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Post-feminism for children: feminism 'repackaged' in the Bratz films

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Abstract
After their release in 2001, Bratz dolls carved into Barbie's previously monopolistic share of teen doll sales. Amidst their growing popularity, cultural critics expressed a host of concerns about Bratz dolls, especially over how they sexualize youth, but the line grew to include a host of products like costumes, makeup kits, games, books, clothing, and movies. It also inspired new, similar doll lines from other toy companies. In this article, we situate the Bratz's popularity in a specific cultural moment tied to the history of modern feminism. We use a content analysis of the Bratz movie series to explore the feminist and post-feminist thematics it contains. We identify the images of girlhood that are being marketed through the films and explore how the series repackages not only girlhood but also feminism itself in a way that encourages girls to exchange political power for purchasing power.

Keywords
Bratz, children's media, content analysis, girlhood, post-feminism, qualitative methods

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Introduction

After their introduction in 2001, Bratz dolls 'took the toy industry by storm', nearly eclipsing Barbie as the top-selling doll in the pre-teen market (Jopson, 2011). Today, the product line has expanded to include numerous specialty dolls (e.g. Bratz Beach Party, Bratz X-Press It!, Bratzillas), playsets, lunchboxes, styling heads, apparel, makeup kits, and more. The Bratz have a cartoon show, animated movies, a theatrical release film, websites, music albums, video consoles, and DVD games. Products similar to Bratz dolls flooded the market following their introduction. Barbie owner Mattel, Inc. created 'My Scene' Barbies (D'Innocenzio, 2002) and 'Flavas' dolls (Kyles, 2003) to compete with Bratz. Recently, toys like 'Liv' dolls (Green, 2009), 'Monster High' dolls (Zimmerman, 2010), and NomStars have occupied toy aisles alongside Bratz.

This reinvention of 'hip' Barbie-style dolls for pre-teen girls occurred amidst and contributed to a fervent debate among parents, educators, and researchers about the effects these products have on children's understandings of gender, race, and sexuality (e.g. Coy, 2009; Orenstein, 2011). Their prominence is also part of a debate among modern feminist scholars about the significance of the current moment in the history of US feminism(s). From the mid-1990s on, scholars have documented multiple and contradictory trends in feminist activism. Some document an active third wave of feminism challenging patriarchy and the gendered, racialized, and heteronormative structure of society (see, for example, hooks, 2012; Smith, 2012). Others document backlash against feminist gains or a 'post-feminist' movement (see, for example, Hawkesworth, 2004; McRobbie, 2004). Scholars find evidence of both – and a tension between the two trends – in media artifacts aimed at adults (especially women) (see, for example, Brasfield, 2006; Levine, 2008).

In this article, we apply the critical feminist analytical lens scholars have used to examine adult media to a film series marketed to 'tweens' or children (especially girls) between the ages of 6 and 12: the Bratz. While most analyses of media aimed at children explore gender/racial stereotyping and sexualization of women and young girls (Bang and Reece, 2003; Coy, 2009), we examine the feminist and post-feminist themes present in the Bratz films. By interrogating the tension between feminism and post-feminism in this cartoon about girls 'with a passion for fashion', we uncover conflicting images of girlhood and how they contribute to a repackaging of modern girlhood.

(Post)feminisms in contemporary media for women and girls

Many scholars contend we are currently in a 'post-feminist' era (Gerhard, 2005; Hawkesworth, 2004). Like backlash to the women's movement, post-feminism is 'an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s came to be undermined', but the two are distinct phenomena (McRobbie, 2004: 255). Rather than being a direct response against feminist arguments, post-feminism engages with feminist progress while simultaneously dismissing it as irrelevant (Hawkesworth, 2004). Post-feminism rejects an alleged feminist emphasis on women as victims, instead focusing on individual lifestyle choices and the pleasures of being a woman (Braithwaite, 2002). It is 'a re-negotiation of antifeminist and feminist thought in and through popular representations of women' that

'explores the new possibilities afforded to women' while at the same time reasserting and renaturalizing the logic of separate spheres (Gerhard, 2005: 41). It is deeply tied to contemporary market ideologies and celebrates women's ability to transform themselves – or to literally become more powerful versions of themselves – through consumption (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006).

Post-feminism in women's media

Media is a primary place post-feminist thematics are emplaced. Indeed, 'elements of contemporary popular culture' are 'perniciously effective in regard to [the] undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism' (McRobbie, 2004: 255). Media artifacts as variant as beauty pageants, television, advertisements, films, books, and magazines engage with, validate, construct, and/or repudiate contemporary feminism (Joseph, 2009; Thompson, 2010). Analysis of such artifacts focuses on a few core qualifiers to evaluate whether they are feminist/post-feminist. Emphasis on collective power, advocating social change/equality, and highlighting bonds between women are taken as signs of feminist tone/theme (Brasfield, 2006; Peirce, 1990). Simultaneous engagement with and dismissal of feminism; emphasis on personal struggles and women's independence rather than collective efforts; individualization of social problems; conflating bodies, beauty, appearance, or consumption with power; and/or framing sexual objectification as freely chosen have all been used to qualify content as post-feminist (Bae, 2011; Coulter, 2010).

