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Retail Tales and Tribulations: Transmedia Brands, Consumer Products, and the Significance of Shop Talk

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by Avi Santo

Abstract: This article challenges media studies scholars to pay closer attention to retail spaces as sites that mediate how entertainment franchises engage consumers. Examining retail through a media industries lens, it argues that retail is a site of struggle among retailers and brand owners over how brand stories are told, if at all. The article explores both the storytelling devices used in telling *Frozen* and *Sesame Street* stories at Target and how shop talk among retailers, brand owners, and manufacturers shapes the kinds of stories that entertainment properties can tell at retail, especially as those stories intersect with retail imaginings of why consumers shop and how consumer behaviors might be divided along gender, class, race, and age configurations. It ends with a case study analyzing how Sony's *Annie* (Gluck, 2014) brand story was told at Target in light of the near-complete absence of blackness as either a viable brand attribute or a recognizable consumer category in that space.

I n a 2012 interview, Maura Regan, senior vice president of global licensing for Sesame Workshop, explained the company's approach to merchandising characters like Elmo by likening retail to "just another medium for telling our brand's story."[1] Regan conceded, however, that the consolidation of the retail market and the rise to power of big-box retailers like Walmart and Target posed challenges to the twenty-first-century business of licensing characters and entertainment brands. This was a common refrain among numerous heads of consumer product divisions whom I spoke with while researching this article. Rick Rekedal, former head of licensing and current global general manager for franchises for DreamWorks Animation (DWA), called retail the "tightest funnel" among all franchise outposts, including film and television.[2] Meanwhile, Ryan Williams, senior director of retail

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1 Maura Regan (senior vice president of global licensing, Sesame Workshop) in discussion with author, June 26, 2012.

2 I use "outpost" to describe a site of franchise activity that is decentered from a brand's corporate headquarters, yet still considered a significant branch of branded activity. Outposts serve branded missions to colonize or lay stakes in certain territories, but they often must adapt to the particular industrial and cultural ecosystems in

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development for Nickelodeon, acknowledged that although in-store shop concepts and interactive displays made retail an important site of creative extension for properties like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, intense negotiation between category buyers and licensees over how best to reach consumers had forced brand owners to become mediators to ensure that their stories were prominently and properly featured.[3]

Despite an increasing recognition that scholars should include consumer products, especially toys and apparel, as part of the transmedia mix, media studies has not paid enough attention to retail spaces as sites of mediation.[4] Retail is integral to the goals of the contemporary entertainment industry to transform media texts, characters, and worlds into cultural commodities and lifestyle brands.[5] Retail not only sells media (e.g., DVDs, video games, interactive toys, books) and the hardware needed to consume it (e.g., home entertainment centers, gaming consoles, mobile devices); it is also a mediated environment that makes use of digital technologies to guide, persuade, and entertain consumers.[6] Most important, it is a site of mediation among multiple parties over how brands are integrated into consumer lifestyles and become forms of self-expression and points of identification.

Retail is a site of struggle over the meanings we assign to branded commodities, where competing interests engage in asymmetrical negotiations over the power to define how and why entertainment franchises are extended into everyday lived

which they stake their claim. In this sense, my use of the term "franchise outpost" is in conversation with Derek Johnson's claims that media franchises must be analyzed for the complex relationships engendered between intellectual property owners (acting as franchisors) and the sites of mediation tasked with producing content featuring the intellectual property (serving as franchisees). Most of the tactical work of brand extension happens at franchise outposts, not corporate headquarters, where franchising strategies are delineated. Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). Rick Rekedal (global general manager for franchises, DreamWorks Animation) in discussion with author, July 14, 2012.

3 Ryan Williams (senior director of retail development, Nickelodeon) in discussion with author, November 7, 2015.

4 See Morgan Blue, "D-Signed for Girls: Disney Channel and Tween Fashion," *Film, Fashion & Consumption* 2, no. 1 (March 2013): 55–75; Matthew Freeman, "Transmediating Tim Burton's Gotham City: Brand Convergence, Child Audiences, and *Batman: The Animated Series*," *MeCCSA* 7, no. 1 (2014): 41–54; Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Johnson, *Media Franchising*; Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Avi Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet: The Lone Ranger and Transmedia Brand Licensing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Marc Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix: Franchising Toys and Characters in Japan* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); and Joseph Turow, "The Case for Studying In-Store Media," *Media Industries Journal* 1, no. 1 (2014): 62–68.

5 According to Kacie Lynn Jung and Matthew Merlin, lifestyle brands are products or services that provide consumers with an emotional attachment to an identifiable lifestyle. Consumers then project this lifestyle by purchasing and using particular brands. Kacie Lynn Jung and Matthew Merlin, "Lifestyle Branding: As More Companies Embrace It, Consumer Opposition Grows," *Journal of Integrated Communications* (2002–2003): 40–45. As such, merchandise is seen as an integral resource for people to assert their uniqueness, style, and worldview and cultivate what Sarah Banet-Weiser calls a "self-brand." Sarah Banet Weiser, *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). Ultimately, "lifestyle" is an industrial and marketing discourse that celebrates the commoditization of identity, community, and social interaction and seeks to position brand culture as a resource for self-expression.

