

AMERICAN GIRL: A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO DOLLS, CHILDHOOD, AND  
CONSUMER CULTURE

MIRAH KIRSHNER

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE  
YORK UNIVERSITY  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

JUNE 2020

©Mirah Kirshner, 2020

## **Abstract**

Through a theorization and analysis of the American Girl doll brand, in this dissertation I illustrate the mutually constructing connection between childhood and consumer culture. There are several elements that contextualize my work including historical research on and a contemporary theorizing of childhood, dolls, motherhood, and consumer culture. As part of my study, I look to historical accounts of dolls, childhood, and consumer culture starting from the late nineteenth century. Locating children and consumer culture only within the contemporary moment functions to deny the integral relationship between the two and thus reinforces the modern myth that childhood, in some idealized past, was innocent of market forces. As such, I contextualize the very category of the modern child in consumer culture rather than document how a pre-existing, un-marred state of childhood was infiltrated by the market. I argue that childhood and motherhood are connected and central to grappling with the nature and influence of consumer culture. Thus, I also address the role of mothers as consumers, and explore motherhood and childhood as shaped in part through consumer culture. Furthermore, I seek to explore representations of girlhood through an examination of both print and digital resources. In a broad sense, therefore, this study offers insight not only into cultural understandings of childhood, but also into the social production and reproduction of consumer culture through identity. That is, I examine how understandings of childhood function to (re)produce consumer culture and how consumer culture in turn, functions to (re)produce childhood.

## **Dedication**

For my mother and father,

Thank you for starting me on this journey many decades ago.

You instilled in me a passion for education, the courage and curiosity to question taken for granted notions, and a love of the creative.

You also imparted on me the significance of seeing worthy projects through in spite of their inevitable twists and turns.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my committee members: Liz Podnieks for your patience, direction, and many insights; Cheryl Cowdy for your input and encouragement; and Steve Bailey for your wisdom and guidance through this long journey. Thanks to Dennis Denisoff for your astute input on my proposal. I also want to thank Natalie Coulter for your generosity and encouragement. Thanks to Andrew Schmitz for your support in the early stages of my writing. Many thanks to Leigh Felesky and Malinda Campbell for cheering me on and championing me through so many of the ups and downs of this project. Hélène Lawler, thank you for your excellent coaching and listening skills. I also want to offer thanks to the staff at the Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, NY who supported my work through the Strong Research Fellowship and beyond.

Clara and Amélie thank you for just being you; you inspire me every day. Finally, Ron Philipp thank you for coming along on the twists and turns of this journey with me. I thank you for your many years of love, support, and encouragement; this project wouldn't have been possible without you.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>DEDICATION .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
CONSUMER CULTURE.....	12
PRE-LIQUID AND LIQUID MODERN STATES.....	18
CHILDREN AND CONSUMER CULTURE.....	21
MOTHERHOOD, CHILDHOOD, AND CONSUMER CULTURE.....	26
DOLLS.....	29
THE PROMISES OF CONSUMER CULTURE .....	32
AMERICAN GIRL .....	34
<b>CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....</b>	<b>37</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	37
CHILDREN AND CONSUMER CULTURE: DEFINING THE FIELD.....	39
THE MISSING CHILD AND THE MISSING CONSUMER CULTURE .....	40
HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON CHILDREN AND CONSUMER CULTURE .....	44
MOTHERHOOD AND CONSUMPTION .....	56

TOYS.....	57
DOLL STUDIES.....	59
AMERICAN GIRL .....	66
CONTRIBUTION .....	70
<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>73</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	73
EXPLANATION OF METHODS .....	74
<i>Semiotics</i> .....	74
<i>Discourse Analysis</i> .....	78
<i>Visual Discourse Analysis</i> .....	82
RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....	83
DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS .....	84
<i>Initial Objects of Analysis</i> .....	84
<i>Expanding the research</i> .....	85
<i>Locating patterns of representation</i> .....	87
<i>Contextualizing patterns</i> .....	88
CONCLUSION.....	88
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: LITTLE MOTHERS.....</b>	<b>90</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	90
INTENSIVE MOTHERING .....	92
CONSUMING MOTHERS .....	97
INTRODUCTION TO BITTY BABY.....	99
PRECIOUS GIRLHOOD.....	100

MOMMY PLAY .....	103
MOMMY AT HOME .....	106
LOVE AS CONSUMPTION.....	107
PREPARING FOR BABY AS CONSUMPTION .....	110
MOMMY EXPERTS.....	113
THREE READERS .....	116
NOSTALGIC SHOPPING .....	120
LIKE MOMMY, LIKE BABY.....	123
CONCLUSION.....	128
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: MATERIAL GIRLS .....</b>	<b>131</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	131
CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY .....	132
INTRODUCING “TRULY ME”.....	139
SELF-DISCOVERY FOR SALE.....	140
UNIQUENESS ON ORDER.....	145
FAST FASHION & SELF ENRICHMENT.....	147
TWINNING.....	148
ANIMATED DOLLS.....	152
CONCLUSION.....	156
<b>CHAPTER SIX: DIGITAL DOLLS.....</b>	<b>158</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	158
THE AMERICAN GIRL WEBSITE.....	161

SOCIAL MEDIA.....	168
STOP MOTION ON AGTUBE.....	170
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>185</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	185
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS .....	187
CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .....	192
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	194
<b>WORKS CITED .....</b>	<b>196</b>



## Chapter One: Introduction

I am sitting at a table eating lunch in New York City in early January 2011. We are visiting the city on a short winter holiday. My children are seated with me happily eating their meal. My other table companions are quietly tucked into highchairs thoughtfully provided by the café. So far this morning, we've looked at books, toys, and toy displays. We've wandered past racks of clothing. We've visited the hairdresser and had ears pierced. I haven't purchased anything for myself or anything directly for my daughters though; it is the other quiet companions that are central to this visit. Hair gleaming and tightly braided and earrings shining, the two dolls occupying the specially sized highchairs opposite me are the *raison d'être* for our visit.

We are on their turf, so to speak, in the American Girl flagship store. The store is dedicated to selling the company's branded items, all of which centre around the American Girl doll lines. It is a massive, multi-floor, department store-like shop complete with café, doll hospital, hairdresser, and personal shopping departments. There are lots and lots of goods for sale: dolls, books, girls' clothing, dolls' clothing, and tons of doll-related toys and accessories. We've been primed for this visit by the American Girl catalogues delivered to our home. These extensive periodicals feature the wide range of items sold by the company. It is the general school yard chatter, the themed birthday parties, and the playdate activities involving the dolls and their array of accoutrements that introduce us to this particular branded universe. Indeed,

the toys provide the basis for shared experiences and act as touchstones of familiarity and commonality; they are the starting point for many hours of play.

They are also startlingly expensive and wandering around this grand store confirms just that. I'll be honest; I'm feeling torn about this particular outing. Part of the pull to this Disney-like place is the want to participate in a social experience that holds meaning in a community, a community in which girls talk about American Girl, and being part of those conversations seems to require some level of participation with the brand. Part of the reluctance I feel is that this cultural experience is entirely manufactured with profit in mind and harnesses girlhood as its means. The store is a temple of consumption and its excess is staggering.

I am both grateful that we can experience this over-the-top, unique, girl-centred, wonderland of a place, and simultaneously uncomfortable with all of the decadent excess and the seemingly happy, sugary sweet stories of girlhood that surround us. Furthermore, even in the writing of this experience, I am aware of my privilege: I have the luxury to experience such a place and to not only feel, but to write about, ponder, and study my ambivalence about it. For me, being in this location, the massive flagship American Girl store, acts as a starting point to considering issues about subjectivity, social structure, and consumer culture. It is a moment of reflection on this place and this brand that illuminates, in a "personal as political" sense, the weightiness in amongst the shelves of clothing, dolls, toy cars, and doll furniture. Little did I know at the time that my feelings of ambivalence, in fact, parallel larger contradictory and yet mutually constructing relationships, histories, and beliefs about motherhood, childhood, and consumer culture.

Both my maternal grandmother and mother played with dolls in their childhoods, but when I was growing up, in my family, dolls were a more controversial play choice. There was no American Girl back then, but there were other choices of branded dolls. I was allowed Barbie, but not the Baby Alive doll I so desired nor indeed any baby or girl doll. My mother didn't want her daughters' playtime filled by diapering and tea parties, which she feared most doll play would encourage. She wanted her children to be able to dream about possibilities outside of the suburban motherhood that now structured her days. Interestingly, she didn't mind Barbie. She wasn't fazed by the sexualization for which the doll has been so criticized because Barbie was the ever-talented, independent, and capable doll who could be an astronaut or a firefighter, though truthfully, she<sup>1</sup> never took on either role in my house. Instead, she bore the results of my haircuts and marker-embossed tattoos. Barbie wore the braces I fastened for her and withstood periodic surgery as her limbs were systematically removed and reassembled—to greater and lesser success—as I wondered about the mechanics of the doll. Barbie was sometimes an independent, ambitious, and lone tenant of the homemade apartment I fastened out of a cubby in my bookshelf and sometimes the unfortunate bottom occupant of a hastily cleaned up mound of toys. The doll's role in my playtime was far from her 1950s

---

<sup>1</sup> I have elected to use the pronouns “she” and “her” to refer to the doll, even though “it” could equally be used. As I will explore later in the dissertation, dolls are often personified and thus terms such as “her” and “she” are used to refer to the toy; Certainly, this toy was for me highly gendered and animate and so I have chosen “she” and “her” over the more grammatically sound “it.”

origins as a glamorously-styled teenage fashion model with optional wedding dress (Mattel Inc., 1958).

Years later my daughters had dolls, including the aforementioned American Girls, and truthfully, I was ambivalent about the toys. My challenges with dolls for my own children weren't just about wanting them to embrace possibilities beyond what I saw as prescribed gendered roles. As my own play evidenced, and academic scholars have illustrated, playing with dolls does not necessarily mean that the player interacts with the toy in a prescribed manner (e.g. Formanek-Brunell, 1998; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2006). Girls don't always play the sweet mama to their dolls. Certainly, I had critical assessments of dolls for being sexualized or nurturing a sugar-and-spice-and-everything-nice girlhood. And I queried how race, ethnicity, gender, privilege, ability, and class were represented in different lines of dolls and how these representations might impact my children's perceptions of the world.

Another big part of my unease lay in buying mass-produced dolls. For me, engaging with the dolls meant leading my children into a branded world that markets a particular kind of girlhood that is undeniably shaped by purchasing. American Girl, the brand that provides the objects of study for my research, evokes a seemingly appealing, if problematic, kind of girlhood of wonder, innocence, and goodness. I've selected American Girl as it is a popular contemporary brand. The catalogue pages, website, and the dolls themselves connote the previously mentioned qualities. Indeed, the dolls, as with any corporately mass-produced toys, are accessed through participation in the marketplace. The goodness and wholesomeness evoked by the dolls is shaped through consumption. The dolls and the numerous associated branded products exist to be purchased. As such, the facilitation of the girlhood qualities

associated with the brand are linked with buying items, however, that link is buried in the rhetoric of an idealized childhood.

As objects of consumption, mass-produced, branded dolls are potent artifacts through which to articulate the conflicted yet mutually constructing relationship between childhood and consumer culture; both have a long history that predates the twenty-first century. These two areas, in the context of modernity, are positioned as separate and in opposition to one another. As scholars Daniel Cook and David Buckingham note, children and the market are treated respectively as “the sacred and the profane” (2011, p. 3; 2004b, p. 7). Yet modern childhood and consumer culture are in fact closely connected: each gains meaning from its relationship to the other.

Commercial dolls,<sup>2</sup> as commodities geared to children and as cultural artifacts, offer a bridge between the domain of childhood and the domain of the market. As such, an inquiry into these toys offers insight into the complicated interdependence between the concept of childhood and of consumer culture. If we understand consumer culture to mean the articulation of the self—that is, the expression of identity—through consumer goods, services, and products, then commercially-produced children’s dolls are a potent place to begin excavating

---

<sup>2</sup>The notion of commercial dolls is in contrast to homemade dolls or substitute dolls. Dorothy Washburn (1987), in her report on oral doll history, notes that the participants in her study—who played with dolls anywhere between 1900-1940—distinguished between “handmade” and “store bought” dolls (1987, p. 16). Handmade dolls include “rag dolls,” “sock dolls” and “clothespin dolls.” Furthermore, G. Stanley Hall and A. Caswell Ellis’s (1897) study on dolls lists objects that the respondents to their survey identified as play substitutions for dolls; these objects were, to a child, a doll. These include “clothespins,” “potatoes,” “peanuts,” and “a chicken” (1897, pp. 8–9).

myths of childhood within contemporary Western culture.

Through a theorization and analysis of the American Girl brand, in this dissertation I illustrate the mutually constructing connection between childhood and consumer culture. There are several elements that contextualize my work including both a contemporary theorization of and historical research on childhood, dolls, motherhood, and consumer culture. As part of my study, I look to historical accounts of dolls, childhood, and consumer culture starting from the late nineteenth century. Locating children and consumption only within the recent past functions to deny the integral relationship between the two and thus reinforces the modern myth that childhood, in some idealized past, was innocent of market forces<sup>3</sup>. I contextualize the very category of the modern child in consumer culture rather than document how a pre-existing, un-marred state of childhood was infiltrated by the market. As Cook has noted, childhood and motherhood are connected and central to grappling with the nature and influence of consumer culture. Thus, I also address the role of mothers as consumers, and explore motherhood and childhood as shaped in part through consumer culture. Considerations of childhood and motherhood are central to understanding consumer culture.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I seek to explore representations of childhood through an examination of both print and digital resources. In a broad sense, therefore, this study offers insight not only into cultural

---

<sup>3</sup> This “myth” about childhood, which is located within the contemporary “West,” will be discussed in detail later in the dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> As I will discuss, my work builds on insights from Cook (2004b) about the relationship between children and the market, and about the roles of mothers in consumer culture.

understandings of childhood, but also into the social production and reproduction of consumer culture through identity. In particular, I look to how myths of childhood, particularly girlhood, serve to (re)produce consumer culture and how consumer culture in turn, (re)produces childhood.

This study, as I will explore in depth in the review of literature chapter, is grounded in childhood studies. My focus is primarily on girlhood. I acknowledge that girlhood may be situated, at once, as part of the discourse of childhood and as a discourse unto itself. For the purpose of this work, I situate girlhood within childhood. As such, I locate my work within studies on children and consumer culture. I focus on the relationship between childhood and the market and argue that considerations of girlhood are central to understanding it. By so doing, I assert that childhood is not neutral terrain. It is carved by many defining categorizations such as race, class, ability, and gender; all of which are part of my analysis. Discourses of girlhood as part of discourses of childhood anchor my study.

Furthermore, before I continue, I want to offer some clarifications of terminology. My use of the term motherhood references Adrienne Rich's ideas. Rich refers to the institution or the patriarchal imperatives of mothering as motherhood, and she defines the term mothering as the actual acts of mothers (1976/1995).<sup>5</sup> When I speak of motherhood, therefore, I am referring

---

<sup>5</sup> As I will explore later in the dissertation, it is possible to have empowered or, as Andrea O'Reilly names it, "outlaw" mothering (2004, 2006). The institution of motherhood as a discourse may weigh heavily as an impossible ideal, but it does not prevent acts of mothering that occur outside of its parameters. That is, there is possibility for agency and action in the face of a discursive construct.

to it as a discursive construct. However, the discursive construct, or the “institution” as Rich calls it, may deeply inform expectations and experiences of mothers (1976/1995, p. 13).

I view the terms girlhood and childhood similarly. I frame both as discursive, so while girlhood may be represented in particular ways, actual girls may or may not act to maintain those standards. Miriam Forman-Brunell, for example, illustrates this point as she documents that the ways girls play with dolls do not necessarily conform to the ways that doll play is prescribed (1998).<sup>6</sup> Thus, in the same way that mothers do not necessarily conform to the cultural imperatives of motherhood, girls do not necessarily conform to the dictates of girlhood.<sup>7</sup>

This dissertation seeks to answer the following research questions: how are social roles, such as childhood and motherhood, produced by consumer culture, and in turn how do these roles (re)produce consumer culture? In order to grapple with these questions, I consider objects of study that are tangible expressions of the link between the market and childhood. In particular, given that my focus is on a particular gendered notion of childhood, namely, girlhood, I select commercial dolls. As highly gendered toys and objects that span the history

---

<sup>6</sup> Forman-Brunell’s book, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood* documents dolls and doll play between 1830-1930.

<sup>7</sup> Further, Robin Bernstein’s observations about children and childhood nuance my reading of Rich. Bernstein characterizes children and childhood as co-producing (2011). Thus, in her view, there is no pre-existing state of childhood, but rather a dynamic state in which childhood is co-created by and co-creates children. Bernstein’s observations do shape my understanding of discourse. Motherhood or girlhood may be viewed as a discourse and the active engagement of mothers and girls may be viewed as agency: the former is not stagnant to the latter’s dynamism nor vice versa.



of modern childhood, commercial dolls are rich texts for exploring the link between girlhood and consumer culture.

American Girl, a contemporary doll line, anchors my research. As my study reveals, the branding of the American Girl dolls evokes the characteristics of childhood, and particularly girlhood, that are linked with the convergence of children and consumer culture. The brand provides a solid example of the myths of modern childhood that involve wonder, innocence, and magic as accessible through the market. By myths I am referring to naturalised beliefs about childhood. As I will illustrate in this dissertation, these particular assumptions about the early stages of human life involve the imagining that certain characteristics; for example, the aforementioned attributes of wonder, innocence and magic, are attainable through purchasing items. In order to locate these myths in time, I also examine historical notions of childhood. To address my research questions, I analyze the brand, American Girl, and contextualize my findings within historical research.

A striking example of interplay between consumer culture, childhood, and motherhood can be found in the brand American Girl. The company produces several lines of dolls, and doll accessories and clothing, as well as girls' clothing and books. I have selected American Girl because it is an influential, contemporary, modern brand that harnesses ideas of childhood and motherhood that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. My area of focus begins in the late nineteenth century when the role of consumer culture in society is clearly articulated as a dominant form of life in Britain and North America, and new ideas of childhood are apparent. Of course, consumer culture emerged prior to the nineteenth century; nonetheless, I have situated my research in the late nineteenth century because it represents a definable time

period in which there is convergence between several shifting elements: changes in family life, changes in perceptions of the child, changes in the role of the mother, and the mass production of goods. The nineteenth century is not an originating moment but rather a time period in which these shifts are apparent and definable. The American Girl brand is a powerful lens through which to examine modern childhood: a childhood that has evolved with and through consumer culture.

This project is divided into seven chapters. In this introductory chapter, I present the background necessary to contextualize my research. This chapter explores the ideas that form the basis of this dissertation. In order to consider the mutually sustaining relationship between consumer culture and childhood, there are a number of concepts across different disciplines that must be addressed, so the balance of the introduction explains the theoretical underpinnings of the research in the later chapters.

In chapter two, the review of literature, I explore two main areas of academic inquiry: children and consumer culture, and doll studies. Although my study draws on scholarly insights from a number of disciplines, it is in these two areas that I make my primary contributions. I add to the growing literature of children and consumer culture by taking up Cook's (2008) insight that children and mothers are central to understanding consumer culture. In addition, I focus on a gendered childhood—girlhood—and examine its mutually constructing relationship with consumer culture. I use dolls as my objects of analysis, as such, my work also falls within doll studies. In particular, I illustrate how branded, mass-produced dolls are a potent place to understand perceptions of girlhood grounded in part by consumer culture.

Chapter three explains the methods that I utilize to investigate my objects of study. I draw on semiotics and discourse analysis to explore American Girl. As the methodology chapter illustrates, Michel Foucault's work on discourse guides my analysis. I frame consumer culture primarily through the work of Jean Baudrillard, who positions it as discursive and constructed in part through semiotics. His work, explained later in this chapter, provides the link between discourse and semiotics and informs my choice of methodologies for this dissertation: I use insights offered by Foucault, Gillian Rose, and Roland Barthes to analyze my objects of study.

The next chapters present my research: in particular they focus on my analysis of American Girl. In chapter four, I examine the baby doll and look to the American Girl line of dolls called Bitty Baby. The analysis in this chapter ties together girlhood, motherhood, and consumer culture and offers historical links to modern childhood. In chapter five, I explore the Truly Me line of American Girl dolls. I examine the interplay of identity and commodity within consumer culture by focusing on representations of girlhood. In chapter six, I analyze the overlap of consumer and commodity by focusing on the online presence of the brand; specifically, I compare the American Girl website to the brand's presence on YouTube.

In chapter seven, I conclude by summarizing my findings and discussing areas for future research. In particular, through my analysis and historical research on dolls, I emphasize the links between representation, identity, and consumer culture.

## Consumer Culture

As consumer culture is a core concept within my research, I start by investigating its meanings and clarifying how I define the term within my work. As Don Slater explains, “consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through the market” (1997, p. 8). As such, consumer culture reaches far beyond the simple acquisition of goods; it permeates human relationships. It also has a long history<sup>8</sup> and its dominance forms the backdrop to the development of modern childhood and the rise of commercial dolls. Therefore, the consideration of consumer culture is integral to my study.

To begin my exploration of consumer culture, I examine the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Slater, and Baudrillard whose theories form the basis for my usage of this concept. Bauman explores the parameters of consumer culture by looking at its development and its impacts. He examines the shift from what he terms consumption to consumerism and argues that consumption begins with the ‘Paleolithic revolution,’<sup>9</sup> which brought about the means to

---

<sup>8</sup> Slater notes that consumer culture came about in the West in the eighteenth century (1997).

<sup>9</sup> Bauman uses the term Paleolithic revolution in the context of human history. He does not provide a date for it. According to the editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Paleolithic era is thought to have commenced 2.58 million years ago and ended at about 10,000 BCE (2019).

accumulate; that is, humans could store more than they needed (Bauman, 2007, p. 26).

However, as he notes, this type of consumption does not constitute consumer culture. Rather, Bauman identifies a paradigm shift in the meanings of accumulation, which he terms the “consumerist revolution,” that got the ball rolling on contemporary consumer culture in the West. While he does not give a specific date, according to Bauman, the roots of consumerism began,

with the passage from consumption to ‘consumerism,’ when consumption, as Colin Campbell suggests, became ‘especially important if not actually central’ to the lives of the majority of people, ‘the very purpose of existence’... and when ‘our ability to “want”, to “desire” and “to long for”, and especially our ability to experience such emotions repeatedly, actually underpins the economy’ of human togetherness. (2007, p. 26)

Consumerism, then, is about more than just holding, storing, or accumulating stuff. The key factor is not the ownership of objects, but changes in the way objects are understood and function, and the impact those understandings have on human relationships.

Consumerism, Bauman observes, acts as a binding factor for a society. Specifically, commodities have value beyond the worth assigned in the marketplace; they are imbued with the characteristics of the larger social systems in which they play a part: “Unlike consumption, primarily a trait and occupation of individual human beings, *consumerism* is an attribute of *society*” (Bauman, 2007, p. 28). In consumerism, he elaborates, the meaning of objects shifts from how useable they are to the ideological value that they hold. That is, value is not simply about how many dolls are in the toy box, but the meanings those dolls take on in and through

consumer culture. Furthermore, consumption is part of a larger process of consumer culture. Slater explains his understanding of the two concepts as follows: “Consumption is always and everywhere a cultural process, but ‘consumer culture’—a culture *of* consumption—is unique and specific: it is the dominant mode of cultural reproduction developed in the west over the course of modernity” (1997, p. 8). In other words, in consumer culture, the market is deeply influential in many aspects of life.

The meaning of objects within consumer culture is of central concern to Baudrillard. He links consumption to both semiotics and discourse by focusing on signs. He is interested in articulating the meanings attributed to objects beyond their use-value; as such, he uses the terminology of semiotics.<sup>10</sup> According to Baudrillard,

consumption is not a material practice, nor is it a phenomenology of ‘affluence’. It is not defined by the nourishment we take in, nor by the clothes we clothe ourselves with, nor by the car we use, nor by the oral and visual matter of the images and messages we receive. It is defined, rather, by the organization of all these things into a signifying fabric: consumption is *the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse*. If it has any meaning at all, consumption means *an activity consisting of the symbolic manipulation of signs*. (1976/2005, p. 218)<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Semiotics is explored in detail in the methodology chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>11</sup> Again, as in the methodologies chapter, I want to clarify that I don’t view a sign as having a single fixed meaning. I do, however, believe that the array of meanings, sometimes simultaneous and contradictory, does gain value and understanding from the universe in which they are read.

Baudrillard's observations form the basis of my contention that consumer culture can be demarcated by its reliance on meanings rather than just by accumulation. As such my analysis involves both semiotics—the systematic reading of signs—and discourse analysis.

The focus of my dissertation is on consumer culture, which I define in part through Bauman's description of consumerism and Baudrillard's description of consumption. When Bauman speaks of a shift from consumption to consumerism, he equates consumerism with consumer culture and identifies a time before consumer culture when consumption (i.e., the accumulation of objects) took hold. The accumulated objects are not necessarily something purchased; they could be saved, gathered, or hunted, for example. In contrast, when Baudrillard uses the term consumption, he means consumption within consumer culture. He is not referring to Bauman's Paleolithic phase; rather, he is talking about market-based accumulation. While both scholars use different terminology, when Bauman uses consumerism and Baudrillard refers to consumption, each is speaking of behaviours and understandings within consumer culture.

In another potent example of sign value within consumer culture, Baudrillard reminds us, “‘affluence’ is, in effect, merely the accumulation of the *signs* of happiness” (1970/2017, p. 49). In other words, the use-value of objects does not produce affluence, rather it is the sign-value of the goods that does. Therefore, consumer culture comes into being, in a sense, through sign-values. Consumer culture is a myth in a Barthesian sense because it is presented as a natural state and communicated through mediums including language, objects, interactions,

self-presentation, identity, and relationships.<sup>12</sup> The concept of affluence itself is, of course, only meaningful within a consumer society; specifically, it is only meaningful within a constellation of signs that have value in relation to consumerism. Baudrillard's observations anchor my analysis of branded dolls as they carry meanings beyond their use-value. The branded aspect of the dolls engages most significantly with signification, which holds meanings only within larger contexts such as modern childhood.

Consumerism becomes a society's organizing principle because of the sign-value of goods, but the signs don't just rest with objects; they exist in an atmosphere in which human relationships—interpersonal and intrapersonal—are influenced by and defined, at least in part, through consumer culture. According to Slater, “consumer culture is about continuous self-creation through the accessibility of things which are themselves presented as new, modish, faddish, or fashionable, always improved or improving” (1997, p. 10). Here individuals are expressing their identities by commandeering commodities. The values and meanings of the goods are then associated with the consumer. However, the range of goods is always changing and so the continual acquisition of new goods is required. Slater's idea connects with Bauman's notion of liquid modern consumerism, in which the consumer is continually reaching for fulfillment though a barrage of goods that are continually unfulfilling. Bauman explains, “consumer society thrives as long as it manages to render the *non-satisfaction* of its members” (Bauman, 2007, p. 47). The sign-value of goods in this case is made of unfulfilled

---

<sup>12</sup> I reference Roland Barthes's foundational work, *Mythologies* (2013) in which he applies semiotics to culture and media. His methodology is core to my analysis and will be explored in detail in the methodology chapter of this dissertation.



promises about identity and possibility. (Examples of this process will be illustrated later in the dissertation as I examine the American Girl dolls.)

The relationship of consumer and commodity is taken even further by Bauman who identifies consumers themselves as commodities.<sup>13</sup> In the process of self-invention through goods, it is consumers who are ultimately the product: “They are,” in Bauman’s words, “simultaneously, promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote” (Bauman, 2007, p. 6). Within consumer culture, the individual’s self-expression and even identity are influenced by and through the market. According to Bauman,

the crucial, perhaps the decisive purpose of consumption in the society of consumers ... is not the satisfaction of needs, desires and wants, but the commoditization or recommoditization of the consumer: *raising the status of consumers to that of sellable commodities*. (2007, p. 57)

---

<sup>13</sup> Bauman is speaking of a contemporary state within consumer culture in the context of the contemporary West where identity is deeply tied into signs and significations. He is not referring to a literal state of persons as chattel and/or slaves. Although this point may seem obvious, it is important to state, in part, because an investigation of historic perceptions of childhood, which tie to consumer culture, is linked to an historical context when plantation slavery was a part of the American economy. As I will explore later in the dissertation, Bernstein has examined perceptions of childhood in American culture from the mid-nineteenth century into the twentieth and establishes the deep influence of ideas of race in post-slavery America on perceptions of childhood (2011). Further, I’ve noticed that the conversations about the emergence of consumer culture do not tend to focus on the historic realities of persons as property or, indeed, the exclusivity of who had access to personhood and the links between personhood and property ownership. These are vital elements for future research on consumer culture.

In Bauman's thinking, the commodity and the individual merge within consumer culture. These ideas about the overlap of subjectivity and commodity are particularly useful in articulating the relationship between consumer culture and identity.

### **Pre-Liquid and Liquid Modern States**

There are differences in the ways consumer culture was experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the ways it functions today. These differences can be explained by Bauman's notions of "liquid modern consumerism" (2007, p. 32). He differentiates between two states in consumer culture: in what he calls the pre-liquid state, the value of objects still retains some permanence after purchase; whereas, in the liquid state, the value of objects changes upon purchase. According to Bauman,

at a time when it was vividly described by Thorstein Veblen at the beginning of the twentieth century, 'ostentatious consumption' bore a meaning sharply different from its present one: it consisted in the public display of wealth with an emphasis on its solidity and durability, not in a demonstration of the facility with which pleasures can be squeezed out of acquired riches right away and on the spot, promptly using them up and digesting and relishing them in full, or disposing them and destroying them potlatch-style. (2007, p. 30)

That is to say, liquid modern consumerism refers to a state of affairs in consumer culture in which commodities promise to satisfy and, once purchased, do not fulfill their promise.

Bauman sees this expression of consumerism as characteristic of the current era of consumer culture. The change to liquid modern consumerism is accompanied by an increased mass

production of goods. This shift to the liquid modern state signifies a change from earlier manifestations of consumer culture. Certainly commodities, for example, always had meaning beyond their use-value, but within liquid modern consumerism, those meanings spill, shift, and change.

In pre-liquid consumption meanings are more stable. A purchase made for a child holds similar worth values from before and after the purchase, and thus is held onto for many years. For example, French fashion dolls were fancy toy depictions of women that were given to little girls of privilege and were popular among affluent families in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century. The dolls were expensive and required a trousseau of clothing and paraphernalia (Formanek-Brunell, 1998). They had at the ready attire for funerals, the opera, and a variety of other social occasions. Part of the purpose of the dolls was to teach girls of privilege comportment, proper attire, and expected social behaviours, including consumer roles, they were to display as adults (Formanek-Brunell, 1998). While the dolls were valuable as play objects for the girls, they were also valuable for the family. The dolls indicated high status as they were material evidence that the family could afford such expensive and refined play items.<sup>14</sup> These toys were a commodity and fully integrated in consumer culture.

---

<sup>14</sup> The doll may have other meanings beyond the ones indicated in this research. Toys are not always played with in the ways indicated by the toy producer or imagined by the purchasing families. Consider Barbie dolls tattooed with markers or barbered by play scissors. The meanings of a doll may change with different players and different social contexts. The way a doll is depicted in marketing materials, such as the American Girl catalogue, is not necessarily the way that the doll will be used. As such, my interpretations of the American Girl brand are not the only possible interpretations.

The French fashion doll was clearly a product of a pre-liquid state of consumer culture. They were expected to be a long-term gift, an investment and something the child would hold onto for many years. The meanings of the dolls remained stable after their purchase and they held their value as an object of consumer culture over time. By contrast, within the liquid modern culture of today, a doll can lose its meaning after purchase and either need to be fully replaced as it is no longer in style—and thus its sign-value shifts from one of affluence to one of unfortunateness as the doll is newly perceived as old and out-of-date—or, as we shall see with the American Girl dolls, the doll requires continual upkeep with new and better accessories to maintain its relevance.

The ever-changing status of sign-values is a key characteristic of Bauman's liquid consumerism. The commodity in question loses its value as the sign meanings change upon purchase. In order to keep the market moving there must be a constant desire for more goods; thus, the purchasing of goods doesn't offer a lasting sense of satisfaction. It is instead replaced by a want for new, more, and better goods. The presence of consumption within the postmodern era described by Slater may be understood to be the liquid consumption that Bauman discusses (though this stage of consumer culture is part of a longer history). Bauman's observations dovetail with insights from Slater, who notes that while consumerism is often linked with the postmodern era, it is in fact located in modernity (1997).<sup>15</sup> As Slater observes,

---

<sup>15</sup> While exact dates are highly debatable, for the purpose of this project, modernity may be defined as emerging after the Enlightenment (i.e., late eighteenth century and/or early nineteenth century), while post-modernity may be situated post-WWII, in the mid to latter part of the twentieth century.

“consumer culture appears to many as fully formed only in the *postmodern* era. However, consumer culture is inextricably bound up with modernity as a whole” (1997, p. 9). As such, consumer culture does not find its genesis in the mid to late twentieth century.

Consumerism not only provides the bricks and mortar of a social / economic system, but it is also a key aspect of subjectivity. According to Dennis Denisoff, “two key factors in the production of consumer culture were, first, the stimulation of desires that fostered the purchase of goods and, second, the impact of these fabricated desires on the formation of human subjectivities” (2016, p. 7). In other words, consumer culture involves not just a shift in economics, but also a shift in personal identity and aspiration (2016). Consumer culture is not simply about having; it is about being. As such, an investigation of childhood within the context of consumer culture must include an inquiry into the very notion of the child.

## **Children and Consumer Culture**

The genesis of my research lies with the observation that although childhood seems to be an inevitable, natural state, it is in fact a cultural construct. By this I do not mean that we can escape a mode of growth and change that happens in early life. Instead, I consider the categorization of those years deemed “childhood” as a coherent part of the lifespan as an invention. Childhood as a social construct is well documented (e.g. Ariès, 1962; Zelizer, 1985/1994). The notion changes in various social and historical contexts—if indeed, it exists at all—and while it may seem “natural,” childhood is in fact an imagining born out of the culture that nourishes it. For example, as I will illustrate, the childhood depicted in the American Girl catalogue is a particular version that is intertwined with consumer culture. Imaginings of what constitutes childhood as a distinct stage of life—or in fact whether or not it is viewed as a

distinct life stage at all—and what characterizes its inhabitants (i.e., children) is not constant throughout history, or across cultures. Philipp Ariès establishes this point in his 1962 book, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, by depicting historically changing ideas of childhood in Europe.

Furthermore, the modern child does not pre-date the rise of consumer culture. Children didn't just represent a larger market for a growing system of capitalist acquirement; children were deemed children, in part, through this economic system. As Denisoff points out, Western, modern concepts of childhood emerged as consumer culture took hold (2016, p. 2).

Buckingham adds,

The development of a children's consumer culture gathered pace in the mid-nineteenth century, in parallel with new post-Romantic ideas of childhood. Just as children were being recognized as a distinct and special group—as pure and innocent, and in need of careful protection—they were also coming to be seen as a potential market. (2016, p. 70)

Ideas of childhood as sacred, and children as “innocent” and “pure,” developed alongside notions of children as consumers.<sup>16</sup> Consumer culture emerged as a dominant structure of social reproduction, in part, through changing notions of childhood. The parallel growth of consumer culture and childhood was not mere chance.

---

<sup>16</sup> As Bernstein documents, the concept of childhood innocence did not uniformly apply to all children in mid-nineteenth century (2011). It was a highly racialized notion. Bernstein's work will be explored in detail later in the chapter.

The meanings of childhood shifted and complemented the emergence of consumer culture as a dominant mode of relating to the world. According to Denisoff, “to establish and maintain its position as a broad social ideology, consumer culture had to develop not simply in step with the new model of childhood, but *through* it” (2016, p. 6). In this context, childhood identity was tied up with consumption. These new understandings of childhood occurred not as a reaction to commercial culture but in concert with and through commercial interests. Consumer culture as an economic and ideological mode was, and is for that matter, deeply invested in the “new” notion of childhood. According to Denisoff,

consumer culture was a large-scale phenomenon that relied for its development on small-scale acts of identity formation, acts that were often most readily fulfilled through the young, who were seen as especially open to and in need of influence, control and shaping. (2016, p. 1)

As scholars such as Buckingham (2011) and Cook (2004b) note, arguments related to children and consumer culture often imply that there was a time when childhood was non-commercialized, when it was free from the hold of commercial interests. These arguments position childhood as being at odds with the marketplace: childhood is as good as the market is bad.