Using these measures, scholars have critically analyzed the feminist/post-feminist thematics of popular television series. For example, some contend that *Sex and the City* (*SATC*) is feminist because it portrays the 'tension [women experience] between independence and the desire for sex, love and partnership' (Wignall, 2008: 18), challenges heteronormative sex, and focuses on female friendship (Gerhard, 2005; Henry, 2004). Most, however, point out the show's post-feminist content – looking at how it ignores race and class struggles, for example (Henry, 2004). Likewise, contemporary beauty shows contain the same dueling thematics. For example, while the *Miss America Pageant* declined in popularity, shows like *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* – which promote finding individual fulfillment through cosmetic surgery and body-shaping technologies – gained large audiences (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006). Reality television is in tune with 'a particular version of femininity that resonates with contemporary ideologies of personal transformation, celebration of the body, and female empowerment' (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 256–257). These shows replace feminist emphasis on social change and liberation with narratives of personal struggles, choices, and triumphs over individual circumstances. They celebrate women's power to change their lives by changing their bodies. As such, they engage in a post-feminist conflation where 'appearance *is* one's character and capacity for achievement' (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 268).

Analyses of media aimed at children and/or girls

While youth are among the nation's most avid media consumers, few studies look explicitly at feminist messages (or the lack thereof) in media for younger audiences (e.g. Hains,

2009; Peirce, 1990). Instead, studies of children's media tend to look at issues like gender stereotyping (e.g. Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Taylor, 2003), bodies and/or sexualization of young girls (Durham, 2009; Weida, 2011), or representations of race/ethnicity (Bang and Reece, 2003). Studies reveal how children's media products reproduce inequality by leaning on racial/ethnic stereotypes, erasing the significance of race in shaping people's experiences (e.g. Sano, 2009; Winograd, 2011), or representing boys more often and in a wider range of roles (Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Taylor, 2003).

Even when claiming to be more progressive than previous films, movies for girls and children often reinforce patriarchal gender norms (Orenstein, 2011; Whelan, 2012). Notwithstanding the longstanding popularity of fairy tales that tend to emphasize ideal feminine beauty, recent films like *The Princess and the Frog, Brave*, and *Frozen* show more complex princesses who challenge stereotypes. Nevertheless, most Disney Princess films support narrow, traditional views of femininity (Whelan, 2012). Disney's monopolization of the 'princess narrative' means these messages shape the lives of girls in powerful ways (Orenstein, 2011).

Few studies evaluate the content of media aimed at children and young girls regarding whether or not it is somehow feminist. For example, Peirce's (1990) analysis of *Seventeen Magazine* revealed that much of the magazine's text is dedicated to girls' concerns about appearance, finding a man, and managing a household. Schlenker et al. (1998) extended that analysis to a longer time span and revealed that while visibly cognizant of feminist movements in the society, the magazine still provides only a limited presentation of female adolescence: one centered on appearance, beauty, and traditional femininity. *Seventeen*'s simultaneous engagement with the women's movement and dismissal of its importance for young girls' lives arguably make it more 'post-feminist' than 'feminist'.

Debate on whether or not children's media contains feminist elements tends to center on the concept of 'girl-power' or 'pro-girl rhetoric' that champions girls and girl-culture by 'reclaiming the feminine and marking it as culturally valued' (Hains, 2009: 98). Girl-power resonates with power-feminism (Wolf, 1994: 53), a version of feminist thought that represents women as powerful political and financial agents:

> …. [power-feminism] encourages [women] to identify with one another primarily through the shared pleasures and strengths of femaleness, rather than primarily through our shared vulnerability and pain [and] calls for alliances based on economic self-interest and economic giving back rather than on a sentimental and workable fantasy of cosmic sisterhood.

Here, women are powerful individual agential subjects who enjoy the strengths of femaleness and pursue self-interest instead of uniting on the basis of shared victimhood (Hains, 2009). Thus, power-feminism is an identity feminism predominantly embodied by economically privileged White women who control resources poor women and/or women of color do not (Guerrero, 2009; Hains, 2009). Hence, 'it is up to the individual woman to make her own way, without the need for collective political action or sustained critique of systemic injustices' (Levine, 2008: 376). By rendering '(women's) power as consumer power', power-feminism carries great salience in pop culture (Hains, 2009: 93).

The 'tremendous financial power' of young girls and/or tweens led to power feminist discourse finding 'an unexpected home in children's media' (Hains, 2009: 90–91).