6 For example, Dan Herbert and Chuck Tryon each analyze video stores as sites that cultivate film cultures as well as sell films and other domestic film-viewing paraphernalia. See Herbert's *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014) and Tryon's *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

experiences.[7] To date, this struggle has primarily been conceptualized as between different groupings of consumers, typically children and parents (usually mothers), and as pitting (sometimes savvy) consumers against the combined manipulations of brand owners and retailers.[8] On occasion, the struggle has also been framed in terms of management versus retail labor.[9]

Examining retail through a media industries lens, I argue that retail is also a site of struggle between retailers and brand owners over how brand stories are told, if at all. I argue that early shop talk among brand owners, manufacturers, and category buyers, occurring long before products reach shelves, establishes the storytelling conventions available to entertainment franchises at retail. It also works to reconstitute media properties as lifestyle brands compatible with retail imaginings of why consumers shop at their stores.

Brand stories purposely conjoin consumers and brands as co-protagonists in shopping expeditions. According to Daniel Miller and Steven Miles, beyond its utilitarian function, shopping can assume a ritualistic dimension that seeks to resolve deep-rooted contradictions found in Western society between desires for conformity versus individualism and demonstrations of love through sacrifice versus indulgence, not to mention the pedagogical value of pleasure.[10] Industry self-theorizing on the topic is not dissimilar, as brand stories are often conceptualized by licensors and brand owners as tales that speak to consumers and address their needs, wants, and concerns as much as they celebrate the story of *Sesame Street*, *Star Wars*, or Strawberry Shortcake.

As such, brand stories diffuse character qualities and overarching story messages and themes into an experiential, tactile encapsulation of childhood and parenting as filtered through industry imaginings of consumers and why they shop. Importantly, such industrial imaginings are divided according to perceived gender, class, race, and age differences that align with consumer categories either discursively constructed or erased through retail's product arrangement and assortment. This can have a profound impact on how entertainment properties are merchandised, especially those featuring nonwhite protagonists. Indeed, retail's deep investment in gender and age categories as commonsense ways to organize consumer tastes and sensibilities, coupled with the near invisibility of race as a like category, greatly constrains how brand stories are told about, for, or by people of color. This is especially true of big-box retailers like Target and Walmart that claim to appeal to all consumers through an array of product categories.

In the introduction to *Race and Retail: Consumption across the Color Line*, Mia Bay and Ann Fabian note that "the subject of race and retail is surprisingly understudied."[11]

7   Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (New York: Routledge, 1981), 227–240.

8   Seiter, *Sold Separately*; Turow, "In-Store Media"; Christine Williams, *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); David Buckingham, *The Material Child: Growing Up in Consumer Culture* (New York: Polity, 2011).

9   Williams, *Inside Toyland*.

10 Daniel Miller, *Consumption and Its Consequences* (New York: Polity, 2012); Steven Miles, *Spaces for Consumption* (London: Sage, 2010).

11 Mia Bay and Ann Fabian, introduction to *Race and Retail: Consumption across the Color Line*, ed. Mia Bay and Ann Fabian (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 5.

Where scholars and critics have addressed racial discrimination at retail, it has typi-
cally been through the lenses of prejudicial hiring practices and the stocking of
offensive merchandise such as ethnic Halloween costumes and Confederate flags.[12]
Some scholars have also explored "retail redlining," wherein store owners purposely
avoid setting up shop in minority neighborhoods or stock inferior products at those
locations.[13] The experience of "shopping while black," which refers to ways African
American consumers are treated with suspicion and indifference by retail staff, has also
received some critical attention.[14] Yet little has been written on how ideas about race
inform retail acquisition and merchandising practices.[15]

Before delving deeper, a few caveats are necessary. First, the focus of my research
is primarily on entertainment franchises and media brands directed at children and
adolescents in the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries
(although many have strong adult secondary markets), which influences not only the
types of products sold and brand stories told about these properties but also the retail
partners that are sought out. Second, retail is a diverse and multitiered field, ranging
from vertically integrated retail shops like the Disney Store, to specialty chains like
Hot Topic, to so-called category killers, or retailers that dominate the market for one
particular product (e.g., toys) or consumer (e.g., children) category like Toys "R" Us, to
superstores like Walmart and Target.[16] Its heterogeneity exacerbates the challenge of
telling coherent brand stories and extending entertainment franchises through these
environments. Each of these retail channels has its own brand identity and will em-
ploy different purchasing, merchandising, marketing, and design strategies to connect
with consumers. Retail heterogeneity also varies greatly by location. Too often, the
most celebrated brand extensions are reserved for flagship stores in New York City

12 Christine L. Williams and Catherine Connell, "'Looking Good and Sounding Right': Aesthetic Labor and Social
    Inequality in the Retail Industry," in *Working in America: Continuity, Conflict, and Change in a New Economic Era*,
    ed. Amy Wharton, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 169–180; Elizabeth Kramer, "Batmobama and ObaMarx:
    The Meanings of the Material and Visual Culture of Obama Mania," *Journal of Design History* 26, no. 4 (2013):
    345–361.

13 Naa Oyo A. Kwate, "Retail Messages in the Ghetto Belt," in *Race and Retail: Consumption across the Color Line*,
    ed. Mia Bay and Ann Fabian (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 34–56.

14 George E. Scheer, Saundra Smith, and Kristen Thomas, "'Shopping While Black': Examining Racial Discrimination
    in a Retail Setting," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 39, no. 6 (June 2009): 1432–1444.

