accept their passage from childhood to adolescence in terms of commodities” (Majer O’Sickey, 1994, p. 24). Barbie’s late-1980s US television program was created in response to the deregulated industrial context of television and to new competition, especially the MTV-inspired *Jem*, savior of orphans by day, pop singer/superhero at night. Jem’s rock-band angle further allowed the integration of music licensing. Predictably, Barbie’s own TV program also cast her as a rock singer, thus also exploiting music-licensing potential (Cross, 1997).

The history-oriented American Girl doll line, introduced by Pleasant Company in the 1980s, built successful sales from different doll characters in the larger brand. No one character dominated the line, and each had her own books, dolls, products, and identity. The line also emphasized fan identification with the dolls, which were designed to be the same age as the target market. One scholar noted that through various rhetorical marketing strategies and the product line “AG of Today,” “The company constructs its audience, ‘you=American girl,’ and forms a special relationship between Pleasant company and that audience” (Acosta-Alzuru & Lester Roushanzamir, 2003, p. 65; see also
Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002). The Bratz line uses a similar multicharacter and identity branding strategy, greatly extending the lifestyle dimension, integrated promotion, and consumption orientation of girls' brands.

The Context and Development of Bratz

To develop Bratz, MGA Entertainment (originally an electronic games company) exploited several contextual factors that accelerated children’s marketing from the mid-1990s. One such factor is the increased emphasis on the tween girl market, part of the larger movement of increasingly fragmented target markets (Turow, 1997). Tween direct purchasing power increased 400 percent (to $30 billion) from 1989 to 2002, and potentially influenced another $670 billion in adult spending in 2004 (Schor, 2005).

Another trend is the increased use of children-oriented marketing research, including focus groups; the collection of information from new, interactive media; and the cultivation of more naturalistic, ethnographic techniques (Schor, 2005). Such techniques are central to Bratz. Focus groups were conducted before the brand was launched for tween preferences and desires, and continue throughout the life of the brand. The name, look, color scheme, and extension products of Bratz are influenced by the feedback provided through focus groups with, and Internet postings from, tween girls (“A True Lifestyle Brand,” 2003; Bannon, 2002; Kim, 2004; Palmeri, 2005). Bratz designers are purportedly required to read fan mail (Talbot, 2006).

Given the above, MGA plugged into tween-friendly cultural trends. These trends include hip-hop (hence the “z” in Bratz); girl-power icons (that often equate sex with power) such as Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera; Japanese visual media such as anime and manga (as seen by Bratz’ huge eyes); and an emphasis on “fun consumption,” including fashion and shopping activities.

Globalization also played a role. The Bratz dolls and their mediated manifestations are strategically ambiguous in their ethnicity, as manifested by their varying skin tones and “exotic” names such as Sasha, Jade, and Yasmin; only one of the original dolls (Cloe) is clearly Caucasian. As one MGA executive rather crassly described the global advantages of this strategy,

We don’t even market them as belonging to a particular race. We have little girls in South America who think Sasha is South African, girls in Samoa who think she is Samoan and girls in the United States who think she is from Harlem. (Parry, 2003, p. 3)

Bratz has sold particularly well in such countries as England, Japan, Israel, and Dubai (Goldman, 2003).

Bratz dolls and their extension lines (including Lil’ Bratz and Bratz Babyz) have been incredibly successful, growing from just under $97 million in doll sales in 2001 to $2 billion in global doll and licensing sales in 2005 (Goldman, 2003; Talbot, 2006). Licensed products number into the hundreds, with new fashions, characters, and themes being introduced regularly. The 2005 brand extension Bratz Rock Angelz featured a DVD (offering an “origin story” in which the four original characters form a magazine and a rock band), CD, dolls, and toys that totaled 300 licensed tie-ins (Fulmer, 2005). Their marketing success, controlling 40 percent of the fashion-doll market, led commentaries to declare the brand “Barbie’s new rivals” (Talbot, 2006).
Given the success of Bratz and its marketing and mediated strategies, this article asks three research questions, informed by Debordian concepts:

RQ1: How do the larger marketing and packaging strategies of Bratz products illustrate the logic of integrated spectacular consumption?

RQ2: To what extent do Bratz media—magazines, books, video entertainment—integrate into these larger marketing strategies?

RQ3: How is an ideology of consumption and shopping spectacularized in the brand?