Cartoons and products made specifically for girls (e.g. *Bratz, The Powerpuff Girls, Kim Possible*) are evidence that marketers feel tweens are 'worth courting' and that a new 'populist feminism' (i.e. 'girl-power') helps companies harness and benefit from girls' market power (Hains, 2009; Lamb and Brown, 2007). However, media artifacts aimed at tweens are not subjected to analysis that explores their feminist or post-feminist themes as frequently as those aimed at adults.

In this article, we examine how feminism is packaged and sold to tween/teen audiences in the Bratz movie series. Given that it is nearly impossible to shield children from interaction with market and media forces aimed at capturing, shaping, and capitalizing on girls' interests, closely examining how girlhood is constructed vis-à-vis feminist/post-feminist thematics in pop culture artifacts is an important research venture (Lamb and Brown, 2007; Orenstein, 2011). Our analysis builds on studies of media for women – which examine feminist/post-feminist thematics – and studies of media for girls/tweens, which typically examine race/gender stereotyping. Our underlying objective is to conceptually understand embedded messages about feminism in the popular Bratz movies, thereby allowing insight into the images of girlhood being marketed through the films. We focus specifically on how the films emphasize individuality and collectivity and how the merging of these two themes – post-feminist girl-power and second/third wave feminist notions of empowerment through friendship and language – repackages not only girlhood but also feminism itself.

Methodology

Our data come from a content analysis of Bratz movies marketed and released in the United States. We restrict our sample to the 11 (of a total 15) animated movies that are aimed at pre-teen girls: *Bratz: Starrin n' Stylin* (2004), *Bratz: Rock Angelz* (2005), *Bratz: Genie Magic* (2006), *Bratz: Passion 4 Fashion Diamondz* (2006), *Bratz: Fashion Pixiez* (2007), *Bratz: Kidz Sleep-Over Adventure* (2007), *Bratz: Kidz Fairy Tales* (2008), *Bratz: Girlz Really Rock* (2008), *Bratz: Pampered Petz* (2010), *Bratz: Genie Magic 2: Desert Jewelz* (2012), and *Bratz: Go to Paris the Movie* (2013). We excluded *Bratz: Babyz (*2006), *Bratz: Super Babyz* (2007), and *Bratz: Babyz Save Christmas* (2008) because ancillary analysis revealed them to be aimed at a younger audience and not directly relevant to our current objectives. We omitted *Bratz: The Movie* (2006) because its live-action format and audience are different than the other films. Finally, we excluded DVDs that recycled episodes of the TV series rather than full-length films because of differences in format, story line, and structure.

For each sampled film, we created detailed transcripts (dialogue and lyrics) as our primary source of textual data. While transcripts included visual descriptions of scenes and characters, visual and audio cues (e.g. tone of voice, characters' appearance) were also included via multiple viewings of each film. Analysis was conducted in two stages. First, we inductively coded films and transcripts for emergent patterns and themes. During this stage of open coding, we identified five broad and overlapping codes potentially relevant to the current analysis: representations of power, celebrations of girl-power, expressions of independence, emphasis on appearance, and typical roles of girls/women and boys/men. In the second stage, coders viewed the films again to further

develop sub-codes within each of the five preliminary categories. Data were then organized using three categories representing the foundation of our emergent analysis: individuality (for emphases on individual achievement/identity), collectivity (for emphasis on the power of the collective), and repackaged (for the repackaging of feminism and/or girlhood). This final stage of coding thus involved a transition from open coding to the development of robust integrative categories of understanding, culminating in the results discussed below.

The films center around four girls with a 'passion for fashion': Cloe, a blonde White girl who likes pink and any 'feminine frills with a rocker's edge'; Sasha, a Black teenager with long dark hair who loves 'street style' and 'staying on the beat of the latest new music'; Yasmin, a racially ambiguous teen of color who is slightly shy and prefers 'vintage bohemian' fashion; and Jade, an Asian teen with long, straight black hair who excels academically and is always designing 'new outfits for [her] girls to wear' (MGA Entertainment, 2015). While the Bratz are by design a racially diverse group, they lack the materialities of race. Indeed, as Guerrero (2009) points out, for the Bratz '[r]ace merely serves as another kind of 'accessory' that signifies 'hipness', without incurring the actual costs and consequences of real-world racial signification' (p. 5). The four girls run a self-titled fashion magazine (*Bratz Magazine*), attend school at 'Styles High', spend excessive amounts of time at the mall, and often find themselves at odds with their archenemies: Burdine, a self-absorbed, middle-aged White woman who serves as an editor of a competing fashion magazine and her high school-aged interns, sisters Kirstee and Kaycee, who the Bratz call 'the Tweevils' because they are 'twins' and 'evil'.

Film plots revolve around conflicts between the Bratz and/or the new friends they acquire in each story. Oftentimes, the Bratz invite a fifth character into their group and help her overcome obstacles to her dreams by giving her a fashion makeover. In the end, the Bratz's friendship is strengthened as they conquer conflict together and successfully empower others to follow in their footsteps. Through these characters and story lines, the films present tensions between individualism and the collectivity and illustrate girls' power to confront and solve problems together. Bratz films carefully balance 'nods' to both feminist and post-feminist rhetoric. In doing so, they promote a particular depiction of girlhood and a 'repackaged' power-feminism for tweens.