This perspective of good/bad also assumes that the economics of consumption can be held at bay; while adults may be marred by the marketplace, children can and should be unaffected by it. Buckingham makes this point: “Ultimately, consumption is part of the lived experience of capitalism; and children do not stand outside that, in some pure or unsullied space, even if that is what some commentators appear to imagine or wish” (2011, p. 3).

Further, as Buckingham and Cook have both noted, such arguments assume that children not only exist outside of economic relationships but are in fact, the antithesis of all that is commercial. As Cook has observed and Buckingham, quoting Cook, has argued, children and the market are treated respectively as “the sacred and the profane” (Buckingham, 2011, p. 3; Cook, 2004b, p. 7). The very idea of such a pairing seems, in Buckingham’s words, “almost sacrilegious” (2011, p. 3). There is an underlying assumption that childhood exists in a bubble, unharmed and untouched by capitalism.

An historical look into the ideological demarcation between childhood and the market reveals shifts in the mid-nineteenth century. In the United States, for example, there is a change in the economic sphere for the urban-dwelling, middle-class as the market becomes an adult domain (Zelizer, 1985/1994). At this time, the notion that children should contribute to the family by taking on household responsibilities or helping with economically compensated work duties alongside their parents is no longer a given (Zelizer, 1985/1994). There is a separation of childhood and the market as some children are removed from the workspace, becoming, in Viviana Zelizer’s words, “‘economically worthless’ but ‘emotionally priceless’” (1985/1994, p. 3). These new ideas of childhood innocence and purity negate the market as a force that, at least in part, redefine childhood: At the same time that their meaning is newly negotiated through the marketplace, children are, at least ideologically, removed from the realm of capitalism. Zelizer notes, “the birth of a child in eighteenth century rural America was welcomed as the arrival of a future laborer and as security for parents later in life” (1985/1994,



p. 5).<sup>17</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century that view of childhood was changing. In the American urban, middle-class at this time, children become “economically worthless” (1985/1994, p. 5). And for working class families, these changes reach a tipping point in the twentieth century: “By the 1930s, lower-class children join their middle-class counterparts in a new non-productive world of childhood, a world in which the sanctity and emotional value of a child made child labor taboo” (Zelizer, 1985/1994, p. 6). However, even today, while children are seemingly<sup>18</sup> removed from the working sphere, they are not, in fact, removed from the economic sphere. They are arguably more firmly planted in the economic terrain. While they are no longer wage earners in the Global North, they become a central concern in the economic equation as consumers.

Children hold key roles in the economy from which they are seemingly protected. They not only act as consumers, or a viable reason for participating in the marketplace, but they learn and reproduce the new modes of being shaped by consumer culture. According to Denisoff, “they were recognized as the most accessible context through which consumerism ... could be the driving force of cultural identity” (2016, p. 6). The legacy of modern childhood continues to inform Western perspectives on childhood today.

---

<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that Zelizer is most certainly speaking of children in certain communities only in eighteenth century America. For example, a free-born child could bring value to the family; whereas, a child born into slavery could not hold this promise for their parents.

<sup>18</sup> Zelizer has observed that children continue to work (1985/1994).

As discussed, childhood was a vehicle for the (re)production of consumer culture. Still, the discussion of nineteenth-century childhood must be further contextualized. In particular, childhood also has to be considered in the context of social categorizations like race, gender, and class. As Zelizer observes, middle-class children were deemed precious decades before those from the working class (1985/1994). In the mid-nineteenth century, children in the United States of America were not universally innocent; the term only in fact applied to certain children (Bernstein, 2011). In the context of a post-slavery America, as Bernstein observes, the popular imaginings of childhood innocence were racialized; that is, the innocent child was assumed to be white (2011).<sup>19</sup> Childhood, even as discourse then, must be considered through the lens of social categorizations such as gender, race, and class.

### **Motherhood, Childhood, and Consumer Culture**

In order to understand the changing views of childhood for middle-class children in the late nineteenth century, motherhood must also be considered. When concepts of modern childhood emerge, new ideas of motherhood also emerge. As Zelizer explains, “in particular, the sentimentalization of childhood was intimately tied to the changing world of their mothers” (1985/1994, p. 9). Zelizer explains that in the late nineteenth century, as the domains of economically compensated work and the household separate, middle-class motherhood

---

<sup>19</sup> See Bernstein’s analysis for further explanations of how children and childhood are represented from the mid-nineteenth centuries into the twentieth. Her research reveals the vast difference between representations of girlhood based on race. Bernstein’s work is discussed at length in the review of literature chapter.

becomes tied to the home.<sup>20</sup> As these mothers take on new domestic roles as guardians of the home, and ideas about their children change, children lose their economic value to the family and childhood becomes precious (Zelizer, 1985/1994). Privileged mothers are encouraged to interact with their children in a way that reflects the new ideas of childhood. Specifically, if children are precious then a mother's job involves sustaining this quality. These ideas of children as innocent and in need of protection in turn reinforce mothers' roles as guardians of the home and family. The notion of the mother as guardian of her precious children focuses first on privileged mothers—white, middle and upper-class. Zelizer observes, “the specialization into expert full-time motherhood intensified at the turn of the century spreading (in ideal if not always in practice) to the working class (1985/1994, p. 9).

The role of these mothers as the caregivers within the household involves preserving and protecting childhood. These interactions include, in part, a relationship to the public space of the market. As Cook points out, mothers are integral to building and sustaining children's roles within consumer culture (2004b). They act both as the guardians of the private space of the home where the sacred child can be protected, and as the shoppers who purchase goods in the best interest of their children. In this way, mothers act as a conduit between the public sphere of the market and the private sphere of the home (Cook, 2004b). Indeed, part of the protective role of motherhood involves interactions with the market. The connection between

---

<sup>20</sup> Zelizer is speaking about a particular community of mothers and children. As she notes, changes for middle-class children occurred decades before those changes were experienced by working class children.

mothers and children within the context of consumer culture continues to inform how each is defined today.

The legacy of nineteenth-century ideals of privileged motherhood are still apparent in the contemporary demands of intensive mothering, which Sharon Hays chronicles as emerging in the late twentieth century: “According to the logic of intensive mothering, children and child rearing should be treated as sacred, and both should be protected from the contaminating logic of our rationalized market world” (Hays, 1996, p. 122). The mother protects the child within the family sphere, represented by the home, to preserve the child’s wonder, preciousness, and innocence.

Part of nurturing the sacred child involves consumption, as childhood innocence and wonder exist in conjunction to capital, not despite it. As Hays observes when describing mothers practicing intensive mothering,

Considering the amount of time, energy, and money these mothers expend on their children, and considering that they live in a world where maximizing personal profit is understood as not only acceptable but desirable, why wouldn’t they seek a tangible return on their investment? The answer is found in the logic of intensive mothering itself. According to that logic, children should be valued not for the material gains they might bring to their parents but for their goodness, innocence, and inherently loving nature—all of which mark their distance from the corrupt outside world. (1996, pp. 124–125)

In Hays’s view, mothers’ labour is compensated not by money, but by the fulfillment of needs that exist outside of capitalism. A mother’s work is priceless and as such is framed as existing

in a realm that is demarcated by its separation from the market. However, motherhood exists within consumer culture to the extent that the mother cares for her child through her participation in the marketplace as a consumer. So, while her labour is “priceless,” her role as a consumer is very much a part of her “fitness” as a mother. In this way, motherhood and childhood are connected and both function as discursive constructions that relate to the market.

In summary, mothers provide access to the market while preserving the sacredness of the child. Herein lies a contradiction: the role of mothers is supposed to be outside the market as their reward is not capital; nevertheless, mothers are firmly planted in the economic realm as they engage in consumption for the good of the child. As with childhood, motherhood is contradictory, existing simultaneously both inside and outside the market.

## **Dolls**

Mass-produced dolls may be viewed as a signification of both the emergence of modern childhood and of consumer culture as a dominant form of societal construction. According to Forman-Brunell,

after the Civil War, doll play absorbed and channeled a number of inter-related changes in the lives of American girls: increased affluence, new consumer outlets, smaller family size, and greater emphasis on imitation of adult social rituals and the formalized play it encouraged. (1998, p. 15)

Commercial dolls, in particular, were increasingly popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In that era, many commercially produced dolls were very expensive and owning one was a marker of the wealth of the family. Commercial dolls were produced most often in France or Germany (Bernstein, 2011). Because the imported dolls cost so much money, they were not accessible to all children:

The vast majority of these commercial dolls remained prohibitively expensive for daughters of working-class families. While dolls cost between \$5 and \$25 in 1890, the annual income of an industrial worker was \$486 and that of a farm worker only \$233. (Bourcier & Formanek-Brunell, 1989, p. 10)

Furthermore, as Bernstein notes, few American children of colour owned European dolls (Bernstein, 2011). Thus, commercially produced dolls, as objects of conspicuous consumption, were a place where privileged families could display wealth, access, and refinement.

In the case of the expensive French fashion dolls, the toys involved a trousseau of goods that enriched both play and the status of the doll's owners. The vast wardrobes and props allowed privileged girls, as little mothers, to dress the doll for any occasion. Part of the appeal of fancy dolls was to socialize girls to their gendered and class-based duties: "girls were expected to imitate the new social activities of their *nouveau riche* mothers by displaying their elaborately-dressed dolls at ritualized occasions. Dolls donned socially appropriate outfits for strolling, visiting, tea parties and funerals" (Bourcier & Formanek-Brunell, 1989, p. 10). These dolls denote not only femininity and class, but also social order within consumer culture. French fashion dolls, for example, with their trunks, all-occasion clothing, and accessories prepared privileged girls to both act and shop like their mothers. Certainly, they were tools of play to help orient privileged girls to acceptable social responsibilities.

Commercial dolls function not only as a status symbol and a tool for socialization, but also as companions. They are play-objects that are adorned, accessorized, and shaped to depict persons and, in the late nineteenth century, are sold, in part, as playmates for children:

Girls' lives, like those of their parents, were affected by the shift from household production to conspicuous consumption. Children's magazines, books, poems, songs, and stereographs revealed that girls were encouraged by adults to develop strong emotional bonds with their numerous dolls, to indulge in fantasy, and to display their elaborately dressed imported European dolls at such ritual occasions as tea parties and social calls. (Formanek-Brunell, 1998, p. 8)

What is of particular importance here is that with the rise of consumer culture, girls are encouraged to form bonds with mass produced objects. As such, dolls offer a portal through which we can examine the emergence of what Slater refers to as the "dominant mode of cultural reproduction developed in the west over the course of modernity": namely, consumer culture (1997, p. 8).

Commercial dolls can be positioned as texts that offer insight into the relationship between imaginings of girlhood and the market. In particular, the branding of dolls in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is built on desirable, appealing culturally-based stories of girlhood. Buying into the commercial dolls of the nineteenth century and the branded dolls of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can be read as part of buying into Westernized, culturally sanctioned notions of girlhood.

Dolls act as a portal through which to examine the dynamics of childhood, motherhood, and the market. Commercial dolls bridge the entirety of the historical periods from which I

draw as they are available through both Bauman's pre-liquid and modern liquid states. As commercial toys, they straddle the line between a priceless and innocence-infused girlhood and the mass-produced, buying-oriented consumer culture. As such, dolls and the liquid modern marketing of dolls are valuable objects of study because they offer a portal into understanding the (re)production of consumer culture as a core part of Western culture.

### **The Promises of Consumer Culture**

Part of the appeal and concern of consumer culture in the nineteenth century was its promise of social mobility. In her discussion of consumer culture, Lisa Jacobson notes, "perhaps most threatening of all, the new culture suggested that everyone—regardless of age, class, gender, or race—was entitled to desire whatever they pleased" (2). In particular, the new consumer society promised an emerging middle-class access to the higher echelons of society. Peter Stoneley describes the circular nature of this economic phenomenon: "This was an upward spiral: growth in production and consumption enables the rise of the middle class, who in turn confirmed their rise with consumption" (2007, p. 3). Moreover, consumer objects act as signifiers of social status. The possibility, regardless of the reality, is that anyone might be able to purchase the signs of social status. Stoneley, in his study of consumer culture and girlhood in nineteenth-century literature, quotes a character in Louisa May Alcott's *An Old Fashioned Girl*: "If they spent their wages properly, I shouldn't mind so much, but they think they must be as fine as anybody and dress so well that it is hard to tell a mistress from a maid" (33). The idea is not that the clothing itself is a threat, but what the clothing connotes in the context of a culture where consumption is deeply tied up with expressing identity, part of which involves social status.



Writing in the twentieth century, Baudrillard observes that consumer culture carries with it the myth that it allows access because it seemingly flattens inequalities:

One is tempted to regard consumption and the growing participation in the same(?) goods and the same(?) products, both material and cultural, as a corrective to social disparities, social hierarchy and the ever-increasing level of discrimination where power and responsibilities are concerned. In fact, the ideology of consumption, like that of education (i.e., the representation one has of a total equality before the electric razor or the car, like the representation one has of total equality before writing and reading), does, in fact, play this role. (1970/2017, p. 78)

The myth at play then is that the market offers an opportunity for social equality. However, this belief itself seemingly offers the opportunity for social mobility, while in actuality it serves to perpetuate inequity. As Baudrillard explains,

Everyone today can read and write; everyone has (or will have) the same washing machine and buys the same paperbacks. But this equality is entirely formal: though bearing on what is most concrete, it is in fact abstract. And it is, by contrast, on this homogenous abstract base, on this foundation of the *abstract democracy of spelling or the TV set*, that the real system of discrimination is able to operate—and to operate all the more effectively. (1970/2017, p. 78)

Baudrillard's point—and I shall not take up his perceptions on education or assumptions about literacy here—is that consumer culture seems to offer access. In his universe of significations, if everyone has the possibility of purchasing signs of affluence, then they are seemingly affluent. However, he also notes that this promise of consumer culture is false as it actually

serves to diminish acknowledgement of actual inequality. Again, in consumer culture, goods are imbued with meanings, and it is the articulation and questioning of those meanings that anchor much of the work of this dissertation. In particular, the objects in question are part of the American Girl brand.

## **American Girl**

American Girl's product lines centre on dolls and include girls' clothing, doll clothing, dolls, doll accessories, and books. American Girl was established in 1986 and is a subsidiary of Mattel (American Girl, n.d.-k). American Girl is unique in the sense that it doesn't primarily distribute its toys through mass retailers; instead, it focuses on selling through the company website, branded stores, and a traditional paper catalogue. According to Mattel,

the American Girl segment is a direct marketer, children's publisher, and retailer best known for its line of historical dolls, books, and accessories, as well as the Truly Me, Girl of the Year, Bitty Baby, and WellieWishers brands. American Girl also publishes best-selling fiction and non-fiction titles, plus the award-winning American Girl magazine. The American Girl segment sells products directly to consumers via its catalog, website, in its proprietary retail stores in the U.S., and at select retailers nationwide. Outside of the U.S., American Girl products are available in specialty boutiques at select Indigo and Chapters stores in Canada and three franchise stores with Majid Al Futtaim in the United Arab Emirates. (2018, p. 5)

The doll brand is popular. According to the company, “[o]ver 32 million American Girl® dolls have been sold through the company's catalogue, retail stores, and website since 1986” (American Girl, n.d.-d).

The American Girl catalogue is a paper catalogue that is mailed to subscribers and available in American Girl stores and boutiques. It advertises the range of products available by the company. It also provides links to extensions of the brand, for example the American Girl YouTube channel, American Girl website, American Girl magazine, and American Girl DVDs. There are different lines of dolls within the catalogue, and each doll line is presented within its own section. According to the brand’s website, “the American Girl catalogue is the largest consumer toy catalogue and ranks as one of the top 30 consumer catalogues in the country” (American Girl, n.d.-d).

As with the commercial dolls of the nineteenth century, the toys themselves are only part of the selling point. The significations of the dolls are also for sale. In the past, the status-imbuing qualities of a French fashion doll were part of the appeal of the doll. Today, in what Bauman deems liquid modern consumer culture, signification has shifted from just objects to entire brands. American Girl is one such brand, offering not only items for sale, but also experiences and personal qualities.

According to its website, “American Girl has dedicated its entire business to being a trusted partner in building girls of strong character and helping them reach their full potential” (American Girl, n.d.-k). The business, like any brand, is certainly about selling products, but it also sells stories: in this case, stories of modern girlhood. The brand provides a host of objects of analysis that simultaneously embrace both the market and the ideals of a non-

commercialized girlhood, providing a potent opportunity to explore the highly complicated connections between modern childhood and consumer culture.

Although I am focusing on an analysis of various aspects of the brand, my object of interest is not American Girl *per se*. Rather than offering a critique or assessment of the company's products, I am instead looking to American Girl for the insight its products offer into consumer culture. More specifically, I examine the ways in which consumer culture is reinforced by and reinforces societally normative understandings of social roles such as childhood—in particular, girlhood—and motherhood. Indeed, the brand is a means to learning more about consumer culture; it is not in itself the end point of the analysis. Instead, the brand offers a powerful lens through which to catch glimpses of the entrenched nature of consumer culture.

In the next chapter, the review of literature, I explore the work of other scholars in two main areas: children and consumer culture, and doll studies. As such, I provide the background to contextualize my analysis of the American Girl brand.

## Chapter Two: Review of Literature

### Introduction

Two academic fields ground and situate my research: children and consumer culture, and doll studies. As I will illustrate, my primary influence is children and consumer culture with a lesser focus on doll studies.

As an academic field, children and consumer culture is relatively young and growing; there is some debate as to whether the academic area is, as yet, coherent enough to be defined as a field. There are any number of articles and research studies that could be linked to the topic, but as I will highlight later in the chapter, an abundance of research tangentially linked does not constitute an academic field. Consequently, part of the purpose of this chapter is to highlight work that defines the emerging discipline as a discipline. Broadly, this chapter will offer a snapshot of the overarching patterns of the emerging field by highlighting works that grapple with the shape and form of the field. It will also explore the assertion that children and consumer culture should be considered an independent discipline as opposed to a sub-field to childhood studies or consumer culture studies. Moreover, it will highlight the tension of meaning that puts the notion of childhood and that of consumer culture at odds both within academia and in popular debates on consumption and childhood. Historical research is key to locating this tension, so the chapter will highlight nineteenth-century economic and social changes as fundamental to current Western understandings of both the child and consumption.

Finally, it will address material cultures of childhood, exploring why this research is limited and yet key to understanding current Western constructions of childhood.

As material culture, dolls are a core area of inquiry and potent texts for cultural understandings, so the final portion of this review will focus on doll studies. The area of inquiry is newly defined as an academic area. It is characterized by the application of hybrid methodologies, inquiry into texts of multiple formats, and use of interdisciplinary approaches. In particular, this approach overlaps with girlhood studies as often dolls are the objects of inquiry for research into notions of girlhood. And of course, all work centres around the subject of dolls. As such, I will illustrate some of the key characteristics of research in this area and situate my own study within it. In addition, I will highlight some of the work on the American Girl brand, the subject of my research chapters.

Ultimately, I hope to highlight some of the gaps in the research and illustrate how my research contributes to the cohesion of these two fields as a whole. My work addresses some of the lapses within children and consumer culture, and it follows the approach and methods popular in doll studies. My work sits within the overlap between these two academic areas.

While this chapter focuses on children and consumer culture and doll studies, the research in this dissertation is cross-disciplinary as it includes a wide range of materials from diverse disciplines such as English, sociology, motherhood studies, women's studies, girlhood studies, history, cultural studies, media studies, economics, and communication. While these subjects are all significant in the cross-disciplinary nature of both consumer culture and doll studies as general areas of study, this chapter will not focus on these individual disciplines. Certainly, my research involves a number of disciplines and has implications in a number of

fields; however, those subjects are not the focus of the review of literature as the purpose of this chapter is to review the literature under the umbrella of children and consumer culture and, to a lesser extent, doll studies.

### **Children and Consumer Culture: Defining the Field**

Children and consumer culture is an emerging field. Part of working within this subject involves defining the academic area. While there is a great deal of work that may fall into the topic area, this research, as both Daniel Cook (2004a, 2008, 2012a, 2013) and David Buckingham (2011) note, is not necessarily positioned in the same constellations. Cook, in his 2008 article “The Missing Child in Consumption Theory,” explains that while there have been an increased number of publications regarding children and consumption, this work does not represent a coherent, single discipline (Cook, 2008). Often research is not considered in the context of other studies. Cook observes, “any insights, formulations or problems arising out of the different studies of children’s consumption have yet, to any significant degree, to be put in conversation with one another beyond some incremental, often fact-based additions to previous research” (2008, p. 221). He notes that research may be categorized as children and consumer culture, but this topic area is not enough to constitute an academic field because it has not been positioned within a single, cohesive framework (2008). Cook’s viewpoint provides an insight into the shape of the discipline and opens up the opportunity to investigate research that seeks to define the parameters of children and consumer culture as a field of study.

Broadly defining the areas of children and consumer culture that have been researched, and putting them into dialogue with one another, is part of making sense of the diverse, multi-disciplinary work on the subject. Buckingham, in his book *The Material Child: Growing Up in*

*Consumer Culture* (2011), remedies, to a certain extent, some of the issues identified by Cook. His work adds to the growth of children and consumer culture as a cohesive field of study rather than simply a topic area. He sketches a critical overview of issues within it. In particular, he draws a link between the lack of children in consumption studies, the lack of studies of consumption in the study of “the sociology of childhood,” and the slew of recent popular books on the evils of children and consumer culture (Buckingham, 2011, p. 60). The common thread is the conviction that children and consumer culture are somehow opposed in nature and, ultimately, there is some point in the history of childhood where consumer culture and childhood are completely separate from one another. There is, according to Buckingham, “a lingering nostalgia for a ‘natural’ pre-technological or pre-commercial childhood” (2011, p. 60). As such, he problematizes Western-based assumptions that have positioned discussions about children and consumer culture. This is a core point expressed by other authors such as Cook (2008) and Beryl Langer (2004). Buckingham observes that debates about children and consumer culture have often been reductive and polarized, even within academia. Buckingham’s book effectively provides a comprehensive overview of the field through a critical lens. He puts a wide range of literature into conversation by framing the work within critiques about the field. Buckingham brings work from consumer culture and sociology, among other fields, into orbit around children and consumer culture and in so doing grows the discipline.

### **The Missing Child and the Missing Consumer Culture**

As Cook notes, work on children’s consumer culture has often been positioned in the margins of or completely absent from other academic disciplines. Studies of children and



consumer culture have not been taken up in any central way, as Buckingham (2011) explains, in consumer culture studies or sociology of childhood studies, so the research on children and consumption comes from varying disciplines with varying methodologies, perspectives, and purposes. Cook (2008) also observes that, in general, research on children and consumer culture has not been considered in context of consumption theories as a whole. Within the loose field of consumer theory, children are viewed as a kind of special interest group rather than a central part of the queries and conversations.

The observation that children have not been viewed as central to consumer culture studies is shared by other scholars such as Langer (2004); Lydia Martens, Dale Southerton, and Sue Scott (2004); and Buckingham (2011). Langer explains,

there are monographs and edited collections dedicated to the discussions of children and consumption or globalization (see Cook, 2002; Kline, 1993; Seabrook, 2001; Seiter, 1995; Stephens, 1995), but the categories ‘child’ and ‘children’ are rarely included as subjects of discussion by social theorists interested in consumption or globalization as such. (Langer, 2004, p. 253)

Langer reflects on how assumptions about childhood, specifically the notion of “the sacred child” (2004, p. 252), underpin rhetoric used both by industry and critics of industry. The child is often positioned in contrast to the “profane market” (2004, p. 252). The author also explains that play and toys, topics I will take up later in this chapter, can act as a bridge between the “sacred” and the “profane,” that is, the child and the market (2004, p. 252). These normalized understandings of childhood play out in other domains of discourse. As Buckingham (2011)

and Cook (2008, 2012a) have observed, the view that the child and the market are at odds also works to situate children as marginalized or wholly missing from studies on consumption.

In terms of academic research, consumption studies is not alone in reinscribing the seeming opposition between the child and the market. Martens, Southerton, and Scott's (2004) article "Bringing Children (and Parents) into the Sociology of Consumption" explains that while there has been an increase in publishing on the topic of children and consumer culture since the 1990s, the issues raised by the research have not been adequately considered in the context of what they term the sociology of childhood and the sociology of consumption (Langer, 2004). This article, like Buckingham's book, provides commentary on and categorizes research from a host of disciplines. As such it also works to provide cohesion to research that comes from a variety of methodologies, fields, and intentions. Integrating research on both childhood and consumption provides the framework for new means of academic inquiry.

Acknowledging the disconnect between concepts of the child and frameworks for studying children and consumer culture offers opportunities for insight into the social constructions of childhood. As both Cook (2004a, 2008) and Buckingham (2011) have pointed out, recent literature in the area of children and consumer culture often positions children as completely distinct from consumer culture. As Buckingham notes, "this argument seems to presume that children used to live in an essentially non-commercial world; and that their entry into the marketplace over the past several decades has had a wide range of negative consequences for their wellbeing" (2011, p.1). There are two key ideas here. Firstly, there is an assumption that Western children have lived in a space outside of the capitalist marketplace at some point in history. Secondly, there is an assumption that children should live in a space that

exists outside of the capital marketplace. As Cook has also observed, the idea is that children at some point enter the economic realm having lived outside of it (2008).

The concept of childhood as a pure place, in contrast to the impure market, influences not only general discourse about childhood, but also academic research in childhood studies and consumption studies. Cook's editorial for *Childhood* entitled "Taking Exception with the Child Consumer" continues the discussion about the lack of integration of the child consumer in childhood studies and consumer culture studies (Cook, 2013). Unacknowledged normative understandings of childhood underpin the sidelining of the child consumer within research in childhood studies and in consumer culture studies (2013). As Cook observes,

The question is not one of the amount of attention paid—not about a separate entry in an encyclopedia or a designated chapter in a handbook—but of what counts as 'real' or core aspects of children's childhoods, conceptually speaking, in one's studies. (2013, p. 424)

The underlying claim situates consumer culture outside of 'authentic' childhood. As Buckingham has noted, these assumptions have positioned frameworks of inquiry inside of the academy (e.g. Buckingham, 2011). Cook proposes an approach, "to manifest the critical eye *and* to allow children their pleasures and self-defining practices in and through goods *and* to integrate these as necessary, unavoidable aspects of childhood without apology, hesitation or equivocation" (2013, p. 426). In order to integrate the aspects that Cook proposes, childhood must be located within consumer culture, and consumer culture must be located within childhood.

## Historical Scholarship on Children and Consumer Culture

Historical research into children and consumer culture is a key part in exploring the seemingly contradictory relationship between the two. If we are to follow the line of thinking that children had, at some point in the past, a life free from the economic sphere, then historical research on Westernized, capitalist cultures should reveal evidence of such a time. However, as Buckingham reminds us,

contemporary childhood takes place in and through market relations—as indeed it has done for centuries. Ultimately, consumption is part of the lived experience of capitalism; and children do not stand outside that, in some pure or unsullied space, even if that is what some commentators appear to imagine or wish. (2011, p. 3)

Nevertheless, historical research into the symbiotic relationship between the children and consumer culture is relatively rare as is research that focuses on historical periods prior to the twentieth century.

Cook's chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Consumption* entitled "Children's Consumption in History" (2012a) offers further insight into the shape of the emerging academic discipline by looking to historical research. He notes that scholarship on the histories of child consumers has been largely absent from historical accounts of both childhood and consumer culture (Cook, 2012a). This absence is explained as a symptom of the cultural understandings of childhood and consumption as morally opposed. Cook observes, "the marginality of children's consumption cannot be attributed to simply an artifact of academic myopia, but must be understood also as a social-historical reality" (2012a, p. 586).

Beyond the marginalization of studies of the child consumer, there are challenges within

children and consumer culture. Cook poses questions about the academic terrain: namely, how does one define a child, and what constitutes a child's consumption (i.e. is it done on the child's behalf by a caregiver or parent?) (Cook, 2012a). Additional challenges are posed by the availability of material culture for study. Children's objects are not always saved or savable as they are worn out or given away. Another trial is locating accounts by children of their interactions with material culture (Cook, 2012a). Cook observes, "given these complications, it should not be surprising that scholarship on children's consumption history is spotty, disjointed, and does not yet hold together as a body of knowledge or tradition of research" (2012a, p. 588). Historical research on children's consumer culture is an area that requires further study.

Finally, Cook explores historically-based work that attempts to bring in the experience of the child directly. He examines Miriam Forman-Brunell's<sup>21</sup> research on girls and dolls as she looks at dolls as a means to examine the lives and social expectations of children (Formanek-Brunell, 1998).<sup>22</sup> Overall, Cook offers a focus for future historical work on children and consumer culture:

Finally, the future direction of scholarship in this area must engage directly not simply with the ways in which consumption and consumer culture 'commodified' or otherwise commercialized childhood, but also with how children's presence and actions

---

<sup>21</sup> Miriam Forman-Brunell published her early works under the surname Formanek-Brunell; her more recent work is published under Forman-Brunell.

<sup>22</sup> Forman-Brunell's research will be examined in depth later in this chapter.

transformed consumption and consumer industries and, as well, with how childhood itself has been transformed irrevocably in the process. (2012a, p. 599)

Cook's observations about the meanings of childhood as connected to consumer culture are particularly relevant. Such work involves moving children to the core of research on consumer culture, both as subjects of study and as active participants. The lack of inclusion of children in studies is a bi-product of the marginalization of children's studies as a whole.

The complicated relationship between consumer culture and childhood reaches back further than the twentieth century. The nineteenth century, in particular, is a key moment to examine both consumer culture and childhood as both concepts took on new meaning. As Buckingham states,

The development of children's consumer culture gathered pace in the mid-nineteenth century, in parallel with the emergence of new, post-Romantic ideas of childhood. Just as children were being recognized as a distinct and special group—as pure and innocent, and in need of careful protection—they were also coming to be seen as a potential market. (2011, p. 70)

Dennis Denisoff makes this point in the introduction to *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*: “Because consumer culture and the dominant modern concepts of the child arose in Western society at roughly the same time and place, the effects of the young and childhood on this era of consumerism warrant extensive consideration” (2016, p. 2). Denisoff observes that there is a relationship between consumer culture and concepts of childhood that extends beyond timing. He notes that in nineteenth-century Britain, new ideas about childhood were developed in part through consumer culture. Moreover, he offers the insights that

consumer culture involves linking a sense of self with commodities or access to money. And finally, he says that consumer culture took hold through changing ideas of identity; i.e., seeing the self in part through one's relationship to the marketplace (Denisoff, 2016).

Like Cook (2004b, 2012a), Denisoff acknowledges that markets had a hand in shaping the very notion of childhood. This link between identity and consumption is core to understanding consumer culture influence. He explains,

nineteenth-century concepts of the child took shape through a series of small changes in Western perceptions and attitudes, and one of the most influential trends in this process was the birth of consumer culture in Britain. It arose when the ideology of consumerism—the association of human worth, purchasing power and material possessions—became the basis by which a substantial number of individuals fashioned and identified themselves, others and society. Consumer culture was a large-scale phenomenon that relied for its development on small scale acts of identity formation, acts that were often most readily fulfilled through the young, who were seen as especially open to and in need of influence, control and shaping. (Denisoff, 2016, p. 1)

The link between the “birth” of consumer culture and modern childhood is of central importance.

If we are to move forward the notion that childhood is often viewed as though it traditionally existed in a vacuum located outside of consumer culture, then historical work on both consumer culture and modern childhood is necessary. As Denisoff notes, in Britain, modern childhood was “born” at about the same time as consumer culture. Both new concepts developed through changing shared perceptions and indeed they flourished in concert as each

influenced and reinforced the other. Denisoff's contribution offers an opportunity to problematize the assumption that is central to many academic projects, popular books, and general understandings about childhood and the marketplace: namely, the moral grounding binarism that childhood is as good and innocent as consumer culture is bad and corrupting. An historical examination challenges that modern Western childhood is (or at least was at some glorious, yet undetermined, point in the past) untethered from consumer culture.

Linking historical changes of views of childhood to economics is one way to trace a connection between the two. A grounding text in this area is Viviana Zelizer's *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (1985/1994). The book doesn't take up consumer culture as such, but it does provide a connection between childhood and the market. In particular, Zelizer's work ties together the notions of modern childhood with economic changes traced to the nineteenth century. Zelizer documents the shift in the concept of the child between the 1870s and the 1930s. She explains that children in this time period became "economically 'worthless' but emotionally 'priceless'" (1985/1994, p. 3). As the economy shifted to a separation between the public and the private space, for many middle-class folks, paid labour occurred outside of the home and domestic life flourished inside of the home. As this separation occurred, children also left the workforce in increasing numbers; child labour became less common.

Zelizer contends that as children left the economic realm as workers and settled into the new family home, now a private, non-commercial space, the idea of what it was to be a child altered. These shifts involved, in Zelizer's words, a "sentimentalization of childhood" (1985/1994, p. 9). The value of children was emotionally-based rather than based on their



economic production. In mid-eighteenth-century America, laboring families saw value in the contributions of a child to the economic welfare of the family. Children contributed to the work and home life and would later look after their aging parents (Zelizer, 1985/1994). These circumstances changed, at least for middle-class children, by the 1850s when the expectations of children changed. By the 1930s, working class children saw a similar shift. Rather than work, education and the importance of play were emphasized and according to Zelizer, “the sanctity and emotional value of a child made child labor taboo” (1985/1994, p.6). Children were valued in a new way.

As the roles of children changed, perceptions of childhood also changed. No longer viewed as economically viable producers, children were seen as innocent and good and seemingly not part of economics. According to Zelizer, “in an increasingly commercialized world, children were reserved a separate noncommercial place, *extra-commercium*. The economic and sentimental value of children were thereby declared to be radically incompatible” (1985/1994, p. 11). The sentiment was moral in nature. Viewing children as innocent and the market as corrupting firmly placed children outside of the economic sphere. These changes, Zelizer points out, paralleled the changes in middle-class mothers’ roles as fulfilled within the home. Zelizer points out that by the beginning of the twentieth century, this aspiration of a mother’s fulfilling life caring for family within the home had also spread, even just as an ambition, to the working class (Zelizer, 1985/1994).

Even though children seemed to be separate from the economic workings of the family, Zelizer observes that the new view of childhood brought about an even closer tie between children and the market: “this exclusively emotional valuation had a profoundly paradoxical

and poignant consequence: the increasing monetization and commercialization of children's lives" (1985/1994, p. 15). Zelizer suggests that as children were perceived outside of the economic realm, as they were sentimentalized and seemingly protected, they were actually more firmly planted within the market.

These changes raise the question of why, with the economic shifts of industrialization, the very idea of the child changed. Why did children become precious just as work shifted to the public sphere and the home shifted to the private? Zelizer suggests that the changes in the views of childhood "served as a bulwark against the market" (1985/1994, p. 211). Children were valued emotionally, but in terms of the insurance policies that Zelizer explores, for example, children were also assessed economically. The policies, spelled out in dollars, were based on an emotional valuation rather than productivity valuation.

Although consumer culture is not Zelizer's subject *per se*, her contributions nonetheless provide a solid grounding for studies of consumer culture. The tension between the emotional and productivity assessments of the child is core for studies on the consumer child. Cook notes this tension in his article "Pricing the Priceless Child: A Wonderful Problematic" (2012b). He observes that while Zelizer does not grapple with consumer culture, she does provide valuable tools to ground such investigations. According to Cook, Zelizer's contributions to work on children and consumer culture include locating an historical period for the shift to so-called modern childhood and highlighting the interplay between the profane and the sentimental that grounds conceptions of the consuming child (Cook, 2012b). Her work provides an historical context for modern childhood and highlights a correspondence between both social and economic influences. Cook observes,

The rise of concern about and attention paid to children over the last century—in academic, political, and service contexts—has occurred in the very societies where capitalism and a market economy have either taken strong hold or have threatened to do so; hence, the focus on children serves as something of a moral counterweight, a “bulwark” as Zelizer puts it, to the commercialization process. Or, at least, this is one way to grasp the parallel rise of childhood and consumer capitalism. (2012b, p. 472)

The focus on preserving the sacredness of children in the face of the profane market is at play here.