Method

Database searches were conducted of all popular and trade journalism related to Bratz, focusing especially on marketing techniques and goals from Bratz executives. Such material contextualized the Bratz texts examined and often was consulted throughout the analytical process. In addition, textual analysis was applied to several Bratz-licensed products as described on the Bratz and other shopping websites, the Bratz DVD Bratz Rock Angelz, two issues of Bratz Magazine (March and April 2006), two episodes of the Fox Bratz TV program (“It’s Not About Me, Week”; “Crush in a Rush”), the Fox Network Bratz website, and several Bratz books (see References for cited works). Bratz media were viewed/read multiple times, and extensive notes were taken on each form examined, focusing on wording, visuals, and their juxtaposition.

The concept and operationalization of integrated spectacular consumption was used as a “sensitized concept” (Christians & Carey, 1989) to focus the qualitative analysis and coalesce relevant themes in this discourse. Attention was paid to how the discourse emphasized visual elements, commodity logic, and an integrated promotional ethos—elements that comprise integrated spectacular consumption—and what forms these elements may take.

The Integrated Spectacular Consumption of Bratz

Based upon the review of MGA strategy and the analysis conducted for this research, three intertwined elements were found to spectacularize Bratz-as-commodity: (1) the scope of products that create what the manufacturer calls a “lifestyle brand”; (2) the different integrated media forms that promote themselves and other Bratz licenses; and (3) the message that the act of consumption, not just the possession of material goods, forms peer communities and identity. These three elements are integrated to create a spectacular Bratz universe in which a tween lifestyle is constructed through a particular orientation to commodity acquisition.

Bratz as “Lifestyle Brand”

As noted, the centrality of the image is key for a spectacular society, a characteristic that Debord argued trumps material possessions. He wrote,

An earlier stage in the economy’s domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading of being into having that left its stamp on all human endeavor. The
present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from having to appearing: all effective “having” must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate reason d’etre from appearances. (1967/1995, p. 16, emphasis in original)

This primacy of appearing over having is reflected in Bratz. Compare the Barbie slogan, “We’re into Barbie,” with Bratz “Girls with a Passion for Fashion.” These slogans reflect the difference between owning a doll, and living and looking like a doll. The “girls” whose passion is for fashion refer not just to the dolls, but also to their fans. MGA, seeing the potential in still-forming tween self-identities, significant focus group data, and the economic benefits of selling more than just toys to tween girls, stress that Bratz is a “lifestyle brand” rather than a toy brand. As one Bratz marketing executive explicitly put this,

We want the girls to live the Bratz life—wear the mascara; use the hair product; send the greeting card. The toy business is shrinking. Kids are getting older younger and we’re losing them to clothing, computers and DVDs. If Barbie is about fantasy, then Bratz is about real life. (Gold, 2004, p. 4)

Like Barbie, Bratz is into consumption—consuming fashion, media, licensed products—but, unlike the older-appearing Barbie, Bratz can precisely model for tween girls how they can display consumption spectacularly right now, at their current age, not when they are 19. The physical look of the dolls, with their small bodies—they are purposefully designed to be shorter than a Barbie doll (Bannon, 2002)—but giant eyes and hair, lush lips, and sexualized outfits, connote simultaneously the youthfulness of tweens and the worldliness and commodity-enhanced appearance of older teenagers.

This bizarre but marketing-friendly combination is not an accident. The look of the dolls is micromanaged and product defining. Isaac Larian, the founder of MGA, boasted, “Each doll goes through 16 rotations—that is workers—just to paint the eyes” (Gold, 2004, p. 2). Tie-in makeup lines reward this attention, including “a color-themed cosmetics line to complement the personalities of the five different Bratz girls” by the cosmetics company Fira (Prior, 2004, p. 45). The dolls’ clothing receives careful attention, with MGA employing professional designers who monitor teen celebrity fashions and regularly attend fashion shows. “We change the clothes the dolls wear three or four times a year, just like in the full-sized fashion industry,” claims Larian (Gold, 2004, p. 2). With commercially available licensed Bratz clothing that the tween girls themselves actually wear, the emphasis is on the fairly subtle use of the Bratz logo or distinctive lush-lips branded icon on the clothes, rather than large images of the doll-characters, as one might see in Barbie or other branded clothing (Kim, 2004).