Tensions around individualism

Our sample includes over 450 examples of emphasized individuality. Nearly two-thirds of these cases celebrate an individual's self-expression and encourage pursuit of dreams. Oftentimes, however, girls who step out independently are framed negatively as selfish or reckless and incapable of solving problems without help. Thus, there is a tension between celebrating opportunities girls have to become who they want to be (positive individuality) and highlighting pitfalls of complete independence (negative individuality).

Individual characters who boldly express themselves are highly praised. In fact, the code 'express self' appears nearly 100 times in 11 films, and the phrase appears directly in music and conversations. For example, during a makeover scene in *Passion 4 Fashion Diamondz*, a Bratz friend named Sharidan walks the catwalk while music in the background plays:

Shinin' like real diamonds
Got a style your very own
Don't be afraid to let it show
C'mon express yourself
The way that you feel
Be who you are
Cuz you glow like a star
Strut it, love it, work it-yeah!
You got it goin' on
Time to take control – oh
On the catwalk here you go – oh
Believin' in yourself
And everyone can tell
That you're shinin' like real diamonds
Yeah – hit it
You're an individual
Don't be afraid to let it show
C'mon express yourself! – oh
Anyway you want to …

In *Starrin n' Stylin*, the Bratz's teacher echoes this sentiment when he tells students to'[c]hoose an artistic medium – any medium – and express yourself. The project you turn in should tell me who you are and what it's really like to be you'. In each of these cases, when an individual expresses herself, others respond positively to her decision to take charge and embrace 'what it's really like to be [her]'.

Self-awareness is also valued in the films in a way that illustrates individualized conceptions of inequality present in post-feminist pop culture tropes, where 'questions of equality and choice have been resolved in women's favor' and 'it is up to the individual woman to make her own way' (Levine, 2008: 360). For example, in *Genie Magic*, Sasha announces, 'People, my dream is about to become reality. B-HIP Radio is auditioning teen DJs for a part-time gig. Sasha is about to take over the airwaves!' In *Pampered Petz*, Bratz friend Lola comments, 'This is like a dream come true. My two greatest passions, music and animals, together in one night!' The films endorse the idea that girls should be aware of and use talents to pursue their dreams, but present these ventures as a matter of choice, simplifying the path to success. After all, the Bratz establish a fashion magazine, open a fully equipped office suite, and start a rock band in the span of one film (*Rock Angelz*) with minimal trouble.

However, the films also communicate that girls are dependent upon and responsible to others. The Bratz are most likely to celebrate individual pursuit of dreams that enable the collective good. Individual accomplishment is limited (or impossible) without the collectivity. For example, when the Bratz plan to start their own magazine in *Rock Angelz*, they map out how each member will share responsibilities according to her unique skills:

Yasmin: You know, we should really have our own magazine …
Cloe: I could write an advice column. 'Dear Cloe, Fashion Emergency'.
Yasmin: And I can write about trends, where to stand, where to work it. And where to learn the latest poses.
Sasha: And I can be the editor … I mean, the music editor. I'd review what's down and slammin' and gets everybody jamming.
Jade: And I'd be the most cutting-edge.
All Bratz: Lifestyle editor!

Each individual has a clear sense of what part she can play as well the others' talents, which is evidenced by the Bratz' completion of Jade's sentence. Their individuality is celebrated inasmuch as it enables the group to achieve a collective goal: magazine publication. As this example illustrates, celebration of individuality is carefully balanced in relationship with the collectivity, which in the films is not society generally, but the friendship of the four main characters – the Bratz.

This balanced celebration is also apparent when individuals try to work independently, but fall short. Just as collective goals require individuals, individuals require the collectivity to be successful. For example, in *Passion 4 Fashion Diamondz*, the girls meet Sharidan, who is afraid to model her designs. Yasmin encourages her:

Sharidan: Girls, I don't think I can do it. Maybe … I don't have that special something.
Yasmin: Everyone has that special something. It's just a matter of bringing it out. And look at you – you're totally stylin'.

Cloe gives Sharidan a necklace for good luck, and Sharidan marches out onto the catwalk, strutting to the following music: 'You've got it – something like no one else. You can tell. That you've got it. The way that you sparkle and the way that you shine'.

Examples where individual girls struggle without the support of the group find parallel in cases of self-interested individuals who attempt to operate independently and fail. When the Bratz or their friends strike out on their own, they fail and/or incur the displeasure of their peers. In this typical plot pattern for the series, a character succeeds only after reunification with her friends. For example, in *Starrin n' Stylin*, Yasmin hurts her friends when she publishes secrets in her school newspaper column to increase her own popularity and readership. In the end, Yasmin apologizes, 'I'm sorry … I wanted to spice it up. Then, when everyone started talking about it, I felt important'. After this apology, the girls accomplish goals (planning prom and completing their school group project) that had previously vexed them in the film because of their inability to work together.