Cook explains that Zelizer impacted his own research and notes that her account provides necessary context for contemporary considerations of children and consumer culture (2012b). Historically, children and the goods marketed to them were positioned in a way that embraced the characteristics of the modern child as sacred, for example (2012b). The market could be viewed as in line with the innocence of childhood as long as the goods were framed as having a positive effect on the child; in other words, the goods were viewed in service to education or personal growth (Cook, 2012b). In this sense, the child became symbolic and this imagining of childhood continues to impact Western culture. Cook states,

I think it is worth considering the ways in which children and childhood—particularly in the context of wealthy, consumer, and media-saturated societies—have come to represent sacred, noneconomic, sentimental value par excellence even as a commercial culture increasingly oriented to their worlds and perspectives continues apace on a global scale. (2012b, p. 472)

Zelizer provides a valuable jumping off point for authors, such as Denisoff (2016), Jacobson (2004), and as Cook himself noted, Cook (2012b), to investigate the historical foundations of the consumer child. Her work parallels the notion of modern childhood and the changing economics domain, which offer a viable place from which to inquire about the relationship between how the very meaning of childhood in the overdeveloped world is connected with and reliant on the market.

As Cook and Buckingham have noted, childhood is not an add-on to studies on consumer culture, it is core. It is central precisely because its very meaning is so deeply tied to economics. Historical work by Denisoff (2016), Cook (2004b), and Jacobson (2004) build on this idea by offering investigations of historical periods in which both childhood and economics shifted in a symbiotic way. Zelizer's work offers an early identification of this historical change.

Historical investigations into childhood and consumer culture offer insight into the relationship between these two realms. In particular, the search for a Western pre-commercialized childhood reveals a long history of children as consumers in the United States. Lisa Jacobson's book *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century* is an historical account that focuses on the child consumer in the United States mainly between the 1890s and the 1930s (2004). Like Cook, Jacobson states that there is a lack of historical research into children's participation in consumer culture (2004). She explains that children and consumption have a longer history than is often assumed as consumer culture and childhood have often been linked with the emergence of American television in the mid-twentieth century (2004). However, children were positioned as

consumers well before then: “More than half a century before television enchanted the baby boom generation, middle-class children had become targets of advertising and prominent figures in corporate dreams of market expansion” (Jacobson, 2004, p. 1). Jacobson offers a range of time in which the child consumer emerged rather than pinpointing a single moment. As she says, not all children were framed as consumers at the same time: “children’s experiences of capitalism in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries varied considerably by class, gender, race, and even age cohort” (Jacobson, 2004, p. 4). Her research includes a careful consideration of the nuances of children’s histories. Moreover, she situates the 1930s as a time when U.S. children were most uniformly situated as consumers, and she cites the 1930s radio shows targeted at children as evidence. These shows had a wide reach and embraced listeners from the middle and lower classes as well as children living outside of urban spaces (Jacobson, 2004).

Jacobson’s research offers a solid grounding for the emergence of the child consumer in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, her research focuses on how children’s consumer culture came to be normalized. Jacobson highlights a host of social changes that worked in tandem. She says her book “stresses how dynamic interactions between the market and new family ideologies, including new notions of play, helped to shape and ultimately legitimize children’s consumer culture” (2004, p. 4). Her work highlights the different realms in which the changes occurred as consumer culture took hold. Jacobson’s research establishes the long history of the child consumer and documents the rise in marketing to children.

Beyond the study of when children became targets of marketing—and indeed Jacobson notes that this did not happen all at once—and assumed their place in the consumptive landscape, Jacobson brings up a core idea about the symbolic relationship between children and consumer culture:

Child consumers thus figure into my story not only as economic actors and social beings, but as cultural icons that helped Americans grapple with the promises and perils of consumer culture at a moment when its legitimacy was still contested. (2004, p. 2)

In some sense, new concepts of the child helped usher in consumer culture as a popular ideology. Jacobson's view is reminiscent of Zelizer's, who justifies the changes in notions of childhood (i.e., "the priceless child") as a "bulwark against the market" (2004, p. 211). Here the child is not only an extension of, but also a symbol of, the market. Concerns or celebrations about the new social place of consumer culture were, according to Jacobson, focused onto notions of the child (2004). In addition to considering changing notions of childhood, Jacobson links the social, economic, and political forces that shaped the acceptance of children as consumers.

The history of the consumer child is also taken up by Cook in *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry And The Rise of The Child Consumer* (2004b). Cook examines the emergence and development of the children's clothing industry in the United States between 1917-1962 (2004b). The research situates the clothing industry as a means to investigate the relationship between modern childhood and consumer culture (2004b). He examines, "a story, a history, of the social production of the child consumer" (Cook, 2004b, p. 5). In order to examine the symbiotic relationship between childhood and

consumer culture, the child must be framed as discursive (2004b). Cook contends that the marketplace is an integral part of the meanings of childhood:

As I argue and demonstrate, commodification is not merely some process imposed upon independent, individualized children which has turned them into consumers, nor is it something that soils pristine, autonomous childhood, but instead forms the basis of latter-day children's culture. (2004b, p. 6)

A fully-formed, pre-existing child is not plunked into consumer culture and then changed, but rather the concept of the child itself is shaped, in part, through consumer culture and shapes understandings of consumer culture.

Cook traces what have come to be known as the ages and stages of childhood, the infant and the toddler for example, as market categories that each require a different array of goods. Cook writes, "the simplified thesis of this book is that markets shape persons in and through the consumer culture of childhood" (Cook, 2004b, p. 11). There are other examinations into the emergence of "natural" stages of childhood as market categories. Cook's article co-authored with Susan B. Kaiser, "Betwixt and Between: Age Ambiguity And The Sexualization of The Female Consuming Subject" (2004) examines the tween as a gendered category. Natalie Coulter's book *Tweening the Girl: The Crystallization of the Tween Market* (2014) traces the emergence of a popularly accepted highly gendered stage of childhood. And the tween is in part defined by her engagement with capitalism. Coulter observes, "a girl at a period of late, middle childhood or pre-adolescence is only marked as a tween when she enters the marketplace as a market, a customer and an audience" (2014, p. 10). The emergence of the teenager in relationship to the market has also been traced (e.g., Palladino, 1996; Schrum,

2004). Here differing categories of pre-adulthood are shaped, at least in part, in conjunction with the good of the market.

The central thrust of this work fits with later calls to acknowledge childhood and children as key to studies of consumer culture. To Cook, the child is central: “children’s presence and practices must be acknowledged as constitutive of—rather than derivative of or exceptional to—commercial, consumer culture generally” (Cook, 2008, p. 221). The child as discourse provides insight into the production and reproduction of consumer culture. By providing historical accounts of the child consumer, Cook sheds light on taken-for-granted ideas of childhood that even today frame conversations about children and consumer culture.

### **Motherhood and Consumption**

Discussions of the historical consumer child spill over into discussions of motherhood and consumption. Cook has illustrated the roles of mothers in the emerging children’s wear industry in the United States (2004b). In the 1920s, upper and middle-class mothers purchased layettes for their babies (Cook, 2004b). These mothers were the target market for the growing children’s wear industry. In the context of consumer culture, part of the role of the good mother is the good purchaser. According to Cook, “over the course of the first three decades of the twentieth century, a particular convergence of social, cultural, political and economic trajectories took shape, in condensed form, in the commercial persona and historical reality of the “mother as consumer” (2004b, p. 41). Certainly mothers were purchasing items for their children, but they also performed a symbolic role in the new economic system: “Mothers thus became positioned as a middle term between the child and the market, softening the blow of commerce on the social and moral value of their children” (Cook, 2004b, p. 11).



If children should be central to studies of consumer culture, then mothers should assume a similar placement. Cook concludes that both children and mothers must be central to considerations of consumer culture: “Consumption theory—if it is to serve us—must be reordered and rethought such that the lives and experiences of children, mothers and women generally (and childhood, motherhood and womanhood) are encoded like DNA into conceptualizations of commercial life” (Cook, 2008, p. 237). Cook’s examination of the roles of mothers within consumer culture links children, motherhood, and consumer culture. A discussion of children as consumers, itself a marginalized area of study, also includes a discussion of mothers.

Clare Rose builds on Cook’s insights in “Maternal Consumption: A View from The Past” (2013). The article examines British mothers’ roles as consumers of children’s clothing from 1890-1914 (C. Rose, 2013). These roles were shaped by emerging discourses about proper mothering and consumption as a symbol of status (C. Rose, 2013). The legacy of these expectations of mothering still inform attitudes today. Rose notes that the historical inquiry is useful in framing contemporary debates about mothering and consumption as some concerns and interpretations voiced in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries are echoed today (2013). Rose’s work effectively articulates the need for historical investigations in contextualizing contemporary perspectives about consumption.

## **Toys**

As Rose argues, citing Cook, not only is there a lack of research in the area of the history of childhood and the rise of consumer culture, but there is also little work on historical “material culture” of childhood (p. 179). As Cook observes, this is partially due to children’s

objects and perspectives not viewed as particularly relevant for academic study and the relative fragility of well-used children's objects (2012a). However, children's toys are a potent place to examine perspectives on childhood and, at least with toys that are mass produced, consumer culture. As Langer notes, toys can be viewed as a bridge between childhood and consumer culture, two concepts that have been positioned as so seemingly at odds with each other (2004).

An overview of toys is offered by Gary Cross in *Kids' Stuff: Toys and the Changing World of American Childhood* (1997). He discusses toys and concepts of play in the nineteenth century as well as the changing landscape of toys in the twentieth century (Cross, 1997). Toys, attitudes toward play, childhood, and parenting are highlighted throughout the text (Cross, 1997). Cross discusses the nostalgia with which adults look back at their "non-commercialized" childhood in contrast to the explosion of ever-changing toys of the late twentieth century. He views the 1930s as a turning point for children's toys as toymakers increasingly promoted products that appealed directly to children rather than their parents. He says, "the new generation of fantasy toys did not always draw upon parental ideas about what childhood meant, nor did they offer a cross-generational appeal which parents could share and understand" (Cross, 1997, p. 102). Cross's observation links to both Cook's (2012a) and Lisa Jacobson's (2004) view that the 1930s were a turning point for children's consumer culture.

Furthermore, like Denisoff (2016) and Zelizer (1985/1994), Cross highlights changes in the notions of childhood in the nineteenth century as tied to economic shifts. Certainly, industrialization was key: "Mechanized production and aggressive retailing may appear to have little to do with the building of family life around children. But the mass-marketed toy in the late Victorian nursery put these two worlds together" (Cross, 1997, p. 26). As work shifted

outside of the home and the home became instead a place of leisure, children were able to play more (Cross, 1997). Play and toys became part of good child-rearing practices. And certainly, for affluent children, time spent at home meant a growth of amusements in the nursery. Aimed at middle-class children, toys of the late nineteenth century were like miniature versions of objects used by adults; for example, air rifles, kitchen sets, and watches (Cross, 1997). These kinds of toys helped children anticipate their adult roles, and they appealed to the adults who were ultimately the decision-makers about what purchases would be made (Cross, 1997). Cross traces the shape of the marketplace through the shifts in toy production in the twentieth century. In so doing, he also offers insights into the changing landscape of play, parenting, and childhood.

## **Doll Studies**

One type of toy, namely dolls, anchors an emerging interdisciplinary academic subject, doll studies. Historically, A. Caswell Ellis and G. Stanley Hall's "Study of Dolls" (1897) offered a first peek into these toys as a significant area for scholarly study. It wasn't until almost 100 years later that doll studies gained momentum as an academic area of study. According to *Dolls Studies: The Many Meanings of Girls' Toys and Play* (2015), doll studies took on momentum in the 1990s with feminist research on dolls as material culture. Pioneering critical analyses on dolls (e.g., Chin, 1999; Formanek-Brunell, 1998; Rand, 1995; Rogers, 1999) situate dolls as valid sites of critical inquiry. The popularity of branded doll lines such as American Girl and Barbie provide the motivation for some of the research, and the academic approach of choice is decidedly feminist and post-structuralist (Forman-Brunell, 2012; Forman-Brunell & Whitney 2015). Because the area is cross-disciplinary, research takes on a

wide variety of topics and methodologies (Forman-Brunell & Whitney, 2015). Doll studies overlaps with girlhood studies as dolls are often harnessed as objects of inquiry as a means to grapple with notions of girlhood (Forman-Brunell, 2012; Forman-Brunell & Whitney 2015).

Doll studies as a discipline is in its early stages, even compared to the newly emerging children and consumer culture. As Cook has noted with regards to children and consumer culture, in order to build a discipline, research must be in conversation rather than simply tangentially linked by topic (2008). The conversation within doll studies is just beginning. There are two notable collections of work that offer some oversight of the discipline, and even in the case of the first title, name it as a discipline: *Dolls Studies: The Many Meanings of Girls' Toys and Play* (2015) and an issue of *Girlhood Studies* entitled “Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls: New Directions in Doll Studies” (2012). In the introduction to “Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls,” Forman-Brunell explains that doll researchers often fasten hybrid methodologies and approach their topics through the lenses of a variety of disciplines (2012). Like Buckingham’s book on children and consumer culture (2011), both publications provide context and begin to link texts that fall under the very wide umbrella of doll studies. The commonality of the work centers on dolls as sites of interrogation into areas such as gender, sex, race, class, ability, sexuality, culture, power, and society. Miriam Forman-Brunell and Jennifer D. Whitney note, “together, those conducting doll research today see dolls as dynamic texts that represent layered versions of realities, mediated by the often-contradictory ideologies, values, or worldviews of doll creators, producers, consumers, and players” (2015, p. x).

One of the foundational texts in doll studies also crosses over to consumer culture. Forman-Brunell examines dolls as material culture. In *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (1998), the author quotes Laura Star, a doll collector who in 1909 stated, “history could be taught by means of dolls. The future historian will have no difficulty in reconstructing our age if he merely finds a few toys in dusty garrets or museums” (qtd. in Formanek-Brunell, 1998, p. 2). Forman-Brunell discusses gendered childhoods and dolls, and also she focusses on the doll-making industries. In particular, she highlights doll businesses in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were created and run by women and she highlights the differences between dolls created by men and those created by women. In part, doll-making businesses run by women challenged popular notions of femininity simply because they were businesses run by women. Forman-Brunell documents the shift from home-made dolls to industry-made ones and thus, like Cross (1997), traces toy development alongside the societal changes that correlate to the rise of consumer culture.

Dolls became tools of socialization and also status symbols. As Cross explains, toys are not simply for children, but serve a purpose for the adults who purchase them. While Cross (1997) observes that time-starved parents of the late twentieth century purchase toys to alleviate guilt, Forman-Brunell (Formanek-Brunell, 1998) explains that late nineteenth century middle-class fathers especially gifted girls with dolls to compensate for a lack of time with the family. By the late nineteenth century, dolls with extensive wardrobes and accessories were available to families with the financial means to purchase them. Forman-Brunell explains that expensive dolls were status symbols for families (Formanek-Brunell, 1998). In particular, the

scholar locates dolls as texts that provide insight into consumer culture, the changing dynamics of the family, and girlhood.

In “The Politics of Dollhood in Nineteenth-Century America,” an entry in *The Girls’ History and Culture Reader: The Nineteenth Century* (2011), Forman-Brunell notes that doll-play shifted in the nineteenth century. Dolls that pre-date the American Civil War were intended for manual skill-building. Making dolls helped girls develop sewing skills. However, by the 1890s, elite American girls were encouraged to play and bond with purchased dolls. Indeed, expensive dolls were considered a familial status symbol. Doll play functioned in part to teach the manners expected of middle and upper-class girls; nonetheless, Forman-Brunell explains, girls did not always play with dolls in socially prescribed ways. She observes that girls buried their dolls for example. This behaviour was an act of self-affirmation and rebellion. Forman-Brunell notes,

after the Civil War, doll play absorbed and channeled a number of interrelated changes in the lives of American girls: increased affluence, new consumer outlets, smaller family size, and greater emphasis on imitation of adult social rituals and the formalized play it encouraged. (2011, p. 226)

Again, the author reads dolls as texts, which offer insight into the times and places in which they are produced.

A key contribution of Forman-Brunell’s work is not only to legitimize dolls as a valid site of inquiry, but also to problematize the ways in which dolls and doll play have been popularly perceived. Forman-Brunell and Whitney observe that the book *Made to Play House* offers the insight that dolls have varied meanings (2015). Dolls are not trivial objects or tools

that only reinforce patriarchal gender roles. Girls play with dolls in ways that are subversive and challenge popular notions of girlhood (Forman-Brunell, 2012; Forman-Brunell & Whitney, 2015). In addition, the work offers the insight that the kinds of dolls that were produced in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, and the imaginings of how the dolls would be used, were highly gendered. Men and women in the business of doll making offered different interpretations of girlhood and the ways in which those dolls were received and understood also varied (Forman-Brunell & Whitney, 2015; Formanek-Brunell, 1998). Forman-Brunell explains, “Although both men and women doll manufacturers urged girls to play with the dolls they produced, they disagreed on just what that activity entailed” (Formanek-Brunell, 1998, p.5). Male doll makers tended to encourage girls to mother their baby dolls; whereas, pioneering female dollmakers often focused on doll play as an opportunity to learn about “health and hygiene in the home” (Formanek-Brunell, 1998, p.5). Despite these intentions however, the girls gifted with the dolls did not necessarily follow the maker’s expectations. Some children rejected the dolls entirely in favour of other pursuits while others created more creative doll play narratives such as funerals (Formanek-Brunell, 1998, p.5).

In her book *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), Robin Bernstein also acknowledges children as dynamic cultural players and meaning makers: “Children do not passively receive culture. Rather, children expertly field the co-scripts of narratives and material culture and then collectively forge a third prompt: play itself” (2011, p. 29). She views children and childhood through the lens of performance; that is, children and childhood co-create each other. Childhood, then, is not a pre-ordained state that children enter; instead, Bernstein views childhood as part of a dynamic process. She says, “that

embodiment—the historical process through which childhood and children coproduce each other—occurs through surrogation” (Bernstein, 2011, p. 23). She explains that surrogation refers to the means by which a culture sustains itself; that is, the ways that norms within a culture are recreated. Bernstein views childhood as co-created by children, and doll play, as she documents, is part of this process. Furthermore “dolls are emblems of childhood,” and thus are associated with childhood and innocence (Bernstein, 2011, p. 19).

Bernstein, like Zelizer (1985/1994) and Cook (2004b), examines historical ideas about the sentimentalization of childhood. She explains, “by the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly” (2011, p. 4). However, Bernstein specifies the role of race within the concept of childhood innocence. She points out that the rise of the innocent child in the nineteenth century did not uniformly apply to all children.

Bernstein notes,

childhood innocence—itsself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them under claims of holy obliviousness—secured the unmarked status of whiteness, and the power derived from that status, in the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries. (Bernstein, 2011, p. 8)

According to Bernstein, the qualities associated with sentimental, innocent childhood were also associated with whiteness (Bernstein, 2011).

However, as Bernstein observes, the racial categorization of childhood innocence was not acknowledged, which lent it all the more power. The denial of whiteness intrinsic to notions of childhood innocence was in fact one of the characteristics that made the concept so potent:



sentimental childhood innocence manifested through the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and ... race. Of course, no nineteenth century children existed outside race (or gender or class) nor were any children perceived as unraced.

Innocence was not a literal state of being unraced but was, rather, the performance of not noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories. (Bernstein, 2011, p. 6).

So while childhood innocence seemingly transcended race, gender, and class, in actuality it did not (Bernstein, 2011).

By analyzing dolls alongside literature, visual texts, and documentations of doll play to analyze the notion of childhood innocence within the context of America from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Bernstein documents how dolls factor into notions of childhood. Dolls, through their association to childhood, take on the very quality of innocence that was also historically grafted into a universalized, yet particular, imagining of childhood. She notes,

dolls have, for more than two centuries, been understood as the defining feature of girls' culture and a metonym for girlhood itself. By considering dolls not as objects or texts that contain racial meanings but instead as things that script a repertoire of behaviours, I demonstrate the importance of dolls—and therefore girls and girlhood—to large-scale racial projects. (Bernstein, 2011, p. 19)

As such, a discussion of the rise of the innocent child and the rise of consumer culture is also a discussion about power/knowledge manifested with and through social/political categorizations and representations.

## **American Girl**

Beyond dolls and toys in general, the doll brand American Girl, my focus later in this dissertation, has been the subject of a number of academic studies. The brand is cited as one of the founding sites of inquiry for doll studies (Forman-Brunell & Whitney, 2015). In an early piece of research in doll studies, Maria Carolina Acosta-Alzuru uses textual analysis and interviews to assess the messaging and impact of American Girl (1999). Her work sits at the beginnings of both doll studies and research on the American Girl brand. In the dissertation “The American Girl Dolls: Constructing American Girlhood through Representation, Identity and Consumption” (1999), Acosta-Alzuru grapples with identity and representation as part of larger societal processes that are demarcated by power. Her feminist, cultural studies approach finds value in everyday texts as both contributors to and barometers for social practices. A key aspect of the dissertation is its subject matter: dolls. Although there had been literature on the Barbie doll, Acosta-Alzuru notes that she was only able to locate one academic article on the American Girl (1999). Almost 20 years hence, there is a good deal of literature on the brand, and doll studies is emerging as a distinct area of study.

Acosta-Alzuru’s dissertation includes the use of multiple methodologies, an approach that is popular in doll studies (Forman-Brunell & Whitney, 2015). The methods rely on both the discursive analysis of texts and interviews. The author focuses on many texts including the American Girl catalogues. She also interviews mothers and daughters about the brand. Of late, there has been a call to include the voices of children in research about children and consumer culture (e.g. Buckingham, 2011). The reception of consumer culture and the intention with which it is marketed or the interpretations of adults may not line up. In other words, the ways

that children negotiate commodities only becomes apparent when those children are actually asked. Their reception of these items may differ from what an adult might imagine. Research that includes the voices of child consumers address this issue by including children (e.g., Acosta-Alzuru, 1999; Chin, 2001; Russell & Tyler, 2002; Sparrman, 2009). Furthermore, research also includes adult recollections of their girlhoods. Dorothy Washburn's 1987 report based on interviews with 78 women who played with dolls between 1900 and 1940 focuses on their recollections of doll play (1987).

In the last 20 years, the literature on the American Girl brand has grown significantly. There are many studies that involve inquiries into representation of elements such as gender, class, race, nationalism, ethnicity, and ability<sup>23</sup> (e.g., Acosta-Alzuru & Roushanzamir, 2003; Marcus, 2012; Schalk, 2016; Valdivia, 2009). In addition, the appeal of the brand in relationship to nostalgia has been documented (e.g., Brookfield, 2012; Marcus, 2012; Marshall, 2009; Rosner, 2014). Two articles stand out as linking representation with identity and consumption: "Everything We Do Is a Celebration of You: Pleasant Company Constructs American Girlhood" (2003) by Acosta-Alzura and Elizabeth Lester Roushanzamir, and "I'm an American Girl...Whatever *That* Means': Consuming Pleasant Company's American Girl Identity" (2002) by Acosta-Alzura and Peggy Kreshel. The article "Everything We Do"

---

<sup>23</sup> Ability is the subject of inquiry in only one of these articles: "Ablenationalism in American Girlhood" (Schalk, 2016). Schalk notes that "no scholars, to my knowledge, have discussed disability in relation to the brand" (2016, p. 36).

explores representation of nationality, race, ethnicity, consumerism and gender through a textual analysis of a range of products produced by the brand. The article concludes that representation affects perception:

In sum, the American Girl dolls and products render the world for its young consumers. Our study underscores that this rendering is not innocent. Inclusions, exclusions, and hierarchies are naturalized, offering a particular view of race, gender, and the ‘imagined community’ that is embedded in social practices and power relations that help determine our ways of seeing and imagining from a young age. (Acosta-Alzuru & Roushanzamir, 2003, p. 67)

In other words, the dolls offer an early initiation for children into political relationships marked by power meanwhile, “I’m an American Girl” (2002) focuses on interviews with American Girl consumers. It concludes that there is a negotiation between the brand and the brand users:

The American girl identity, though based on partial, essentialist, and romanticized view of history, is a symbolic project under constant negotiation. Constituted “in representation” (Hall, 1990, p. 222), the American girl identity nevertheless, is a coproduction of Pleasant Company texts that represent that identity and the consumers who incorporate it in their everyday lives. (Acosta-Alzura & Kreshel, 2002, p. 158)

The articles both highlight the complicated relationship between representation, consumption, identity, and ultimately work in concert to bridge textual analysis with power and lived experience.

While most research in American Girl involves a critique of the brand (e.g. Acosta-Alzuru & Roushanzamir, 2003; Marcus, 2012; Rosner, 2014; Schalk, 2016; Valdivia, 2009),

there is some research that celebrates the effectiveness of the branding. The article “American Girl and the Brand Gestalt: Closing the Loop on Sociocultural Branding Research” (Diamond et al., 2009) dissects the success of the brand. The article, unsurprisingly, comes from a marketing perspective as it is published in *Journal of Marketing*. While the purpose of the text is to further successful marketing of other brands by examining what makes American Girl effective, it does come to similar conclusions as critical articles. The article states,

a brand such as American Girl is a cultural cynosure, an object of focal fascination and contemplation by virtue of its resonance with norms, values, and mores. Because a culture’s key identity issues are always under construction and in active negotiation, such a cynosure is a site of contestation. The brand acts as a lightning rod and a fault line for contemporary cultural debate. (Diamond et al., 2009, p. 133)

This is perhaps the best explanation of why American Girl, and popular brand identities in general, make for such a rich text for scholarly inquiry. The texts act as a portal for a host of societal norms, understandings, and beliefs.

Additionally, Emilie Zaslow’s comprehensive book on American Girl entitled *Playing with America’s Doll: A Cultural Analysis of the American Girl Collection* (2017), leads to similar conclusions and offers a nuanced approach to an analysis of the brand. Zaslow examines how American Girl is situated as both a profit-generating brand grounded in corporate status quo and a potentially empowering brand created, in part, by politically driven, feminist writers and designers. The contradictions of the brand allow space for both status quo interpretations and cultural resistance (Zaslow, 2017).

The digital space is also an area of inquiry for research on American Girl and extends the terrain for scholarly inquiry. Jessica E. Johnston examines American Girl-themed videos posted on YouTube in her article, “The Doll ‘InbeTween’: Online Doll Videos and the Intertextuality of Tween Girl Culture” (2018). In particular, she investigates how girls, as users/producers of American Girl-themed videos, interpret and contest notions of girlhood in the online world. As such, analysis of content on social media sites such as YouTube offers insight into how users are interacting with and interpreting the toys. In some ways, this research is an extension of the research that seeks to include children’s perspectives (e.g. Acosta-Alzuru, 1999; Chin, 2001; Hains, 2012; Russell & Tyler, 2002; Sparrman, 2009) as the user-created content provides an opportunity to consider not just the cultural texts (i.e., the dolls or the catalogues) but also the interpretation of these cultural texts by girls themselves.

## **Contribution**

This project falls at the crossroads of modern childhood, the dominance of consumer culture, and mass-produced material culture for children; hence, it is historical and stretches from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. This work addresses a gap in work on children and consumer culture generally by linking inextricably the very notion of modern childhood and consumer culture. Childhood is the central object of study for my dissertation precisely because it acts as a barometer for larger social, political, and economic sensibilities. The understanding of the category of child has been deeply informed by consumer culture. However, my focus is on the symbiotic relationship between consumer culture as a dominant ideology and the “birth” of modern childhood.

My work is interdisciplinary and thus may be claimed by any number of subjects; however, the research is situated within children and consumer culture as it seeks to address some of the overall inquiries that have been proposed within the subject and to fill some of the research gaps within the emerging discipline. Certainly, this research also falls within the realm of doll studies. While my overall contribution is to children and consumer culture, the methods are perhaps better suited to the doll studies that have a solid history of feminist, post-structuralist approaches that read a variety of texts in a number of mediums. The subject matters of my inquiry and the variety of texts consulted, as well as the hybrid method, are characteristic of the work in this area.

My research seeks to further bring into conversation work that falls under the realm of children and consumer culture and to contribute to defining the emerging discipline as a whole. I hope to illustrate the primacy of children to understanding and analyzing the production and reproduction of consumer culture. As such, I will establish the importance of historical accounts of children and consumer culture as a viable place to address contemporary debates about the topic. The marketing of dolls provides a viable entry point into meanings of childhood and bridges the seemingly disparate communities of the commercial market and childhood.

Furthermore, my research centers on girlhood particularly as a subject of inquiry. It puts girls at the centre of considerations of consumer culture, identity, and representation. My work also weaves a cross-disciplinary narrative by teasing out the relationship between historical studies on childhood and motherhood; textual analysis of both traditional paper-based catalogues; and dynamic contemporary digital spaces including social media. My study

offers a bridge between varied sites of research and academic disciplines in order to contemplate identity and consumer culture.



## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Introduction

The area of academic inquiry with which I engage is found in the overlap between children and consumer culture, and doll studies. This dissertation positions the child as a discursive construction and seeks to discern its parameters through doll-related objects of inquiry. In order to establish the primacy of the relationship between the concept of the child and consumer culture, I undertake what might broadly be termed a textual analysis. As stated in the introduction, I define consumer culture in part through insights offered by Jean Baudrillard, who states that consumption is discursive and is thus reliant on “the symbolic manipulation of signs” (1976/2005, p. 218). In order to excavate this terrain, I use the most suitable tools at my disposal: semiotics and discourse analysis. Roland Barthes (1957/2013) grounds my use of semiotics while my interpretation of discourse analysis is grounded in the work of Michel Foucault (e.g., 1979, 1980, 1982, 1978/1990, 1993). In addition to sourcing Foucault’s work directly, I also look to Gillian Rose’s (2010) interpretation of Foucault within the context of visual methodologies: namely, visual discourse analysis.

In this chapter, I explain and discuss semiotics and discourse analysis and highlight the benefits as well as the limitations of each for my study. I establish how these methods complement each other. In addition, I outline my research questions, research design, data collection, and modes of analysis.

## Explanation of Methods

### Semiotics

I look to Barthes because he initiates the application of semiotics to “collective representations” (1957/2013, p. ix); namely, he explains how aspects of cultural belief systems can be interpreted through everyday phenomena. Objects of analysis are wide-ranging and include media, like the cover of a magazine; material culture, like toys; and popular culture, like the face of Greta Garbo (Barthes, 1957/2013). Barthes explores these concepts in *Mythologies* (1957/2013) where he illustrates and explains his method of semiotics. I use Barthes as a jumping off point from which to assess differing meanings in the objects with which I engage. I find him particularly useful because he uses a method of analysis—semiotics—to locate meanings in texts, pictures, objects, and events. His method is clearly articulated, and he provides a solid beginning for reading individual objects of analysis. Barthes grapples with a wide range of texts and draws on popular culture as well as everyday events. He explains,

the development of publicity, of a national press, of radio, of illustrated news, not to speak of the survival of myriad rites of communication which rule social appearances makes the development of a semiological science more urgent than ever. In a single day, how many really non-signifying fields do we cross? Very few, sometimes none. Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, signals, sign-boards, clothes, suntan even, which are so many messages to me. (Barthes, 1957/2013, p. 221)

Barthes explains that human-made objects have meaning. They offer insight into cultural belief systems. Barthes's work is particularly useful for my analysis of marketing and advertising products. Semiotics assumes that a store catalogue or a doll, for example, offers insight into the society in which it is produced.

Barthes's method is grounded in Ferdinand de Saussure's work in linguistics (Barthes, 1957/2013). He builds on Saussure's observations about the relationship between the signifier, the signified, and the sign in language. Barthes explores a second level of signification, which he refers to as myth, involving the linguistic sign as a signifier that, united with a signified, becomes a different sign. Barthes uses the example of a bundle of roses to illustrate his method:

Take a bunch of roses: I use it to signify my passion. Do we have here only a signifier and a signified, the roses and my passion? Not even that; to put it accurately, there are here only "passionified" roses. But on the plane of analysis, we do have three terms; for these roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existed before uniting and forming this third object which is the sign. (Barthes, 1957/2013, pp. 221–222)

Barthes works with two levels of signification. On the first level, the level of language, Barthes refers to the signifier, signified, and sign. This first level of a sign is called meaning. The meaning also forms the basis for the signifier, the start of the second level of meaning. He refers to the second level of meaning as myth and the myth as metalanguage. In this second level of meaning, Barthes names the signifier the "form." The signified of the second level is called the concept. And the sign of the second level is signification (Barthes, 1957/2013, p.

224). As a method, Barthes views semiology as part of science and ideology: “This is the case with mythology: it is part both of semiology, inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology, inasmuch as it is a historical science: it studies ideas-in-form” (1957/2013, p. 221).

Semiotics is a useful method for reading texts. I want to state that although I am using the technique of semiotics, I do not subscribe to a structuralist approach. This may seem contradictory, but I will explain. Semiotics provides the justification for reading images, popular culture and even, as Barthes deftly does, everyday rituals. I use the method, but do not believe that my interpretations are anything but interpretations. I don't believe that meaning is fixed, so while I find the technique useful, I divorce myself from the conclusions that the reading reveals an absolute, unchanging moment in a fixed universe of signs. Barthes himself states that myth is an historically-based phenomenon:

one can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things. (1957/2013, p. 218)

Barthes then states that myths are human creations. The possibility of the meanings of objects changing over time, for example, opens up the possibility for multiple interpretations. Meanings are not fixed. At the very least, Barthes's observation frees the signifier from some sort of inevitable state. According to Barthes, signs may be read differently given context:

take a black pebble: I can make it signify in several ways, it is a mere signifier; but, if I weight it with a definite signified (a death sentence for instance, in an anonymous vote), it will become a sign. (Barthes, 1957/2013, pp. 221–222)

Signs are not closed, even in Barthes's estimation. Using semiotics today means being open to multiple sign interpretations at once. The original explanations of semiotics describe more of a rigid tool and do allow for more flexibility of interpretation. The method that Barthes develops provides a solid grounding upon which to begin to engage with a series of texts. Semiotics also offers a useful starting point for analysis. As such, I use it, as I will explain, in the early stages of my analysis as semiotics cannot offer the breadth of insight of discourse analysis.

Barthes provides the concept of "myth" in his application of semiotics to popular culture (1957/2013, p. ix), and this formulation is significant in order to shape the details of this dissertation. However, the analysis moves forward with Foucault, who employs a broad method with which to consider power and representation by contemplating both historical and contemporary processes. Barthes's notion of myth offers a way into the assessment of the individual texts and thus provides evidence of the norms, attitudes, and assumptions within a given framework. Nevertheless, semiotics does not provide a tool for an adequate analysis of my research, so I consider the readings of myth through the lens of Foucault and pull back from the details offered by a semiotic approach to look at larger patterns within a larger picture offered by discourse analysis. Semiotics provides the means to analyze individual texts, while Foucault's work shapes those analyses into a larger context. If discourses are (re)produced through a number of mediums then an analysis of discourse must be deft enough to accommodate a wide-ranging breadth of texts.

## Discourse Analysis

Foucault's work is useful to contextualize the insights of semiotic readings. As Foucault notes, "while the human subject is placed in relations of production and signification, he<sup>24</sup> is equally placed in power relations which are very complex" (1982, p. 778). As semiotics offers the opportunity to peel back layers of signification, Foucault's work advances the discussion of power and the subject. In particular, his use of a range of cultural objects over time is useful. Rather than investigating a single moment of signification, Foucault offers a grander analysis of cultural processes.

My dissertation is inspired by Foucault's later work in which he is "writing a history of the present" (1979). In particular, my work is inspired by Foucault's notion of a "genealogy" (e.g., 1979). This is a loosely defined method that problematizes contemporary ideologies through an interrogation into historical circumstances. Foucault looks to history not to construct an evolutionary narrative, but to offer insight into commonly held contemporary views. Foucault's approach begins with an historical analysis. History provides some temporal distance for the theorist; such distance is much more difficult when grappling with theorizing one's own life and belief systems. It is perhaps easier to analyze epochs in which we do not play a part than to rethink what we know to be "true" today. With a Foucaultian analysis, we

---

<sup>24</sup> Foucault's use of "he" is of course sexist language. The assumption of the human subject as male is not uncommon in the historical period in which Foucault writes. It is also a reminder of why placing girls at the centre of conversations about subjectivity is important. The disruption of the assumed male, adult subject is relevant today as we still contend with the legacy of a time in which these characteristics were a given.

consider how power functioned in an historical context, and then relate that functioning to present circumstances.