15 Conversely, there is important research on African American youth acquisition practices as well as alternative
    stocking practices at ethnic and minority-owned shops. Elizabeth Chin, *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and Ameri-
    can Consumer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Neiset Bayouth, "Marketing Identity,
    Negotiating Boundaries: Ethnic Entrepreneurship in the Coffeehouses and Narghile Lounges of Paterson, New
    Jersey," *Race and Retail: Consumption across the Color Line*, ed. Mia Bay and Ann Fabian (New Brunswick, NJ:
    Rutgers University Press, 2015), 163–175. There has also been scholarship on marketing practices directed at
    minority consumers, including Arlene Davila's *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley:
    University of California Press, 2012), and Katherine Sender's *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay
    Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Both Davila and Sender argue that advertising directed at
    these groups has sought to align consumer impulses with broader ideological investments in whiteness and
    heteronormativity (or, at least, has sought to deracialize and desexualize these communities even as advertisers
    target them as consumers).

16 Since the initial research for and writing of this article, Toys "R" Us has declared bankruptcy. As of June 29, 2018,
    it had shut down all of its 735 stores in the United States.

or Los Angeles, meaning that they are not indicative of typical ways brand stories are told in suburban outlets throughout the United States.

Third, while online shopping challenges the dominance of bricks-and-mortar stores, the latter still remains the primary venue for reaching consumers, albeit an increasingly uncertain one for brand owners.[17] As such, Raj B. Schroff, vice president of WD Partners, a brand marketing strategy firm specializing in on-site retail marketing, reassured prospective clients that although overall store foot traffic is down and online sales have risen by 15 percent every quarter since 2013, attributes associated exclusively with physical stores, like "instant ownership" and the opportunity to "touch and feel" merchandise, still dominate consumer decisions when it comes to where they shop.[18]

With these caveats in place, this project employs John T. Caldwell's four registers of analysis—textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts, interviews with industry workers, ethnographic fieldwork, and economic and industrial analysis.[19] It relies on evidence gathered from the following:

- interviews with consumer product, licensing, and retail specialists working for major children's entertainment providers like Sesame Workshop, Saban Brands, Sony Entertainment, Nickelodeon, and DreamWorks Animation;
- trade press, webinars, and industry blogs from retail, merchandising, and marketing experts offering insight and information about both the actual and perceived state of the retail industry; and
- observational research conducted between March and September 2015 at a Target in Norfolk, Virginia. I chose Target because it offers a wider range of branded product category opportunities than Toys "R" Us or Hot Topic, which in turn allowed for a more comprehensive investigation into retail as mediator of branded lifestyles.

Although my sample size is admittedly small, it is scalable because chain retailers like Target employ fairly schematic floor plans across all their stores along with consistent stocking and inventory practices tied to regional distribution centers.

Most of the examples I draw on are from perennially merchandised brands like *Sesame Street* and the seemingly relentless *Frozen* phenomenon, which continued to occupy significant retail shelf space as of 2018 even though the film had been released on DVD in March 2014.[20] (The film short *Frozen Fever* was screening in theaters alongside the live-action remake of *Cinderella* in March 2015, which might also account for its continued presence at retail at the time of my site visits.) I also look to industry-celebrated

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17 Retailers like Walmart, Target, and Hot Topic operate both bricks-and-mortar and online stores, but consumer product divisions continue to give physical locations primacy in their licensing and merchandising strategies.

18 Raj B. Schroff, "Third Wave Retail," International Licensing Industry Merchandisers' Association (LIMA) webinar, May 18, 2016, http://www.licensing.org.

19 John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

20 Typically, retailers stock film-related merchandise for a period of time starting six weeks before its theatrical release or two weeks before a DVD release. While merchandise can linger on shelves well past those dates, it is not typically replenished in the way *Frozen*-branded products have been between 2014 and 2018.

examples of product extension partnerships, such as Target's exclusive direct-to-retail clothing line for Sony's *Annie* (Gluck, 2014), which served as a controversial example of the retailer's approach to selling racial diversity.[21]

In what follows, I first make explicit the importance of consumer products to the contemporary entertainment industry's practices of transmedia franchising and lifestyle branding while also arguing that retail environments offer strategic points of contact between franchises and audiences. I then explore how the asymmetrical relationships among retailers, consumer product experts, and manufacturers contribute to the formulation of particular types of shop talk about how products are positioned, brands extended, and stories told at retail. Finally, I end with a case study analyzing how *Annie*'s stories were told at Target in light of the near-complete absence of blackness as either a viable brand attribute or recognizable consumer category in that space. In the conclusion, I return to the possibilities and threat posed by online shopping, less to affirm or debunk its impact on retail storytelling than to address how it is reconstituting shop talk among consumer product experts and category buyers. While this article at times paints in broad strokes, it is my hope that it offers ample evidence for why media scholars ought to expand their sites of analysis to include retail as a contested medium for extending entertainment properties into consumers' lives.