A similar theme, the tension between individuality and connectedness to the collectivity, is present in other films. In *Girlz Really Rock*, the Bratz' friend Anna expresses doubt about becoming a professional ballerina when she sings, 'In my heart, I've always had a dream. But all alone, what does it really mean? … Is my dream worth the price?' In *Pampered Petz*, Lola, a middle-aged woman of color who runs a pet shelter, is estranged from her daughter who is very career-driven. 'Celia is a very important lawyer … She doesn't have time for me', Lola laments. The films celebrate Yasmin as a good writer,

Anna as a talented dancer, and Celia as a powerful lawyer, but the tension is clear. Pursuing individual goals is attached to relational sacrifices and individual women/girls are framed as incapable of accomplishing goals without the help of peers. While the Bratz speak freely and make numerous personal choices, they cannot take successful individual action. The only way the Bratz successfully navigate their lives is through the power of the collective expressed in the form of small-group friendship.

Power of the collective

Together, the Bratz wield significantly more power than any one individual in the films. They apply this power to collective dreams of starting a rock band or creating a fashion magazine and to each member's individual dreams, like Sasha's music career. They also use it to reshape the identities and prospects of individuals invited into their circle, such as helping Sharidan model her designs. The girls' collective power is embodied through physical interactions and verbal celebrations of friendship such as high-fiving each other while squealing with excitement. For example, in the opening scenes of *Go to Paris The Movie*, the Bratz decide to throw a party to celebrate 15 years of friendship. After the decision, they high five each other and dance around:

Yasmin: Brainstorm. Let's celebrate our 15th anniversary by throwing one, big …
All Bratz: Partay! [all high five]
[disco music starts, all dance around the bed]

This group interaction is typical. In our sample, there were over 50 examples of the Bratz high-fiving, hugging, and gathering for 'emergency huddles' to problem-solve. Group hugs often signal individual (re)admission into the collective. In *Desert Jewelz*, Alia, a girl who was betrayed by a villain pretending to be family, is invited to join the Bratz family:

Alia: It is good to finally know the truth about my family. But now I also know that I am truly alone.
Katia: That is not true. You are not alone. We shall be your new family.
Sebastian: That is the truth.
[Alia runs over, group hugs]
All Bratz: [cheer]

Group physical interaction is often accompanied by simultaneous verbal exclamations ('Bratz!'). The final product is a group plan superior to anything one individual could come up with. This process is exemplified when the Bratz name their magazine in *Rock Angelz*:

Cloe: We need something stylin'.
Sasha: With attitude.
Yasmin: That's us!
[…]
Jade: That's it – Brats! [Creates image on the computer screen]

Cloe: Cool Cat, are you crazy? That's what Burdine and the Tweevils call us.
Yasmin: So, we make it our own.
Sasha: Give it some [pauses] attitude [turns the 'S' into a 'Z' on the computer]
Yasmin: But maybe a little too much attitude?
Cloe: I got it. Hold on [makes a halo appear above the 'R'].
All Bratz: Bratz! [everyone high fives]

Here, they desire a name representing their collective, decide that attitude and style describe them, take a name the Tweevils call them (Brats), and then transform it using attitude (a Z instead of an S) and style (a halo above the R). Transforming a word that has previously been used to insult them into a source of empowerment pays significant homage to second and third wave feminist and queer scholars who, noting the power of everyday words and spaces, reclaim terms that were once sources of discrimination, infusing them with new political meaning (e.g. Cooper, 2002). It is important to note, however, that Bratz reclaiming has more to do with style/attitude (a.k.a. 'Brattitude') than politics.

Collaboration is deeply embedded in the plot of each film. Typical plot conflicts occur when individuals are separated from the collective. For example, in *Kidz Fairy Tales*, Sasha, Jade, Cloe, and Yasmin spend a significant amount of time separated and attempting to solve problems alone, but failing. It starts with them preparing to put on a play. The girls lambast young women in fairy tales for being 'lame' and ineffectual in the face of challenges. They argue if they had been in their place, they would overcome those challenges easily:

Sasha: [*Little Red Riding Hood*] Oh grandmother. What big eyes you have. Oh grandmother, what big teeth you have! Oh!! [*drops her things*]. Oh brother. Guys! We're supposed to go on in 15 minutes and I still can't get into it. I mean, how lame is little red riding hood anyway? Her grandmother's got fur, sharp teeth, and whiskers! Duh!! Run you little goof! She's a wolf.
Jade: [*Snow White*] Tell me about it, Sasha! Snow White is even more embarrassing! Cook and clean? For seven messy guys?? No pay check? No thanks! Loser!
Cloe: [*Rapunzel*] Sorry Cool Cat, I think I win. Rapunzel? First of all, how about a name change?
Yasmin: [*Cinderella*] Hmmm. I always kinda liked the name Rapunzel. Anyway, try playing wimpy Cinderella sometime. I mean, how hard is it to sneak out to a ball?