For Foucault, power is inextricably tied to knowledge and truth (e.g. 1980), so a Foucaultian analysis involves problematizing the known and considering how power functions through unquestioned articulations of truth. At the centre of the project is a grappling with articulations of the self: the formulation of a subject that has a legacy to the past. According to Foucault, “I have tried to get out from the philosophy of the subject through a genealogy of this subject, by studying the constitution of the subject across history which has led us up to the modern concept of the self” (1993, p. 202). Some of Foucault’s work focuses on institutions, the prison and the clinic for example, “where,” in his words, “certain subjects became objects of knowledge and at the same time objects of domination” (1993, p. 203). However, it is not only institutions that exercise power and coercion. Foucault identifies the interplay between “techniques of domination” and “techniques of the self” as a location of power (1993, p. 204). His notion of “the techniques of the self” is useful in considering how the subject produces and reproduces power through identity. Power here is not solely institutional, but replicated through knowledge, which occurs at an individual level. The articulation of the self or the representation of the other is also a replication of power.

It is the notion of the subject that is of particular interest in my work. I examine the formulation of the girl as a discursive construct within the context of Foucault’s notion of power/knowledge. Still, I do not view the formulation of the subject through a formal institution, like for example the school system, an institution Foucault touched on in *Discipline*

*and Punish* (1979). As I mentioned, my interest is in articulations of power, not as active coercion but as integrated with imaginings of identity. Foucault notes,

we must not understand the exercise of power as pure violence or strict coercion. Power consists in complex relations: these relations involve a set of rational techniques, and the efficiency of those techniques is due to a subtle integration of coercion technologies and self-technologies. (1993, p. 204)

I draw on Foucault's conceptualization of power/knowledge; in particular, the idea that power is inextricably tied to ideas, categories, and perceptions. Power does not, in his thinking, emerge only from points of physicality.

Foucault's method is decidedly messy and intentionally, I argue, un-method-like. Foucault's work is constantly shifting and while there are some broad patterns within Foucault's genealogical studies, he does not adhere to a precise step-by-step technique. In this sense, Foucault is a bigger picture thinker who doesn't concern himself with building a predictable, micro-level pattern; instead, he offers a method of broad strokes. His work shakes up commonly held "truths" and problematizes societal myths. He looks at how the past continues to shape the present; not as a cause and effect, but rather, how the functioning of power in a past context relates to the present. As such, it is challenging to define a step-by-step research and analysis plan from Foucault's work. The legacy of this approach is played out in contemporary methods of discourse analysis. As Rose notes, "many discourse analysts ... suggest that successful discourse analysis depends less on rigorous procedures and more on other qualities" (2010, p. 156). One of the challenges of a Foucaudian approach is its lack of specificity; yet, this lack is also the core of the method: discourses are complex, wide-reaching



and varied, thus the approach to grappling with them must have the flexibility and deftness to consider and make meaning from a wide range of objects of inquiry.

Another challenge with Foucault's work relates to the idea of the subject. His purpose in studying the subject is to grapple with "the modern concept of the self" (Foucault, 1993, p. 202). However, Foucault doesn't adequately consider the lapse between discursive construction and the self. The subject is discursive, but the self is not solely a pre-determined, discursive construction. The line between the two isn't quite so straight. When, for example, I analyze the constructions of girlhood in the American Girl catalogue, I cannot then jump to the assumption that girls, even those who are engaged with the brand, perceive themselves or the products in the same ways that girls are represented on the page.<sup>25</sup> Hence, Foucault's work is useful for looking at representations, but not necessarily for interpretations of the self.

In the Introduction to *Dolls Studies: The Many Meanings of Girls' Toys and Play* (2015), Miriam Forman-Brunell introduces the work of the doll studies authors included in the book by explaining that by,

interrogating dolls and investigating their production, consumption, representation, and reception, the authors shed collective light on the many meanings of dolls that continue

---

<sup>25</sup> Some scholars of American Girl dolls include methods like interviews and girl-directed and recorded play sessions in their study of the dolls in conjunction with or in place of textual analysis in order to address the limitations of using one method only (e.g., Acosta-Alzura & Kreshel, 2002; Brookfield, 2012; Hains, 2012; Marshall, 2009).

to serve centrally as objects through which girlhoods are constructed and reimagined, mediated and contested, played and performed. (2015, p. xi)

My method is thus framed through some of the tasks outlined by Forman-Brunell. Foucault's work is invaluable to explore representations, and representations are significant as they offer a significant part of the picture in the play of power and the (re)construction of humans as subjects. I explore this subject in chapters four and five of this dissertation. Another part of the task of doll studies, scholarly consideration of resisting and performing girlhood, will be taken up in chapter six.

### **Visual Discourse Analysis**

The legacy of Foucault's insights is taken up in visual discourse analysis. This method brings together in a systematic way elements of semiotics and discourse analysis. The approach harnesses Foucault's insights about truth, power/knowledge, and subjectivity and offers tools to analyze visual texts. Visual discourse analysis takes from semiotics the legitimacy of making meaning from a variety of visual texts. It also relies on Foucault's work, which legitimizes linking a breadth of objects of analysis to address the functioning of power. Visual discourse analysis provides the tools to identify patterns of representation (G. Rose, 2010). It also, according to Rose's description, offers broad methodological steps and thus offers systematic tools for data gathering and analysis (2010). According to Rose, the approach involves locating initial objects of analysis, expanding the research to include a wider array of materials, searching for patterns of representation within the materials, contextualizing those patterns by considering the "institutional location" and audience (G. Rose, 2010), and finally

offering an analysis.<sup>26</sup> Rose's explanation helps focus Foucault's complicated and somewhat vague research method.

## Research Questions

In a very broad sense this dissertation takes up a statement by Daniel Cook who offered this overarching thesis for his book, *The Commodification of Childhood*: “markets shape persons in and through the consumer culture of childhood” (Cook, 2004b, p. 11). Consumer culture is a force that constructs subjectivity, or at least perceptions of subjectivity, and in turn those subjectivities (re)construct consumer culture. Of particular interest are children and consumer culture as they have often been constructed in opposition to one another; Viviana Zelizer, for example, points this out in her explanation of the rise of the “sacred” child and the “profane” market (1985/1994) and this observation has further been taken up by Cook (2004b) and Buckingham (2011). The tension between these two discursive constructs, children and consumer culture, lies in the symbiotic relationship between the two that relies in part on the denial of that symbiosis. Furthermore, I use scholarship on children and consumer culture as an anchor for my investigations, but I focus my study on girlhood, specifically. I take up insights offered by Doll Studies and look to dolls as objects of inquiry to offer insight into subjectivities and consumer culture. The core question I investigate is the following: How are social roles,

---

<sup>26</sup> Rose discusses two forms of visual discourse analysis. I am referencing her explanation Visual Discourse Analysis I (G. Rose, 2010) as the second method relies more heavily on the analysis of institutions.

such as childhood, girlhood, and motherhood, produced by consumer culture, and in turn how do these roles (re)produce consumer culture?

## **Data Collection & Analysis**

Discourse analysis involves examining how human subjects are understood and how that understanding produces the human subject. In the case of this study, I investigate how girlhood is (re)constructed. In particular, I grapple with the conflicted yet mutually constructing relationship between childhood and the consumer culture. The study requires an investigation into both historical and contemporary circumstances. My research steps are shaped by Rose's description of visual discourse analysis. Nevertheless, within the stages of research outlined by Rose, I rely on Barthes's semiotic method to code objects of analysis. The last stage of the method that I employ involves framing results with Foucault's insights about the subject and knowledge-power.

### **Initial Objects of Analysis**

The starting point of my analysis is a series of American Girl catalogues distributed in Canada between 2012-2016. I selected these as they were the most recent catalogues available as I began writing in 2016. They also spanned four years offering opportunity to look for patterns in several seasonally-based issues. Mattel's 2013 annual report noted that American Girl is one of "the top four doll franchises in the world" (Mattel Inc., 2014, p. 1). In terms of context, American Girl dolls were created by Pleasant Company in 1986 and were first distributed by mail order catalog (American Girl, n.d.-s; Collins, 1996). Mattel, the toy company that owns Barbie, purchased the company in 1998 (Creswell, 2017). I select these

catalogues in particular because they have such a wide reach. The catalogues are designed to appeal to an audience of consumers by depicting childhood and selling goods. They are potent texts with which to examine concepts of the child and of the market, and the relationship between the two. Dolls have a long history as playthings directed primarily at girls and as objects of mass production, and as such provide useful text for investigations into the equally long history of consumer culture and childhood. In addition, the American Girl catalogue is highly gendered and offers insight into culturally accepted notions of girlhood. The second part of my analysis focuses on the company's digital sites; namely, the American Girl website and its YouTube channel. The website provides some clear similarities and differences to the paper catalogue. There is a whole layer of interaction made possible online that is simply not attainable through paper. For example, the American Girl customer can customize dolls and doll accessories. In addition, the brand's extension to YouTube provides a potent place to examine the (re)production of notions of girlhood by both the brand itself and by individual users. The social media site allows for an examination of media production by girls themselves, outside of the direct brand production of American Girl.

### **Expanding the research**

A key aspect of discourse analysis is intertextuality (G. Rose, 2010) and thus, in addition to the American Girl catalogues, I research primary and secondary sources relating to dolls. In part, I draw on resources from the Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. The museum boasts the biggest comprehensive collection of materials related to play in the world (Strong Museum of Play, n.d.). Its collection includes over 15,000 dolls (Strong Museum of Play, 2014). As such, I access an extensive collection of toy-related items such as

marketing materials, advertisements, trade publications, historical documents, scholarly studies, books, and journal articles. The time frame I reference ranges from the mid-nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. I selected this period as its earliest point, the mid-1800s, is referenced as a moment when both the concept of the child and the role of consumer culture had shifted. As Buckingham reminds us, “the development of a children’s consumer culture gathered pace in the mid-nineteenth century, in parallel with the emergence of new, post-Romantic ideas of childhood” (2011, p. 70). I research scholarly work both on dolls in general and on the American Girl brand in particular. As the main objects of my study are not only play things but also products that are mass-produced and supposed to be profit-generating for a corporation, I also focus on company information about Mattel, the owner of the American Girl brand. As such, I look at annual reports that correspond to the time frames of the American Girl materials I analyse. I also look to news releases and articles by and about the brand. Much of this material is available through the American Girl website.

As I conduct the research, I am mindful of the critique of visual discourse analysis that questions how a researcher determines whether materials gathered are relevant or tangential (G. Rose, 2010). I determine the common thread among the materials I select for the study is the mass-produced children’s doll available in North America.<sup>27</sup> These are dolls that are created in bulk for the marketplace rather than homemade for personal use. While there have been dolls for centuries, I focus on the mass-produced doll as it links the plaything with

---

<sup>27</sup> Dolls also have a long history of production in one country and distribution in others. For example, until the outbreak of WW1, German toy factories supplied many of North America’s store-bought toys.

consumer culture. In addition, dolls tend to be highly gendered toys, both in appearance and intended audience. As such, they are a potent place to locate a study on girls and consumer culture. Finally, dolls and doll-related materials span the time period of my investigation. They are consistently available as objects of analysis through the late nineteenth and twentieth, and into the twenty-first centuries.

### **Locating patterns of representation**

As the method of visual discourse analysis suggests, I familiarize myself with my research materials. When working with the American Girl catalogues, I examine the text and visuals in the catalogues and note themes that emerged. I look for the recurrence of words and phrases, similarities between images, and repetitions in the juxtaposition of text and image. I code the themes and then I go through every catalogue to search for instances when this theme occurred and then determine whether it was a regularly recurrent pattern. By coding, I mean I look for patterns—for example, the recurrence of words, phrases, images, or denotations—and I develop terms to describe them. This step is informed by semiotics as I am making meaning from the imagery and wording on the pages of the catalogue as I determine themes. Then I dive back into the literature to search for other instances where this term appears. I select the most relevant and strongly supported themes to explore in the dissertation. These are the patterns that occur with regularity and are expressed in a number of ways; for example, the word love appears often in the pages. The term is reinforced by connotations of love in photographs in which girls kiss and hug their dolls.

### **Contextualizing patterns**

The patterns in the catalogues are considered a part of a larger network of materials. As the visual discourse analysis method suggests, I examine the patterns in light of audience and location. For whom is the text intended? Where is the text produced and distributed? In addition, historical materials provide the groundwork to locate patterns that are either consistent or inconsistent with the constructions in the American Girl catalogue. Additional materials such as dolls, doll collector catalogues, advertisements, catalogues, literature, and newspapers are also consulted to contextualize the coded patterns. Furthermore, scholarly work grounds the patterns. Multi-disciplinary theory in consumer culture, motherhood studies, doll studies, girlhood studies, and childhood studies as well as children and consumer culture are the core areas I use to frame and explain the patterns.<sup>28</sup> Finally, as my central research interest is about the conflicted, yet mutually (re)constructing relationship between the child and consumer culture, the observations of this step are framed by Foucault's work on the subject, truth, and power/knowledge

### **Conclusion**

The space of inquiry for my dissertation exists in the overlap between children and consumer culture, and doll studies. Both areas are interdisciplinary and thus draw on resources from a wide range of academic fields. My points of intervention are within children and

---

<sup>28</sup> Please see the explanation of theories in the introduction to this dissertation for further details.



consumer culture, while my objects of inquiry are doll-related. I employ a methodology that incorporates semiotics and discourse analysis. The method is effective as it can process material culture and printed materials from a variety of contexts. My approach is familiar in the newly-emerging area of doll studies; as Forman-Brunell notes, scholars of doll studies often employ a range of methods in an interdisciplinary context (Forman-Brunell & Whitney, 2015). Through my use of this method, I process historical and contemporary materials and frame the resulting insights within theory offered by disciplines such as consumer culture and motherhood studies to offer commentary on the complicated and mutually-sustaining relationship between childhood and consumer culture.

## Chapter Four: Little Mothers

### Introduction

Consumer culture is not simply about the consumption of goods; it is also about social (re)production, including the (re)production of social identities. Certainly, consumer culture is sustained by social understandings. It is about a trade in social identities reproduced, in part, through particular views of childhood and motherhood. Certain articulations of childhood and motherhood also work to (re)produce consumer culture, creating a cyclical process. The American Girl catalogue is a portal through which we can gain insight into this process.

The Bitty Baby line of dolls in the American Girl catalogue provides the means for insights into what I have deemed the “little mommies myth.” Specifically, the section of the catalogue devoted to this line depicts girls mothering the dolls, which provides a potent place in which to examine representations of girlhood, motherhood, and consumer culture. I ground these representations in historical examples to establish that they are not new; instead, they have a long history. I illustrate the hold of consumer culture on understandings of girls and girlhood; in particular, the legacy of mothers as conduits for the market, which is apparent in the marketing of the Baby doll line. Thus, notions of motherhood that link mothering to the marketplace also inform notions of girlhood.

By looking at children and consumer culture through the portal of mothering, I address the challenges cited earlier in this dissertation; namely, the lack of scholarly work linking

motherhood, childhood, and consumer culture. Children and mothers, as I previously explored, are positioned in scholarship on consumer culture as tangential. However, I argue that they are a far more central concern. As Daniel Cook observes, “children and childhood, and thus mothers and motherhood, must be acknowledged as constitutive of—rather than derivative or exceptional to—commercial, consumer culture generally” (2008, p. 219). In particular, I examine a gendered childhood—girlhood—and, thus, in keeping with Cook’s findings, my research similarly places girlhood and motherhood at the centre of the production and reproduction of consumer culture.

By examining how girlhood is framed in the Bitty Baby catalogue pages, I uncover pieces of the framework of consumer culture. I draw on histories of both childhood and motherhood, namely the changes in middle-class family roles apparent in the late nineteenth century as well as the role of mothers and children identified in the late twentieth century theory of motherhood: intensive mothering. I examine the continuities between these historical time frames, specifically, the mother as the primary caregiver and as in charge of the home, which includes consumer purchasing; childhood as a place of wonder and innocence; and the deep impact of the market on family life. I then apply these insights to the Bitty Baby pages of the American Girl catalogue to create what Michel Foucault might refer to as “a history of the present” (1979); that is, I offer an analysis of the relationships between contemporary motherhood, girlhood, and consumer culture.

The rest of this chapter is structured as follows. First, I offer a background on intensive mothering and link this concept to historical motherhood. Next, I engage with the ideas of innocence and wonder as core parts of childhood. I then illustrate how motherhood and

consumption are closely related. Finally, I dive into the pages of the catalogue and examine the Bitty Baby doll to establish the contemporary legacy of these ideas of motherhood and girlhood, and to illustrate how they continue to inform social identities today.

## **Intensive Mothering**

Intensive mothering is a term coined by Sharon Hays in 1996 to describe what she deems the prevailing model of motherhood in the United States at that time (1996). There are two components to intensive mothering: the ideal mother and the ideal child. According to Hays, in intensive mothering, the mother is the central caregiver to her children and gives them constant attention and stimulating interaction. Moreover, the mother must expend “copious amounts of time, energy, study, and material resources on the child,” and “put her child’s needs above her own” (Hays, 1996, p. 8). Finally, she must be fully schooled in expert advice on child development (Hays, 1996). Although Hays published her findings in 1996, there is evidence that this model continues to prevail as the model for good mothering in the twenty-first century (e.g. Damaske, 2013; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Ennis, 2014; Hallstein, 2006).

While not all mothers perform intensive mothering, this model of gendered parenting is deeply influential. Certainly, it is a directive of motherhood that is not equally accessible to all mothers, yet it is a popular measurement of mothering across social classes. Hays notes that intensive mothering is viewed as an ideal in the United States even if it is not practiced by all mothers. She argues,

These ideas are certainly not followed in practice by every mother, but they are, implicitly or explicitly, understood as the proper approach to the raising of a child by the majority of mothers. In other words, the ideology of intensive mothering is, I maintain, the dominant ideology of socially appropriate child rearing in the contemporary United States. (1996, p. 9)

Intensive mothering continues to influence expectations of mothering. As noted, intensive mothering requires extensive outputs of time, money and energy. The demands of this philosophy of child rearing assume a high level of privilege and access to resources. However, these barriers are not acknowledged, and mothers from across different socio-economic backgrounds are held to the unrealistic standards of intensive mothering. Some mothers try to maintain the standards of intensive mothering, even with access to significantly fewer resources (Elliott et al., 2015).

While intensive mothering is not the only form of mothering available to women, it is a dominant form of motherhood. It privileges white, middle-class motherhood, and is the measuring stick against which other forms of mothering are measured. As Hays acknowledges,

My primary focus is on middle-class notions of appropriate child-rearing. Although this model has never been followed in practice by the majority of parents, the model of the white, native-born middle class has long been, and continues to be, the most powerful, visible, and self-consciously articulated, while the child rearing ideas of new immigrants groups, slaves, American Indians, and the poor and working classes have received relatively little positive press. (Hays, 1996, p. 21)

Further, the standards of intensive mothering imply a lack in other mothering styles, even those that have long histories and may be commonly practiced. Those styles that do not conform to tenets of intensive mothering are otherized (O'Reilly, 2006). Intensive mothering is equated with good mothering. Hays states that the notion of intensive motherhood as an ideal is common across class lines and subsequent studies have supported this viewpoint (e.g. Elliott et al., 2015; Hays, 1996). Mothers can construct empowered mothering beyond intensive motherhood (O'Reilly, 2004, 2006); however, such alternative mothering practices are positioned as bad under the watchful eye of intensive mothering (Hallstein, 2006). As such, intensive mothering sets up criteria for good mothers and bad mothers. Good mothers, of course, are those who comply with the tenets of intensive mothering.

The ideal child accompanies the ideal mother in the framework of intensive mothering. Hays describes this child using terms such as “innocent,” “pure,” “wide-eyed,” “wonder,” and “priceless” (Hays, 1996, pp. 8, 122). Additionally, this child offers an “unpremeditated, guileless kind of affection” (1996, p. 122).<sup>29</sup> It is the responsibility of the mother to recognize, guard, and nurture these desirable childhood traits. Thus, these ideals of middle-class, white motherhood and childhood work in concert with each other.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Hays's description of childhood under intensive mothering dovetails with observations by Cook (2004b), Zelizer (1985/1994), and Bernstein (2011) about the sentimentalization of childhood.

<sup>30</sup> As motherhood is politically located, so is childhood. Bernstein reminds us that from the mid-nineteenth century, childhood innocence in America applied only to white children (Bernstein, 2011, 2017). Her subsequent commentary on the subject explains that white

Intensive mothering imperatives dictate that the backdrop to playing the good mother is the household. The family home, under mother's watchful eye, is the centre of child-rearing. Part of the concept of the home, then, involves its place as a private space that is separate from the public spaces of the market. Hays notes that "according to the logic of intensive mothering, children and child rearing should be treated as sacred, and both should be protected from the contaminating logic of our rationalized market world" (1996, p. 122). The home is viewed in opposition to the outside world; home is as safe as the outside world is scary (Hays, 1996). The intensive mother protects the child within the family sphere, represented by the home, to preserve the child's wonder, preciousness, and innocence from the profane elements, like the market. In the intensive mothering model then, the household is symbolic of the motherhood domain.

The home as the appropriate nurturing ground for the child is not simply an invention of intensive mothering. In the nineteenth century, the home plays an important role for the changing ideas of the middle-class mother and child. The idealization of the home as the domain of the good mother is connected to the emergence of the priceless child. As Viviana Zelizer explains, "the sentimentalization of childhood was intimately tied to the changing worlds of their mothers" (1985/1994, p. 9). She notes that in the nineteenth century, ideas of motherhood change as ideas of childhood change. As white, middle-class childhood becomes

---

children continue to be framed as innocent whereas for example, black children are not (Bernstein, 2017).

precious, middle-class motherhood and its domain, the household, becomes idealized (Zelizer, 1985/1994).

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, as middle-class mothers become guardians of the home and the market dominates outside of the home, middle-class childhood becomes a state of innocence and wonder in need of careful guardianship. Notably, not all children are deemed innocent at the same historical moment. Within the United States, for example, nineteenth century concepts of childhood innocence assume white, middle-class children (Bernstein, 2011; Zelizer, 1985/1994).

In intensive mothering, part of the mother's role is to protect the child; hence, childhood is positioned in the private space of the childhood home, and as such it is framed in opposition to that which occurs outside of the home: the adult public space of the market. The mother also actively engages with the market by shopping for her family. Although she interacts with the market as part of good mothering, her work is not compensated. Mothering is not paid work because its rewards cannot be equated with money (Hays, 1996). The ideology of the pricelessness of children acts to muffle the value of a mother's labour, reframing that value as "priceless" as well. Taking an approach modelling the logic of the market, Hays observes,

Considering the amount of time, energy, and money these mothers expend on their children, and considering that they live in a world where maximizing personal profit is understood as not only acceptable but desirable, why wouldn't they seek a tangible return on their investment? The answer is found in the logic of intensive mothering itself. According to that logic, children should be valued not for the material gains they



might bring to their parents but for their goodness, innocence, and inherently loving nature. (1996, pp. 124–125)

In other words, the wonder of childhood itself functions to justify the separation of childhood from the market. If childhood is priceless, then any of the labour involved with creating a wondrous childhood is also priceless.

### **Consuming Mothers**

The work of mothers is placed outside the framework of capitalism; therefore, the labour involved with mothering is not valued in a market-driven world. However, behind the scenes, good mothering in fact fully depends on a relationship to capitalism. In consumer culture, the mother is situated as a link between the private and the public: the home and the market. As the nurturer, the mother cares for and consumes on behalf of her children. In fact, she cares by consuming. Indeed, the mother absorbs the tension between the child and the market. As Cook explains, “the consuming mother has emerged as a cultural figure that straddles two oft-thought disparate spheres combining intimacy and care for others, on the one hand, with commerce and market activity on the other” (Cook, 2011). Furthermore, the meaning of the market absorbs, amoeba-like, the goodness of the mother and is thus less profane in her presence. Yet, the meanings of childhood, (re)established through their opposition to the market, remain intact.

The mother as the buying agent for the family has a long history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle and upper class women were courted by retailers to purchase on behalf of their children (Cook, 1995). For example, a May 1915 advertisement in

*Playthings*—an American industry journal for toy sellers—explains, “the mother of Every American Family Is the Real Purchaser of Playthings. Her hobby is Children, Chiefly Babies. Therefore, the baby Doll is Now, Always has Been and Always Will be the Biggest and Best Seller in the Toy Department” (Fleischaker & Baum, 1915, p. 7). As the journal advises, sales techniques should be aimed at mothers, the assumed toy purchaser. In reference to one such technique the journal assures, “its effect upon the mothers is wonderful and easy to understand” (Black, 1915, p. 37). In the toy department, the mother is acknowledged as the purchasing decision-maker for the family.

The incorporation of consumption as a defining part of motherhood follows as the motherly role of purchasing for the family softens the harsh, impersonal market and frames consumption as desirable in the private space of the family. In his work on the children’s clothing industry, Cook locates this ideological link between purchasing and mothering in the early twentieth century: “Motherhood, beginning in this era, thus becomes expressed and expressible through consumption—as consumer practice—and thereby commodified, emerging as a value-in-exchange” (2004b, p. 65).

In this light, motherhood is not only about buying goods for children; it is about identity. The characteristics of both motherhood and childhood are expressed through consumption. Undeniably, the good purchaser is part of the caring role of the good mother. As Cook observes, “over the course of the first three decades of the twentieth century, a particular convergence of social, cultural, political, and economic trajectories took shape, in condensed form, in commercial persona and historical reality of the ‘mother as consumer’” (2004b, p. 41).

In short, the identity of the good mother is measured not only by the amount of time focused on her wondrous child, but also by the funds she spends on the child (Hays, 1996).

## **Introduction to Bitty Baby**

The Bitty Baby section of the American Girl catalogue offers a compelling lens through which to examine these cultural understandings of what constitutes an ideal childhood and motherhood. The Bitty Baby dolls are much like what might be thought of as classic baby dolls in that they resemble babies. While all of the Bitty Babies are similar, there are differences in the dolls' appearances; specifically, they come in various combinations of eye colour, skin tone, and hair colour and texture. The catalogue pages devoted to this line of dolls feature photos of little girls holding dolls, the dolls by themselves, as well as images of clothing, books, and accessories. In addition to large photos featuring the products, the items are priced and described. There are also illustrations and other text scattered throughout the pages.

The Bitty Babies are highly gendered; they are not simply babies, but girl babies. "Your Bitty Baby doll is just waiting for you to bring her home" exclaims one headline (American Girl, 2013a, p. 56). "Everything you need to fill her nursery with love" explains another (American Girl, 2013a, p. 57); while another block of text suggests, "maybe her eyes are brown like yours" (American Girl, 2014a, p. 41). The "her" in each of the statements refers to the Bitty Baby doll. And the gendered pronoun is complemented by the photos of pink dresses, bows, flowers, and frills. The language and the photos deliver a kind of idyllic sugar-and-spice-and-everything-nice girlhood as the objects are imbued with girlhood qualities. These qualities are, of course, not universal, but they are framed as desirable. The descriptions evoke Hays's discussions of the required "innocent and pure" children of intensive mothering (1996, p. 8).

These children, however, are highly gendered, as they are particularly female children, and thus the qualities presented are tied to girlhood.

Furthermore, the child players who interact with these dolls are also highly gendered. The catalogue pages are filled with photos portraying girls, and only girls, playing with the dolls. Both girls and dolls wear markers of a particular girlhood: dresses, ruffles, pink clothing, and long hair styled in pigtails or hairbands. The text also reinforces this take on girlhood with comments such as: “Bitty Baby’s world inspires memories your little girl will cherish” (American Girl, 2015a, p. 41); “Bitty Baby is just waiting for your little girl to bring her home to cuddle and play” (American Girl, 2015a, p. 40); and “Your little girl’s imagination will leap to life when she chooses from one of 11 Bitty Baby™ dolls” (American Girl, 2014a, p. 38). In every case, the language—“your little girl”—speaks to a reader who has a girl for whom, presumably, these items will be purchased. It also links the products as an entrée to an idealized, gendered childhood that is filled with imagination, cuddles, play, and cherished memories. These depictions link to a sense of both nostalgia and innocence. The memories to be made and the innocence of play are depicted in the pages. These characteristics evoke Hays’s innocent, wide-eyed children, the deserving offspring of intensive mothering.

## **Precious Girlhood**

As discussed earlier, characteristics of girlhood in consumer culture involve preciousness, wonder, and innocence. The catalogue pages depict a portrait of such a girlhood: “A girl’s first baby doll is a treasure she’ll keep for a LIFETIME” exclaims a two page spread of a little girl holding her doll (American Girl, 2015m, p. 49); the preciousness and innocence of childhood are implied in the word “treasure.” “perfect choices for precious hearts” reads the

text above a smiling girl snuggling with her doll (American Girl, 2015e, p. 66). “Ruffled and ready to twirl” is the description of a photo of a girl and doll in pink dresses with pink hair bands in front of a pink-topped table (American Girl, 2015c, p. 44). There are also photos of girl and dolls wearing matching tiaras (American Girl, 2014b), tulle dresses (American Girl, 2013c), and fairy wings (American Girl, 2015d). The ruffles, the bows, tiaras, flowers, fairy outfits, tutus, and all of the pink on the pages connote angelic qualities, which, in combination with the text, connote the preciousness and wonder of girlhood. Robin Bernstein observes, “dolls have, for more than two centuries, been understood as the defining feature of girls culture and a metonym for girlhood itself” (2011, p. 19). The pages of dolls and girls, equally adorned in pink-laden accoutrements, connote a very particular version of girlhood. The preciousness of girlhood is signified through markers of girlhood, most of which are for sale. The pages express girlhood through shopping; however, the pairing of the sacred child and the profane market is softened by the innocence and wonder of flouncy dresses, pink tulle, and pretty ruffles.

Depictions of doll and girl clothing as an expression of girlhood are not new. A 1919 advertisement from the journal *Playthings* extolls the virtues of mothers dressing their daughters and girls dressing their dolls:

As well dressed and groomed as the most fastidious mother ever dressed her best beloved child. The doll’s clothes manufactured in the Rauser work rooms, express the idea that a doll is—to the child—a living, breathing human being. If the child is well dressed she is not happy with a poorly dressed doll. It hurts her maternal pride. As America has reached the point where the most dainty, tasteful and exquisite clothes are

necessary on dolls for the trade of the larger towns and cities. (Katherine A. Rauser, 1919, p. 150)

In addition to the good taste of properly adorned girls and dolls, the volume of doll-related goods available was vast. An article from the same issue of *Playthings* assures, “this department is fully equipped to outfit any size doll, with any garments the little mother might fancy for her child, such as underwear, bootees, sacks, rompers, dresses, corsets, sweaters, skating costumes, coats, hats, furs, etc.” (‘Kann’s go after employes’ [*sic*] toy trade’, 1919, p. 203). Here girls are defined as honing the skills, for shopping and style, that will serve them as future mothers. The notion that girls need dolls, and both girls and dolls need stuff, is not new; this stuff, signifying affluence, has connoted girlhood for well over a century.

The characteristics of an ideal, intensively mothered childhood described by Hays (1996) are echoed in the pages of the American Girl catalogue. The innate characteristics of childhood as wondrous and precious, and the notion that these attributes need to be preserved and protected are on display. The text tells the tale. One catalogue extolls “wonder in every darling detail” (American Girl, 2014d, p. 74), and assures the reader that “sweet care and soft whispers come out at sleepyttime” (American Girl, 2014d, p. 72). Another layout promises “fairy-tale wonders and precious wishes” (American Girl, 2014a, p. 71). Still more examples include, “perfect choices for precious hearts” (American Girl, 2015m, p. 51) and “treasured beginnings for little ones” (American Girl, 2015m, p. 50). Furthermore, the text combined with the visuals also conveys the wonder and preciousness of girlhood. A photograph in the January 2015 catalogue features a girl, eyes closed, as she cuddles a doll against her cheek. Both doll and girl wear matching pajamas: a white fabric spotted with pink flowers and green leaves.

Pink frills frame the neckline of the doll's and the girl's matching outfits; both wear pink crowns marked with pale purple stars. The girl's eyes are closed, seemingly in reverence for her love for the doll (2015a), and the line "love, care, and everything precious" floats next to the photograph (American Girl, 2015a, p. 41). The photos and phrases denote Hays's (1996) preciousness and wonder: the very aspects of childhood that need to be guarded and preserved by mothers. Furthermore, it is the interaction with the market itself, the purchasing of the pink crown and purple stars, that allows for access to a precious and wondrous childhood.

Part of the portrayal of this gendered childhood involves connoting and denoting qualities such as wonder and innocence, but another piece of the puzzle is the ideal motherhood connoted on the pages. As both Zelizer (1985/1994) and Hays (1996) note, commenting on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, wondrous childhood works in tandem with motherhood. Here, the play of the wondrous childhood is accompanied by the play of an ideal motherhood. Furthermore, the text and visuals in the catalogue denote those dear aspects of childhood that need to be guarded by mothers. The classic myth of the sacred child in need to protection from the profane market is at play (e.g. Buckingham, 2011; Cook, 2004b). However, in this case, mothers protect their children, not by keeping them from the market, but by embracing it. For it is the market that offers the opportunity to fulfill the wonder and preciousness of this version of girlhood. Again, the profane market is softened by the rhetoric of a wondrous girlhood.

### **Mommy Play**

The construction of the doll as a baby and the child as a mother is evident on the catalogue pages as girls' play is characterized as mothering. Girls are shown caring for their

Babies, holding, feeding, playing, bathing, and cuddling the dolls (e.g., American Girl, 2014c). A photo in the March 2014 issue depicts a little girl preparing her Baby for a bath, while the next page depicts a little girl putting her Baby down to sleep in its crib. Girls cuddle with and beam at their dolls. They play mommy and, as virtually the only players on the pages, are represented as the primary caregivers of the dolls. This constant interaction depicted in the photos as girls focus on their dolls connotes the continual attention and interaction required of intensive mothering. It also reinforces the notion of the highly gendered assumptions of parenting; it is, after all, only girls on the pages playing mothers to their Babies. The connotation is, thus, that it is the little mother who is the primary caregiver for the Baby. The mother link is also illustrated in the item descriptions: “Mommy’s Purse,” “Mommy’s Diaper Bag,” and “Mommy’s Diaper Bag Essentials” are all items for sale (American Girl, 2015e, p. 68). The child is literally referred to as a mommy and the items that are marketed to her are identified as mommy-items. The text connects to the images that portray girls playing little mommies to reinforce the mommy theme.

While girls in the catalogue are identified as mommies, the dolls are identified as babies. The catalogue offers, “carriers and accessories for ‘mommies’ on the move” (American Girl, 2015d, p. 53), while another product description advises, “your little girl can sing and rock her baby to sleep in this sweet and sturdy wooden cradle” (American Girl, 2015e, p. 68). Here the text indicates that the child is the mommy and the doll is “her baby.” It also links the nurturing act of singing and putting a baby to sleep and mothering.

The play portrayed on the pages imbues the dolls with lifelike qualities. These characteristics personify the mass-produced, corporate objects by equating them with actual



human babies. One customer review featured in the catalogue exclaims, “this is an adorable baby. Very well made, and sturdy enough for the most playful little mommies” (American Girl, 2013b, p. 38). Another caption confirms, “the adorable floral-print baby basket is perfect for holding her new bundle of joy” (American Girl, 2015e, p. 67). Each of the terms used to describe the dolls might also describe an actual child; “bundle of joy,” refers to a newborn baby and, again, the pronoun “her” links to the notion of the female child consumer as the primary caregiver. Hays’s view of mothers as the primary caregivers to their children is evoked here (1996). Furthermore, the baby dolls are positioned as children; the commodity object becomes human. It is a flip of Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of the consumer as the commodity, as it is the object that is the subject here. However, Bauman’s idea holds true as the ability to interchange commodity and consumer is at play in the humanized Bitty Baby.