The connection between the dolls’ clothing and their fans is emphasized throughout Bratz media that serve explicitly as fashion guides. The book Bratz Crazy for Shoes: A Guide for Your “Soles” (2005) includes the section “Shoe Basics 101: The Top Six Categories,” which pairs descriptions of flats, boots, etc. with drawings of Bratz characters in those styles. The March and April 2006 issues of the US version of Bratz Magazine offers images of the dolls in various styles, sometimes with tips about “fashion choices” (including “dos and don’ts”). Even more telling of the “lifestyle brand” strategy is a multipage “fashion-spread” section in which the dolls are dressed in various outfits. Next to these photos are additional photos of an actual piece of clothing or accessory that girls may
purchase to match the particular Bratz style. The price of the item and the retail outlet where it is sold is also listed. For example, when the Princess Bratz line was released (with Princess-specific dolls and Bratz outfits available), the text in the March issue told readers, “you can achieve the superb princess style by adding a fake fur shrug to jeans and a tee.” To the right of this text was a picture of such a shrug, with this description: “Pink fur shrug, $50, Harry Angels at Groove Theory”; left of this text was a picture of a Bratz doll in a similar fur shrug. The following page offers a “where to buy” listing of commercial websites and phone numbers to purchase the products, including Groove Theory.

The text of Bratz Magazine is written in first-person plural, as if the Bratz themselves were the magazine’s journalists (more on this in the following section). So a preview on page 3 of the fashion section of the April 2006 issue announces, “We model all of our new looks, show you how you can get the styles yourself, and give you the scoop on which celebs are showing off these styles, too.” Bratz dolls become Bratz models in more than one way, then, for a commodified lifestyle: the spectacular display of appearance as “being,” not just “having.”

Bratz-branded electronics are also an example of lifestyle commodification. Tween fans may purchase (or influence the purchase of) Bratz computers, cell phones, and MP3 players, the latter in the form of a lipstick. As the image-orientation of spectacular phenomenon would indicate, the emphasis is not functionality, but rather the products’ look and how this look fits into the Bratz brand during a particular fashion cycle. “We’re making fashionable electronics that can fit into a girl’s room,” said one MGA executive (Kim, 2004, p. B1). The Bratz lifestyle philosophy also applies to furniture. MGA pushes big retailers to carry Bratz-branded furniture in their furniture sections (the “adult” sections) rather than with toys (Kim, 2004), a strategy not unlike that of clothing retail spaces for age-sensitive tweens (Cook, 2004). A television commercial for Bratz-style room decorations is labeled “Livin’ Bratz Home Decor Collection” and touts the branded goods as “Your Life, Your Style.” In this case, Bratz-branded furniture is explicitly tied to notions of self, life, and personal space.

Sexualization, commodification, and globalization converge to highlight the Bratz lifestyle as spectacular consumption. The lifestyle that is constructed by the brand—the provocative clothes; the cosmetics-enhanced look; the adult-oriented accessories—is typically cited by critics who are disturbed by the overt sexuality in these branded products. However, girls have sought adult-oriented clothing and accessories as identity signifiers since at least the 1950s. As Cook and Kaiser (2004) note, “This sexuality, or sartorial gestures toward it, encodes a sense of autonomy and personhood and has been sought after and welcomed by girls even as it is promoted by certain corners of the industry and decried by social commentators” (p. 206). MGA originally coded the Bratz look in a doll line in which the physicality of the dolls (big eyes and lips, no nose), and their clothes (trendy, skimpy) are sexualized and therefore sold as defiantly adult-oriented fashion. This “lifestyle appearance” was then transferred to Bratz electronics, makeup, and clothing that may be purchased and used to achieve a similar empowering sexuality/maturity for Bratz fans (something again that Barbie could never immediately offer her young fans). Economically, for MGA, it seems that the postdoll accessories—the commodities that become part of the look of Bratz’ fans, not just their toys—are the future of the brand. The doll is then the hook, the model, for the other branded and often more expensive/profitable products necessary for the wider Bratz lifestyle. In this way,
MGA exploits the identity-defining process in a spectacularly commodified and integrated way.

And MGA exploits it on a global scale. The ambiguous but nevertheless varied skin tones of the different dolls and their non-Western names imply that girls of any ethnicity, any country, can acquire the empowering adult look by literally purchasing themselves to be Bratz. Although their skin tones and hair vary, the cartoonish hyperfemininity of an all-lips-and-eyes Bratz face and the sassy style of clothing/accessories diminish the visual differences between characters: the Bratz look, not the embracing of multicultural difference, is the unifier.