The Bratz are then thrown into an alternate reality where they face what fairy tale heroines did. Their success comes only when they work together rather than alone. Once reunited, they reflect on nearly failing to defeat fairy tale villains. Jade remarks, 'And [the princesses] were alone. We had friends to help us!'

Jade's remark highlights the Bratz' shift in perspective. Early on they criticize the princesses' inability to overcome gendered obstacles, such as being forced to cook and clean for men. Their ridicule embodies post-feminist blindness to ongoing

inequalities in unpaid and paid domestic labor that continue to impact women's lives – especially women of color (see, for example, Bae, 2011; Joseph, 2009). In the standard Bratz narrative, the girls would have helped the princesses understand the power they have. Instead, the Bratz realize the princesses were up against an unfair system (i.e. working without their friends). This consciousness-raising experience helps the Bratz overcome the horizontal hostility (i.e. negative feelings toward another marginalized group) they previously expressed toward the other heroines (White and Langer, 2006). They conclude it is unfair to judge girls whose lives they have not experienced. This conclusion aligns with second and third wave feminist resistance to essentializing privileged women's experiences; promotion of the value of difference; and acceptance of multiple, coexisting standpoints as valid starting points for inquiry and activism (e.g. Mohanty, 2013). It also complicates viewing the Bratz through a strictly post-feminist lens because their blindspot is challenged by a consciousness-raising experience, and their final conversation emphasizes the need for collective action to overcome obstacles.

In *Fashion Pixiez*, the Bratz work with two pixie sisters, Symboline and Brianna, to reanimate their mother, who Lena (a villain) turned into a tree. At first, Symboline is alienated from her family and socializes with evil pixies who spend their nights dancing (disconnected from one another, as though they are in a trance) in a forest night club. Her family's problems are solved when the Bratz bring Symboline and Brianna together to help their mother:

Brianna: No matter what you see or feel, keep holding hands! The bond of family and friendship is stronger than Lena's power! Be brave, hold on to each other.

All Girls: [in unison, holding hands around a tree while dark pixies and Lena try to stop them]: Be brave, hold on to each other, never let go! Be brave, hold on to each other, never let go! Be brave, hold on to each other, never let go! [Explosion. A woman appears.]

Mom: Well done, my daughters!

Here, the girls harness their collective power, and all of the film's problems are resolved simultaneously: Lena is defeated, Symboline is turned back into a good pixie, her mother is brought back to life, and the family is reunited.

As these examples show, collective power resolves tensions around individuality in the Bratz films. Individuals become their most powerful selves when connected to the collective. The collective allows pursuit and accomplishment of goals without relational sacrifices or failure. This creates a paradox in the films, however. The Bratz celebrate individuality only so long as the individual submits to their collective identity. Where a feminist collective gains power from diverse individuals who freely engage in it and aims that power at collective liberation (e.g. Smith, 2012), a post-feminist collective gives power to individuals who submit to it. When paired with the series' focus on fashion and limited vision of femininity, individuals become powerful via the collectivity through conformity to beauty-oriented group standards. Consumerism becomes the means to solve problems and enact collective power.

Consumerism as girl-power

The Bratz's collective problem-solving power is a dominant theme in each film, but they wield it in consumerist contexts and ways. Stores, the food court, and the outdoor courtyard at the mall are often where the girls huddle up to generate solutions to problems they face. In fact, shopping scenes are featured over 60 times in the sample and present in 80% of the films. In addition, the Bratz often use transformations of an individual's appearance as a means to solve problems – transformations that are then modeled onstage (a dressing room, catwalk, or concert venue) in front of an audience.

One of the films' most common plot arcs involves the Bratz bringing a fifth character into their group and collectively empowering her through a fashion makeover. A version of this takes place in *Genie Magic, Passion 4 Fashion Diamondz, Fashion Pixiez, Pampered Petz, Girlz Really Rock*, and *Genie Magic 2: Desert Jewelz*. In *Passion 4 Fashion Diamondz*, the Bratz give Sharidan a makeover so she will have the courage to express herself as a burgeoning fashion designer:

Sharidan:	Oh, girls, I'm so sorry, but couldn't one of you take my fashions and model them for me? No one wants to see me up on a catwalk. I mean, look at me. Besides, my parents would never let me do something so crazy.
	[…]
Cloe:	They're your fashions. You've gotta model 'em with pride!
Jade:	Yeah, girlfriend!
Sasha:	People – sounds like our girl here needs a confidence adjustment.
All Bratz (together):	Makeover!

The Bratz insist Sharidan take ownership of her fashion talent by modeling her own designs, but they collectively take ownership of her to empower her to do so ('*our* girl needs a confidence adjustment') (emphasis added).