The notion of a doll as human is not exclusive to American Girl. Of course, baby dolls, and dolls in general, have a long history of being perceived as animated objects. Dorothy Washburn notes in her report on doll play from 1900-1940 that dolls with realistic features, including baby dolls, “were named, treated as babies or individuals of other designated ages, and, in general, thought of as real people” (Washburn, 1987, p. 17). Furthermore, G. Stanley Hall and A. Caswell Ellis, in their 1897 study on dolls, chronicle children who felt their dolls had experiences such as “feeling hurt,” “feeling warm,” being “talkative,” “crying,” being “hungry,” and being “jealous” (Hall & Ellis, 1897, pp. 15–16). However, in the case of my analysis, it is the branded, mass produced, corporate aspect of the doll that brings it into Bauman’s domain. The object in question is an American Girl doll, which is packaged, if you will, with a story and sold based on that storytelling. The toy then is both perceived as a

commodity, for sale, for profit, mass-produced by a corporation, and as an animated being: a human. This overlap well reflects the blurry consumer/commodity realm chronicled by Bauman.

## **Mommy at Home**

The catalogue primarily locates the interactions between child and doll within the home. The photos connote the idea of a household as the images of play occur within rooms that could be found within a home. A photo from the issue entitled, “Together we make the holidays,” features a girl with a Bitty Baby, holding a pink and white plastic spoon against the lips of the doll (American Girl, n.d.-c). A change table is featured in the front of the scene. It bursts with doll clothing and accessories such as sweaters, slippers, changing pad, blanket, and plastic phone. The background consists of an interior white window, a white chair with pink cushion, and a pink-vased, flowering plant. The scene looks as though it takes place within or around a home. Throughout the catalogue, photos featuring the kitchen sink, cushions, chairs, and windows all locate the scenes within different rooms in a household. Moreover, each scene seems to take place not just anywhere, but in a cleanly-scrubbed, Pinterest-worthy home: an idealized domestic space. In each case, girls are playing with dolls in a domestic setting and are mimicking tasks associated with childcare. Hays notes that in intensive mothering part of a mother’s labour involves protecting her children: “This protection includes guarding them from what is perceived as the dangerous and corrupt world outside of the home” (1996, p. 124). This safe space is connoted on the catalogue pages. It is the place of the good mother and the innocent child and this evokes the binarism of the sacred child and the profane market. The home is the domain of the mother and, as such, it is also protective space for the child. The

idealized childhood and the idealized motherhood are connoted by placing all these scenes within the context of an idealized home.

## **Love as Consumption**

As I will illustrate, love plays a central role in making the market palatable for family life. Love is a term that appears repeatedly in the Bitty Baby pages of the catalogue. A description in one issue exclaims: “welcome your Bitty Baby home to cuddle and love!” (American Girl, 2013c, p. 49). “Pack a lot of love into your day together” advises a headline over a page of items for sale in another issue (American Girl, 2012, p. 52). The phrase “love and caring at every step” decorates a photo of a child holding a doll (American Girl, 2015c, p. 45). Meanwhile, another headline asserts, “make-believe and pretend grow into REAL LOVE” (American Girl, 2016, p. 43). Other issues exclaim, “choose a baby doll just right for your girl to love and cherish” (American Girl, 2015d, p. 50) and assure “every Bitty Baby™ doll is ready to be loved” (American Girl, 2015d, p. 66). Love is a topic brought up again and again in the catalogue. It serves to justify the need for the toys for sale.

Furthermore, the notion of love reinforces the mothering role of the girls in the photos. The child, playing mother, is purchasing items to show love by “fill[ing] the nursery” with the American Girl branded items. As Hays observes, “love is the basis of good child rearing, according to the logic of intensive motherhood, primarily because it is the basis of encouraging the child’s happiness and the child’s goodness” (Hays, 1996, p. 110). On the pages, girlhood’s goodness and happiness are connoted in both images and text. And just off the page, it is the motherly love that is connoted as having set the stage for both.

While the purchasing of these items is linked with love, the commodities themselves are also presented as love-worthy. In every case, love is identified with consumption. It is an emotion fulfilled through the acquisition of a commodity imbued with human characteristics. A relationship between the human child and the object is characterized as emotion-based. The object, then—a branded, mass-produced object—is something that can be “loved,” and purchasing the object is a way to access love. Love is shown by giving items, and the items are lovable.

The focus on love in the catalogue relates to intensive mothering where love for children is shown, in part, through purchasing on behalf of the child. This love is also mirrored in the play illustrated on the pages as girls are shown interacting with their dolls; the girls are depicted surrounded by items (such as bibs, strollers, bathtubs etc.) necessary to care for their Babies. In addition to the paraphernalia, the doll itself is a purchasable item. As such, the child identifies with a mass-produced object, mothers that object, and even “loves” that object. The notion of love reinforces the mothering role of the child in the photos. It also equates purchasing with love. Finally, it denotes the love-worthiness of an object acquired from the market.

There are two layers I wish to discuss that are located in the American Girl catalogue text. In the first, the purchaser, identified as mother, shows love to her daughter by purchasing the doll and accessories. Second, the child herself shows love towards the commodity doll. Girls are depicted as giving and even creating love through purchasing, but they also offer love, through consumption, to commodities—just like the mothers purchasing the branded items for their daughters. Here, the commodity is not just the portal through which love is

expressed, but the “receiver” of the love itself and the premise upon which the expression occurs.

Love is a central component for intensive mothering: “one’s ‘natural’ love for the ‘inherently’ sacred child necessarily leads one to engage in child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive child rearing” (Hays, 1996, p. 129). Love, then, is part of the explanation for the seemingly naturalized imperative of intensive mothering. Intensive mothering is positioned as a natural outgrowth of love, and a natural expression of motherly love. Love justifies intensive mothering, including the vast material expenses. In the logic of intensive mothering, good motherhood is expensive (Hays, 1996). As such, part of caring for a child as good mothering involves purchasing.

Love is a hot topic in intensive mothering as it justifies the intensive motherhood’s taxing and historically unique demands on mothers. Hays observes that the women she interviewed for her study on intensive mothering believe,

they are primarily responsible for the child (whether they like it or not), they see the child as innocent, pure, and beyond market pricing, they put the child’s needs first (in word if not always in deed), and they invest much of their time, labor, emotion, intellect, and money in their children. *Their* answer to the question of why they make this tremendous investment is contained in the logic of intensive mothering itself. For them, the joy of sharing, the love they feel, and the love that children promise to return are sufficient reward. (1996, p. 130)

Herein lies the glitch. Children are firmly outside of the market and thus motherly labour, too, is outside of the market. The “payback” for all of the motherly labouring is, in part, love. Love

cannot be measured by the market. And that same love is packaged and sold—sign, signifier, signified—in the rhetoric of girlhood evoked through the branded dolls. Love is simultaneously better than money and acquirable through the market. Jean Baudrillard’s consumer culture is at play here. Meanings are grafted onto the purchasing and gifting of market-based objects; they are also grafted directly onto the objects themselves, which then become love-worthy. The Bitty Baby’s *raison d’être* is to create profit in a market economy, and yet its core purpose is hidden using the rhetoric and imagery of love. Love is, of course, the very motivation for keeping innocent childhood protected and safe from the profane, capitalist market world.

### **Preparing for Baby as Consumption**

In the logic of consumer culture, love is not just restricted to objects. The care of a child is achieved, in part, through purchases. This purchasing even occurs in anticipation of a child’s birth such that children enter the domain of consumption prior to their arrival (Cook, 2008).<sup>31</sup> Cook notes that babies may be anticipated with a flurry of goods: the strollers and bibs and blankets that are displayed in the Western ritual of baby showers are one such example:

Contemporary children of wealthy nations ... enter the world already pre-figured as consumers—not as shoppers of course—who are already embedded in webs of

---

<sup>31</sup> Of course, a child’s arrival into a family can mean a birth, but there are other ways in which a child may arrive into a family.

commercial-material relations and envisioned as recipients and users of products at the outset of, and even prior to, their earthly existence. (Cook, 2008, p. 232)

As such, the identity of a child as a consumer is, in part, shaped through this anticipatory shopping that can begin before they are even born (Cook, 2008).

Childhood as a whole is shaped through the market and, as discussed earlier in this dissertation, stages of childhood have been shaped through marketing. For example, marketing was central to the establishment of infancy (Cook, 2004b). Cook explains, starting in the 1920s, middle-class expectant mothers were encouraged to purchase a layette—a set of clothes and goods ready for baby (2004b). The marketing of baby goods as a purchasing necessity was key to developing a stand-alone infant market (Cook, 2004b). As a result, stores began creating new departments around this concept, further helping to establish infancy as a “natural stage” of childhood (Cook, 2004b, p. 232).

Like the flurry of purchases that might occur for an expected baby, the Bitty Baby also demands a trousseau. To this effect, the catalogue features a “Deluxe Layette Collection” (e.g., American Girl, 2014d). Alongside a photo of a girl holding her doll, text promoting the Layette states, “get ready for Bitty Baby’s arrival! The outfits and accessories in this special set will make your new Baby feel right at home” (American Girl, 2013c, p. 49). Similarly, the November 2013 catalogue features a photo of a girl, beaming at her doll, next to the caption, “everything you need to fill her nursery with love” (2013c, p. 49). Both girl and Baby are surrounded by the contents of the layette for sale: pajamas, gingham dress, cardigan, pants, tights, shoes, rattle, bottle, bib, hangers, and a suitcase. Here the girl is depicted as the caregiver who is setting up a nursery for the doll. The caption is reminiscent of the purchasing

that occurs even before a child is born. The text further states, “this special set will make your new Baby feel right at home” (2013c, p. 49).

Statements such as “*your* new Baby” and “everything you need” address the child as the caregiver for the doll. The doll is referred to as a baby here, and the child, addressed with “your,” positions the girl as the mother. To compound the role of child as mother-in-waiting to the Baby, the catalogue extolls, “girls can personalize their Bitty Baby doll by selecting the signature sleeper she arrives in, as well as choosing a name and creating a personalized welcome announcement online” (American Girl, n.d.-g). Once again, the doll is related to the baby and the child to the mother. These depictions are reminiscent of Hays’s identification of the mother as primary caregiver for a child (1996). The mothering extolled is based on a relationship of interaction with the marketplace. The doll and all of the doll-related paraphernalia are ready for purchase. The good mother is the good consumer and this is also reflected in the girl mother represented in the pages of the catalogue.

Note again that Baby is capitalized, reminding the reader that it is a corporately owned, trademarked, mass-produced object. This Baby clearly belongs to the corporation. However, at the same time, it is positioned as a personalized toy and a loveable baby for a girl. The love worthiness of objects is again reinforced. In addition, the girl can prepare for her bought corporate Baby in the same way an adult mother, in this type of motherhood, prepares for a human child: by shopping. Again, framing these concepts within Baudrillard’s notion of consumer culture as sign systems, the object itself becomes not only the signifier of a relationship between a mother and child, but also the primary recipient of that signification.



## Mommy Experts

Not only is love promised by purchasing these products, expert advice is also on order in the American Girl catalogue. The expertise offered by the corporation is connoted in two main ways. First, the catalogue offers links to parenting advice, establishing the corporation as an expert. Second, the doll itself is presented as being created by experts, thereby making it educational and necessary.

The notion of consulting experts to help with effective mothering is part of both the expert mothering of the late nineteenth century and intensive mothering of the 1990s and beyond. In both cases, the expertise of mothers is overshadowed by experts who offer their services within the marketplace. According to Hays, in the late nineteenth century, middle-class mothers were encouraged to follow the mothering guidance of child experts (1996). In the twentieth century, authors like Benjamin Spock (whose work Hays cites from the 1940s to the 1990s), T. Barry Brazelton (whose work Hays cites from the 1980s), and Penelope Leach (whose work Hays cites from the 1980s and 1990s), created popular manuals for childcare that were deeply influential (Hays, 1996). These authors, according to Hays, “fully elaborated the ideology of intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996, p. 68). Nevertheless, in Bauman’s liquid consumer stage, it is also the corporation that takes on the role of advising mothers on the proper way to mother.

The American Girl company offers parenting advice in several ways. For example, the catalogue offers links such as the following to their parenting resources: “Bitty Baby loves moms, too. Find the app, e-books and parenting tips: [americangirl.com/bittyparents](http://americangirl.com/bittyparents)” (American Girl, 2014b, p. 46). The corporation also offers online parenting advice through its

branded storybooks: “Each book also comes with a special ‘For Parents’ section with tips to help your little girl become “more confident, patient, and independent” (American Girl, 2013c, p. 46).

Mothering skills are not all that is on order, however. The Bitty Baby products are also presented as beneficial in other ways. In describing the storybooks that feature the Bitty Baby dolls and products, the catalogue text reads,

inside the pages, your girl will find countless hours of imaginative play—from a polar bear playdate to a jungle expedition. Along the way, the stories will teach her to tackle her fears, get along better with others, and even use creativity to help solve problems. (American Girl, 2013c, p. 46)

Indeed, expert advice is offered about stage fright, in *Bitty Baby at the Ballet* (Larson & Cornelison, 2013b); separation anxiety, in *Bitty Baby and Me* (Larson & Cornelison, 2013a); and healthy play, in *Bitty Baby Loves the Snow* (Larson & Cornelison, 2013c). These books offer expert-approved resources for good mothering and teachable moments directly to the girls who read them (American Girl, 2014e, p. 45).

Expert advice is not just offered overtly by directing the mother to the American Girl experts; it is also offered more subtly through the promises of the benefits available by purchasing the actual products themselves. According to the company website, Bitty Baby™ was created “to help teach younger girls ages 3-6 important life skills like caring and nurturing” (American Girl, n.d.-s). A photo of a girl kissing a doll on the site is captioned “nurturing playtime today teaches kindness and caring that lasts a lifetime” (American Girl, n.d.-f). These descriptions highlight an educational purpose of the toys: socializing girls to care

for others. In other words, the dolls are presented as fostering play that teaches girls skills associated with mothering.

The doll is expert-approved and is depicted as a tool to access preciousness. As the text assures, “Born from the idea of child development experts, Bitty Baby inspires precious first steps into learning, loving play, and imagination” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 49). The purchasing allows access to the ideal girlhood through its association with approving experts. Further, the text informs readers that the dolls are generated by “award-winning creators” (American Girl, 2014b, p. 46). The dolls are also “heirloom quality” and stand for “American Girl values” (American Girl, 2014b, p. 46). The phrase “American Girl values” is what is for sale here. These values, extolled by the corporation through branded products, are framed as desirable. We have the synergy of childhood and the corporation, with the corporation offering something of value to childhood through motherhood. There is a mix of the profane and the sacred, childhood and the market. As Cook (2004b) notes, it is the mother who acts as the conduit between the home and the market and she is called on again here to access corporate experts and buy branded materials.

In sum, consumption becomes supportable on behalf of children when it is linked with some sort of developmental or educational aspect. As David Buckingham explains, “commercial marketing is acceptable, it would seem, if it promotes products that are ‘healthy’ or ‘wholesome’” (2011, p. 11). In addition to making products desirable, expertise is taken away from the mother and given to experts. She is encouraged to consult “expert” sources. In the past, as in the childcare manuals previously discussed, experts were child professionals, individuals deemed knowledgeable, who researched and published books. However, in this

case, the expert is not a person, but a corporation. The brand itself is connected with the expert-driven tenet of intensive mothering. The educational aspect of the marketing of the dolls is linked to characteristics such as nurturing and loving. The connotation is that the toys are not frivolous, but educational and appropriate for child development. In other words, the toys are a tool for the healthy child and the corporation has become the provider of such tools.

### **Three Readers**

While the benefits of playing mommy are central to the depictions in the Bitty Baby section of the catalogue, there are in fact several layers connoted through the mix of photographs, text, and illustrations. As I have already established, the currency of good motherhood goes hand-in-hand with wondrous childhood within the culture of consumption. Both aspirational ideals are for sale here, and the readership for each is connoted in the layouts of the pages.

The interplay of mother and girl/ girl and object is apparent throughout the Bitty Baby section as the directive phrases of the catalogue describe at least three layers of mothers. The first set of little mothers is found in the photos themselves: little girls are depicted with dolls. The second set of little mothers is the imagined girl readers. These readers are mirrored by the images of girls in the catalogue. The third layer involves actual mothers as purchasers. Take, for example, a heading referenced earlier in the chapter: “everything you need to fill her nursery with love” (American Girl, 2013c, p. 49). The phrase is located next to a photo of a girl with a doll and lots of doll-related items. It is followed by a description and a photo of the items that are available in the \$180 “Deluxe Layette Collection.” The first little mother, the “you” who can supply the necessary items to “fill her nursery with love,” is the girl in the

photo. The second little mother is the girl reader, who can replicate the loving nursery by accessing both a doll and the necessary layette items, all named and priced on the page, by acquiring them.

Moreover, the goods are costly and access to them requires access to money, another requirement of providing “love.” The “you” is the girl reader and the “her” is the doll. Thus, the child can create a loving environment for a purchased object, the doll, by interacting with purchased goods. The third mother, an actual mother, is the person who has the ability to make the purchases, and, in so doing, will have “everything you need to fill her nursery with love.” The “you” here is an actual mother, while the “her” is an actual “girl.”

There is a question of who can actually purchase a Deluxe Layette collection for \$180. The costs of the items in the catalogue are prohibitive. They—at least as first-hand purchases directly from the company as opposed to say a garage sale find or hand-me-down—are only within reach to a particularly high socio-economic layer of society. This potential for “good mothering” can only be fulfilled by a small sector of mothers. The ideals of intensive mothering are bound with socio-economic status (Hays, 1996). And yet, it is the purchasing that is required to fulfill good mothering. Love is equated with fulfilling the purchasing required for healthy child development.

The process of love is mirrored for mother and child. Just as the child mother can create love through purchasing—and indeed, love an inanimate commodity—the “real” mother can create the love for her “real” daughter. In all counts, love between person and commodity, and love between people, is created by participating in consumption. And it is not just love that is accessed through the market, but “imagination” (American Girl, 2013c, p. 50), “sweet dreams”

(American Girl, 2013c, p. 54), “caring” (American Girl, 2015b, p. 49), “everything precious” (American Girl, 2015b, p. 47), “fairy tale wonders and precious wishes” (American Girl, 2014d, p. 71), and “sweet care” (American Girl, 2014d, p. 74). In short, the elements of a wondrous childhood are for sale. Hays’s intensively mothered “innocent and pure” child is described (1996, p. 8). Indeed, this is Zelizer’s, and then Hays’s, “priceless child” (Hays, 1996, p. 8; Zelizer, 1985/1994). Moreover, in all cases, motherhood is depicted as occurring within the marketplace. Playing mother means engaging with purchased goods, as girls in the catalogue are shown playing little mommies by interacting with purchasable items. In this sense, an idealized motherhood is depicted through an idealized girlhood, and both involve the market.

The catalogue presents the ideal model of mothering, through consumption, as the way to create the ideal, wondrous childhood. Although photos of adult mothers are essentially absent from the catalogue pages, the good mother is present throughout. Except in very rare cases, the only mother to be seen in the pages is a child. But she—the adult, real mother—is there, implied, ready and waiting to create wonder by purchasing from the catalogue.

The omission of real mothers from the catalogue pages of American Girl is not an isolated case. Cook observes this phenomenon in mothering magazines more broadly. He notes that these magazines frequently include advertisements that depict mothering without mothers (Cook, 2011). Ads instead illustrate happy children, and happy children denote the good mother who is just outside of the frame. Cook terms this type of depiction “matriocularity”: the maternal viewpoint (Cook, 2011). Children “perform” childhood within the frame and the mother gazes lovingly from outside of it (Cook, 2011). In the American Girl catalogue, photos

depict girls playing mother to dolls, but in general actual mothers are only implied as setting the stage for the happy scenes.

The catalogue focuses on depicting photos of girls, dolls, and other doll-related merchandise. However, in one rare occasion in the Bitty Baby pages of the catalogue, there is a photo of an adult, a woman. In the photo, a girl, who is holding a doll, sits on the woman's lap. All players in the scene—the woman, the girl, and the doll—are white and blond as each mirrors the other in appearance. The mother and child are smiling (American Girl, 2013c, p. 46). The woman appears to be reading to the child from a book, which is also part of the goods for sale on the page. The book is one of a series of storybooks produced by American Girl that chronicles a fictional tale of the Bitty Baby doll and features both the doll and the items for sale in the catalogue as part of the story. There are five of these storybooks featured on the page. The catalogue states,

your little girl's imagination will leap to life when she chooses from one of 11 Bitty Baby dolls to love, hug, and share in all sorts of adventures. Each doll arrives with a special wishing star and *Bitty Baby and Me*, the first in a series of beautiful picture books that will have your little girl playing, pretending, and learning with every turn of the page. New plush animals, plus adorable outfits and accessories inspired by the stories, make playing with Bitty Baby more fun than ever! (American Girl, 2013c, p. 46)

Here, the mother is both depicted in the photo and addressed as the reader of the catalogue. What is implied is that purchasing the doll, packaged with the book and star, is the entrée to

“your little girl, playing, pretending, and learning.” In short, the mother needs the market to create this wondrous childhood for her daughter.

Of note, the voice of address changes throughout the catalogue; seemingly both mother and child are audience. “Your little girl’s imagination will leap to life” (American Girl, 2013c, p. 46) seems to address the adult reader. While a few pages later the assurance, “The outfits and accessories in this special set will make your new Baby feel right at home” seems to address the child (American Girl, 2013c, p. 49). Phrases like “her baby” and “your little one” can be read as speaking to either mother or child. They not only link the consumer child to the toy as a parent to a child, but also address the mother reader who is poised to purchase the merchandise on behalf of her daughter.

The motherhood depicted on the pages is consumptive mothering. The mother who is not on the page, who is implied, is producing the wondrous childhood by purchasing. At the same time, the girls playing mother are mirroring the same behaviours. Both depictions are idealized: an ideal motherhood is setting the stage for an ideal childhood with the products acquired from shopping. The process of acquiring itself is modeled in the play of childhood. Shopping both allows the acquirement of the proper equipment for childhood and is itself the object of developmental play.

### **Nostalgic Shopping**

The value of these dolls taps into a yearning for a past—which may never have actually existed—of the wondrous childhood. For example, the doll layette is described in the catalogue with phrases such as “keepsake-quality” and “inspire[ing] memories,” evoking nostalgia and



linking the items for sale to a lost time. This nostalgia is part of a wondrous childhood. It evokes Gary Cross's ideas of childhood as a time of "wondrous innocence." He notes that this imagining of childhood involves consumption. Parents purchase items for their children to both offer their children access to an idyllic childhood and to access it themselves. The notion of wondrous innocence involves a nostalgia for another era: a longing for both a time past and for a personal past (2004).<sup>32</sup> The connoted promise is that purchasing these goods, the layette for example, offers a return an idyllic past, both to childhood and, ironically enough, to a pre-consumer culture era.

As Cross reminds us, the place of parents and children in the wonder of toys has a long history:

Through spending on children, parents temporarily entered an imaginary world of childhood fantasy free from the fear and tedium of change. They recovered their lost worlds of wonder through the wondrous innocence of their children's encounter with commercial novelty. Adults found refuge in the mystique of childhood, but a very special kind of childhood, defined and experienced through consumer culture. (2004, p. 15)

Here perhaps the target market for the dolls is not simply the children for whom they are seemingly purchased. The act of participating in the economic exchange—that motherly

---

<sup>32</sup> The term also evokes Bernstein's (2011, 2017) work on childhood innocence and its link to the perpetuation of racism in the United States. Bernstein's work will be explored more fully both in the next section of this chapter as well as in the following chapter, "Material Girls."

routing between the sacred and the profane—also serves to grace the parent, in this case the mother, with the wondrous childhood environment.

Terms such as “keepsake,” “memories,” and “heirloom quality” connote nostalgia (American Girl, 2014b, p. 46). Certainly, it is an assumed future nostalgia: a time in the future in which the items will be treasured for their connection to the past. The purchaser is making an investment, reminiscent of toys made by artisans in bygone eras, while these are in fact mass-produced, assembly-line items. This denial of the origins of the object are reminiscent of Karl Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism<sup>33</sup>, but within Baudrillard’s consumer culture universe. Here the labour involved in creating the item is hidden, but even more, it is hidden within a story about the item that connects that item with a mode of production that is false. These dolls are not created by artisans, in a pre-factory economy, yet they are associated with these notions. In this sense, the sign value of the dolls prevails over their actual means of production.

The layette is a nostalgic concept, which connotes a charming time past. Like the sacred child in contrast to the profane market, this past time is associated with a space that is not contaminated by the evils of consumption. The layette offers access to an historical sacred space outside of the profane market. As Henry Jenkins explains, “nostalgia is the desire to re-create something that has never existed before, to return to some place we’ve never been, and

---

<sup>33</sup> Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism involves the valuation of an object not through the human labour involved in its creation but through its worth as dictated by the market. As such, there is an effacement of the human labour involved in the creation of the item.

reclaim a lost object we never possessed. In short, nostalgia takes us to never-never land” (1998, p. 4). The yearning is for a time that never existed. It references an historical time that pre-exists contemporary consumption. However, the *raison d’être* for the layette is consumption; the nostalgia here, therefore, is about a shopping experience. As we have established, the very notion of modern childhood is deeply tied to consumer culture; thus, the nostalgia is truly for a non-existent time.

### **Like Mommy, Like Baby**

As previously stated, the Bitty Baby dolls are designed to mirror their girl counterparts and come in a range of eye colour, skin tone, and hair colour. These are the characteristics, along with a code, that identify the particular dolls for sale: “light skin, red hair, hazel eyes”; “dark skin, textured black hair, brown eyes”; “medium skin, dark brown hair, brown eyes” (American Girl, 2015e, p. 66). The dolls are featured in photos by themselves as well as in pictures with girls in which the dolls and girls share physical characteristics: similar hair colour, eye colour, and skin tones. I will explore the implications of the images of twinned girls and dolls and notions of race in detail in the next chapter when I examine the Truly Me line, but here I want to discuss how the mirroring serves to (re)construct intensive motherhood, precious girlhood, and consumer culture.

In the catalogue images, Babies and little mothers look alike in almost all cases. Considering the representation of the doll and girl as daughter and mother previously discussed, this similarity in the physical characteristics between girls and dolls connotes a particular imagining of motherhood. “Mothers” mother “children” who match them in terms of physical markers of skin tone, eye colour and hair colour. What results is an overwhelming

pairing of girls and dolls by physical characteristics. As Andrea O'Reilly states, in addition to the dictates that the needs of the child always have priority over those of the mother and the sheer volume of "time, money and energy" required to mother: "The discourse of intensive mothering becomes oppressive not because children have needs, but because we, as a culture, dictate that only the biological mother is capable of fulfilling them" (2006, pp. 43–44). In this light, the pages idealize a mothering relationship that occurs between a mother and daughter that share particular markers of appearance. One way to read these depictions is that the biological relationship implicit within intensive mothering is connoted here. Of course, mothers and children—biological or not—may or may not share physical characteristics. Nonetheless, here in this text, a mother-daughter relationship is connoted through these matches in physical appearance. The representation is, of course, a limited and dismissive view of mothering as per intensive mothering.

The depictions on the pages tell the story of intensive mothering, part of which, of course, involves protecting childhood innocence (Hays, 1996). Childhood innocence, as we've established, has a long history. Bernstein's (2011) work discusses how the childhood innocence of the mid-nineteenth century was an unacknowledged, racialized notion. The American innocent child, right into the twentieth century, was a white child (Bernstein, 2011). Further Bernstein notes, "in the second half of the nineteenth century, white childhood, and especially white girlhood, became laminated to the idea of innocence" (Bernstein, 2011, p. 63). Here, on the catalogue pages, childhood innocence is evoked with language and pictures, through girlhood and what Bernstein identifies as "emblems of childhood," dolls (2011, p. 19). Furthermore, the dolls are differentiated not by names, but by some of the previously noted

bodily characteristics. For example, the dolls are pictured in the catalogue with descriptions and codes. For example, “light-skin, blond hair, blue eyes DFN63DS”; “medium skin, dark brown hair, brown eyes DFN65DS” (American Girl, 2015e, p. 66). Notwithstanding that girls are overwhelmingly depicted as playing with dolls that match them in the markers of appearance that describe the dolls (hair, skin, and eye colour), there is a depiction of a range of race and ethnicity of both girls and the dolls on the pages.<sup>34</sup> On these pages, all girls and dolls in various combinations of hair, skin, and eye colours are wondrous, innocent, and precious, adorned with pink bows, angelic crowns, wings, and ruffles. This depiction runs counter to histories in which, as Bernstein has documented, not all children are equally understood as innocent (2011). Childhood innocence carried with it the implication of whiteness (2011). And here all dolls and girls are surrounded by images and text describing wonder, innocence, and preciousness. As such, all children depicted in the pages are seemingly included in the category of innocent childhood.

The innocence, the wonder, the preciousness is equally applied to all within the promises of the market. As Baudrillard (1970/2017) states, consumer culture seems to offer

---

<sup>34</sup> This range of representation is not proportional. As an example, the May 2015 issue features a page with a range of dolls featured in headshots and identified by physical characteristics and codes. Eight of the 11 dolls on the page have “light skin,” two have “medium skin” and one has “dark skin” (2015c, p. 42). (Moreover, one of these dolls has “almond-shaped eyes,” while the rest simply have “eyes.”) Also, one doll, the largest on the page and the only one pictured head to toe, has “medium skin” and the facing page features one large photograph featuring a girl of colour holding a doll of colour (2015c, p. 43). Further consideration of the representations of race and ethnicity are required to fully address just how they are depicted on the pages. For example, a content analysis of images could provide more insight into proportions of representation both in terms of the entire catalogue and the Bitty Baby section in context within the catalogue.

equal opportunity and access for everyone. Certainly, the trappings of this idyllic girlhood are only a few clicks with a credit card away. However, as Baudrillard (1970/2017) also notes, this promise of equality is a lie. The promise itself serves to deny the realities of inequalities based on social categorizations such as ethnicity, race, gender, and class.

In the idyllic girlhood on the pages of the catalogue, the “good” qualities of a “good” girlhood created by the “good” mother, who is of course just off the page but has set the “good” scenes, seems accessible. The depictions evoke Baudrillard’s observation of the myth that consumer culture offers an even playing field (1970/2017). In the Bitty Baby pages of the catalogue a “full belly and happy heart” and “love and caring at every step” are available for purchase (American Girl, 2015c, pp. 46, 45). And all of the little mommies are engaged with idyllic girlhood gear: “Sweet Dreams Wooden Crib \$115” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 47); “Bitty’s Stroller \$58” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 45); “Twirly Tiered Outfit for Little Girls \$48” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 44); and “Deluxe Layette Set \$115” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 43). Seemingly, this wondrous childhood is available to all; at least, this wondrous childhood is available to all who can afford it.

Class cuts deep here. The depictions on the pages, along with the prices, seem to offer access to a wide population of children; still, there is no acknowledgement of just how exclusive access to the goods, and more significantly, the connoted wonder and innocence, actually is. On a practical level, the goods are certainly not accessible to all mothers. More to the point, the price tags and the prescription of good mothering are yet another manifestation of what Hays identifies as the “the “most powerful, visible, and self-consciously articulated” messaging about motherhood as “the model of the white, native-born middle class” (1996, p.

21). As such, race and socioeconomic status are considerations. As one example, Sinikka Elliott, Rachel Powell, and Joslyn Brenton note that Black mothers in the United States are “far more likely” than white mothers, “to be raising children in poverty” (2015, p. 353). Moreover, all mothering is not the same. For instance, “studies show that on top of the everyday work of parenting, Black mothers actively work to protect their children from racism and to empower their children to survive and thrive in a racist society” (Elliott et al., 2015, p. 353). Unlike the idyllic representations on the pages, the work of all mothering is not equal.

There is a forgetting of racism with the promise of buying goods. As Bernstein explains of mid-nineteenth century America,

sentimental childlike innocence manifested through the performed transcendence of social categories of class, gender, and ... race. Of course, no nineteenth century children existed outside of race (or gender or class), nor were any children perceived as unraced. Innocence was not a literal state of being unraced but was, rather, the performance of not-noticing, a performed claim of slipping beyond social categories. (2011, p. 6)

It is the slipping that is key, even into the twenty-first century. On these catalogue pages, even with the depictions of who gets to mother which doll based on markers of appearance, there is a connotation of equity made possible through shopping. The privilege in the well-scrubbed homes filled with stuff that provide the background to little mommy and Baby play on the pages is seemingly accessible by shopping. The promise itself, to parallel Baudrillard’s ideas, serves to render invisible perpetuated inequities based on race and class. In

the Bitty Baby section, all of the little girls are precious and innocent. Societal inequalities are lost in the rhetoric of the wondrous girlhood available for sale.

## **Conclusion**

The catalogue is a cultural object that gives us insight into social structures that are based on collectively agreed upon identities and is a potent place to study these taken for granted ideas about childhood and motherhood. It offers the link between the aspirational depictions and the potential for action. As both Zelizer (1985/1994) and Hays (1996) have noted, one can't have the wondrous childhood without the ideal motherhood, and neither can happen without the market. Like a room of mirrors, there is reflection upon reflection upon reflection. The doll is a doll, but also represents a child, while the child represents childhood but also motherhood. And the mother, who appears absent, is reflected throughout. Each of these is a socially accepted identity within the culture of consumption, and all are being depicted simultaneously.

A core part of the narrative in the Bitty Baby section of the catalogue centres around consumption: accessing experts through consumption, making a childhood precious through consumption, socializing girls through consumption, giving through consumption, and accessing love through consumption. The catalogue language denotes mothering as occurring within the domain of capitalism. It is characterized by purchasing and then interacting with the purchases, making evident the link between the market, girls, and mothers.

The association between mothering and the consumer child is reinforced through other aspects of the catalogues as well. Girls playing mommy are engaging with the marketplace:



both literally, because the play involves goods that must be purchased; and figuratively, as play depicts caring for a baby by shopping and using the purchased goods. The good mother is the good purchaser, and the good girl is poised to become the good mother: today, playing with and loving objects of consumption, and tomorrow doing the shopping herself.

While the child, a human, is depicted as a mother, the doll, an object, is the stand in for an actual baby. The relationship illustrated is not simply between humans, but between a human and a commodity. This particular commodity is mass-produced by a multinational corporation. The traditional play of girl and doll is one element, but that play is fully immersed in consumption. The mother love played out on the pages is between a child and an item of value in the corporate marketplace. The relationship itself is defined in a context of purchasing: buying the doll and buying all of the paraphernalia that is displayed as part of the play relationship; indeed, the purchased material is integral to illustrating and establishing the mothering relationship between girl and doll.

The triad interplay of motherhood, childhood, and the market from the late nineteenth-century continues its legacy into the twenty-first century. In the global north, childhood is defined in part through the market as is motherhood, and each in turn reinforces the dominant ideologies of consumerism. Dolls, which have been available on the market throughout the time frame explored, act as a barometer for societal notions of girlhood, motherhood, and consumerism. The notion of consumer culture as a great liberator from social inequity is also on display. Analysis of the Bitty Baby line of dolls offers insight into these issues.

Purchasing within the culture of consumption is not only about acquiring goods; it is also about identity. Another brand of American Girl dolls, the Truly Me line, offers a powerful

lens through which to examine a sense of collective identities within the culture of consumption. In particular, the Truly Me portion of the catalogue offers insight into a gendered childhood: girlhood. These concepts form the basis for the next section of this dissertation.

## Chapter Five: Material Girls

### Introduction

Consumer culture is about much more than simply purchasing and acquiring goods; it is also about identity and subjectivity. Consumer culture informs how the self, relationships, and even life stages are articulated and (re)created. My consideration of consumer culture is influenced by Don Slater who reminds us that it is, “the dominant mode of social reproduction developed in the west over the course of modernity” (1997, p. 8). It is the (re)production of subjectivities in concert with the (re)production of consumer culture that focuses the work in this chapter. Specifically, I examine how this relationship of co-creation plays out through the lens of girlhood. Girlhood is a gendered childhood, and, as established in the previous chapter, is often viewed as existing outside of consumer culture, indeed, even in need of protection from consumer culture. However, girlhood, as I am illustrating in this dissertation, is in fact both defined through consumer culture and simultaneously serves to (re)create it.