Bratz as Integrated Plugola

Besides the promotion of a particular Bratz look and identity that girls can purchase, Bratz media are also, logically enough, very self-promotional. That is, a Bratz TV episode, DVD, book, or magazine article does not just promote the overall brand, the lifestyle, or the other commodities that provide the Bratz look. Rather, the names of specific Bratz products are integrated throughout Bratz media content in a children's media version of "plugola," where media content promotes subsidiary licenses of the same media owner (McAllister, 2002). Such a web of licensed promotion would typically occur as part of "corporate synergy," in which a multimedia corporation (Time Warner or Disney, for example) would coordinate the effort (Meehan, 1991). Here, the connection is the license and its corporate owner MGA, with Bratz media involving various media companies (News Corp; Titan Publishing, a celebrity magazine company out of London; the publisher Grosset & Dunlap). The commodity orientation of the brand, though, facilitates integrated plugola even absent the controlling force of one media company and makes Bratz media very self-referential, with in this case the "self" being the larger universe of Bratz products that are available for sale.

Bratz print media mention specific Bratz products routinely. Ads for specific Bratz dolls in the magazine are virtually impossible to separate from promotional-based copy. Much of this is to be expected from such fan-targeted media, such as an article in the April 2006 issue of Bratz magazine that previews "our cool new movie," the Bratz Genie Magic DVD. Plugola pops up in more unconventional places in the magazine, including responses to readers' letters in "Bratz Mailbag." When one reader writes in the March 2006 issue that she is having a birthday party, one suggestion from the responding Bratz is "no party is complete without some dancing, so throw on some tunes (like the Bratz Rock Angelz album!)." When a reader in the next issue writes that she likes to read mysteries, the Bratz helpfully suggest, "check out our own new line of mystery novels, Bratz Clued In!"

Plugola also appears in Bratz fiction by mentioning tie-in media lines and licensed products that serve as literary product placements. Tie-ins like the book Rock Angelz; Ready to Rock!, "Based on the DVD!," is not new to the children's publishing industry. Much more innovative is Bratz All-Night Mall Party (O'Connor, 2004), in which many of the specific faux-retail outlets that the Bratz visit in the course of the book's plot are available as toy sets. Early in the short novel, after the Bratz leave their school ("Stiles High"), "Less than an hour later, the girls were lounging in the huge marble Jacuzzi at their favorite makeover spot, the Stylin' Salon 'N' Spa" (p. 13). The Stylin' Salon 'N' Spa was a toy set from 2002 (makeup for both dolls and girls included); it was also the title of a 2003 Bratz book for "Ages 8 and up." Specific names that the Bratz visit in the novel, such as Kiss & Make-Up and Fashion
Friendz-y, were available for sale in the Lil’ Bratz Mall toy set, where small plastic stores could be bought separately and attached to create a multiretail toy mall. Even seemingly throw-away lines tout actual Bratz commodities; at one point Yasmin needs to buy some lipstick for the Homecoming Dance: “Yasmin ran to the back of the store and pointed to the red, shimmering lip gloss she needed so badly. ‘Yes, Hearts Afire!’ she said to the woman behind the counter” (p. 26). Hearts Afire is in fact a specific Bratz tie-in lip gloss that girls can purchase.

Bratz electronic media are also filled with product plugola. The plot of the DVD Bratz Rock Angelz (edited and recycled to become the first three episodes of the Fox series) involves the girls starting their own fashion magazine called Bratz, which features the same basic layout and design as the actual Bratz Magazine (and which explains the rhetorical strategy of having the magazine written as if by the Bratz themselves). The DVD (and recycled television episodes) also conspicuously feature Rock Angelz brand extensions, including a Bratz CD player and a Bratz computer, both distinctive in their “fashionable electronics” style and available for purchase. More specific to the Rock Angelz line, the CD the characters produce as part of the plot was a real commercially released CD. The CD’s image is displayed in the DVD story, as is the Rock Angelz jet, car, and touring van, all available as toys. “Special Features” of the DVD include an additional Bratz TV episode, a “music video” of a song the Bratz sing in the DVD (included of course on the CD), a commercial for the CD, a demo for the Rock Angelz video game, and the “Bratz Rock Angelz Cross Sell Gallery,” which revolves images of various tie-in merchandise, including the CD and CD player that are woven into the plot.

In such ways, specific Bratz products are normalized through their visibility in Bratz media. Bratz plots become a commodity-oriented narrative world that does not just feature Bratz characters or even mention Bratz products, but illustrate how specific Bratz brand tie-ins may be integrated into a complete and officially licensed Bratz lifestyle.