Consumer Products, Retail Experiences, and Franchised Lifestyles. Consumer products and licensed merchandise occupy an increasingly central role in how contemporary entertainment conglomerates develop media properties. In 2014, licensed merchandise accounted for $241.5 billion in global retail sales and earned brand owners $13.4 billion in royalties.[22] Character and entertainment licenses were the greatest slice of the licensing pie, at 44.4 percent.[23] Eighteen of the top fifty licensors were entertainment companies; Disney leads the pack with $40.9 billion in retail sales.[24] Sesame Workshop's $1.8 billion in licensed product sales netted the company $37.4 million in revenue in 2015, accounting for 40 percent of the company's total earnings. Sesame Workshop folds those earnings back into its educational and outreach programming.[25]

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21 In describing *Annie* as a media franchise, I build on Derek Johnson's assertion that media franchising is focused on the development of multiple sites of branded production that need not be part of a tightly connected transmedia story. *Annie* may not have been conceived as a film project that would generate sequels, but it was conceived as a franchise in the sense that Sony's industrial logic was to identify multiple sites for producing content featuring the *Annie* brand, including merchandise, novelizations, and a soundtrack album, each of which was intended to offer different access points and ways to engage with this particular iteration of the brand. On a broader scale, Annie the intellectual property has repeatedly been franchised via licensing agreements across multiple platforms from radio to stage to film to toys. This has been ongoing since shortly after the character's comic strip debut in 1923. Sony's *Annie* is itself a franchise outpost for the larger heritage brand. Evoking the concept of franchising in connection to media brands also allows me to expand upon Johnson's claim that "as multiple industries came into inter-operation, franchised production networks served as sites of struggle and negotiation for and between media institutions," through my analysis of shop talk. Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 22.

22 International Licensing Industry Merchandisers' Association (LIMA), *Licensing Industry Survey 2014*, http://www.licensing.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/2014LIMA-Licensing-Industry-Survey.pdf.

23 LIMA, *Licensing Industry Survey*, 2014.

24 Tony Lisanti, "Top 150 Global Licensors," *Global License!* 18, no. 2 (May 2015): T3–T48.

25 "Financials," Sesame Workshop, http://www.sesameworkshop.org/about-us/financials. This website is updated annually. Figures from 2015 were accessed in February 2016.

It is not simply that franchise-themed merchandise is lucrative; also, consumer product divisions are playing greater roles in the development and integration of merchandise into media productions. Rekedal explained that a representative from DWA's consumer products division is always part of the core creative team on any film to help develop "hooks that allow kids to take the story home with them in organic ways." Rekedal suggested that it was his team that came up with the idea that there should be multiple classifications of dragons in the *How to Train Your Dragon* franchise (2010–present) so that kids would not only have something to collect but also find the dragon that best suited their individual personalities.[26]

Scholars Tom Englehart, Zachary Roman, and Mathew McAllister have disparaged such practices for blurring the lines between storytelling and advertising.[27] Yet there has also been increasing recognition on the parts of other media scholars that merchandise can play important storytelling roles for transmedia franchises and that the relationship between media and merchandise is mutually constitutive under such conditions. For example, Ellen Seiter argues that efforts to generate branded media content to promote existing toy lines actually opened up spaces for girls' television programming, which had been largely absent before the 1980s.[28] Jonathan Gray argues that in the late 1970s and early 1980s *Star Wars* action figures not only kept the franchise fresh in children's minds between film installations but also offered semistructured opportunities for children to participate in expanding characters' backstories.[29] Derek Johnson identifies merchandise as integral to the realization of two transmedia storytelling principles, extraction and immersion.[30] Merchandise enables consumers to take things away from the media text, whether toy replicas or items seemingly nascent to fictional universes, such as Dunder Mifflin coffee mugs or Bertie Bott's jelly beans. Meanwhile, costumes, props, and tents made to look like Smurf mushroom homes all offer the potential for their owners to inhabit those worlds. Both extraction and immersion can increase fan investment in a franchise's story world, and they also provide means for consumers to integrate those franchises into their daily lived experiences and tell stories about themselves.

As I have previously argued, one goal of merchandising is to transform characters and media properties into lifestyle brands whose tactility enables them to cross over from the screen and serve as private and public forms of self-expression.[31] Similarly, Marc Steinberg argues that character merchandising contributes to a transmedia property's "material ubiquity in lived space," which in turn facilitates its adoption and adaptation

26   Rekedal interview.

27   See Tom Englehart, "The Strawberry Shortcake Strategy," in *Watching Television*, ed. Todd Gitlin (New York: Pantheon, 1987): 74–108; Zachary Roman and Mathew McAllister, "The Brand and the Bold: Synergy and Sidekicks in Licensed-Based Children's Television," *Global Media Journal* 12, no. 20 (Spring 2012): 1–15.

28   Seiter, *Sold Separately*.

29   Gray, *Show Sold Separately*.

30   Derek Johnson, "Inviting Audiences In: The Spatial Reorganization of Production and Consumption in 'TVIII,'" *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5, no. 1 (2007): 61–80.

31   Santo, *Selling the Silver Bullet*.

by consumers to communicate aspects of their identity as individuals and as a member of particular communities through their possession of "media-commodities."[32]