In the last chapter, by examining the Bitty Baby line of American Girl dolls, I illustrated some of the ways in which relationships and identity are part of consumer culture. Specifically, I mined representations of motherhood and girlhood primarily through the lens of intensive mothering. In this chapter, by contextualizing my readings of the marketing of a second line of American Girl dolls, called “Truly Me,” I explore another aspect of consumer culture: namely, representations of the self. Primarily using the work by Zygmunt Bauman and

Jean Baudrillard, I illustrate that girlhood is a critical site of investigation into the co-creation of subjectivity and consumer culture. Bauman and Baudrillard offer frameworks from which to theorize the interrelationship of subjectivity and consumer culture. Though neither specifically focuses on girlhood, their work offers explanations of the relationships between consumers and commodities and, as such, each sketches out some of the parameters of consumer culture.

Bauman, in speaking of children and consumer culture, states, “as soon as they learn to read, or perhaps well before, children’s ‘shop dependence’ sets in. There is no separate drilling strategies for boys and girls; the role of consumer, unlike that of producer, is not gender-specific” (2007, p. 55). As such, he denies that there is any gendered aspect to the consumer. As I illustrate in this chapter, and in this dissertation on girlhood, the framing of consumers is in fact highly gendered. While I find the blurred space of consumer/commodity identified by Bauman highly useful, I also demonstrate that this space is, in fact, highly defined. It is marked by social categorizations, amongst others, such as gender, race, and class.

## **Consumer Culture Theory**

In this chapter, I will focus on the Truly Me line of American Girl dolls. This line is of particular interest because the dolls are designed to match their girl counterparts. Unlike the Bitty Baby dolls, the dolls are not portrayed as babies to be mothered by girls. Truly Me dolls are marketed as a “friend” (Business Wire, 2015). Consumers are encouraged to purchase dolls that look like the girls who will interact with them and select from a variety of accessories that express that girl’s interests. The branding of the line focuses on the exploration and expression of a girl’s “true” self; hence, the name Truly Me.

There are two core ideas I wish to explore through an investigation into the American Girl Truly Me line of branded goods: the enhancement or expression of subjectivity through the acquisition of commodities and the construction of subjectivity as commodity. In both cases, signification is relevant as branded goods hold value beyond their so-called functional use. Within the context of consumer culture, items or services purchased become less important for their functional value and more important for their signification value. Bauman explores the relationship between consumers and commodities, in part, by acknowledging the function of the market in offering aspects of identity. As such, he explains that commodities are imbued with qualities that are then grafted onto consumers. Part of the appeal of the commodity, then, are those characteristics that, upon consumption, become expressions of a consumer's identity. According to Bauman,

in the case of subjectivity in the society of consumers, it is the turn of the buying and selling of the tokens deployed in the construction of identity—that allegedly public expression of the ‘self’ which is in fact Jean Baudrillard’s ‘simulacrum’, substituting ‘representation’ for what it is assumed to represent—to be effaced from the appearance of the final product. (2007, pp. 14–15)

In consumer culture, identity is constructed, at least in part, through the acquisition of goods. These goods hold qualities that are promised to the consumer. This process is essentially the basis of contemporary branding: purchasing branded goods is not about the straight on use-value of those goods, but about their meanings. For example, as I will explore later in this chapter, Truly Me dolls connote self-expression and discovery. These qualities are part of the market value of the toys. The dolls are not about the same thing as unbranded dolls;

they come with grafted-on characteristics that can then become part of and expressed by the consumer who acquires them.

In consumer culture, the presentation of the self is not solely about goods or services acquired through the marketplace; it is also about the positioning of the self within the universe of branded goods. In consumer culture, goods are valuable because of their sign values.

According to Baudrillard,

*to become an object of consumption, an object must first become a sign.* That is to say: it must become external, in a sense, to a relationship that it now merely signifies. It is thus *arbitrary*—and not inconsistent with that concrete relationship: it derives its consistency, and hence its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relationship to all other sign-objects. (1976/2005, p. 218)

Through the lens of consumer culture, goods are often useful because of their meanings, and the meanings of those goods supersedes any use-value that the objects may hold. The meanings are derived from a web of signs that mark, value, and position a given commodity.

Bauman argues that subjectivity itself is positioned as a commodity. The notion of personal branding expresses the idea well; it encapsulates framing the self as a commodity. Although Bauman does not use the term, “personal branding,” he does discuss the positioning of the self as commodity. He observes, “the most prominent feature of a society of consumers—however carefully concealed and most thoroughly covered up—is the *transformation of consumers into commodities*” (Bauman, 2007, p. 12). The concealment is what he calls, “subjectivity fetishism;” a term he adapts from Karl Marx’s notion of

commodity fetishism. Bauman locates subjectivity fetishism with what he deems a society of producers:

Writing from inside the budding society of producers, Karl Marx censured the economists of his time for the fallacy of ‘commodity fetishism’: for their habit of overlooking or hiding human interaction, by design or by default, behind the movement of commodities; *as if* the commodities, on their own, entered relationships with each other with no human mediation. (Bauman, 2007, p. 13)

The idea is that the human labour, and thus the humans involved in the creation of a commodity, is effectively erased. Thus, for example, goods seemingly simply appear, shiny and new, on department store shelves, ready to purchase, without history.

The erasure of human labour is of central concern to Marx, who is writing within the context of a society of producers. Similarly, Bauman distinguishes this state from the later society of consumers, observing the emergence of “subjectivity fetishism”:

If it was the lot of *commodity fetishism* to hide from view the human, all too human substance of the society of producers, it is the turn of *subjectivity fetishism* to hide the commoditized reality of the society of consumers. (2007, p. 14)

Just as human labour is erased from objects for sale, the deeply entrenched influence of consumer culture is erased from the very activities, experiences, and understandings that reinforce it. Subjectivity fetishism serves to erase the phenomenon whereby subjectivity is framed as a commodity.

Baudrillard's notion of signs taking meaning from other signs also relates to the commodities and subjectivity. In fact, the measure of value occurs through the attribution of meaning to goods. According to Baudrillard,

strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in previous ages, but by **objects**. Their daily dealings are now not so much with their fellow men, but rather—on a rising statistical curve—with the reception and manipulation of goods and messages. (1970/2017, p. 43)<sup>35</sup>

In consumer culture, meanings held by items that are associated with the market are central.

When subjectivity is itself framed as a sign, it takes its place in the context of other signs. When the language of signification, for example, is used to give value, that valuation can live on whatever it is grafted to: this could be an object, a characteristic, a concept, or even subjectivity. It is not the thing<sup>36</sup> that holds the value, as Baudrillard reminds us, but the story about the thing which ultimately subsumes the thing that holds value. Bauman notes,

---

<sup>35</sup> Like with Foucault, Baudrillard is using sexist language by assuming a masculine subject. This type of assumption forms part of my motivation for writing this dissertation: here, in my study of consumer culture and subjectivity, I put the girl at the centre.

<sup>36</sup> I use the term “thing” for the same reason that Cook uses the term “it” to describe the child consumer. He explains, “I tell a story, a history, of the social production of the child consumer. This is a discursive figure that animates children’s culture with its insatiable desire for things, its knowledge about products, its tastes, its conspicuous display, and its seemingly unquestioned identification of self with commodities. It is referred to as “it,” rather than as a she or he, to emphasize that the child consumer I investigate is not a sentient being with a unique biography but a discursive construct with a history” (Cook, 2004b, p. 5). My use of “thing” refers to the locations—an object, an expression of self—that hold sign value in consumer culture.



in a society of consumers, no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectiveness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity. (Bauman, 2007, p. 12)

The subject is thus framed with the attributes of a marketable object and the marketability is an ongoing process. This ever-changing state of affairs is in line with Bauman's notion of liquid modern consumerism which is characterized by continually changing desires and meanings (2007). Furthermore, consumer culture is about the ongoing task of (re)inventing the self by using, of course, the ever-changing array of commodities that are available through the market (Slater, 1997). And the push for the expression of the self is part of the sale. In order to stay relevant in the consumer culture universe, Bauman argues, that framing of objects or even of the self must be continually reinforced.

However, this consumer culture-infused subjectivity is not inevitable. Bauman recognizes agency in individuals, which allows resistance to what might be interpreted as a predetermined molding of subjectivities within consumer culture:

Subjectivity fetishism, just like commodity fetishism before it, is founded on a lie, and it is so founded for much the same reason as its predecessor was—even if the two varieties of fetishism focus their cover-up operations on opposite sides of the subject-object dialectics ingrained in the human existential condition. Both varieties of fetishism stumble and fall at the same obstacle: the stubbornness of the human subject, valiantly resisting the repetitive attempts at its objectification. (2007, p. 20)

Bauman recognizes that even in the universe of Barthes and Baudrillard, amidst significations upon significations, humans still have agency.

Agency on the part of the human subject is a familiar idea. The notion of children as “independent social actors” anchors much work in childhood studies (James & James, 2012). The notion of agency “emphasizes children’s ability to not only have some direction over their own lives take but also, more importantly, to play some part in the changes that take place in society more widely” (James & James, 2012, p. 4). As such, agency is about more than just resistance. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, a mother has agency and can act in ways that are empowered in the face of the dictates of motherhood (O’Reilly, 2004, 2006). As Adrienne Rich reminds us, there are differences between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the lived experience of mothering (1976/1995). That is, the actions taken by a mother do not necessarily conform to the dictates of motherhood. Certainly, these nonconforming individual actions can be viewed as politicized, and, such choices are “outlaw mothering” (O’Reilly, 2004, 2006).

In the same vein, Miriam Forman-Brunell notes that the expectations of doll play may be very different from the actual experience of play (1998). For instance, as previously discussed, the expensive dolls of the late-nineteenth century may have been purchased with the intent of displaying the family social status and wealth, but this messaging did not necessarily frame the ways in which girls actually interacted with their dolls. In fact, doll play in general did not necessarily follow prescribed instructions. At tea parties, perceived by adults to be part of traditional and acceptable girl play, girls did not necessarily conform to adult expectations. According to Forman-Brunell, “doll parties, considered entirely too sedate by some girls, were

transformed into invigorating activities unlikely to win the approval of adults” (Formanek-Brunell, 1998, p. 32). She chronicles girls sliding down staircases on tea trays and breaking their dolls by smashing them (Formanek-Brunell, 1998). These late-nineteenth century girls, Forman-Brunell notes, played with dolls in ways that did not conform to ideals of femininity such as docility (1998). As such, like motherhood, imaginings of what should constitute girlhood do not necessarily describe the experiences, actions, or perceptions of actual girls.

In my research, I distinguish between the representations of girlhood and the ways in which girls may interpret and express themselves. Again, there is an echo of Rich’s distinction between institution and experience. These observations support my view that, while I am reading cultural texts through semiotics and discourse analysis, my interpretation is neither inevitable, nor is it necessarily descriptive of the experience of girls. Instead, in this chapter, the analysis offers insights into—to borrow a term from Rich—the institution of childhood,<sup>37</sup> specifically girlhood, and its highly complicated and deeply entrenched relationship to consumer culture.

### **Introducing “Truly Me”**

As I mentioned earlier, the focus of the chapter is the American Girl doll line called Truly Me. These dolls are aptly named because the dolls are designed to match their girl counterparts. As a May 2015 press release explains, “Truly Me, formerly known as My

---

<sup>37</sup> I am not speaking of all childhoods but elements of a particular girlhood framed by consumer culture and situated within the so-called West.

American Girl, allows a girl to create a one-of-a-kind friend through a variety of personalized doll options, including 40 different combinations of eye color, hair color and style, and skin color, as well as an array of outfits and accessories” (Business Wire, 2015). Like the Bitty Babies, the Truly Me dolls are all the same size, but vary in eye and skin tone as well as hair colour, style, and texture. The options of dolls allow buyers to select the version of the doll they want to purchase. Along with the dolls, the Truly Me section of the American Girl catalogue contains a variety of items for sale including a host of clothing, for both doll and girl, and doll-related accessories. Some samples include a salon chair, a sport storage bench, a slow cooker dinner set, a gymnastics floor beam, a science fair display board and telescope, and a set of school lockers—all doll-sized (American Girl, 2015e). The multitude of accoutrements, along with the dolls themselves, is on offer as accessories to a doll play that is presented as mirroring girlhood. This particular version of girlhood involves lots of purchased goods.

### **Self-Discovery for Sale**

Colourful text dances around a girl holding a doll and an American Girl shopping bag on the cover of the May 2015 issue of the American Girl catalogue: “Discover truly me,” and “Of all the things I can be, the best is truly me!” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 1). This issue debuts the line of Truly Me dolls, outfits and accessories (American Girl, 2015c). As such, in this chapter, I draw several examples from this issue of the catalogue as it introduced the line to American Girl consumers. On the cover, the doll and the girl match in terms of appearance. “Discover truly me” can be read as inviting the catalogue reader to shop for a doll that

expresses the identity of the child for whom it will be purchased.<sup>38</sup> In a sense, the reader—or perhaps more accurately, the shopper, as this is a catalogue after all—is asked to purchase a doll and invited to “discover” the toys. However, the page also connotes a way to “discover” the self. The text directs the shopper to “discover truly me.” The shopping bag portrays purchasing things on the market; the doll expresses the girl, the girl expresses the doll, and shopping provides the backdrop. If the purchasing connotation were not obvious enough from the fact that these images and phrases appear on the cover of a retail catalogue, the American Girl bag seals the deal. The tissue poking out from the top of the bag connotes a purchase that has been made; the girl has purchased something big from the store and it sits in the giant red bag on her arm. She is happily discovering and being her best: truly me.

Self-discovery is also helped along by the brand in terms of expertise. Like the Bitty Baby doll-branded advice to parents, the Truly Me line also offers life guidance. The catalogue promises “hours of fun-spiration! Every Truly Me doll comes with me-and-my-doll activities with dozens of do-together crafts, quizzes, creative ideas and recipes, plus advice on friendship, self-confidence, and more!” (American Girl, 2015e, p. 34). Besides the advice available to Truly Me girl consumers, the brand promises an experience of self-discovery through purchasing the items associated with the line.

---

<sup>38</sup> It is understood that the toys featured in the catalogue are for children, specifically girls as almost every photograph of a human in the catalogue is a photograph of a girl. Girls are consistently featured as interacting with the dolls.

Here the self is expressed through a relationship to purchasable items. This excavation or expression of the self happens through buying the doll. It is a perfect moment of consumption: one learns about one's self through the purchase of a commodity. The commodity is then necessary for self-knowledge. The commodity is even an expression of the inner characteristics. According to Bauman,

consumers' subjectivity' is made out of shopping choices—choices made by the subject and the subject's prospective purchasers; its description takes the form of a shopping list. What is assumed to be the *materialization* of the inner truth of the self is in fact an *idealization* of the material—objectified—traces of consumer choices. (2007, p. 15)

The shopping experience is not about acquiring goods for their use-value but rather their sign value. In this case, the sign value is tied to subjectivity. The goods become an expression of the “truth” rather than just goods. Bauman views this exchange as the valuation of these goods as meaningful to subjectivity. One can only be true or authentic by actively participating in the capitalist market; specifically, by acquiring items that not only express the self, but in some sense are the self. The goods are a manifestation of inner “truth.” The authenticity described relates to an imagining of girlhood that is constantly striving. Again, in every case, the actions required to be one's self are acquiring goods and in so doing, we may interpret, the self is expressed.

The story of the expression of the self through purchasing continues throughout the catalogue. The text relates the name of the line “truly me” to all sorts of qualities, experiences, and objects: “Suited up for sun and ready for anything is truly me” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 6); “Trying something new is truly me” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 13); “Shining bright with

every step is truly me” (American Girl, 2015e, p. 38); and “Trying hard and having fun is truly me” (American Girl, 2015e, p. 40). Each phrase headlines a page that features a host of items associated with the sentiment of the text and necessary for its fulfillment. For instance, “trying something new is truly me” anchors a two page spread of 14 items from a skateboarding set to a sparkly jazz outfit (American Girl, 2015c, pp. 12–13). The name Truly Me denotes the corporate naming and ownership of the items for sale. Like with Bitty Babies, the capitalization of the words is part of this denotation. But the term “truly me” also connotes authentic subjectivity; something that is true (i.e., honest and authentic) and “me” a pronoun used to describe the self. In any case, the connotation is that the term “truly me” refers simultaneously to the corporate, branded, commodity and to an “authentic” self. The girlhood expressed is striving both for her own authenticity and the expression of that authenticity. Both require the connection to an every-changing array of goods for sale; as such this girlhood fulfilled also requires, and thus assumes, access and privilege.

Ultimately, the qualities that are being sold in the catalogue have been grafted onto both girl and dolls. The same language—“truly me”—is used for both. Bauman’s notion of a melding of commodity and human—subjectivity fetishism—is relevant here (2007). Self-discovery is made possible through the goods attained through the market. The goods provide the means to articulate and perhaps even form the self. As such commodity and subjectivity are interconnected.

In the May 2015 issue, photographs of 20 of the 40 dolls available for sale are presented in a two-page spread. Each of the dolls is photographed from head to upper waist, against a white background, and is wearing an identical pink dress. All are positioned in the

same way. The notion of sameness is further denoted as the dolls for sale are not named; instead, each doll is identified by a code (for example, CLD69 or CLD36 etc.). The identification of the dolls by a code rather than by a more humanizing name—as, for example, the American Girl historical line of dolls does—enhances the malleability of the dolls as empty signifiers for their human counterparts.

In the midst of the headshots, in large font, is the declaration: “Choose Me!” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 5). The connotation is that the reader can choose herself: choose me!; or the adult purchaser of the item can choose the most suitable “me” for a girl: choose her subjectivity! This connotation is that the doll should be a match to the girl, an expression of the girl consumer, even an object representation of the child. The self is thus expressed outside of the body, indeed outside of the human, and as a commodity. Bauman’s notion of the blurriness of human and commodity is expressed here:

In most descriptions, the world formed and sustained by the society of consumers stays neatly divided into things *to be chosen* and their *choosers*; commodities and their consumers: things to be consumed and the humans to consume them. In fact, however, the society of consumers is what it is precisely because of being nothing of the sort; what sets it apart from other types of society is exactly the *blurring*, and ultimately the *effacing* of the divisions listed above. (2007, p. 12)

The commodity and the human are overlaid through the text and visuals on the catalogue page. The characteristics of the human are made manifest in a branded, mass-produced object.

Appearance is presented as an articulation of, perhaps even a definition of, the self. If the girl selects her object representation dependent on outward features, then we may surmise



that her own identity is understood as defined by these factors. The Truly Me layout is similar to the Bitty Baby layout of dolls, but there are more doll “combinations” available. In the September 2015 issue, the dolls are identified by a code and a short description of hair texture, cut, and colour as well as eye colour: “layered black-brown hair, blue eyes”; “wavy blond hair, brown eyes”; “brown hair with bangs, brown eyes” (2015e, pp. 34–35). While the girls and dolls in the Bitty Baby section connote little mothers and Babies, in the Truly Me line, the girls and dolls are presented as a direct mirroring of each other. The connotation in the Truly Me line is that when a girl chooses a doll, or a doll is chosen for her, it reflects the girl.

### **Uniqueness on Order**

In addition to self-discovery, unique, individual qualities are also only a monetary transaction away. A two-page spread that shows photos of the dolls, books, girls, and doll accessories is topped with the phrase, “Meet everything that makes me shine” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 2). “Everything that makes me shine” links to the idea of characteristics of the self that make someone stand out from the crowd. Here “everything that makes me shine” is available for purchase in the catalogue. The unique characteristics of an individual are available through shopping for mass-produced, branded items; each realizable as an item for purchase.

A sense of uniqueness is connoted throughout the catalogue and used to describe the goods for sale. The text proclaims: “Celebrating what makes me unique is truly me” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 8); “Of all the things I can be, the best thing is truly me™” (American Girl, 2015e, p. 34); “Exploring my unique style is truly me” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 50); and “Shining like only I know how is truly me” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 16). Each connotes a

sense of distinctiveness. The catalogue text asserts, “American Girl puts more than 25 years of support behind every girl’s unique journey” (American Girl, 2015c, p. 3). Each of the phrases includes the notion of something individual. Certainly, the use of the term “unique” states it plainly. But even the idea of being “truly me” links to a sense of individuality and thus distinction from others. Whether “shining like only I know how” or “of all the things I can be” the idea connoted is uniqueness.

Ironically, this uniqueness is expressed through consumption of mass-produced toys. In addition to the catalogue, the Truly Me line of dolls is also available through the company’s website. The site extolls,

the choice is yours with this selection of dolls that can be customized by hair, skin, and eye color—then the doll can truly become unique by adding outfits, accessories, and more to match your girl's favorite activities and interests. (American Girl, n.d.-o)

Personal characteristics are on display through or by goods purchased. And indeed, these characteristics are positioned as distinct. The connotation is that uniqueness can be expressed and even constructed through goods and services that are anything but unique: they are mass produced and commonplace and yet rare. In Baudrillard’s (1981, 1976/2005, 1970/2017) universe of signs, the mass-produced objects take on the quality of uniqueness, and this uniqueness is then grafted onto the possessors of those objects. Here it is not only subjectivity that is for sale but individuality.

## Fast Fashion & Self Enrichment

The American Girl catalogue text proclaims the benefits of ongoing consumption. It offers “[e]ver-changing selections of outfits and accessories to fuel new interests” (American Girl, 2015c, pp. 2–3). The visuals showcase the breadth of items for sale: pages are filled with dolls in animated activities—dancing, gardening, grooming, slumber partying (e.g. American Girl, 2015c)—and photographs of clothing and accessories to suit dozens of aspects of the Truly Me lifestyle. Here, curiosity and learning find their genesis in clothing, but not just clothing, “ever-changing” clothing. The very phenomenon of disposable fashion expresses Bauman’s liquid modernity so well: the new, better, faster is extolled.

At the most basic level, the items presented and described on the pages are evidence of the abundance of goods available in the culture of consumption. Baudrillard describes the consumption landscape: “Profusion, piling high are clearly the most striking descriptive features. The big department stores, with their abundance of canned foods and clothing, of foodstuffs and ready-made garments, are like the primal landscape, the geometric locus of abundance” (Baudrillard, 1970/2017, p. 44). And the catalogue pages offer such an abundance of goods.

Consumer culture is not simply about the amount of goods for sale; it is the underlying consistent need to buy more and more to express or position the self or even just to be yourself. However, the promise of the goods is never fulfilled. As Bauman observes, “consumer society thrives as long as it manages to render the *non-satisfaction* of its members (and so, in its own terms, their unhappiness) *perpetual*” (2007, p. 47). Thus, the push to keep buying goods is fuelled by a hungry economy, as the need to express the self is never fully met. Within

consumer culture, at least in principle, the needs of subjectivity line up with the needs of the market. The expression or exploration of the self is thus continually reached for and yet never realized. Shopping offers the promise of fulfillment that is ultimately unfulfilling. The lack of fulfillment then becomes the motivation to keep shopping in order to search for the self and hoping that the self will be completed. And in the Truly Me line, pages and pages of goods with price tags are ready and waiting with promises of a fulfilled girlhood.

## **Twinning**

In the Truly Me section of the American Girl catalogue the dolls and girls look exactly alike in virtually every picture of a child and doll. On the pages, there girls and dolls are twinned. On the inside cover of the May 2015 issue, again the issue that debuts the Truly Me line of dolls, there is a photo of three girls holding dolls: the first is a girl with light skin and red hair who sports a pink shirt and silver tulle skirt, and the doll she holds has the same outfit, skin tone, and red hair; the second is a girl with a medium complexion and dark brown hair pulled into a high ponytail, wearing blue glasses and a sun dress, and her doll sports the same look and, of course, matches her in skin tone, hair colour, and hair style; the third girl is blonde with light skin and is dressed in a pink outfit and blue shoes, and the doll she holds has the same clothing and features.<sup>39</sup> In addition, all the dolls and girls photographed together appear

---

<sup>39</sup> In this explanation, I am using the language of the catalogue used to identify dolls to describe the appearance of girls and dolls.

able-bodied.<sup>40</sup> All have relatively long hair; in this section, there are no short-haired girls or dolls.<sup>41</sup> This detail of matching girls and dolls is not unique to the Truly Me line of dolls. The prior line, My American Girl<sup>42</sup>, and the Bitty Baby line of dolls also featured matching girls and dolls on the pages of the catalogue. Page after page, catalogue after catalogue, we see girl and doll matched by markers of hair, eye, skin, clothing, and, seemingly, ability based on physicality. After all, the catalogue exclaims, “marvelous matches are truly me” (2015e, p. 53). The denotation is that girls select dolls that look like them, and in so doing, select dolls that express their subjectivity; that is, outward characteristics are indicative of inner qualities.

The outward markers of appearance are the defining characteristics by which a girl twins with a doll. When one takes the name of the line into account—“Truly Me”—these characteristics connote markers of identity. If the doll is “truly me,” and thus an expression of the self, then the self is identified, at least in part, by these outward markers. These particular qualities of appearance are then positioned as key points upon which to assert identity. First,

---

<sup>40</sup> There are dolls featured without girls in tow, who are represented as having physical disabilities: for example, in the July 2015 issue, there is a doll holding the leash of a dog in a service vest next to a doll in a wheelchair (2015d) and in the January 2016 issue, there is a doll with “Arm Crutches,” also for sale, in the background of a doll scene. There is also a doll in a “Berry Wheelchair for Dolls,” with a pointing stick in front of an “Adventures in Astronomy” poster (American Girl, 2016, pp. 26–27, 35). There are doll-sized accessories that connote differently-abledness, in terms of physicality, but there is no direct representation of differently-abled girls. For a further discussion of representations of ability in the American Girl see for example, “Ablenationalism in American Girlhood” (Schalk, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> The long hair connotes girlhood. This point becomes clearer in the next chapter in which I explore new dolls who are gendered as male and sport short, cropped hair.

<sup>42</sup> The Truly Me line of dolls replaced another line of dolls called My American Girl.

physical characteristics such as skin tone, eye colour, hair colour, and hair texture are markers of identity. Like with the Bitty Babies, the characteristics that identify each doll are also potential markers of gender, ethnicity, and race. Second, items external to, but adorning, the body—that is, clothing and accessories—also become defining characteristics of identity. For example, in the November 2015 issue, 23 Truly Me dolls are featured in a two page spread and all appear to be sporting identical pink dresses and silver belts (2015m). The expression of the self is thus embodied by appearance, both in visible characteristics and in the purchasable items.<sup>43</sup> The markers then take on importance as expressions of the self. The notion is that purchasable items express subjectivity: the self is thus expressed not only through the body but also through commodities. Bauman's (2007) notion of subjectivity and commodity is apparent here. Identity is articulated through consumptive practices within the culture of consumption. Identity is formed not simply through consumption but as a view of the self as commodity-object.

The similarity between the girls and the dolls is also connoted visually through the positioning of human and object within the photographs. In photo after photo the girls are touching dolls that mirror them in appearance. The touch itself links the human child with the object through the portrayal of the bodies as pressed against one another. They are, in photo

---

<sup>43</sup> Of course, some characteristics of the body may also be acquired; for example, colour contact lenses or hair dye.

after photo, fused.<sup>44</sup> The relationship between the child and the commodity is presented visually in such a way that the mirrored bodies—and the object, the doll, is indeed presented as having a body—are linked. In some cases, it is difficult to tell where the doll starts and the child ends. This juxtapositioning of object and human further connotes, along with the twinning, a connection between the child and the doll; the human and the commodity. This overlap is related to Bauman's notion of an intersection between commodity and human (2007). In the culture of consumers, the positioning of product and consumer are difficult to distinguish precisely because they blur into one another.

The linking of children and commodities in marketing is not simply an invention of Bauman's liquid modern consumerism. In fact, the child has long been a stand-in for commodities for sale. According to Cook, "in the United States there is a century-long tradition of depicting children in advertisements as vehicles for the personification of commodities" (Cook, 2004b, p. 16). Certainly, dolls have a long history of being an object embodiment of childhood (Bernstein, 2011). Furthermore, these toys are linked with girlhood specifically (Bernstein, 2011). In the American Girl catalogue, there is a hyper-extension of these two histories. In Barthes's work there is a direct line of signification: sign, signifier, and signified (1957/2013). However, in Baudrillard's sign universe, the order is unclear as signs, signifier, and signified are disorderly. There is no clear-cut sign and signified; girlhood and consumer culture are inextricably intertwined. There is a matching of girls and dolls in the pages of the

---

<sup>44</sup> This visual presentation of fused girl and doll is presented both in the Truly Me line and in the My American Girl line that preceded it (e.g., American Girl, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2015a, 2015b).

catalogue, but the direction of which is primary is unclear: is the commodity matching the girl, or is the girl matching the commodity?

The doll holds meaning as a reflection of a girl but also as a mass-produced, corporate, branded object of consumption imbued with “values.” Certainly, meanings of the girl, as a discursive subject, are grafted onto the doll. Dolls as “emblems of childhood” have a long history (e.g. Bernstein, 2011, p. 19). However, as a reflection of the doll, the meanings of the object are also grafted onto the girl. The Truly Me line is aptly named. The doll and girl are mirrored: the doll represents the girl’s authentic self, her “Truly Me,” but the doll also is imbued with qualities that are transferred onto the girl. The doll connotes that in and of itself, it is “Truly Me.” Through the purchase of the doll, the girl is associated with the qualities and values of the “Truly Me” doll. The idealized girlhood is attainable through purchasing the items for sale. The qualities of the authentic self are thus located, at least in part, outside of the girl. In consumer culture, the search for the self occurs through the marketplace, and those commodities hold in them the qualities that are being sought. Rather than just enhancing the self, those commodities are, in some sense, the self. Bauman’s notion of the interplay of subjectivity and commodity is at work. The blurring of each lends meaning to the other. As such, girlhood is interpreted, at least in part, through consumer culture, and consumer culture is interpreted, at least in part, through girlhood.

### **Animated Dolls**

The blurring of human and commodity is connoted by the pages in which dolls seemingly participate in a variety of activities. In the Truly Me line the majority of the photos are of the dolls and objects illustrated in animated action: dolls in bathing suits and flip flops



on the beach, dolls in dance class, a doll in fluffy robe on a spa day, dolls in Halloween costumes, dolls sporting soccer and cheerleading uniforms, and a doll in riding gear with ribbon-adorned horse grace the pages (American Girl, 2015d). The life-giving features of the dolls involved in these activities connotes yet another aspect of twinning. The dolls play out the aspects of an idealised, privileged girlhood—soccer practices, science fairs, sleepovers, riding lessons, and spa days. This girlhood is on order, packaged with toys and accessories for sale. These are the children of intensive mothering. If the Babies described in the last chapter were precious and wondrous, these dolls are busy. They are recipients of packed schedules and a full resume of extra-curriculars that are in line with middle-class ideals of intensive mothering. Hays observes, “wealthier mothers have the money and access to transportation to send their children to tumbling classes, piano lessons, judo classes, swimming lessons” (Hays, 1996, p. 89). Like with the Bitty Babies, there is a classed lifestyle for sale in the Truly Me line.

Baudrillard’s (1970/2017) insights about the promise of consumer culture as a great equality-maker are at play in the Truly Me pages as they were in the Bitty Baby line. There is a promise of a privileged lifestyle that is attainable despite social categorizations like race and class. Like with the Bitty Baby line, the Truly Me line promises access. The implications of social inequities, for example, are rendered invisible in the midst of the spoils seemingly available to all, and yet particular to a middle-class, idealised girlhood. The purchasing of goods is the purchasing of this privileged lifestyle and inequities are dismissed by the implication that class mobility is for sale and available to all. In this sense, the dolls are part of Baudrillard’s universe as signs of an aspirational lifestyle. They have meaning because they are

both direct purchases that are made and they connote the act of purchasing that is necessary for an idealized girlhood. The various combinations of matching girls and dolls engaged in a plethora of activities fully embrace middle-class ideals of childrearing, a lifestyle that is only an order form away.

As I have pointed out, the lifestyle connoted on the pages of the catalogue is class-based. The activities like horse-back riding, soccer practice, and ballet lessons connote privilege. Access to organized activities is often inaccessible to poor families, but viewed as a given by more affluent families (Buckingham, 2011). Spending on lessons or education, for example, is not always framed as consumption. The class-based location of these activities offers them some level of exemption from the category of consumer culture. As Buckingham has chronicled, popular debates around the harmfulness of consumer culture for children often exclude things like lessons and activities that build cultural capital—such as music, language, and dance lessons. As Buckingham notes, this attitude involves “prejudices about taste and cultural value” (2011, p. 11). He adds, “commercial marketing is acceptable, it would seem, if it promotes products that are ‘healthy’ or ‘wholesome’” (Buckingham, 2011, p. 11). These healthy and wholesome ideals—the “American Girl values” discussed in the last chapter—are what is harnessed in the catalogue. The whole enterprise links the good kind of consumption—i.e., middle-class ideals of child-rearing in which consumption that promotes the attainment of cultural capital is not framed as consumption at all—with a line of mass produced, branded, corporately-produced dolls (American Girl, 2014b, p. 46).

Furthermore, the class-based notion of an ideal childhood follows a legacy of childhood in which only select children are included. As discussed earlier in the dissertation, race has

been one criteria by which children have been historically included or excluded in the category of childhood (e.g. Bernstein, 2011, 2017). Robin Bernstein notes that as childhood became a place of innocence in the nineteenth century, it was also clearly articulated as a category that included white, middle-class children and excluded other children (2011, 2017). As such, black children, for example, were positioned outside of childhood. Class is also a social categorization by which children have been deemed children or not. As Dennis Denisoff explains, with reference to the nineteenth century, “the economic deprivation of the poor often denied them the privilege of embodying the category of childhood” (2016, p. 9). The legacies of these historical understandings of childhood endure today.

As with race, class continues to influence notions of childhood. The girlhood apparent in the pages of the catalogue, the pages that exemplify that the goods for sale are “Truly Me,” is an idealized one that sits firmly in privilege. Yet this version of girlhood is not presented as a version; instead, it is presented as universal. As previously discussed, the wide variety of activities and equipment with which the dolls are depicted as engaging is one example of unacknowledged class privilege. There is also an apparent flattening of inequities. All \$115 Truly Me dolls come with the possibility of accessories ranging from a “Pretty City Carriage,” \$275 (American Girl, 2015m, p. 12) to a “Skis and Helmet Set,” \$38 (American Girl, 2015m, p. 16). The activities—skiing, gymnastics, soccer, spa days, beach days, dance classes, gardening, dog grooming, and many, many changes of outfits—depicted on the pages are all part of the package to be purchased (e.g. American Girl, 2015c). And all of these aspects of privilege connoted by the goods in the catalogue are seemingly grafted onto the girls who consume the products. The dolls are after all, “Truly Me”; they provide the characteristics

necessary for a fulfilled, authentic girlhood. The promise on the pages is that the myth of this very particular brand of girlhood is available to all.

## **Conclusion**

The name of the doll line Truly Me is truly apt. The branding of the line involves stories of not only the objects for sale but also the consumers of those objects. As such, the story is as much about the consumer as it is about the doll. The consumer is expressed by the brand; that is, by interacting with American Girl products they become Truly Me. The qualities of one are tied, even reflected, by the qualities of the other. An American Girl doll holds value in the simulacrum of subjectivity in consumer culture that an unbranded doll does not hold. The American Girl doll is packaged with a host of personal qualities that are simultaneously grafted onto its consumer and that are the necessary evidence of the pre-existence of those qualities in the consumer.

In this vein, to consume is to both construct and express a self, and, of course, both require the market. In consumer culture, the self is not expressible, and perhaps does not even exist, without the necessary outward markers: the purchased goods. The dolls are about selling girlhood, which involves significations of the qualities connected to girlhood through signifiers. As such, both dolls and girls are intertwined in the significations of girlhood. And within the realm of consumer culture, girlhood is firmly planted within the market. Bauman explains that construction of identity involves interactions with the marketplace in such a way that subjectivity is framed as a commodity (2007). In my reading, commodity is also framed as subjectivity as each reflects the other.

In this chapter, I use the work of Baudrillard and Bauman to examine the interconnection of subjectivity and consumer culture, using the American Girl Truly Me line of dolls. In the final research chapter of this dissertation, I will explore the relationship between girlhood and consumer culture by looking to what is perhaps a more fully articulated expression of Bauman's liquid modern era: the online world.