The Celebration of Communal Shopping

As mentioned earlier, Barbie as a brand emphasizes individualism and the primacy of material possessions, enjoying the symbolic value of things after acquiring them. Certainly Bratz media also connote that girls can create identity and gain power through clothes, styles, and makeup, as Barbie has symbolized and as girl-targeted magazines and websites often state outright (Labre & Walsh-Childers, 2003; Mazzarella, 1999). In one example of commodity feminism, a Bratz magazine horoscope from March 2006 predicts that, for Sagittarius readers, “A hot new hairdo will boost your confidence this month ....”

In Bratz, however, the consumption ante is raised, as the acquiring process itself—the act of shopping, present tense—is an activity that is naturalized and celebrated throughout Bratz media. Bratz frames as desirable not only products that can be bought, but also the act of buying. Shopping becomes part of the specific Bratz brand identity and characters’ lifestyle and, it is assumed, part of the target market’s identity/lifestyle as well. And, rather than an affirmation of individuality, consumption is portrayed as a communal act, to be done with girlfriends. It is presented as a way to build solidarity and to lift group spirits. It also, of course, self-servingly reinforces the acquisition of all-things Bratz and Bratz-like.

Shopping-themed toys include the previously mentioned Lil’ Bratz Mall line, where individual stores are linked to other stores to allow children to construct a toy mall. For
“Ages 6 & up” is the “Bratz Mall Crawl Board Game: Stylin’ Shopping Game.” In this game, players play as different Bratz who in turn are professional buyers; players, according to the MGA website, “roam the mall lookin’ for your favorite fashion and food stores.”

Bratz books both non-fiction and fiction center on shopping. The how-to Bratz Holiday Shoppin’ Spree (reading level 4–8, according to Amazon.com) describes the shopping style of each Bratz and offers a quiz for readers to determine “your shoppin’ personality” (2003, back cover). A pretween demographic (although no specific target age is explicitly identified) is also targeted by Lil’ Bratz Lil’ Shoppin’ Adventures!: Giant Coloring and Activity Book (n.d.). It includes activities like asking readers to describe Nazalia’s outfit (“Cool and Casual? Totally Trendy?”) and how much they like the mall. In this latter example, the text presents the following difference, clearly presenting the second, more passionate, example as the preferred choice:

Writing is a great way to express [sic] yourself creatively. You can use words to paint a picture of your world. There is a big difference between describing your passion this way:

I like to hang out at the mall and shop.

and this way:

Fashion Mall is the most happenin’ place. I just got a candy colored, striped mini that will light up the hallway at school! And last week, I saw the most adorable plastic coin purse. It looks just like a cat’s face! Next weekend, I’m having lunch with the girls at the mall’s food court to rev up before checking out the new items in the boutiques! As you can see, I practically LIVE at the mall, my home away from home.1

Here the premise of the assignment is describing shopping as “your passion.” The “creative” version celebrates the mall as an exciting space (“happenin’”), as a space to acquire goods for peer respect (“light up the hallway at school!”), as a peer friendly space (“having lunch with the girls”), as a cutting-edge space (“checking out the new items”), and a comforting space for everyday life (“my home away from home”).

The plot of the novel All-Night Mall Party (O’Connor, 2004) involves the Bratz getting accidentally locked in a mall overnight. When the girls first realized that they are trapped, this is the exchange:

“I think this could be fun,” said Jade.
The girls stopped and looked at Jade.
“What?” asked Sasha.
“Think about it: a night in the mall!” replied Jade. “It’s like a dream come true!” (p. 38)

They have various adventures in the mall (getting chased by guard dogs, getting trapped in an elevator), all intermixed with them gleefully trying on outfits and visiting stores. At the end of the novel, they start to leave the mall when it opens in the morning, until they realize that it is the first day of the Fall Sale and decide to stay and spend the morning there. The message: Bratz can never get enough shopping!

Even when whole plots/premises do not revolve around shopping, shopping is often casually integrated into Bratz activities. For example, in the TV episode “It’s Not About Me Week,” when Yasmin’s purse is stolen, her priorities are revealed when she tells her friends, “Guess I won’t be shopping at the mall for awhile.” “That’s awful,” replies Jade. In the
March 2006 horoscope in Bratz magazine, the column suggests as a way to satisfy predicted Pieces’ wanderlust, “Ask your parents if you can visit a friend or relative who lives a little way away, or take a trip to an out of town shopping mall.”