This shift from consumer product as entryway into a story world to vehicle for consumer self-expression suggests that the transmedia brand's story is not the same as the actual transmedia stories being told through the brand. For Regan, *Sesame Street*'s story is "fun, entertaining, educational . . . and is part of the daily life of the child."[33] That story needs to come through on the TV series and at retail, and it is that story—as refracted through playable and performative elements built into the series' sketches— that guides brand owners in deciding which types of merchandise to license, how to design the look of the product and the packaging, and which retail outlets to partner with. Paul Gitter, senior vice president for Marvel Licensing at Disney Consumer Products, has suggested that aligning brand attributes with product mix requires careful calibration: "For example, Hulk, who is really identified with strength, has been teamed with WordLock, which creates really strong, high-quality bike locks; while Captain America is a natural fit for Under Armour because he stands more for activity. If we are being truly authentic to our healthy living, durable strength concept, then we have to have the right character with the right brand."[34] Brand owners, managers, and marketers are also increasingly aware of the ways consumers link brand stories with their own self-narratives. Mark Di Somma explains that consumers "look for how brands fit the story of their life that they are telling themselves."[35] Meanwhile, Dietrich Mateschitz, founder of Red Bull energy drinks, asserts: "People . . . use the story of our brand or business to tell part of their own personal meta story. Put in another way, people don't buy products; they take actions that help advance their own personal meta story."[36]

Morgan Blue deftly illustrates how Disney crafted their D-Signed clothing line, inspired by fashions worn by Disney Channel stars like Demi Lovato, into a lifestyle brand that tween girls could invest in as a means of expressing their personal styles. Importantly, Blue also recognizes how Disney's exclusive partnership with Target affected how the D-Signed brand was crafted for consumers, as it needed to adhere to the retailer's reputation for selling chic yet affordable everyday clothing.[37] Blue's work gestures at the need for media industry scholars to pay attention to retail environments as sites of mediation and encounter between consumers and brands, as well as between licensors, licensees, and category buyers.

Retail is an important site for consumer product divisions because it (1) contains many opportunities for consumers to try on branded identities, (2) has the capability to tie together multiple franchise nodes under one roof, and (3) rationalizes the fantasies

32   Steinberg, *Anime's Media Mix*, 42, 89.

33   Regan interview.

34   Qtd. in "Marvel's Power Play," *License Global*, June 12, 2014, https://www.licenseglobal.com/magazine-article /marvels-power-play.

35   Mark Di Somma, "7 Ways to Craft a Brand Counterstory," *Branding Strategy Insider*, January 29, 2015, https:// www.brandingstrategyinsider.com.

36   Qtd. in "Red Bull and the 'Art of Story Doing,'" *Think Next*, May 25, 2015, https://practicenext.com/thinknext /red-bull-and-the-art-of-story-doing/.

37   Blue, "D-Signed for Girls."

and desires engendered by consumer culture by refracting them through the supposedly mundane activity of shopping.[38] Retail spaces are more than vessels for accessing entertainment brands. They are leisure and social sites that tell stories about consumer culture. As Steven Miles contends, "Spaces of consumption offer the consumer a site of individual and collective dreaming where the spectacle of the space itself can be consumed."[39] Similarly, Marco Pedroni argues that stores now serve as "points of experience" for consumers and assume the role of "protagonists of the creation of immaterial value of the product."[40]

Rachel Bowlby points to the historical shift in the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s from counter service, which necessitated sales-staff intervention, to the self-service concept, in which shoppers could pick up, try on, and abandon items (supposedly) unsupervised as transforming the store environment into a liminal experience—"in this interim, provisional space, between the entrance and the checkout the consumer really could have everything."[41] Michelle Lowe and Neil Wrigley argue that this transformation allows retail to merchandise lifestyles rather than merely products.[42] As the entertainment industries have increasingly sought to tell brand stories that encourage consumers to adopt media franchises as resources for self-expression, retail has emerged as a valuable outpost for transmedia brand extension efforts. This is due to its ability not only to house tangible branded objects featuring franchise characters, worlds, and story elements but also to arrange said objects according to recognizable categories of utility and taste. Retail also grants shoppers the in-store experience of trying on and testing out different branded personas.

So, if retail sells lifestyles and consumer product divisions are looking to extend entertainment franchises into lifestyle brands, then this ought to be a happy, collaborative relationship, right? Indeed, Jane Gaines has shown that there is a long history of mutually beneficial collaboration between Hollywood and retail in transforming screen fantasies and spectacle into accessible fashions and furnishings.[43] As I show in the following section, however, retail increasingly sets the terms by which brand owners and licensees tell their stories to consumers, necessitating new approaches to negotiating with merchandisers and category buyers, a process and practice I label "shop talk."

Shop Talk. Brand stories are shaped within retail environments as well as through negotiations with retail buyers. "Shop talk" refers to the discursive construction of

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38 Buckingham, *Material Child*, 43.

39 Miles, *Spaces of Consumption*, 101.

40 Marco Pedroni, "Sellers of Experience: The New Face of Fashion Retail and the Role of Consumers as 'Store Readers,'" in *Production to Consumption: The Cultural Industry of Fashion,* ed. Marco Pedroni (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 127–144.

41 Rachel Bowlby, "Supermarket Futures," in *The Shopping Experience*, ed. Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell (London: Sage, 1997), 99.

42 Michelle Lowe and Neil Wrigley, *Reading Retail: A Geographical Perspective on Retailing and Consumption Spaces* (London: Arnold, 2002).

43 Jane Gaines, "The Queen Christina Tie Ups: Convergence of Show Window and Screen," *Quarterly Review of Film & Television* 11, no. 1 (1989): 35–60.

retail as a nexus of brand and consumer interactions. Conceptually, shop talk is focused on the "industry lore" and "trade rituals" that structure how entertainment franchises reach consumers through retail spaces.[44] It also explores how retail is discursively constructed in spatio-cultural terms that link retailer brand stories with those of their imagined consumer base, in turn requiring brand owners to demonstrate how their products will fit within these environments. In other words, shop talk is as much about the actual shop as it is the people that shop there and often conflates the two.