## Chapter Six: Digital Dolls

### Introduction

“Is it recording? Hello?” Z sits in front of her computer and launches her vlog while her dog, Popcorn, barks enthusiastically in the background (American Girl, 2015f). Z, short for Suzie, explains she is from “Zeattle” and loves storytelling (American Girl, 2015f). Sporting leggings, a mini skirt, and a purple t-shirt decorated with a camera and the word “smile,” she sits in a gleaming bedroom filled with brightly coloured furniture; a skylight; beadboard, white-washed walls. It is festooned with posters; a multi-coloured, tassled garland; a sparkling, light-up star; and a tri-pod and camera (American Girl, 2015f). It is her first Vlog and she is a natural. So inspired has she been by the American Girl stop motion (AGSM) videos on YouTube that she decided to start the vlog to help others make videos. She will be covering topics such as editing, casting, sets, props, costumes, and lighting. She invites the “world” to watch her videos and submit their own creations: “Oh, and you know the best part? American Girl is going to choose their favourite videos to share with all of us fans.” The video ends as she gets called by her dad to do her homework (American Girl, 2015f). Z is not only the producer of the AGSM video; she, along with Popcorn, is also the star. Z is not a person but a doll, an American Girl doll created specifically for the digital environment and certainly for YouTube.

The American Girl brand not only exists in stores and paper catalogues, it can also be found in the online world. In this chapter, I will examine the company’s website, the

company's YouTube channel, and what is known as AGTube, which consists of both official, corporately produced videos and unofficial, fan-produced videos housed on various YouTube channels. The brand's YouTube channel and AGTube are not the same thing as the YouTube channel consists of content posted by the brand on its YouTube platform; whereas, content considered AGTube is posted by fans of the brand on different YouTube channels. The research in this chapter illustrates the nuances between print and digital locations as sites of excavation about subjectivity and consumer culture. It points to productive sites for further consideration and research on consumer culture, girlhood, and identity. As I will illustrate, the distinctions between these two realms lead us into a new space of consumer culture theory.

I have selected the American Girl website as an object of inquiry as it continues many of the themes around intensive mothering and consumer culture and identity explored earlier in this dissertation. I focus on YouTube as a potent example of social media, as it is illustrative of the interconnection of viewer, producer, commodity, and consumer. In particular, I examine the phenomenon of AG stop motion videos found on the site. Stop Motion videos are a type of content created both for the American Girl Channel on YouTube by the company itself, and by fans on various YouTube channels. These media creations feature the American Girl dolls as animated players starring in digital narratives. While the productions feature the dolls and products of American Girl, they are not necessarily, and were not initially, created by the company itself. These stop motion videos provide insight into the blurred realm of consumer culture, where roles of consumer and producer are not clear cut. Furthermore, the videos offer different kind of site of inquiry, that is texts created not by the corporation but by consumers themselves. Digital media is a compelling site from which to examine how subjectivity is

related to consumer culture. In particular, by looking to both the American Girl website and AG stop motion videos on YouTube, I focus on girlhood as central to considerations of the relationship between an articulation of the self and consumer culture.

This chapter is structured in two parts. First, I explore the website and apply the theories that were previously related to the catalogue. Namely, I will explore the website through the lens of Sharon Hays's (1996) intensive mothering as well as Jean Baudrillard's (1981, 1976/2005, 1970/2017) and Zigmunt Bauman's (2007) theories about subjectivity and consumer culture. In the second part of this chapter, I explore the "blurring" of consumer and commodity. I examine the co-construction of girlhood and consumer culture from within Bauman's (2007) saturated realm between consumer and commodity, object and subject. I capture the dynamic fluidity of interconnectivity that is brought to the fore in the digital context. As I explain, the works of Bauman (2007) along with Jean Baudrillard (1981, 1976/2005, 1970/2017) offer a structure to begin to contemplate the digital space and, as such, provide a framework for examining the American Girl website. Their insights also offer the opportunity to consider the realm of social media.

A deep dive into the ever-expanding digital realm of social media requires consideration of the nuanced, dynamic, and overlapping relationships between consumer and commodity. The contrast in this chapter between the two digital locations—the American Girl website and the presence of American Girl on YouTube—provides insight into the highly complicated relationship between girlhood and consumer culture. And so, these investigations open up possibilities for future directions in consumer culture research.



Through comparing two sites of inquiry in this chapter, I highlight some of the ways in which conceptions of subjectivity in relation to consumer culture can be expanded to accommodate the ever-changing digital environment. As such, this chapter highlights some of the distinctions of investigating identity and consumer culture in social media as opposed to more traditional media formats like print or websites.

### **The American Girl Website**

The American Girl website features photos of well-groomed, smiling girls and moms interacting with American Girl dolls and accessories (American Girl, n.d.-p). The featured players high five, laugh, and appear fully engaged and immersed in their activities with American Girl items (American Girl, n.d.-p). Smiling girls surrounded by toys are adorned in American Girl branded clothing. They play in groups of dolls and girls, look adoringly at their dolls, and play happily on their own (American Girl, n.d.-p). Furthermore, the dolls themselves are captured in independent moments of play: three dolls, two with blue and pink-toed bowling shoes, huddle around the pink and blue bowling balls that sit on a snack bar unit at a bowling alley (American Girl, n.d.-u). Another doll sports pink sunglasses and a flamingo purse as she frolics with a puppy next to a campfire and a tripped-out trailer (American Girl, n.d.-p). And one click brings the site visitor to the items for sale: American Girl Bowling Alley \$150 US (American Girl, n.d.-r) and Maryellen's Airstream Travel trailer \$350 (American Girl, n.d.-q).

The site offers extensive shopping options: the items for sale are all American Girl brand and range from the dolls and accessories to books and magazines. The site hosts 45 million viewers each year (American Girl, n.d.-d). The real purchasing is cloaked, however, with assurances about less concrete items: "self-discovery," "self-expression," "creativity,"

“friendship,” “strong character,” “compassion,” “winning,” “respect,” and “strength” (American Girl, n.d.-p). These qualities of identity are on display and they are packaged with the purchase of the extensive range of items for sale: including, but in no way limited to, doll-sized hangers, cakes, books, kitchens, horses, crutches, hair extensions, lockers, barrettes, puppies, telescopes, beds, campers, and comforters that make up the American Girl universe. Consumers on the website are assured, “we believe in creating girls of strong character. For more than 30 years and counting, we've encouraged and empowered girls to act with compassion, respect, and strength” (American Girl, n.d.-p). These are the qualities that add value to the extensive range of goods for sale on the site.

The American Girl website also gives consumers the opportunity to interact with various aspects of the brand through options such as games and articles. The landing page for the website invites users to click on one of two portals: “Shopping and more for grown-ups” and “games and growth for girls” (American Girl, n.d.-p). The games and growth site include “Quizzes for Girls” such as “Are you a Class Act?”, “What’s Your Love Language?”, and “Personality Predictor; videos featuring, for example, crafts and recipes; and games that are listed under different doll lines and named dolls—for example, the Truly Me section features a game called “Pet Soccer” (American Girl, n.d.-e). Parenting and general advice is also on offer. Features articles include “Eight Strategies to help your daughter make friends,” “Who do you want your daughter to become?”, “Is she ready for a cell phone?”, and “Summer vacation ideas to inspire a lifetime of adventure” (American Girl, n.d.-t). Like in the paper catalogue, both girls and parents, namely mothers, are engaged by the site.

Although the branding of the catalogue and the website is similar, the website offers options for selecting the characteristics of the doll to be purchased beyond those available in the catalogue. For instance, in the Truly Me line discussed in the previous chapter, there are more hair options available for dolls via the website than the previously reviewed catalogues. For example, the website features dolls without hair (American Girl, n.d.-x, n.d.-y) and short-haired dolls (American Girl, n.d.-i), whereas in the catalogues studied earlier, dolls all had medium to long hair. The American Girl dolls are still, of course, highly gendered, but on the website, there are boy dolls for sale. The short-haired doll #74+, for instance, is described with the pronoun “he” (American Girl, n.d.-w). The company has branched out to offering a few boy dolls; nonetheless, as per the name of the company, the brand still centres around girls and girlhood, the subject of this analysis.

The stories surrounding girlhood mirror those featured in the catalogue. The branded goods are available for purchase and the act of purchasing, along with the dolls themselves, both serve to express the self. A title on the site states, “with Truly Me, girls get to show exactly who they are—inside and out” (American Girl, n.d.-v). This shopping for identity echoes Bauman’s (2007) view—explored in depth in the last chapter—of consumption as tied to identity. The dolls and accessories are necessary to express and even form the self. The girls of Hays’s (1996) intensive mothering are on display:

Celebrate what's true in your girl. A leader on the sports field. A whiz in the classroom. A star on the stage. A gourmet in the kitchen. A champion in the saddle. With Truly Me™, every girl can write her own story of who she is and who she wants to be—inside and out. (American Girl, n.d.-v)

The quotation is directed at the adult purchaser, the one who oversees “your girl.” This overseer, as established earlier in the dissertation, is connoted to be a mother. The extensive list of possible activities and the emphasis for the child to perform with excellence is tied to the ideals of intensive mothering. There is an assumed privilege that would allow for access to a world of success that starts, in the American Girl context, with \$115 dolls (American Girl, n.d.-n). As well, the pressure for mothers to provide opportunities for their children that are grounded in consumption is apparent.

The depiction of intensive mothering ideals of middle-class access to numerous activities are featured, though this business is not unique to imaginings of childhood through intensive mothering. Bauman reminds us, “the life of a consumer, the consuming life, is not about acquiring and possessing. It is not even about getting rid of what has been acquired the day before yesterday and proudly paraded a day later. It is instead, first and foremost, about *being on the move*” (Bauman, 2007, p. 98); the website reflects this constant movement. In addition to the numerous activities on display, the continuous reaching for a new and better expression of the self is part of the story for sale. The dolls and other goods articulate, meet, and reiterate the demands of a girlhood within consumer culture.

As in the paper catalogue, the fulfillment of a girl’s identity is also on order on the website. The search for a girl’s self is apparent: “Who do you want your girl to be? A creative spirit. A courageous voice. A joyful heart. A compassionate soul. And so much more. Meet the characters who will encourage your girl to become a strong, empowered young woman ready to change the world” (American Girl, n.d.-j). Here girls are not the empowered ones, though they do have the potential to become empowered through the goods for sale. It is the adult

consumer who is purchasing the products on behalf of “your girl” who is empowered here: “Who do you want your girl to be?” The choice of identities is offered to the adult with the credit card. No matter who holds the wishes for the “girl” in question, the striving for something more is reinforced. This striving is core to the tenets of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996). Here the wants of intensive mothering—the mother orchestrating a “perfect” childhood for her child—overlap with Bauman’s (2007) striving for identity with consumer products. The job of the mother, the purchaser/consumer, is to shape her daughter’s destiny via consumption. And in addition to mothering, the idea of becoming sits firmly in the rhetoric of consumer culture. As Don Slater reminds us, “consumer culture is about continuous self-creation” (1997, p. 10). The push for growth and the subsequent expression of the realized self is part of the sale. The story from the paper catalogue holds true on the American Girl website.

The stories of the availability of identity for sale are similar on the website and in the catalogue; however, as mentioned earlier, the website, by virtue of its digital fabric, offers even more options than the paper catalogue, and these go well beyond hair length. In the Create Your Own shopping section of the website, consumers are invited to “create a doll that matches your style and spirit” (American Girl, n.d.-1). They can select from options like “face shape,” “skin tone,” “hair color,” “haircut,” “hairstyle,” “eye color” for both the right and the left eye, and choices of “freckles,” “braces,” and a “hearing aid” for one or both ears, along with clothing, accessories, and aspects of “personality” such as name and “fav things” (American Girl, n.d.-1). According to the site there are “more than 1.3 million possible combinations” (American Girl, n.d.-1). These options promise the consumer individuality and self-expression:

The right eyes. And face. And hairstyle. Plus, just the right outfit to show a love of dance ... or soccer or math or so many other interests! The Create Your Own experience lets every girl express individuality from head to toe—and with whatever’s in her heart (American Girl, n.d.-n).

The offering to twin girl and doll is not just focused on the physical but on inner qualities of personality.

Again, the brand promises an expression of a girl’s “unique” identity by consuming their products. The site offers consumers the opportunity to “Create the one that’s one of a kind: Girls can design just what they have in mind for individuality that can’t be matched” (American Girl, n.d.-v). The brand’s promise reinforces Bauman’s (2007) observations about the wish to complete the self through consumer products and the idea of creating a unique identity through consumption. Moreover, the messaging of the uniqueness of the self as expressed through consumer choices on the website is familiar ground as it parallels the catalogue; however, the sheer number of choices available for the consumer through the website is greatly expanded. In a statement, posted on the American Girl website, entitled “Representing every girl’s story,” the company engages with the connection between the dolls and the girl consumers:

We know our characters can’t cover every lived experience. That’s why we also give your girl the chance to choose a friend that best expresses the story she wants to tell about herself. To help tell that story to the fullest, we offer a diverse array of face shapes, skin tones, eye colors, and hair styles—or even no hair at all. And beyond accessories for traditional favorites like sports and music and animals, we’ve created

everything from glasses and braces to diabetes kits and service dogs. From what she looks like to what she wears to how she engages with the world, each doll becomes so much more—a friend for every big moment and every little secret. (American Girl, n.d.-b)

The brand offers “your girl” a “friend” and an expression of the self. The notion of the object as friend raises the doll to a kind of human-like status. Simultaneously, the object-friend also serves to tell the story of the girl’s self. The girl’s identity is expressed in part through the purchased doll. The act of searching for and articulating a self links to what Baudrillard refers to as “synthetic individuality”; namely, a sense of uniqueness expressed through association with an array of sign values accessed through marketed goods (Baudrillard, 1970/2017, p. 105). He further comments on consumer culture’s promise to create and even define identity. With respect to media that promotes the discovery of the self through purchasing, he explains that the promise results in “the constant attempt to achieve an impossible, magical synthesis. If you *are* someone, can you ‘find’ your personality? And where are *you* while this personality is haunting you? If you are yourself, do you have to be so ‘truly’?” (Baudrillard, 1970/2017, p. 104). The last question is particularly reflective of the Truly Me line of dolls—whether on the site or on paper—marketed as part of the persistent and impossible push to discover, construct, and express the self.

There are two issues at play here. First, the girl and doll are being equated in terms of identity expression. The girl’s subjectivity is made visible through the branded mass-produced toy. Second, this self-expression is positioned as unique. The idea that subjectivity requires, and is defined by, commodities is central. In particular, the idea that is connoted is that

subjectivity is unique within the context of a limited number of consumer choices. As Baudrillard (1970/2017) says, this uniqueness purports to create distinctness, but it is about sameness because you are using a finite collection of options from which to express the self. The possibility of expressing one's self, therefore, only occurs within the confines of consumer culture.

## **Social Media**

As I have established, the website offers the same story as the catalogue; it is an extension in digital form. Social media, however, offers insight into the consumer created content. In other words, there is a twist to Baudrillard's observations; not only is the self found, constructed, and expressed through consumer goods, but, in the context of social media sites like YouTube, that self is also widely broadcast. It is the access to broadcasting that shifts the focus of the analysis. As Sarah Banet-Weiser observes, "broadcasting yourself" is also a way to brand oneself, a practice deployed by individuals to communicate personal values, ideas, and beliefs using strategies and logic from commercial brand culture, and one that is increasingly normative in the contemporary neoliberal environment" (2011, p. 278). The possibility of self-expression via mass communication is readily available through social media platforms. There is some limited capacity for users to respond to the brand on the website, through reviews for example. Social media provides fertile ground to illustrate the highly complicated interconnection between consumer and commodity precisely because, in this space, the producer and consumer overlap.

As noted, the website provides opportunities for consumers to write and post reviews of the products for sale. For example, the Blaire doll and book has 471 reviews (American Girl,



n.d.-h) ranging from PA\_mom who notes, “my daughter just got her this morning at the Girl of the Year Launch Party and absolutely loves her! She's a beautiful doll with an interesting story. We can't wait to learn more about her” (2019), to dollhater24 who states, “I bought this at the launch party and “Blaire” seems to have a nasty attitude!! Do not recommend!” (2019). The Z Yang doll also has reviews on the American Girl website. One reviewer states, “Z is probably one of my most favorite dolls because she was the doll who first got me interested with doll photography and with having an AG Instagram account! I am so happy that AG made a doll that is so much like many of their fans! She is an excellent doll, with beautiful features” (Hannahhobiag, 2018). Another exclaims, “my daughter, 9, is really into the social media and she can relate to this doll with the camera. I am happy to have a doll that is age appropriate with her interest” (Disney 71, 2018). In the previous chapters, we have only looked at sites of storytelling from the perspective of the producers of the products. Here, we have another site for storytelling: from the perspective of the “consumers” of these products. I chose these because they were first created by consumers directly, and then became part of the marketing platform for the corporation. In particular, examining the AG stop motion videos ultimately strengthens the argument that consumer culture and social identities are deeply interconnected. As such, I examine how American Girl stop-motion videos on YouTube serve as an illustration of the highly complicated (re)production of consumer culture and identity.

The catalogue and the website explored thus far have provided part of the answer to the central questions of this dissertation of the relationship between subjectivities and consumer culture. Social media, a dynamic space of interaction between consumer and commodity, serves not only to even more clearly illustrate a relationship of co-creation between consumer

and commodity, but also it in fact adds new dimensions to it. For this discussion, I focus on one moment of social media in particular: American Girl stop-motion (AGSM) videos on YouTube. They serve as an excellent example of the interwoven roles of consumers and producers. As Banet-Weiser observes, “focusing on the opposing forces of passive and active participation distracts us from the ways in which consumption and production are imbricated practices, rather than isolated, discrete activities” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 63). The AGSM videos on YouTube provides a compelling place to illustrate this highly complicated and interconnected relationship.

### **Stop Motion on AGTube**

In order to begin this investigation, I describe and give some background on the stop motion videos and the YouTube channel in general. YouTube is a social media site launched in 2005 as a location for users to upload and share videos (Banet-Weiser, 2012). It was bought out by Google one year later for 1.65 billion dollars (Banet-Weiser, 2012). The American Girl joined YouTube in 2006 and at the time of writing in October 2019, its YouTube channel had over 107,039,959 views (American Girl, n.d.-a). The channel features content that centres on the American Girl brand. Although there are several playlists on the channel—options include Doll Hairstyles, Crafts & DIYs, and AG stop motion—it is the stop motion videos I want to focus on, for reasons I’ll expand on below. Stop motion involves still photographs taken of a scene with small changes between each frame. Then the frames are put together in quick succession to create the appearance of movement. Thus, in the AG stop motion videos, dolls appear to move without human assistance. The videos created by the American Girl channel feature dolls in different scenarios: baking cupcakes for a birthday party, lounging by a pool,

building a snowman, and walking dogs (American Girl, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019). In short, the dolls appear to be fully animated beings.

The stop motion style of video featuring the American Girl dolls did not originate with AG; the idea actually came from YouTubers first who created the videos and posted them on various individually created channels on YouTube. This fan-created content is dubbed AGTube, a phenomenon that encompasses all of these American Girl doll-related videos posted across the social media site on various channels (Johnston, 2018). According to Jessica Johnston, some fans—“comprised of tweens, teens, and young adult girls”—have been making these stop motion videos since 2007 (2018, p. 59). By contrast, the American Girl started its stop-motion inspired series on its official company YouTube channel in 2015 (American Girl, 2015f). The stop motion videos featured on the official American Girl YouTube channel are a response to and an acknowledgement of consumers, rather than original brand content conceived of by the corporation.

The official American Girl videos acknowledge that the fan-based content is inspired by the corporate-made content. Mattel recognizes fan culture’s role in the creation of the Z series of YouTube videos (described in the next paragraph) in a 2017 press release: “Inspired by the American Girl Stop Motion (AGSM) phenomenon, the series has garnered more than three million views on YouTube and continues to draw a large fan base” (Mattel Corporation, 2017). The “unofficial” American Girl content thus not only has a presence online, but it influences the “official,” corporate content. This consumer-created content presents a distinct difference from content created by the American Girl company because of the location of production; however, both are firmly located in consumption. That is, consumers do not sit

only on one side of the producer/consumer equation. Instead, consumers overlap with producers. This blurring is reminiscent of Bauman's (2007) overlap of consumer and commodity.<sup>45</sup>

The AGSM content created by American Girl in response to the “unofficial” content created by fans is paralleled by the creation of the doll called Z. The doll's formal name is Suzy Yang. Z is a nickname and, according to American Girl, an “alias” for “online communication” (American Girl, n.d.-m; Mattel Corporation, 2017). In a company that was founded on physical dolls, here the digital presence of Z happened prior to the release of an actual doll. That is, she<sup>46</sup> appeared online before there was an actual physical doll available for purchase. According to American Girl,

With the release of her doll in 27 April 2017, “Z” (aka Suzie Yang) made her physical debut—but as a digital character, she has a following reaching back two years.

Z launched her vlog in September 2015, and since then she has actively engaged both the American Girl Stop Motion (AGSM) and American Girl Instagram (AGIG) digital communities, often bringing them together in new and exciting ways. (American Girl, n.d.-m)

---

<sup>45</sup> The consumer/producer overlap is also related to participatory culture whereby consumers create content, connect, and develop community around a given phenomenon. This notion forms the basis for research on fanscapes. Henry Jenkins, for instance, has written extensively about transmedia, fans, and participatory culture (e.g. n.d.).

<sup>46</sup> In the spirit of the animated inanimate American Girl doll in the videos, I am using the pronouns “she” and “her” rather than “it.”

The digital presence of Z, prior to her physical presence, is the company's response to AGtube. The physical doll has been the primary part of the brand message since the corporation's inception. In this case, the online presence of Z took precedent over the physical doll. The character then served to harness the online AGSM activities. The character was introduced by American Girl as a site for both traditional consumption, that is shopping, and online media consumption: "Enter Z: with her collection of books, online videos, accessories, and connection to online communities, Z provides girls different points of access, depending on their age, to digital photography, filmmaking, and online participation" (American Girl, n.d.-m). Even when the physical doll debuted, there were accompanying in-store events including an opportunity for "girls" to create Z-centred stop motion videos (Mattel Corporation, 2017).

On the YouTube series, Z encourages visitors to create their own AG stop motion videos, using the hashtag #AGZcrew. The brand's invitation is a continuation of the presence of "unofficial" American Girl content created and posted by a community of users. In the Z-series video "Lights, Camera, Action! Join the Z Crew," the doll "Z" explains that she is inspired to make videos because of fan-made content. She says, "I ... watched a bunch of the American Girl stop motion movies you've all been making. It made me want to try it too" (American Girl, 2015f). Another episode invites "registered YouTube users" to create a "response video" or leave a comment (American Girl, 2015g). There are also shout-outs (an acknowledgement of another content creator) to individual users who have created AG stop motion videos on YouTube (American Girl, 2015f). The series offers guidance on how to

create stop motion videos (e.g. American Girl, 2015f, 2015g, 2015h, 2015i, 2015j, 2015k, 2015l) and promises to feature stop motion videos made by fans (American Girl, 2015k).

The content created by American Girl is connected to content created by consumers/users in part through the aforementioned hashtags. The official American Girl hashtag #AGZcrew, for example, is intended to lead to other videos posted on YouTube that are made by creators other than American Girl. And there are additional tags on YouTube and Instagram, for example, that are popularly used by American Girl fans, like #AGSM (American Girl Stop Motion) and #AGIG (American Girl Instagram) (American Girl, n.d.-m). On YouTube, the location of AG content creation doesn't determine legitimacy; all content, whether created by the brand or by consumers and hashtagged to AG, is part of the brand messaging.

On AGTube the branded messaging is shared by both producers and consumers. Consumers are framed as producers as they broadcast their videos. Here, in the digital domain of social media, consumers are not only responders, they are the producers too. Moreover, the traditional producers, in this case American Girl, act in response to consumers. Baudrillard's signs are very much at play here in doll land, but what the AGSM videos illustrate is that the signs are in constant motion. There is not a clear sense of the originator in this cycle: do the origins lie with the video makers, who use new platforms to story-tell and thus, build the brand, or with American Girl who creates the dolls and the stories about them that "officially" form the brand itself? As in Baudrillard's sign universe, there is a troubling with the notion of the original and the authentic.

The American Girl brand, then, is context for building community. American Girl claims the space created through the online communities as a fruitful place in which girls can develop and grow. According to American Girl, “by sharing their content and their tips—whether face-to-face or, for teenage girls, online—they are creating opportunities to lead. And they are doing this in ways that are unique to each girl” (American Girl, n.d.-m). Baudrillard’s (1970/2017) observations about uniqueness are at play. However, due to their historical circumstances, they only tell a portion of the story. In the twenty-first century, being unique is only part of the protocol, the other part involves the broadcasting of that uniqueness. AGTube offers a platform for both. The American Girl brand story of self-development and expression is also reflected within the digital environment. The stories told by the American Girl brand focus on girls’ development, and simultaneously, the digital location itself reflects this tale. Banet-Weiser explains,

identity is not understood or experienced as organic or static but rather a “project of the self” where the crafting of one’s self is a constant dynamic, one that relies on media and other cultural spaces as a way to be “self-reflexive” and consistently work on, update, and evolve the construction of the self [see [Giddens] (5)]. (2011, p. 281)

Rhetoric about self-expression, self-realization, and growth is part of the selling story at the same time as the site for such expression is on offer. In other words, the placement of American Girl within social media environments like YouTube is also on brand. Social media provides the platform for public self-expression and self-development. If consumer culture, like Slater notes, is about “continuous self-creation” (Slater, 1997, p. 10) using the tools offered by the market, then both the media platforms themselves and products, like American

Girl dolls, featured in the videos are a part of this process. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the American Girl brand itself promotes girls' self-discovery and self-expression.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, the creation of online videos is promoted by the brand directly, through the Z series. The very tenets of self-discovery and expression extolled in the positioning of the brand overlaps with the characteristics of consumer culture.

While community is built around American Girl, the narratives presented by consumers/users may in fact conflict with the messaging of the official American Girl content. Johnson (2018) has explored some of this AGTube content. As an example, she cites a AGTube video in which “a doll and her boyfriend simulate sex and panic over a pregnancy scare” (Johnston, 2018, p. 65). The creation of videos may be actively encouraged by American Girl, but the content of the AGSM videos may not always be in line with the company's brand vision. According to Johnston,

in the case of AGTube, girls produce videos and comments that communicate their varied experiences in and across each other's YouTube channels, developing a larger knowledge of tweenhood that goes beyond its marketplace conception. AGTube thus creates a digital space in which girls share and validate perceptions of girlhood that

---

<sup>47</sup> The notion of self-discovery and self-expression is also taken up in girl studies. For example, Anita Harris and Amy Shields Dobson chronicle the rhetoric of “choice, empowerment, and voice” around young women through a post-feminism, neoliberalism and post-girlpower framework (2015, p. 145). Their research is part of a larger body of work in girls studies that links together subjectivity, specifically girlhood and girls, and social structures (Harris & Dobson, 2015).



might not fit into the thinking behind American Girl's targeting of its preadolescent consumer group. (2018, p. 60)

An article featured on the American Girl website entitled "Digital Learning & Play: Why Z Matters" explains, "more than a half-million images and videos are tagged #AGSM or #AGIG on social media platforms, and the communities that have developed around these posts make space for girls to encounter, develop, and express new perspectives" (American Girl, n.d.-m). The brand messaging expands from corporate materials to consumer-based content. If Bauman (2007) asks how consumers and commodities meld as consumers view themselves as products, here questions open up about how consumers shape and make meaning from and with commodities.

Up until this point, the primary focus of this dissertation has been with materials that were produced by the American Girl company, with acknowledgement that the way that those materials may be interpreted varies. For example, as I have explored previously, the way that doll play is depicted in the American Girl catalogue may not necessarily reflect the ways in which actual girls play, or interact, with those dolls (e.g. Formanek-Brunell, 1998; Rand, 1995; Reid-Walsh & Mitchell, 2006). Prior to the advent of social media, doll play was not in the public sphere for mass consumption, whereas, in the twenty-first century, doll play is a central feature of the videos created and uploaded to YouTube. Media-based materials about the dolls, in the case of American Girl, were produced by the corporation. In the case of AGTube, however, we now have evidence of consumer reaction and action with American Girl goods. In fact, in the case of AGTube, the company appears to be taking its cues from the consumers.

That is, the stop motion videos—created by the consumer with American Girl products—are noticed and then recreated by American Girl. As Banet-Weiser (2011) points out,

feedback functions on YouTube as a way to create a continuous dynamic between a consumer/user and producer. This dynamic is neither top-down nor bottom-up but ostensibly a meeting between the two, and thus *implies* a nonlinear power distribution from producer to consumer, no system or space controlling another. (2011, p. 288)

As such, the stop motion videos offer dynamic evidence of Bauman’s blurring of the points at which consumer and producer meet and even overlap. The messaging of girlhood is packaged and disseminated not only by the company but also by individual consumers outside of the company’s domain.

While there is a relationship between the producer and consumer that is seemingly “neither top-down nor bottom-up” (Banet-Weiser, 2011, p. 288), the comments in response to the Z video series clearly acknowledge American Girl as “official” and express delight at the sanctioning of AGTube by the company that drives the brand and sells the products. Individual users offer a response to the Z videos with comments such as: “Wow, this is so exciting that American Girl is finally taking part in AGtube! I would love to see a video about Kit, Maryellen, or Julie!” (FiveDollStars, 2015); “YES THIS IS FANTASTIC!! I'm so glad the AG Community is getting recognized!” (Agpals, 2015); “OMG This is so cool! I'm so glad you recognized agtube:D” (Agdoll z, n.d.). Not only are these reactions evidence of the fact that consumer-created AGTube existed before the corporation started producing their videos, but also the corporation, in this sense, is still the centre: the genesis of the products is still with American Girl. The digital environment itself shapes conversations. According to Banet-

Weiser, “the market forces of neoliberal brand culture do not just capitalize on participatory culture or online identity making, in other words, but circumscribe and shape what we have come to know as ‘participation’ and ‘identity’” (2011, p. 281).

The majority of the stories that I have examined in the dissertation thus far involve company-controlled messages, ones that are certainly open to varied interpretations, but that nonetheless are carefully vetted, constructed stories about the items for sale and the consumers of those items. In the case of AGTube, those stories are not necessarily constructed by the corporation. It is consumers who are story-telling on YouTube, and it is the corporation that is following their lead. Nevertheless, these YouTube storytellers are still very much consumers. Certainly, the dolls and many of the accessories in the stop motion videos are sold by the company. According to Johnston, “what is interesting about AGTube is that girls are still participating as consumers when they purchase multiple \$115 American Girl dolls and their affiliated accessories and sets” (2018, p. 69). Johnston further notes that the economic requirements of participating in AGTube may limit who can take part (2018).

The entire enterprise of AG stop motion videos, as creative as it may be, is premised on consumption. Not only are the videos a display of the products for sale by American Girl, but the platform of display is itself a corporate entity: YouTube. According to Banet-Weiser,

YouTube videos, then, do not exist in a social or cultural vacuum; they are posted on a site with the trademarked tagline “Broadcast Yourself,” and one that features advertising, in the form of banner ads posted on the site as well as more embedded forms within the videos themselves. (2011, p. 285)

While the stories featured in the AG stop motion videos may not conform with the branded tales, they are nevertheless framed within consumer culture as a whole, and part of accessing the AG stop motion videos on AGTube is consuming: the consuming of videos that display products on a platform that profits from consumers' views.

If Bauman (2007) felt that the relationship between commodity and consumer was blurry, here the blurriness spreads through his liquid consumer environment. It is the consumers who are storytelling, using the products. Of course, doll consumers have always told their own stories and there is a long history of viewing dolls as animated beings who have adventures of their own. For example, G. Stanley Hall and A. Caswell Ellis, in their late nineteenth century doll study, note that there are "psychic qualities" ascribed to dolls: here they are not speaking of extra sensory abilities; rather, they are referring to humanised qualities such as jealousy, sadness, sleepiness, or love (1897, pp. 15–16). They explain, "Almost all doll play involves the assumption of psychic qualities" (Hall & Ellis, 1897, p. 16). Dolls are viewed as having human characteristics. Moreover, they chronicle girls' commentary on doll play by including comments from the subjects of their study. Girls report viewing their dolls as animated being: "I thought my dolls had the same feelings as persons"; "Dolly was very angry when I wouldn't let her go to see the other children"; "When I found dolly lying on the ground, I thought I could see tears in her eyes, she was so hungry and cold." They also chronicle some of their narratives of their interactions with the dolls: "One day we were invited to a party, and I would not let Rose (dolly) go, because she had been naughty. But she cried so, and said she would be good, that I let her go"; "When brother set the dog on my doll, it was so badly torn that I put it in a box and had a funeral. We cried real tears, but at night it pained me so that I

went alone and dug her up, kissed, hugged her and told her I was sorry”; and “One of my dolls, Belle had a splendid wardrobe. I thought all my other dolls jealous, so I was especially kind to them in her presence, so she should know, despite her fine clothes, I loved them all alike. I sometimes saw her sneer” (Hall & Ellis, 1897, pp. 17–18). The positioning of dolls as humanized and using dolls to create play narratives is not new.

In the imaginings of these historical girls, the dolls are animated beings just as they are in the AGSM videos. With the advent of social media and the individual production of branded media products, however, these play narratives are fundamentally changed. The play that happens in the private domains of 120 years ago is now being created for a mass audience and being broadcast on a platform of mass communication. Elizabeth Chin, discussing a doll-focused YouTube video made by children, explains,

as instances of play, this video and others like it are at once private and public, and exist in a play space made possible by social media and the internet, a space in which the play is about media production, while simultaneously the play produces media as its product. (2015, p. 136)

While there is still private play, of course, the AGSM videos are produced for YouTube and thus created for the purpose of mass communication and this of course shifts the play itself.

The dolls and the media-based “play” are firmly in the domain of capitalism. American Girl is a brand and the dolls are part of that story. Furthermore, the media-based play is created and consumed to the backdrop of consumer culture. Play is then about participating in consumption. It is not only about taking on the role of consumer, the buyer of the toy, but play is about producing content that features the toy and ties the consumer to the role of producer on

the same media-based platform as a corporate entity. American Girl frames the digital media creations as, in part, “imaginative play” (American Girl, n.d.-e). Acts of play narratives— involving not only story but also media production—are seemingly created for the purpose of producing a media product that will be posted onto YouTube for an audience. In fact, they are produced in order to be consumed. The work involved in video productions involves what Banet-Weiser refers to as “immaterial labor,” where the creators of YouTube videos that feature branded products are doing the work of brand promotion (2012, p. 65). Personal expression and commerce are intertwined.

The rhetoric of empowerment and self-discovery apparent in the catalogue and the website dovetails with the possibilities offered by the AGTube. The questions and answers posed by the company relate to both the brand messaging and to identity: “Who do you want your girl to be? A creative spirit. A courageous voice. A joyful heart. A compassionate soul. And so much more. Meet the characters who will encourage your girl to become a strong, empowered young woman ready to change the world” (American Girl, n.d.-j). As previously stated, the sense of empowerment comes from interactions with the market. Both the consumption of the product itself and also the broadcasting of that product becomes fodder for self-expression and self-development. The “Truly Me” messaging about finding the self as reflected and created through a mass-produced, corporate doll expands to digital platforms by inviting the consumer to produce content and continue the journey of self-discovery and self-expression. The overlap of consumer and commodity, articulated by Bauman (2005, 2007; 2019), is fully realized in the digital space of social media. The interconnection between locating or creating the authentic self and expressing that self online is not unique to American

Girl, rather it is a common expression of the overlap of commodity and consumer.

Additionally, the unacknowledged work of promoting brands through creating and posting videos involving products is central. Banet-Weiser observes,

Discourses of empowerment and self-improvement that provide an ontological framework for current understandings of subjectivity are embedded within these labor practices, which insist that the subject maintains an authoritative discourse about herself. Importantly, the self-as-commodity involves a “social relationship” with oneself, one of innovation, production, and consumption, charged with ideally producing a unique, “authentic” self. (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 72)

The girl and the technology are interconnected in Bauman’s blurriness, and both are submerged in his liquid consumption. Banet Weiser reminds us, “audiences, within capitalist media industries, are not only the targets for products; they are the product, and they are both of these things simultaneously” (2012, p. 36). An examination of the digital site of American Girl, especially at user-generated content like AGSM on YouTube, is an expression of this overlap.