Although the above column advises readers to “ask your parents,” in media that feature the Bratz characters, parents are absent. Especially in the fictional versions, viewers do not meet any of the Bratz character’s parents, and they are referred to very rarely. (In fact, the only regularly appearing adult is the evil publishing rival Burdine Maxwell.) Consuming and shopping, then, is a tween-only activity. And it is done in groups. It is constructed as a way to build community and therapeutic good feelings in the Bratz universe. The how-to Bratz Crazy for Shoes advises, “Shopping is always more fun when you have a partner—or two or three!—so always shoe shop with a pal” (2005, p. 27). “We” is often used when describing shopping. “Princess Charming,” a short story in March 2006’s Bratz Magazine about the “Happy Ever After” Dance, begins with Yasmin at the mall saying, “I can’t believe we actually got up at seven on a Saturday,” and Jade clarifying, “Well, it is the shopping event of the year!” When all are invited to Cloe’s Valentine Day party in Bratz: Love is in the Air (2003), Jade suggests, “I say we all hit the mall after school and see if we can’t find something new to wear to the party.” In the Bratz Rock Angelz DVD, when Jade gets fired from the evil Your Thing magazine, Sasha lifts her mood by suggesting, “Come on people, it’s time for some serious cheer up.” And the Bratz knowingly all reply in unison, “Shopping!”

Conclusion

The discourse of Bratz products associates tween-girl identity with Bratz-specific appearances and lifestyles, naturalizes Bratz products in characters’ casual interactions and dialogue, and frames shopping as a fun group activity. While the idea of shopping-as-fun is self-serving for the Bratz brand in that it legitimizes the shopping and purchasing of Bratz products, it also has broader meanings. As Barbie is about individualism and materialism, Bratz is about communal consumption. Shopping is an activity to do with your teen friends and make connections in the Bratz universe. Even when they are not shopping, the fictional Bratz are often hanging out at the “smoothie bar,” located at the mall, consuming drinks. In the Bratz universe, parents and economic constraints are virtually nonexistent, but shopping with peers is a constant. Research confirms the logical assumption (and perhaps focus group finding?) that for young people, shopping with peers increases spending while shopping with family members decreases spending (Luo, 2005). Although Bratz celebrates commodity fetishism and a type of commodity feminism, it also celebrates “communal consumption fetishism,” where the process of consumption, a process involving shopping-as-desired-activity, is assumed to be a key part of the Bratz’ fan community lifestyle.

However, the basic linkage of tween girls with such values as appearance and shopping was not manufactured out of whole cloth by Bratz marketers. In fact, the extensive use of market research and focus groups by the company indicates that it picked up on many young girls’ existing attraction to such trends as appearance-based popularity and shopping as leisure. Nor are all themes in Bratz destructive: the emphasis on girl friendship and confidence are positive messages. But Bratz messages also accentuate and amplify commodity and consumption themes in a way that is very beneficial to the company’s bottom line. The spectacular nature of the brand and its ideology—an intertwined and
consistent consumption message that is coordinated and released in multiple media (books, magazines, DVD, TV) and in multiple content forms (ads and other promotional material, print and TV fiction, magazine columns and fashion layouts, toy premises and descriptions)—makes these themes glaringly obvious and potentially influential.

Based upon the economic success of the brand, there is no doubt that many girls are very much into Bratz, as others were/are into Barbie, American Girls, and the like. For some of the girls 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. One criticism of Debord’s original premise, in fact, is that it assumed a passive audience, with little ability for citizens to critically evaluate the spectacle (Compton, 2004; Kellner, 2003). Children still often have the ability to use their imagination without significant influence from commercial media (Götz, Lemish, Aidman, & Moon, 2005). On the other hand, one study using in-depth interviews of American Girl fans found that many of these girls strongly identified with the characters, fantasized about acquiring accessories, did not fully embrace the “girl power” message of that brand, and displayed problematic values such as ethnocentrism when discussing the brand and which dolls seemed the most “American” (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002).

Bratz are also part of a larger, accelerating children’s commercial culture. Critics have argued that heavy immersion in commercial/consumer culture can lead to the cultivation of commodity-influenced self-concepts that encourage social/economic division and insecurity and commercial susceptibility (Schor, 2005). Others have noted 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). Although audience-centered work is needed to further elaborate and legitimize this claim, based upon their economic success and scope, Bratz at least reinforce, for some, the idea that a life’s passion is for fashion, and also for a commodity orientation and a hyperconsumable society.

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NOTE
1. This particular passage was also briefly ridiculed in a 2006 episode of the US cable television program The Colbert Report, in a satirical segment on children’s culture. Stephen Colbert concludes about the Bratz writing exercise, “Like Shakespeare always said, ‘there’s nothin’ cooler than dropping the ‘G’s’ off thy gerunds.’”

REFERENCES