Yet the ways in which retailers have deployed shop talk to demonstrate their affinity with their customer bases has varied over time. Recently, big-box retailers such as Target and department stores such as Macy's have rewritten the job description of their chief merchandisers, who oversee all product acquisitions, from a role tasked with making instinctive choices about products—that is, someone who serves as a cultural intermediary whose tastes proxy and influence those of the retailer's preferred clientele—to someone who interprets data on shopping habits to identify reproducible product acquisition patterns.[45] Although these data are often presented benignly or even beneficently as a form of shop talk intended to help manufacturers identify consumer taste preferences and refine product categories, there can be little doubt that these parameters also discourage consumer product divisions from straying too far into uncharted product terrain, constraining innovation while normalizing existing categories.

Although the art of product acquisition is being replaced by consumer analytics, retail buying is still defined as a curatorial profession. A concept borrowed from museum and gallery practice, curating implies both selecting and presenting content in particular ways so as to generate specific frameworks of understanding among patrons.[46] Although referring to product acquisition and shelf presentation as curating might be a marketing ploy meant to raise the status of both retailer and shopper, it also points to the kind of guiding role that retailers play, taking consumers on journeys wherein interactions with particular brands and products become part of their overarching self-narrative. As *Inside Retail*'s Karen Spear explains about Target's product

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44 Tim Havens asserts that media industry professionals have developed ritualized explanatory frameworks, which he calls "industry lore," which guide decision making practices about what consumers to engage, how to engage them, and why consumers respond the ways that they do to particular media texts and engagement strategies. Havens, "Toward a Structuration Theory of Media Intermediaries," in *Making Media Work: Cultures of Management in the Entertainment Industries*, ed. Derek Johnson, Derek Kompare, and Avi Santo (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 39–62; Caldwell argues that "trade rituals" establish sites, patterns, and modes of interaction among media professionals that contribute to the crystallization of their occupational identities and habitus. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 33–36. Anthony Giddens argues that structures both set the parameters through which agency can be excised and rely on the agency of individuals operating within those structures to validate and reaffirm them. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1984).

45 Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Suzanne Kapner and Joann Lublin, "In Retail, Data Elbows aside Chief Merchants," *Wall Street Journal*, September 20, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/retails-merchant-princes-lose-sway-1442746801.

46 For a discussion of how the concept of curating has been adopted by retail, see Carmen Nobel, "A New Model for Business: The Museum," *Working Knowledge*, August 15, 2011, http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/a-new-model-for-business-the-museum.

acquisition efforts, "as customers increasingly make decisions based on lifestyle, Target is curating retail stories and content around them."[47]

As curators, retail buyers look to tailor shopping experiences for a store's desired consumers, whom they claim are naturally attracted to certain brands and products (as opposed to shoppers having those desires constructed for them through the curating process). For example, Target describes its "core customer" as a "demanding enthusiast" whose love of shopping is driven by a search for "great value."[48] "Great value" does not necessarily denote low prices but rather a strong return on investment that justifies the purchase. This can mean products that are durable, or it can mean products that serve more than simply utilitarian purposes, such as bringing joy, harmony, opportunity for self-expression, or socialization through acquisition. Target also envisions its "core customer" as female (63 percent of Target shoppers), a millennial or Generation Xer between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four (38 percent) who is married with young children (42 percent of shoppers are from households with three to four family members), with a median annual household income of $83,000. She is also likely Caucasian, as only 8 percent of Target's in-store clientele are identified as African American.[49] These parameters become essential talking points when brand owners and manufacturers negotiate terms for telling—that is, selling—their brand stories at Target locations.

Since the early 1990s, the consolidation of the retail market has exacerbated the challenges brand owners face in telling their stories through merchandise. Eli Dekel, former president of Saban Brands, owners of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, summarizes the state of the field: "Really in the licensing business the number of retailers that matter is a very short list. You know you're talking Walmart, K-Mart, Target, Sears, JCPenney, Kohl's, Toys 'R' Us, and from there on it's a long way down."[50] Mark Caplan, former head of global licensing for Sony, concurs: "You look across the board and there are so many companies we can cross off the list that were around in 2000 and aren't around now. . . . So the retail space has changed dramatically over the years and there are less outlets at retail so we have to be a lot more conscious of the ever changing retail landscape."[51] In particular, Walmart and Target's expansion has led to many smaller shops and regional retailers closing their doors.

As of August 19, 2018, Walmart operated 11,718 stores globally, generating more than $500 billion in revenue.[52] Target Enterprises operates 1,822 stores, primarily in the United States, and while it generated more than $72 billion in revenue, in 2014 its net income decreased by $1.636 billion, in part as a result of failed efforts to break

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47 Karen Spear, "Curating Retail Experience through Testing," *Inside Retail*, August 18, 2015, https://www .insideretail.com.au/blog/2015/08/18/curating-retail-experience-through-testing.

48 Seth Golden, "Target Executives Outline the Retailer's Path to Future Growth," *Seeking Alpha*, March 11, 2015, http://seekingalpha.com/article/2992286-target-executives-outline-the-retailers-path-to-future-growth.

49 "Meet Our Guests," Target Media Network, https://targetmedianetwork.target.com/meetOurGuests#target-stats.