In *Genie Magic*, the Bratz help Katia move from being socially awkward and insecure to a proud and confident teenager. As they try on clothes at the mall, all five girls find outfits that are a fusion of the Bratz style (tight jeans or short skirts) and Katia's Indian cultural accessories (such as forehead jewelry similar to a bindi). Katia explains her transformation to her father: 'Father, it was wonderful. It was the most enjoyable time I have ever had! I made friends. We danced, we laughed. I had a life! Everybody liked me'. Katia's statement is a good summary of how the Bratz negotiate the tension around individualism and the paradox of expressing individuality through conformity. Girls find their true individual identities ('I had a life!') through the process of being incorporated into the group ('Everybody liked me'). The group establishes the boundaries for self-expression.

Characters' self-expression, while lauded as authentic and unique, involves routinized, uniform displays of femininity and consumption of material products. When the Bratz makeover Sharidan, for example, the music playing in the background proclaims, 'got a style of your own, don't be afraid to let it show' as Jade removes Sharidan's glasses. The song says 'c'mon, express yourself, the way that you feel' as the three other

girls approach Sharidan with cosmetics and 'be who you are, cuz you glow like a star' as someone puts eyeliner on her. Lyrics like 'time to take control' and 'believin' in yourself' play as the Bratz cut, color, and style her hair. In the end, she is told to walk the catwalk and 'express [her]self', but instead of a farm girl with glasses, Sharidan is now a Bratz duplicate with flared jeans, makeup, and blonde highlights in her brown hair.

Style and/or fashion are mentioned over 180 times throughout the films. One of the most common phrases the Bratz say to affirm an individual is that she is 'super-stylin'. Clothing and accessories are the outward markers of belonging to the group. Since it is important to display these outward markers of belonging and power, post-makeover fashion shows like Sharidan's are a hallmark of Bratz films. This is documented in the first Bratz makeover scene, when the girls go for some 'shopping therapy' after a stressful week in *Starrin n' Stylin*. The scene comes to a screeching halt when Jade comes out of the dressing room in an outfit the others do not approve of:

Cloe and Sasha:	Huh?
Jade:	What?
Sasha:	Kool Kat?
Cloe:	It's prom, not Halloween.
Jade:	I just really wanna make a splash with my prom outfit.
Cloe:	Mmhmmmm.
Jade:	You don't like it?
Cloe:	Mmm, don't think so.

The Bratz hold Jade accountable to their style standards by giving negative feedback on her outfit choice. Jade says she is only trying to 'make a splash', which is connected to celebration of individuality so frequently echoed in the films, but because the group disapproves of her choice, she changes her mind. Later in the film, she redeems herself when the Bratz have a fashion show while getting ready for prom. A telling song plays in the background:

> You know what they say
>
> Clothes make the girl [yeah]
>
> Clothes make the girl
>
> My friends
>
> We take it seriously
>
> Gotta get it right
>
> We know wherever we go together
>
> We've got to be
>
> Up to the minute
>
> Gotta see me in it
>
> Like my outfit?
>
> I got a passion for fashion

An obsession for dressin' up
I gotta make an impression
So what?
I get my look all together
I can take on the world
You know what they say
Clothes make the girl

After the song, Yasmin declares, '[You] look especially hot, Jade' and Cloe remarks, 'It's official. Jade, the Styles High fashion maven has returned'. Jade wins prom queen, evidence of her peers' approval. For the Bratz, choosing the right outfit is the difference between making the right and wrong impression and, consequently, being able to 'take on the world'. A style mistake – or consumer error – has consequences for a girl's power and agency. In all the examples above, characters' problems are solved through successful consumerism. Sharidan gains confidence to pursue her dream, Katia learns what it means to be a teenager, and Jade reclaims pride in her fashion sense by selecting the proper type of fashion artifacts.

The plot arcs for each film involve the Bratz and their friends creatively solving problems and overcoming adversaries. In *Go to Paris the Movie*, the villain captures Cloe and Jade, who are rescued after creatively leaving a message for Sasha and Yasmin using makeup that doubles as invisible ink. In *Kids Fairy Tales*, the girls are isolated and threatened by mythical villains, but one by one, they find each other (gradually re-establishing their collective power) and outsmart their enemies.

In each film, the Bratz outsmart and overpower adversaries using creativity sometimes culminating in a physical showdown between the Bratz (good) and their foes (evil). The Bratz win these showdowns, such as when they make the evil queen and the big bad wolf fall into a well (*Kids Fairy Tales)* or kick evil supermodel Nicole in the face to knock her out (*Go to Paris the Movie*). Fashion accessories and gadgets aid their physical prowess so that the Bratz' 'passion for fashion' is rarely overshadowed. While their victories could carry potentially empowering messages for young girls, displays of stereotypical femininity are the main method through which they collectively assist an individual in solving her problems. Thus, the feminist liberatory tool of political consciousness raising is repackaged and resold to a pre-teen audience in the form of individual conformity to the group through consumerism.

