

Sexy babies



Bratz dolls: ‘They have breasts, they go clubbing’

By Chris Boone

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They are the girls with “a passion for fashion” and, according to their official Web site, “these Babyz already know how to flaunt it, and they’re keepin’ it real in the crib.”

Parody? Nope. The Bratz line of dolls is among the most popular this Christmas for young girls—such that some 125 million have sold worldwide since they hit the market in 2001, and Toy Wishes magazine lists them among its “Holiday 2006 All-Stars.”

But critics say these dolls—aimed at girls 6 and up, but collected by kids as young as 2—continue an ominous trend of sexualizing girlhood. That’s because, wearing tons of eye makeup and lip gloss and sporting stilettos and bare midriffs, these hotties would laugh Holly Hobbie, with her gingham dress and blue bonnet, out of the toy chest.

Some parents refer to Bratz as “hoochie mamas,” according to Lisa Lee-Fogarty, a public affairs specialist in Atlanta who has decided against buying the dolls for her 5-year-old daughter.

“They just don’t seem very age-appropriate to me,” she says. “She’s seen them, but fortunately she’s never asked for one. I’m not trying to be a prude, but I want to provide my daughter with a different foundation of what makes a beautiful person.”

But, Isaac Larian, CEO of the company that produces the Bratz line, MGA Entertainment, Inc., claims that’s just what he’s doing.

“Sex is only in the mind of adults and they are perverted, in my opinion, when they relate that to children,” he says, insisting the dolls are not dressed provocatively. Furthermore, he insists he’s never heard any complaints from customers: “What we hear is that they are beautiful.”

Mattel's answer to MGA's Bratz is its MyScene dolls, among which even America's sweetheart is vamping it up. MyScene's Bling Bling Barbie Doll comes replete with diamonds and jewel-encrusted clothing (not that she's wearing much; the bare midriff and micromini is standard garb for today's dolls). No word on whether she's ditched the panties (à la Britney), but she does have a cell phone just in case that kid from the sandbox calls.

But does Larian have a point? And doesn't every generation fret that the next is going too far? After all, what's so dangerous about a doll? "They have breasts, they go clubbing, they're living this lifestyle we're seeing from all the young stars like Lindsay Lohan," says Lynn Mikel Brown, co-author of "Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes."

Brown, who teaches education at Colby College in Maine, warns that the doll line "is giving really young girls a narrow notion of what it means to be a woman" and "pushing the 'teen lifestyle' onto younger and younger girls. It's a terrible experiment." Larian argues that such criticism is as manufactured as his dolls.

"I don't know who these 'critics' are," he comments via e-mail. "Get a life and stop reflecting your inner darkness on innocent kids. These are just plastic dolls!"

To make his point, he whips out a quote in the London Times from consumer psychologist Bryan Young at Exeter University: "Parents are always uncomfortable with their children's emergent sexuality, but with Bratz we're talking about children as young as 8. Parents might feel awkward but I don't think children see the dolls as 'sexy.' They just think they're pretty. Whether we like it or not, celebrity culture is important and children do aspire to having impossible dreams."

It's too early to tell what, if any, impact these dolls might have on young girls as they mature, but psychologist Sharon Lamb, who co-authored "Packaging Girlhood" with Brown, says research has proven the harmful effects of too much exposure to sexy media messages. "We're seeing girls having sex earlier, having poor body image, developing eating disorders ..." she says. "It's very rare today to have someone in the media that young girls emulate who hasn't been sexualized."

But Larian contends that his dolls are portraying a positive, multicultural image; Bratz come in all races and nationalities. "They give the message that it is OK to be who you are, whether you are white, Hispanic, African-American or Asian—or any other nationality," he says. And what's so wrong with being fashionable? Larian says the dolls are simply mimicking the culture around us. "They dress how kids are dressed today," he says. "After all, we don't live in a Third World Islamic country."

It could be a lot worse. USA Today recently reported that Hasbro nixed a line of "action figures" modeled after the burlesque troupe The Pussycat Dolls, that it had planned to market to elementary school-aged girls. Hasbro only made its decision after parent

groups spoke out against the heavily sexualized theme of the Vegas-based Pussycat Dolls, best known for their party girl anthem, “Don’t Cha”—as in, “don’t cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me?” And what kind of freak would that be? The kind who wants a “ménage pop off” and for whom “It’s easy to see / And in the back of your mind / I know you should be f*****g with me.”

Parents won in the Pussycat Dolls debate, but Lamb believes the sexualization of children by commercial interests will continue. “It’s not going away, which I find really troubling,” she says. “We’re living in a world where the primary ambition is to look like a pop star or be a diva.” **SP**