50 Eli Dekel (former president, Saban Brands) in discussion with author, June 30, 2012.

51 Mark Caplan (former head of global licensing, Sony) in discussion with author, June 29, 2012.

52 "Financial Information" (2018), Walmart, http://stock.walmart.com/investors/financial-information/unit-counts-and -square-footage/default.aspx.

into the Canadian marketplace and the incursion of online shopping into the retail mix.[53] Simply put, a robust competitive retail landscape assures brand owners that one outlet's struggles could be offset by another's successes. When Target's overreach into the Canadian market failed, it left manufacturers with fewer retail alternatives to place goods on shelves. Target's Canadian failure was less the result of strong retail competition that held the company at bay than poorly developed distribution chains that made stocking merchandise challenging and drove prices up so as to account for transport costs. Shutting down 133 stores left retail vacancies without clear replacements. Moreover, the company's international struggles were felt in the United States as Target tightened its belt with suppliers so as to achieve higher profit margins that offset losses without raising prices. With fewer retail options to turn toward, many brand owners and manufacturers were forced to acquiesce.[54]

Not only have these superstores put many local and regional competitors out of business, in turn limiting the playing field for brand owners seeking to place merchandise on store shelves; their struggles often put pressure on manufacturers to provide higher-quality goods at lower prices.[55] Walmart is notorious for forcing manufacturers to cut profit margins to conform to its promise of offering consumers the lowest prices. Particularly troubling to brand owners has been Walmart's recent suggestion that they stop spending money on jointly promoting the availability of their goods at the superstore in order to trim costs. Although Walmart promises to make up the difference through its own advertising efforts, "the new tensions for suppliers are that they potentially have less control on the way their individual branded products are marketed to Walmart consumers."[56]

Warren S. Grimes argues that multibrand retailers like Walmart and Target wield tremendous power over brand owners, even entertainment and character brands with global appeal.[57] Grimes explains this power imbalance in terms of economies of scale, suggesting that when a chain like Walmart accounts for 22 percent of all toy sales nationwide, it is able to leverage that market share with brand owners. Consequently, brand owners understand that should their property be dropped from Walmart's product mix, the majority of Walmart shoppers will still remain loyal to the retailer and simply choose to buy another branded product, while the brand owners' options for reaching consumers will be greatly constricted.[58] Grimes points to the ways retailers

53 Stock Tiger, "Can Target Sustain Its Rally at Wall Street?" *Seeking Alpha*, March 26, 2015, http://seekingalpha .com/article/3030056-can-target-sustain-its-rally-at-wall-street.

54 Hayley Peterson, "Target's 'Colossal Flop' in Canada Has Turned into a Sinister Omen for American Retailers," *Business Insider*, May 3, 2017, http://www.businessinsider.com/targets-failure-in-canada-is-an-omen-for-the-us -retail-industry-2017-5.

55 Paul Ziobro and Serena Ng, "Wal-Mart Ratchets Up Pressure on Suppliers to Cut Prices," *Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/wal-mart-ratchets-up-pressure-on-suppliers-to-cut-prices-1427845404.

56 Ziobro and Ng, "Wal-Mart Ratchets Up Pressure."

57 Warren S. Grimes, "Buyer Power and Retail Gatekeeper Power: Protecting Competition and the Atomistic Seller," *Antitrust Law Journal* 72, no. 2 (2005): 563–588.

58 Grimes, 580.

use that leverage not only to negotiate lower wholesale prices but also to limit the scope of a brand's reach by refusing to stock items available at other stores.[59]

Chains like Walmart and Target not only control access to consumers but also wield tremendous influence over how consumer products are developed. The pressure placed by retail giants on manufacturers partly explains why licensors seek out large-scale licensees, who are best positioned to meet retailer demands, and why licensors and manufacturers are also risk averse when it comes to developing new categories. In other words, similar to how the rise to power of the three major television networks during the classical network era (1960–1985) curtailed innovation and diversity in favor of safe fare palatable for mass audiences, the consolidation of the retail market has generated a tendency toward risk aversion and a preference for predictable consumer behaviors over creative brand extensions. For as Caplan laments, "We answer to the retailer because they're the ones making the final decisions. So all the work we could put into a property, if a retailer doesn't want it then forget it. . . . [I]f a retailer tells us they want a certain thing or if they tell a buyer or sales person from a toy company they want a certain product they're going to make it."[60]

Although Caplan's perspective might seem fatalistic, he is also quick to assert that just because retail now calls the shots, "it doesn't mean we can't collaborate."[61] Pierre Bourdieu argues that an occupational community's position-taking strategies are always dependent on their perceived position within an organizational hierarchy. These hierarchies also participate in turn in the formation of particular occupational dispositions, or attitudes and beliefs about the nature of one's work and its value within a given institutional and social context.[62] Increasingly, Walmart and Target are able to apply pressure on brand owners and manufacturers to align branded products and in-store promotions with the retailer's brand image. This has led to a revision of how consumer product divisions imagine their core clientele.