Conclusion

Research on implicit and explicit messages embedded in the children's media has addressed issues such as gender stereotyping (Gooden and Gooden, 2001; Taylor, 2003), bodies and/or sexualization of young girls (Coy, 2009; Weida, 2011), or race/ethnicity (Bang and Reece, 2003). In this study, we applied the critical feminist analytical lens used to address questions about media targeted at adults (e.g. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Levine, 2008) to better understand images of girlhood being marketed through the Bratz. The resulting analysis yielded three important findings.

First, there is significant tension around individualism in the films. Although individual expression is applauded, individuals who express themselves apart from the collective fail to accomplish their goals resulting in personal (insecurity) and relational (isolation) consequences. Second, the collective is the dominant entity in the films. Collective power is emphasized through group interactions (high fives, hugs, and huddles) as well as in the recurring plot of individual failure being overcome by collective success. The Bratz navigate the tension around individualism via the collective; paradoxically highlighting that in the films, individuals are empowered through conformity. Accordingly, our final finding, the means through which this collective power is applied to individuals is most often through consumerism. Individuals are remade during makeover scenes, and outward appearance becomes the marker of belonging and harnessing the power of the group.

Congruent with varying feminisms, these findings have significant implications for those engaging with this and related media products. Circumventing consistently embracing post-feminist tropes, the films oscillate between embracing/valuing feminist rhetoric and repackaging it in decidedly post-feminist ways. Clearly situated in a post-feminist 'politics of contradiction and tension', the films portray strong girls, but link their strength to commercial merchandising (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 260). The series avoids directly endorsing post-feminist emphases on individuality. The Bratz girls unite with each other and a diverse set of 'others' to achieve change. However, rather than work to make a better society, they unite to make a better self. Using shopping and a very specific type of femininity, they create a commercialized and uniform self that is lauded as individual and authentic.

That self is only powerful through and because of the group. The power of the group is turned inward, toward its members (or potential members) and their struggles. Conformity to group standards of image and behavior activates this power, but erases difference and blinds the Bratz (and subsequently the audience) to existing inequalities or challenges to empowerment. While individual liberation through collective power and friendship appears initially as a feminist value in the films, it is a 'hegemonic feminism' at best – one that works hard to get certain women (the Bratz and their friends) in advantageous positions within an existing social system but does little to challenge the overall system. The closest the Bratz come to recognizing systems of inequality is in *Kidz Fairy Tales*, but instead of challenging the social world of the princesses, they escape it by using the power of friendship and finish by lamenting that most of the princesses did not have access to best friends to help them.

The individual Bratz' inability to maintain separate (and also empowered) identities, as well as the failure of the Bratz to take action against the system of inequality they briefly recognize, renders the expression of collective power in the Bratz as more than simply a new version of feminism or a conflict between different generations of feminism (Henry, 2004). Larger social problems are occasionally invoked as hurdles. However, they are more routinely left out of the picture when the girls travel the world, start a magazine, or make a band unencumbered by financial worries or the gendered and racialized landscape of women's daily lives that shapes their access to opportunity. What is left is emphasis on the collective, but in a nonpolitical middle ground – a 'powerful, [but] not political, sisterhood' (Gerhard, 2005: 39).

This non-political middle ground is characteristic of post-feminist friendship dynamics that some scholars have identified in adult media (see e.g. Gerhard, 2005; Wignall, 2008). Others find that while contemporary media may take feminism into account in small ways, it remains largely untouched by feminist gains in the 20th century. For instance, Peirce (1990) and Schlenker et al. (1998) found that *Seventeen Magazine* responded to second wave feminism by incorporating more intellectual material in the 1970s and 1980s, but the primary focus of the magazine remained on 'appearance, finding a man, and taking care of a house'. It thus incorporated some aspects of feminism without abandoning its adherence to the larger system inequality, all the while arguing it was simply 'giving [girls] what they want' (Schlenker et al., 1998: 139). In much the same way, the Bratz are unabashedly the 'girls with a passion for fashion', who advocate temporary makeovers rather than significant social change.

While the products fluctuate, the broader dynamic of encouraging young girls to express themselves through consumerism – because, as the *Bratz* say, 'we've got to be up to the minute' (*Starrin n' Stylin*) – remains. Given the size of the market of tween products and its adaptability, scholars must be vigilant in documenting how producers and corporations continue to reinvent or repackage what it means to be a girl. Given the implications this (re)definition has for children, the conversation is being held not only within academic circles but also in living rooms and in front of TVs among parents and children. Media literacy for all generations is crucial at a time when consumerism and identity have become nearly impossible to unravel from one another (Lamb and Brown, 2007; Orenstein, 2011). 'Given the kind of products marketed to children, as well as the intended and unintended messages embedded in advertising campaigns' (Linn, 2004: 19), interrogating content through critical scholarly analyses like the one we present here is an important aspect of media literacy.

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