An investigation of digital media lends insight into notions of identity in the context of consumer culture, and in particular, captures the dynamic connection and overlap between consumers and producers, consumers and commodities. In particular, stop motion videos that are part of AGTube offer insight into the lack of distinction between consumer and producer that is seemingly so well-articulated in an investigation into the print media American Girl catalogue. Because the stop motion videos are produced by consumers who used the branded dolls to tell stories at the same time as the producer, that is the American Girl company, the

distinction between the two is blurred. This blurring highlights a process that is present in an analysis of the print catalogue but is more difficult to view. In print media, consumers using objects to express identity is not documented. But in the case of AGSM on YouTube, the very act of interacting with objects for the purpose of broadcast is based in documentation. In addition to the discovery, articulation, and formation of the self through objects, the act of framing and positioning the self on a digital platform to a potential mass audience adds another layer of analysis that both highlights the commodity self and helps to create that commodity self. The rhetoric about self-expression and self-realization match the activities encouraged by an interactive digital platform. As such, analyses of social media platforms like AGTube are a rich location for future research into identity and consumer culture.



## Chapter Seven: Conclusion

### Introduction

I began this dissertation at a table at the American Girl store in New York City. It was the wandering through girlhood, not as a girl myself, but as a mother, that brought me to the collection of thoughts that form the nexus of this project. I began in a personal space precisely because I wanted to engage with consumer culture not as some foreign entity to be examined at telescopic range, but rather as an influence that is woven into the very patterns of living. Jean Baudrillard reminds us, “it has to be made clear from the onset that consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects, but also to society and to the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system” (1976/2005, p. 217). The personal is political here. Subjectivities are shaped, perpetuated, and articulated by consumer culture; and conversely, consumer culture is shaped, perpetuated, and articulated through subjectivities.

My findings are not a reflection of qualities unique to the American Girl brand, but are descriptions of on-going moments in the construction and re-construction of consumer culture and girlhood. American Girl products and marketing are my objects of study, but they are not the end point; rather the brand is a portal to insights into the cultural understandings about subjectivity and consumer culture. The texts I examine act as illustrations of some of the ways in which consumer culture functions. In particular, I look at the ways in which it seeps into

“everyday” understandings that may seem unrelated. For example, I illustrate how notions of girlhood both reinforce and are reinforced by consumer culture. I chose the American Girl brand specifically as a lens through which to examine the relationship between social (re)production and the (re)production of consumer culture. My examination of the catalogue, the website, and AGTube has led me onto new terrain: I expanded research on traditional media constructed by a corporate entity to ever-changing, media-based accounts of the brand from users of the products. Each object of study has contributed to my understandings of girlhood and consumer culture.

Rather than thinking about consumer culture as just buying goods, I frame it as an organizing entity that influences human relationships, the way that we view the ages and stages of our lives, and even the way that we see ourselves or other people. When we use terms like childhood or girlhood, there are particular meanings that are associated with them (speaking in a contemporary Western context) that link to consumer culture as well. Using or thinking about these concepts involves referencing consumer culture as well as reinforcing it. These contradictory, dynamic, and interdependent relationships of meaning are what is of interest to me.

Childhood is a productive site in which to grapple with how consumer culture functions and what its relationship is with subjectivity. Historically, if we look at studies on consumer culture, childhood is often treated as an add-on, seen as peripheral. I see it as central and an important portal through which to tease out some of the ways consumer culture shapes culture and remains sustained.

I chose dolls for a number of reasons. Dolls provide a link between the idealized notions of girlhood and the market. They offer a meeting point between Daniel Cook's (2008) seemingly separated aspects of children's consumer culture. Overwhelmingly, dolls have been positioned as playthings for girls. They are consumer products but also, to use Robin Bernstein's terms, "emblems of childhood" (2011, p. 19). I looked specifically at commercial dolls, the production of which spans the timeline on which I focus, namely from the late nineteenth century to today. We see dolls on the market through this entire period.

## **Summary of Findings**

I started by doing research into historical accounts of girls and dolls. Then I selected the contemporary doll brand American Girl. I focused on a few sites of analysis: the print catalogue that is put out by the American Girl company and the brand's website, as well as the brand's presence on the social media platform YouTube. In turn, I chose two doll lines to examine in depth: the first is a baby doll line, which I study in relationship to notions of motherhood and consumer culture. The second is a doll line called "Truly Me," which provides insight into notions of girlhood and consumer culture. Finally, I examined the brand's presence online.

Throughout this dissertation, I viewed consumer culture through Baudrillard's lens. That is, I looked at consumer culture as being based on the interpretation and creation of signs. This was why I use Roland Barthes's semiotics (the study of signs) as the first layer of my analysis. The second layer involved discourse analysis, based on Michel Foucault, whose work I use to frame the collections of signs and their meanings within a larger constellation.

Furthermore, I expanded my interpretations by incorporating Gillian Rose's explanation of visual discourse analysis into my analysis.

After examining the print catalogue, I turned my focus to American Girl's digital presence. I examined the company's website, in particular the portion that facilitates the purchase of products. Finally, I looked at AGTube, which is the American Girl presence on the social media platform YouTube. These two sites—the website and AGTube—offered insight into how subjectivity and consumer culture are interdependent and how this interdependence has shifted in the context of digital media.

The first research chapter examined the Bitty Baby line of dolls; the baby doll line offered by American Girl. The ways that motherhood was presented through depictions of girls as little mothers, as well as the implied mothers who are the invisible catalogue readers, linked quite neatly with late nineteenth century and early twentieth century ideals of both a privileged motherhood and a privileged girlhood. And all of these notions are precipitated upon consumer culture. Being the good mother or nurturing a girl to be a good mother is not only about reinforcing gendered roles, but those reinforced gendered roles involve the marketplace: if you are good mother, you are a good shopper. And if the girl is being nurtured to be a good mother, she is simultaneously being nurtured to be a good shopper. Human connections, for example love, thus become expressible and even possible through the marketplace.

I conclude from this analysis that if we are going to study childhood and consumer culture, we have to look at motherhood and consumer culture, which I draw on from Cook (2004b). I also illustrate that social identity, and part of the social identity of girlhood, involves a relationship with, is expressed through, and is understood by consumer culture.

Part of the myth of consumer culture involves framing consumption as a means to overcome social inequity. Shopping, as Baudrillard (1970/2017) astutely notes, is positioned as the great liberator. The myth is that the market allows for social identities, relationships, self-expression, self-realization, as well as agency. Furthermore, the pages of the catalogue depict a privileged lifestyle and offer access to the treasure trove of activities that Sharon Hays described as central to the seemingly idyllic middle-class motherhood of intensive mothering. American Girl dolls after all are for sale with accessories for activities like horseback riding, ballet classes, figure skating, and science fairs. Furthermore, the costs associated with the dolls and gear itself act as a kind of a gatekeeper to accessing this “desirable” lifestyle.

The second research chapter focuses on the Truly Me line of dolls. Here, I look at the co-creation between subjectivity and consumer culture by examining representations of girlhood through these commodities (the Truly Me line of American Girl dolls). The Truly Me line of dolls is marketed as mirroring actual girls; that is, the dolls are supposed to look like the girl who purchases them, so the doll is a twin of the girl. And the rhetoric to sell the dolls is familiar in consumer culture: the products will allow for discovery, realization, and self-actualization. The myth tells us that the girls are coming into themselves and that these purchased goods are necessary tools for this growth. But at the same time these dolls and accompanying branded accessories are marketed products. Thus, purchasing becomes necessary for self-expression. In this idealized girlhood, therefore, these objects are central.

Furthermore, Zygmunt Bauman (e.g. 2005) takes the idea of the usefulness of commodities in the lives of consumers one step further; he positions people as commodities. What he means is that people brand themselves by showcasing personal attributes or

experiences for the purpose of marketability, either for work or for other contexts. Bauman's conception of the overlap of the consumer and the commodity is apparent in the analysis of the Truly Me line. That is, girls are portrayed as relating with inanimate, marketed, branded objects as mirror images of themselves, and as such the self is positioned as the commodity. The dolls then both express and complete the self.

The brand is marketed as offering wholesome, old-fashioned "American Girl" values. As David Buckingham (2011) and Cook (2004b) remind us, consumer culture is often understood as the polar opposite of childhood: the former is the "profane" and the latter is the "sacred." However, within the AG line of dolls, these two opposing forces peacefully co-exist. That is, the qualities of an innocent childhood are for sale. This dialogue between the two is simultaneously negated and completely interconnected. The sacred childhood presented on the pages of the catalogue has an historical legacy in which childhood seemingly exists outside of the market. However, while drawing on idealized notions of girlhood, the American Girl myth is fully immersed in consumer culture. There is an interesting interplay between the brand as wholesome and innocent—a return to an innocent girlhood—and that domain from which it is supposed to be neatly separated: the profane market.

In the final research chapter, I look at digital representations. The American Girl website is very much an extension of the catalogue; we see reflection of intensive mothering (as we saw in the chapter on little mothers), and we also see a similar construction of the self through goods and commodities (as we did in the Truly Me line of dolls). The biggest difference between the website and the catalogue, by virtue of the website's digital fabric, is that it offers a wider variety of characteristics with which to design a doll. If the purpose of the

doll purchase is to match a girl and a doll, there is now opportunity to select and create combinations of the physical characteristics that indicate the match. As such, there is more opportunity to replicate the self in the commodity.

However, when we look at YouTube, the relationship between consumer and commodity is even more evident, particularly when looking at the stop motion videos that are part of AGTube. We see a shift in the way that consumers are interacting with the products in the highly manicured format of stop motion videos created to be posted on YouTube. The videos are marked with a hashtag that uses the brand name, making it difficult to tease out who is the producer and who is the consumer as each overlaps the other. Furthermore, the stop motion videos were first created by consumers, not the company, which we would traditionally see as the producer. The result is a further entanglement not only of producers and consumers but of consumers and commodities. Like with the twinning dolls and their girl counterparts, the question of who or what is the originator is in question. Are the discourses articulated through the dolls producing, in part, the subjectivities of the doll players, or is it the players who are producing meanings for the dolls? This entanglement between production and consumption/commodity and consumer does not allow for a simple explanation of origin.

Up to this point we have generally talked about consumers and producers as neat categories. However, here we have a form of creation with the dolls originating with the “consumer” broadcast on the exact same platform as the traditional producer—that is, the company. These digital expressions blur the idea of producer and consumer. These stop motion videos are an excellent example of this interrelated, highly complicated relationship whereby consumer culture is (re)produced from many locations.

One further aspect involves Cook's (2008) observation that in order to define a collection of research as a field that research should be in conversation. Simply collecting materials which take up similar topics is not enough to define an academic area. Part of the work of this dissertation has been to bring into conversation research from a wide range of subject areas over an expansive period of time for the purpose of inquiring into childhood and consumer culture. I have combined theory from 1957 with research established 60 years later. Additionally, the scholarly work I have cited spans 120 years. And the work I engage with includes a wide range of materials from diverse disciplines such as English, sociology, motherhood studies, women's studies, girlhood studies, history, cultural studies, childhood studies, media studies, economics, and communication. Part of the project involves looking into the limits of theory established well before digital culture hit its tipping point and exploring the shape of theory that might be useful for future work. I contend that thinkers like Barthes, Foucault, and Baudrillard, who wrote—either entirely or primarily—before the advent of social media, shape the terrain in which work on subjectivities and social structures in a digital framework can even be considered. However, a nuanced look at the digital terrain requires tools that are developed for and focused on such a task. My future research will focus on locating and developing these kinds of theoretical tools.

### **Considerations for Future Research**

I began this research through the theoretical perspective of childhood studies by taking up debates about children and consumer culture articulated by Cook (e.g. 2008) and Buckingham (2011). Furthermore, I sought to articulate how fundamental the study of girlhood is to understanding childhood, subjectivity, and consumer culture. I contended that the tension



between the domain of childhood and that of consumer culture is an effective place to illustrate this relationship. As such, my research was grounded in the work of childhood studies. I acknowledged that girlhood is at once a discourse in and of itself and also part of the discourse of childhood. For the purpose of this study however, I located girlhood within childhood. I sought to contribute to understandings of childhood, subjectivity and consumer culture by placing girlhood at the center of my work.

My future research will be focused on the digital domain, particularly with social media platforms where there is user-generated content. The questions that arose in the midst of writing the last half of my final research chapter are those with which I will continue to engage. The inquiry into AGSM videos opens up the possibility for scholarly inquiries into expressions of subjectivity and the relationship between consumer culture and subjectivity. Objects of analysis will be digitally-based and serve to focus further inquiry into the blurry domain of consumption and production in the meeting of traditional corporate marketing with user-generated content. In the digital domain of social media, there is no clear-cut producer or consumer. Rather, the roles of producer/commodity/consumer are continually in flux. YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and ever-emerging similar sites offer the opportunity to capture the interrelationship between subjectivity and consumer culture.

My future work in the area of girls, media, and consumer culture will be situated more firmly in girlhood studies. In particular, I intend to put my research in conversation with girlhood studies scholarship on what Anita Harris and Amy Shields Dobson identify as the interconnection of subjectivities and social structures (2015) within the context of scholarship on girls and media (e.g., Banet-Weiser, 2011; Dobson & Kanai, 2018; Faleatua, 2018; Hill,

2017; Johnston, 2018; Keller, 2015). Much of this work has developed from inquiries into post-feminism and neoliberalism as well as both girl-power and post-girl power contexts. The focus of my dissertation has been grounded in children and consumer culture and doll studies as the core issues with which I grapple are identified within these two academic areas. Future investigations will expand on the insights offered by these academic areas by considering more fully the contributions of work on girls and media towards understanding subjectivity within the digital context.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

If I take myself back to the experience of sitting in the flagship American Girl store, and feeling ambivalent, I recognize that in fact the ambivalence was not solely my own. Rather, the tension is an articulation of the contradictory yet interconnected relationship between girlhood and consumer culture. That ambivalence has to do with the pull of an idealized girlhood in spite of feeling like there's something fundamentally wrong with the hyper-display of consumption. It is an expression of the sacred and the profane. This contradiction is founded in consumer culture and in girlhood, as each relies on the other for its (re)production.

Since I began writing this dissertation, there have been changes for American Girl. Gross sales were down 20 percent in 2017 and a further 28 percent in 2018 (Mattel, Inc., 2019). It appears the popularity of the brand, at least in terms of market share, is beginning to wane. However, the expressions of girlhood apparent in examining the brand continue to endure; the (re)production of subjectivities through consumer culture is still going strong. A \$5,000 American Girl doll bathed in Swarovski crystals is available for the 2019 holiday

season (Mattel Corporation, n.d.; Valinsky, 2019). It is on display at three American Girl stores (New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles) for shopper selfies, and according to CNN is available for sale to three lucky buyers (Valinsky, 2019). The possibility of photos with the doll—not to mention the one percent exclusivity of being one of only three purchasers—harkens back to the French fashion dolls purchased with the intention of showing the status of the family. In the twenty-first century, it is not just possessing an object, but illustrating the close proximity to such an object that holds sway. Selfies, of course, are part of the digital culture of recording, editing, and broadcasting the self. It is the selfies that are for sale as much as the doll. These newer expressions of self, located within past experiences of subjectivity, and connected with consumer culture, will form the basis for my future research.

This analysis of American Girl is very much an analysis of subjectivity and consumer culture. Rather than seeing these aspects as separate spheres, I view them, at least in the context of this study, as inter-related. Examining imaginings of girlhood offers an opportunity to engage with these overlapping realms. In many ways, I began this project in a place of ambivalence as I experienced the American Girl store for the first time. Little did I know this was solid ground upon which to begin my research. The ambivalence itself is a reflection of the contradictory, yet mutually sustaining relationship between childhood and consumer culture. The project has not sought to resolve the ambivalence; rather, my purpose has been to acknowledge and excavate it.

## Works Cited

- Acosta-Alzura, C., & Kreshel, P. J. (2002). 'I'm an American Girl ... Whatever that means': Girls consuming Pleasant Company's American Girl identity. *Journal of Communication*, 52(1), 139–161. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2002.tb02536.x>
- Acosta-Alzuru, C., & Roushanzamir, E. P. L. (2003). Everything we do is a celebration of you!: Pleasant Company constructs American girlhood. *The Communication Review*, 6(1), 45–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420309433>
- Acosta-Alzuru, M. C. (1999). *The American Girl dolls: Constructing American girlhood through representation, identity, and consumption* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.
- Agdoll z. (n.d.). Re: *Lights, Camera, Action! Join the Z Crew!* | #AGZCrew Episode 1 | *American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ub8kCHTHmDA&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=17>
- Agpals. (2015). Re: *Lights, Camera, Action! Join the Z Crew!* | #AGZCrew Episode 1 | *American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ub8kCHTHmDA&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=17>
- American Girl. (2012, November). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2013a, Fall). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2013b, May). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2013c, November). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2014a, January). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2014b, July). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2014c, September). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2014d, October). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2015a, January). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2015b, March). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2015c, May). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2015d, July). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2015e, September). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2015f, September 3). *Lights, Camera, Action! Join the Z Crew!* | #AGZCrew

*Episode 1 | American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ub8kCHTHmDA>

American Girl. (2015g, September 10). *Meet: Kit Kittredge's & Storytelling Basics with Z* |

*#AGZCREW Episode 2 | American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gD1udCZMXrc&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=16>

American Girl. (2015h, September 17). *Zs Screen Test Tips | #AGZCREW Episode 3 |*

*American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuBKP6LIhvw&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=15>

American Girl. (2015i, September 24). *Meet M, The Newest Member of the ZCREW |*

*#AGZCREW Episode 4 | American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQ50X900WH4&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=14>

American Girl. (2015j, October 1). *Z's Stop Motion Movie Set Tips | #AGZCREW Episode 5 |*

*American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkLZ0dIgxwE&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=13>

American Girl. (2015k, October 8). *Edit Your Stop Motion Video with Z | #AGZCREW Episode*

*6 | American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tj3mwIP55HE>

American Girl. (2015l, October 22). *Z's Green Screen Tips | #AGZCREW Episode 8 |*

*American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_yN3e8tbC7k&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yN3e8tbC7k&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=10)

American Girl. (2015m, November). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2016, January). *American Girl catalogue*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (2018a, October 16). *Happy Birthday from American Girl | American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCRVmsq9nKA>

American Girl. (2018b, November 7). *Be a helpful friend: American Girl Stop Motion* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6J3Kw9TTrb4>

American Girl. (2018c, December 17). *Happy Dollidays Stop Motion from American Girl Part 2* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pF6TTSjBbGI>

American Girl. (2019, February 25). *American Girl Pool Party Stop Motion* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zZj3Moslww>

American Girl. (n.d.-a). About American Girl—YouTube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/user/AmericanGirl/about>

American Girl. (n.d.-b). AG Brand Overview. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/discover/our-difference>

American Girl. (n.d.-c). *American Girl catalogue: Together we make the holidays*. Middleton, WI: Author.

American Girl. (n.d.-d). American Girl Fast Facts. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/fast-facts>

American Girl. (n.d.-e). American Girl Pet Games—Truly Me | Play at American Girl. Retrieved from <http://play.americangirl.com/play/trulyme/pets/index.php?id=petSoccer&width=720&height=500&type=game>

American Girl. (n.d.-f). Bitty Baby Dolls & Accessories | Newborn Dolls for Toddlers |

American Girl. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/c/bitty-baby>

American Girl. (n.d.-g). Bitty Baby Dolls and Accessories | American Girl®. Retrieved from

[https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/bitty-](https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/bitty-baby#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&)

[baby#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:](https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/bitty-baby#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&)

[&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&](https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/bitty-baby#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&)

American Girl. (n.d.-h). Blaire Doll & Book. Retrieved from

<https://www.americangirl.com/shop/p/blaire-doll-book-gbl30>

American Girl. (n.d.-i). Boy Dolls. Retrieved from [https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/boy-](https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/boy-dolls#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&)

[dolls#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:](https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/boy-dolls#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&)

[&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&](https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/boy-dolls#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&)

American Girl. (n.d.-j). Building Girls of Strong Character—Character Matters | American

Girl. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/character-matters>

American Girl. (n.d.-k). Corporate Information. Retrieved from

<https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/corporate-information>

American Girl. (n.d.-l). Create Your Own. Retrieved from

<https://www.americangirl.com/create-your-own/create/648776d1>

American Girl. (n.d.-m). *Digital Learning and Play: Why Z Matters: American Girl*. Retrieved

from [https://www.americangirl.com/explore/articles/digital-learning-play-why-z-](https://www.americangirl.com/explore/articles/digital-learning-play-why-z-matters/)

[matters/](https://www.americangirl.com/explore/articles/digital-learning-play-why-z-matters/)



American Girl. (n.d.-n). Discover Truly Me. Retrieved from  
<https://www.americangirl.com/shop/discover-truly-me>

American Girl. (n.d.-o). Doll Features. Retrieved from  
<https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/doll-features>

American Girl. (n.d.-p). Dolls—Clothes, Games & Gifts for girls | American Girl®. Retrieved  
from <https://www.americangirl.com/>

American Girl. (n.d.-q). Maryellen. Retrieved from  
[https://www.americangirl.com/shop/c/maryellen?icid=site\\_home-4\\_promos-maryellen-p3](https://www.americangirl.com/shop/c/maryellen?icid=site_home-4_promos-maryellen-p3)

American Girl. (n.d.-r). New for Truly Me | American Girl. Retrieved from  
[https://www.americangirl.com/shop/c/new-for-truly-me?icid=shop\\_home-2\\_tabs-truly\\_me-p1](https://www.americangirl.com/shop/c/new-for-truly-me?icid=shop_home-2_tabs-truly_me-p1)

American Girl. (n.d.-s). Our Company. Retrieved from  
<https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/our-company>

American Girl. (n.d.-t). Parenting Advice, Advice and Activity Books for Girls, DIY Crafts  
and Recipes for Families: American Girl. Retrieved from  
[https://www.americangirl.com/explore/?icid=site\\_home-3\\_tabs-explore-p2](https://www.americangirl.com/explore/?icid=site_home-3_tabs-explore-p2)

American Girl. (n.d.-u). Shop American Girl Dolls, Clothing, Furniture & Gifts | American  
Girl®. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/>

American Girl. (n.d.-v). Truly Me Dolls| American Girl. Retrieved from  
<https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/truly->

me#facet:&productBeginIndex:0&orderBy:&pageView:grid&minPrice:&maxPrice:&pageSize:&contentPageSize:&

American Girl. (n.d.-w). Truly Me™ Doll #74 + Everyday Accessories. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/dolls/truly-me/truly-me-doll-74-everyday-accessories-06bun07>

American Girl. (n.d.-x). Truly Me™ Doll Without Hair #70. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/truly-me-doll-70-fpg55>

American Girl. (n.d.-y). Truly Me™ Doll Without Hair #73. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/ag/truly-me-doll-73-plus-accessories-06bun154>

Ariès, P. (1962). *Centuries of childhood: A social history of family life*. New York: Vintage Books.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2011). Branding the post-feminist self: Girls' video production and YouTube. In M. C. Kearney (Ed.), *Mediated girlhoods: New explorations of girls' media culture*. New York: Peter Lang.

Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic TM: Politics and ambivalence in a brand culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Barthes, R. (2013). *Mythologies* (Original work published 1957). United States: Hill and Wang.

Baudrillard, J. (1981). *For a critique of the political economy of the sign*. St. Louis, Minnesota: Telos Press, Ltd.

- Baudrillard, J. (2005). *The system of objects* (Original work published 1976). London ; New York: Verso.
- Baudrillard, J. (2017). *The consumer society: Myths and structures* (Original work published 1970). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Bauman, Z. (2005). *Liquid life*. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2007). *Consuming life*. Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z., & Leoncini, T. (2019). *Born liquid: Transformations in the third millennium*. Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity Press.
- Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial innocence: Performing American childhood from slavery to civil rights*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bernstein, R. (2017, July 26). Let black kids just be kids. *New York Times*.
- Black, T. K. (1915, May). Selling the toy: Five fundamentals of retail selling. *Playthings*, 13(4), 37-38.
- Bourcier, P. G., & Formanek-Brunell, M. (1989). *Dolls and duty: Martha Chase and the progressive agenda 1889-1925*. Providence, RI: The Rhode Island Historical Society.
- Brookfield, M. (2012). From American girls into American women: A discussion of American Girl doll nostalgia. *Girlhood Studies*, 5(1), 57. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2012.050105>
- Buckingham, D. (2011). *The material child: Growing up in consumer culture*. Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity.

- Business Wire. (2015). *American girl unveils Truly Me™ doll line and helps girls explore and discover who they truly are*. Retrieved from <http://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20150521005102/en/>
- Chin, E. (1999). Ethnically correct dolls: Toying with the race industry. *American Anthropologist*, 101(2), 305–321. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1999.101.2.305>
- Chin, E. (2001). *Purchasing power black kids and American consumer culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Chin, E. (2015). Barbie sex videos: Making sense of children's media-making. In M. Forman-Brunell & J. D. Whitney (Eds.), *Dolls studies: The many meanings of girls' toys and play*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Collins, G. (1996, September 17). A model case of risks and rewards in small business. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/17/business/a-model-case-of-risks-and-rewards-in-small-business.html>
- Cook, D. T. (1995). The mother as consumer: Insights from the children's wear industry, 1917–1929. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36(3), 505–522. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1995.tb00450.x>
- Cook, D. T. (2004a). Beyond either/or. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4(2), 147–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540504043678>
- Cook, D. T. (2004b). *The commodification of childhood: The children's clothing industry and the rise of the child consumer*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Cook, D. T. (2008). The missing child in consumption theory. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8(2), 219–243.
- Cook, D. T. (2011). Through mother's eyes: Ideology, the 'child' and multiple mothers in U.S. American mothering magazines. *Advertising & Society Review*, 12(2).  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/asr.2011.0016>
- Cook, D. T. (2012a). Children's consumption in history. In *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Consumption* (pp. 585–600). Oxford University Press.
- Cook, D. T. (2012b). Pricing the priceless child: A wonderful problematic. *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 5(3), 468–473. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2012.0047>
- Cook, D. T. (2013). Taking exception with the child consumer. *Childhood*, 20(4), 423–428.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568213501858>
- Cook, D. T., & Kaiser, S. B. (2004). Betwixt and be tween: Age ambiguity and the sexualization of the female consuming subject. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4(2), 203–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540504043682>
- Coulter, N. (2014). *Tweening the girl: The crystallization of the tween market*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Creswell, J. (2017, December 22). American Girl's new doll: It's a boy. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/business/american-girls-new-doll-its-a-boy.html>
- Cross, G. S. (1997). *Kids' stuff: Toys and the changing world of American childhood*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

- Cross, G. S. (2004). *The cute and the cool: Wondrous innocence and modern American children's culture*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Damaske, S. (2013). Work, family, and accounts of mothers' lives using discourse to navigate intensive mothering ideals. *Sociology Compass*, 7(6), 436–444.
- Denisoff, D. (2016). *Nineteenth-century child and consumer culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Diamond, N., Sherry, J. F., Muñiz, A. M., Mcgrath, M. A., Kozinets, R. V., & Borghini, S. (2009). American Girl and the brand gestalt: Closing the loop on sociocultural branding research. *Journal of Marketing*, 73(3), 118–134.
- Disney 71. (2018, May 5). Re: Z Doll & Book. [Customer review]. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/z-yang/z-doll-book-ffd93#BVOSContainer>
- Dobson, A. S., & Kanai, A. (2018). From “can-do” girls to insecure and angry: Affective dissonances in young women's post-recessional media. *Feminist Media Studies*, 0(0), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1546206>
- Dollhater24. (2019). Re: Blaire™ doll & book [Customer review]. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/p/blaire-doll-book-gbl30#bvReviewHeading>
- Elliott, S., Powell, R., & Brenton, J. (2015). Being a good mom: Low-Income, black single mothers negotiate intensive mothering. *Journal of Family Issues*, 36(3), 351–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13490279>
- Ennis, L. R. (2014). Intensive mothering: Revisiting the issue today. In *Intensive Mothering: The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*. Demeter Press.

- Faleatua, R. (2018). Insta brand me: Playing with notions of authenticity. *Continuum*, 32(6), 721–732. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1525921>
- FiveDollStars. (2015). Re: *Lights, camera, action! Join the Z crew!* | #AGZCrew episode 1 | *American Girl* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ub8kCHTHmDA&list=PLOhRWwSyTfGhmo6p0mo1dzVenLV13dV-e&index=17>
- Fleischaker & Baum. (1915, May). Your doll department is judged by your baby dolls [Advertisement]. *Playthings*. 13(4), 7.
- Forman-Brunell, M. (2011). The Politics of dollhood in nineteenth-century America. In L. Paris & Forman-Brunell, Miriam (Eds.), *The girls' history and culture reader: The nineteenth century*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Forman-Brunell, M. (2012). Interrogating the Meanings of Dolls: New Directions in Doll Studies. *Girlhood Studies*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2012.050102>
- Forman-Brunell, M., & Whitney, J. D. (Eds.). (2015). *Dolls studies: The many meanings of girls' toys and play*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Formanek-Brunell, M. (1998). *Made to play house: Dolls and the commercialization of American girlhood, 1830-1930*. Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (1st American ed). New York: Pantheon Books.

- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/448181>
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality* (Original work published 1978). New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1993). About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self: Two lectures at Dartmouth. *Political Theory*, 21(2), 198–227.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. New York: Norton.
- Hains, R. C. (2012). An afternoon of productive play with problematic dolls: The importance of foregrounding children's voices in research. *Girlhood Studies*, 5(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2012.050108>
- Hall, G. S., & Ellis, A. C. (1897). *A study of dolls*. Retrieved from  
<http://archive.org/details/StudyOfDolls>
- Hallstein, D. L. O. (2006). Conceiving intensive mothering. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, 8(1). Retrieved from  
<https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/5016>
- Hannahobiag. (2018, May 5). Re: Z Doll & Book. [Customer review]. Retrieved from  
<https://www.americangirl.com/shop/z-yang/z-doll-book-ffd93#BVOSContainer>
- Harris, A., & Dobson, A. S. (2015). Theorizing agency in post-girlpower times. *Continuum*, 29(2), 145–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1022955>
- Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.



- Hill, S. (2017). Exploring Disabled Girls' Self-representational Practices Online. *Girlhood Studies*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2017.100209>
- Jacobson, L. (2004). *Raising consumers: Children and the American mass market in the early twentieth century*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- James, A., & James, A. L. (2012). *Key Concepts in Childhood Studies* (SECOND EDITION). Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Jenkins, H. (n.d.). Confessions of an ACA-Fan: The official weblog of Henry Jenkins. Retrieved from <http://henryjenkins.org/>
- Jenkins, H. (1998). Introduction. In *The children's culture reader*. New York: New York University Press.
- Johnston, J. E. (2018). The doll "InbeTween". *Girlhood Studies*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2018.110106>
- Kann's go after employes' [sic] toy trade. (1919, December). *Playthings*. 17(11), 203.
- Katherine A. Rauser. The Rauser dressed doll [Advertisement]. (1919, December). *Playthings*. 17(11), 150.
- Keller, J. (2015). Girl power's last chance? Tavi Gevinson, feminism, and popular media culture. *Continuum*, 29(2), 274–285. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1022947>
- Langer, B. (2004). The business of branded enchantment: Ambivalence and disjuncture in the global children's culture industry. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4(2), 251–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540504043685>

- Larson, K., & Cornelison, S. (2013a). *Bitty Baby and me*. Middleton, WI: American Girl.
- Larson, K., & Cornelison, S. (2013b). *Bitty Baby at the ballet*. Middleton, WI: American Girl.
- Larson, K., & Cornelison, S. (2013c). *Bitty Baby loves the snow*. Middleton, WI: American Girl.
- Marcus, L. (2012). Dolling up history: Fictions of Jewish American girlhood. *Girlhood Studies*, 5(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2012.050103>
- Marshall, E. (2009). Consuming girlhood: Young women, femininities, and American Girl. *Girlhood Studies*, 2(1), 94. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2009.020107>
- Martens, L., Southerton, D., & Scott, S. (2004). Bringing children (and parents) into the sociology of consumption: Towards a theoretical and empirical agenda. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 4(2), 155–182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540504043680>
- Mattel Corporation. (2017, April 27). *American Girl debuts new contemporary character 'Z' Yang, (TM) a filmmaker who tells stories through her own creative lens*. [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://news.mattel.com/news/american-girl-debuts-new-contemporary-character-z-yang-tm-a-filmmaker-who-tells-stories-through-her-own-creative-lens>
- Mattel Corporation. (n.d.). *American Girl to Unveil Holiday Windows in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles in Collaboration With Swarovski® Crystals*. [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://news.mattel.com/news/american-girl-to-unveil-holiday-windows-in-new-york-chicago-and-los-angeles-in-collaboration-with-swarovskiR-crystals>
- Mattel Inc. (1958). *Barbie: Teen-age fashion model*. USA: Author.
- Mattel Inc. (2014). *Mattel: 2013 annual report*. El Segundo, CA: Author.

- Mattel Inc. (2018). *Mattel: 2017 annual report*. El Segundo, CA: Author.
- Mattel, Inc. (2019). *Mattel: 2018 annual report*. El Segundo, CA: Author.
- O'Reilly, A. (2004). *Mother outlaws: Theories and practices of empowered mothering*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- O'Reilly, A. (2006). *Rocking the cradle: Thoughts on motherhood, feminism and the possibility of empowered mothering*. TDemeter Press
- Palladino, G. (1996). *Teenagers: An American history*. New York: BasicBooks.
- PA\_mom. (2019). Re: Blaire™ doll & book [Customer review]. Retrieved from <https://www.americangirl.com/shop/p/blaire-doll-book-gbl30#bvReviewHeading>
- Rand, E. (1995). *Barbie's queer accessories*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Reid-Walsh, J., & Mitchell, C. (2006). 'Just a doll?': 'liberating' accounts of Barbie-play. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 22(2), 175–190.
- Rich, A. C. (1995). *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution* (Original work published 1976). New York: Norton.
- Rogers, M. F. (1999). *Barbie culture*. London; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications.
- Rose, C. (2013). Maternal consumption: A view from the past. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 13(2), 178–198. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540513480164>
- Rose, G. (2010). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*. London: Sage.

- Rosner, M. (2014). The American Girl company and the uses of nostalgia in children's consumer culture. *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures*, 6(2), 35–53.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/jeu.2014.0019>
- Russell, R., & Tyler, M. (2002). Thank heaven for little girls: 'Girl Heaven' and the commercial context of feminine childhood. *Sociology*, 36(3), 619–637.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038502036003007>
- Schalk, S. (2016). Ablenationalism in American girlhood. *Girlhood Studies*, 9(1), 36–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2016.090104>
- Schrum, K. (2004). *Some wore bobby sox: The emergence of teenage girls' culture, 1920-1945*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Slater, D. (1997). *Consumer culture and modernity*. Cambridge, UK : Cambridge, MA: Polity Press ; Blackwell Publishers.
- Sparman, A. (2009). Ambiguities and paradoxes in children's talk about marketing breakfast cereals with toys. *Young Consumers*, 10(4), 297–313.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/17473610911007139>
- Stoneley, P. (2007). *Consumerism and American girls' literature, 1860-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strong Museum of Play. (2014, January 28). Toy, doll, game, and related collections.  
Retrieved from <http://www.museumofplay.org/collections/toy-doll-game>
- Strong Museum of Play. (n.d.). About collections. Retrieved from [museumofplay.org](http://www.museumofplay.org)

The Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2019, December 23). "Paleolithic Period."

Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/Paleolithic-Period>

Valdivia, A. N. (2009). Living in a hybrid material world: Girls, ethnicity and mediated doll products. *Girlhood Studies*, 2(1), 73. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2009.020106>

Valinsky, J. (2019, November 4). American Girl's holiday doll costs \$5,000 and is covered in Swarovski crystals. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/04/business/american-girl-holiday-doll/index.html>

Washburn, D. (1987). *Final report: Doll oral history project*. Rochester, New York: author.

Zaslow, E. (2017). *Playing with America's doll: A cultural analysis of the American Girl collection*. New York, NY, U.S.A: Palgrave Macmillan.

Zelizer, V. A. R. (1994). *Pricing the priceless child: The changing social value of children* (Original work published 1985). Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.