

Unnamed Student

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Contemporary Children's Culture

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Agency Created and Mediated: Barbie and Corporate Culture

Within children's contemporary culture, the media works as a prominent figure enforcing dominant ideologies and transmitting traditional cultural values. Toys as a form of material culture encode the cultural values and ideals of their producers. The toy company Mattel has moulded Barbie into a global icon with attempts to create a space where children worldwide can dream and make fantasy worlds with Barbie. However, this space is heavily mediated and fundamentally influenced by a Western appropriation of other cultures. Using Shirley Steinberg's article "Barbie: The Bitch Still Has Everything" along with Article 17 of the UNCRC, it will be shown how Mattel uses calculated marketing strategies to make the Barbie franchise appear culturally-diverse, but ultimately work to stereotype ethnic cultures through a Western lens.

To appeal to a wide range of consumers, large corporations employ strategic marketing techniques to achieve the most success in their business. One of the most effective techniques would be cross-promotion. Mattel uses various strategies in marketing Barbie and employ the help of other large corporations to increase their power and establish a strong identity within children's contemporary culture. The act of cross-promotion that Mattel uses works as an important strategy to merchandise and mass market Barbie to children. In his article, "Young Children and Critical Media Literacy" Jeff Share explains how merchandising and mass media construct a flow that works to link mediums together; which is known as transmedia

intertextuality; this includes the synergy between television, music, clothing, food etc. In the case of Barbie, she has her own interactive website, animated TV shows and movies, as well as her own clothing line. These acts of synergy are important in the success of the Barbie franchise, but one of the most significant corporate decisions for Barbie would be Mattel's partnership with McDonalds.

With children as their main consumers, Mattel joined with McDonalds (a popular corporation in American pop culture) to market Barbie through fast food. This partnership featured miniature Barbie dolls with the purchase of every Happy Meal. Targeted towards children on a global scale, Happy Meals are considered iconic to the McDonalds experience. An important part in purchasing a Happy Meal is the accompanying toy in the paper box. With Barbie being one of these toys, Mattel is able to largely profit from parents buying their children Happy Meals.

As part of this cross-promotion, McDonalds creates advertisements promoting Barbie in their Happy Meals; this is most popularly seen in TV commercials aired between children shows. In these commercials, gender segregation is very prominent; only young girls are shown playing with the Barbie figurines while boys are featured playing with Hot Wheels race cars (both products produced by Mattel). This dichotomy between the sexes is also evident in every McDonald's restaurant where display cases featuring the Happy Meal toys clearly separate the female toys (Barbie) and the male toys (Hot Wheels). Even though children are given the agency to choose which toy they want, they are ultimately influenced by the messages that equate these toys to a particular gender. This is problematic within children's contemporary culture because it creates a fabricated space where children are believed to be given autonomy but are in fact heavily influenced by traditional cultural values perpetuated by these large corporations.

With a corporate agenda at the forefront, Mattel markets Barbie within a system that is only concerned with increasing revenue and maximizing consumption. This remains their main agenda despite the fact that the values they perpetuate can be harmful to children who engage with their products on a regular basis. Share furthers this by stating that “the system functions so well that it often goes unnoticed as natural part of the cultural environment” (Hammer and Kellner 129-130). As a society heavily immersed and influenced by multi-media messages, we become unaware of how much the media inherently effects the formation of our personal identity such as our ideas, beliefs and values. Since the consumer market for children is considerably large in corporate culture, young people are in the most danger of media persuasion. The mass-media platform that Mattel uses to produce and market Barbie allow certain harmful messages to be subconsciously internalized. One of the most controversial messages would be the reproduction of existing relationships between dominant and subordinate groups. This is seen specifically with Mattel’s attempt to attach a multicultural label to their franchise.

Mattel’s efforts in developing Barbie dolls that children of ethnic backgrounds can identify with shows how they have worked to capture the growing ethnic markets in consumer culture. By introducing an African American doll as well as dolls from various ethnicities, it may appear that Barbie teaches children the acceptance and knowledge of other races and cultures. However, this form of “education” is ultimately projected through a Western lens

In her article, “Barbie: The Bitch Still Has Everything,” Shirley Steinberg uses the Jamaican Barbie as an example of the stereotypical Western view of Jamaican heritage: “the Jamaican Barbie comes with large hoop earrings and a red bandana... [and is packaged with] pictures of Bob Marley, sugar cane and palm trees” (Hammer and Kellner 275). Steinberg

emphasizes that these ethnic depictions of Barbie dolls are harmful based on the fact that they are one-sided and stereotypical. She also suggests the idea that ethnicity is defined by those who are not white, basically where the original Barbie sets the standard from which "the other" dolls come from. While "ethnic Barbies" are characterized by their language, foods, native clothes etc., the "All-American Barbie" can do without these ethnic symbols (Hammer and Kellner 276). This is highly problematic because it is promoting misrepresentation of others, leaving a lasting impression on the way children view themselves and other children around the world.

In the UNCRC, specifically Article 17 (a) it states that governments should “encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child...” (UNCRC, Article 17, 1989). In other words, children should have access to reliable information from all media outlets whether it is from newspapers, books, radio, television and/or the Internet, and these mediums should not promote materials that could harm them. It can be argued that the standards to which Mattel produces and promotes Barbie is harmful to the way children understand cultural identity and ethnic differences. Barbie essentially glamorizes the stereotyped and Western view of "ethnic others," encouraging children to think the same way; this is essentially a breach upon their rights guaranteed in Article 17. Along with Mattel’s attempts at being multicultural, they also try to advocate Barbie as a social agent where children have their own space to create fantasy worlds and identities. In reality this is a fabricated space reinforced by adults and saturated with dominant Western ideologies.

Children are encouraged to play with their dolls in ways that evoke their imagination and creativity. Through play, children are also invited to imagine themselves in the dolls image. Within children’s contemporary culture Mattel works as an institutional voice *for* children, allowing young people the agency to play with their dolls in a pre-conditioned and mediated

space. The physical attributes as well as the ideals that Barbie portrays inconspicuously influence how children create and play with them. As discussed before, Mattel continually releases dolls that represent various ethnicities in an effort to attach a multicultural label to their franchise. Their attempts may open that space for "ethnic others" to relate to, however when the dolls are lined up together their physical features look virtually identical. Cultural differences are reduced to surface variations of skin tone and costumes that can be changed at the hands of the consumer (Terry and Urla, 180). Though this is encouraging children to be active agents, Barbie is presenting a dangerous environment where children play with stereotypically commoditized toys in a false space of representation.

As adult allies we have a role to play within children's contemporary culture to help young people reconstruct the cultural objects that mass media and pop culture produce. Mattel along with other large corporations transmit traditional pre-conceived morals and values into consumers through material culture. It is important to encourage young people to be critically conscious citizens rather than manipulated consumers. To achieve this we should not necessarily boycott Barbie but instead give children the agency to explore the material and cultural realities within the messages that surround them. Encourage children to ask questions about the media that they are constantly engaged with and educate them in a manner that will force them to think critically. This will create media literate individuals at a young age which will directly impact children's culture in a positive way.

Works Cited

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