As a result of the consolidation of the retail market, many licensors now prioritize retailer needs and knowledge over those of licensees in devising merchandizing campaigns. In 2013, Disney Consumer Products recast its sales staff from product experts to retailer specialists. According to former vice president of consumer products Bob Chapek: "If you talked to our sales people three months ago, they would say they were either music sales people, games sales people, movies sales people, publishing sales people, or licensing sales people. . . . Now they say 'we are Walmart sales people' or 'Target sales people.' . . . That's a key difference because now they represent the total breadth of the Walt Disney Company for their customer base."[63] Similarly, Dekel explains that Saban employs "a retail development team and their primary focus is working with the retail buyers, the merchants themselves, who sit with the manufacturers

59 Grimes, 582.

60 Caplan interview.

61 Caplan interview.

62 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. Randall Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

63 Qtd. in Tony Lisanti, "Disney's New Character," *Global License!*, June 8, 2012, http://www.licensemag.com /license-global/disneys-new-character.

and place orders . . . so when our licensees, our manufacturers, go into their buyer at a given retailer, it's our job to make sure that buyer is aware of the property, is familiar with why it's compelling, why it's strong, familiar with the larger strategy, how it's impacting other departments in their store . . . bringing the larger impact [of] the larger strategy to the conversation of how many t-shirts do you want."[64] Dekel saw Saban's role as helping pave a path for licensees to reach retail—an inversion of how the licensing business previously operated, with the onus on licensees to place products on shelves.

Dekel also indicated that licensees were no longer the primary client in the product extension chain. "My client *was* the manufacturing company who would become my licensee. . . . But now when the process starts one of the first calls that we make is to retailers and to buyers and to relationships we have at retail and say 'hey look we have this show' or 'we're coming out with this show, we'd like to come in and present it to you and get you excited about it or get your feedback on it.'"[65] Dekel's comments hint at the extent to which consumers—much like television viewers—are not (and have never been) consumer product divisions' clients but rather commodities to be traded in negotiations, first with licensees and now with retailers. The brand story told at retail is first the brand story rhetorically sold to manufacturers and retailers of an alignment between products and shoppers. Essentially, Saban ensures that retailers understand how the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* brand story fits the latter's perceived image of their clientele and can be adapted to help retailers tell their brand story to customers through such merchandise.

What has changed are the positions occupied by the brand owner, manufacturer, and retailer in Bourdieu's "field of power."[66] Historically, it was the manufacturer's role as licensee to convince brand owners that they could create products that would serve the interests of both the property and the consumer.[67] Where previously brand owners and manufacturers haggled over imagined consumers' investments in particular products, now brand owners look to convince retailers that branded products will help attract particular shoppers.

Brand owners are increasingly encouraged to see the retailer as the ultimate client and to position products "from the outside in" by visualizing how they help retailers to "fill out their assortment."[68] At a 2015 International Licensing Industry Merchandisers' Association seminar offered by Parham Santana Design Inc.—one of the industry's most successful brand extension agencies, whose clients include Sesame Workshop, Turner Classic Movies, Discovery Channel, and Warner Brothers—on how to work with retailers, attendees were told to sell "category growth stories" rather than brand

64   Dekel interview.

65   Dekel interview (emphasis added).

66   Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*.

67   Elsewhere, I argue that this has not always been the case and that dating back to the early twentieth century, manufacturers treated brand owners as clients, not vice versa. See Avi Santo, "A Teenie Weenie Amount of 'Goodwill': Cross-Media Character Brand Merchandizing in the 1920s," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2, no. 3 (2012): 283–305.

68   John Parham, "How to Win at Retail: The 5 Rules" (roundtable session, LIMA Licensing University, June 10, 2015).

stories when pitching merchandise to retailers, because buyers wanted to see themselves as the heroes in these narratives in much the same way that brand stories conscripted consumers as co-protagonists through their acquisition of products.[69]

This is more than a conceptual change in the licensor-licensee-retailer relationship. Dekel indicated that retailers have increasingly pushed for direct-to-retail (DTR) partnerships with brand owners that grant them not only exclusive product rights for an entertainment property but, more important, direct control over the licensing and marketing for said products: "Oftentimes the retailer will say we like it but don't worry about making it and shipping it, we'll take care of that."[70] As big-box retailers devote more and more shelf space to their own private-label house brands, DTR exclusives have become a way for brand owners to retain retailer investment in curating their products for maximum consumer awareness. DTR agreements guarantee shelf space but diminish brand owners' control over the vetting of licensees or how the product is positioned vis-à-vis the brand. A common concern is that DTR products are designed to tell the retailer's brand story more than the franchise's, as was the case with Target's D-Signed clothing line, which had to adhere to the retailer's perception of its shopper's price point, in turn affecting everything from fabric choices to types of clothing included in the collection.[71]

Thus, even as consumer product divisions for the entertainment industries see retail as a storytelling medium for their characters and franchises, it is retail that establishes the modes of narration available to brand owners and their licensees. As addressed in the next section, although some of these storytelling devices are open to negotiation, other organizational logics and logistics are not. This is particularly the case when it comes to the construction of identity categories and their association with particular product categories.

Retail Tales. Brand stories are typically expressed at retail through visual merchandising, category ambassadorship, and overall product mix. Visual merchandising can range from product pairings on a mannequin to aisle end caps that feature an array of products within a single category or across multiple categories. It can also include window displays, pop-up shops, and stores-within-stores that aggregate all branded merchandise to a central site. Shop concepts are often the most celebrated means of using retail to extend a transmedia story. Many shop concepts use store space to create immersive experiences for shoppers, who are able to enter into a facsimile of the branded story world to extract items inspired from it. For example, Hasbro and the Toy Store commissioned Propability to construct a display in the shape of Canterlot castle located in the fictional land of Equestria from *My Little Pony* (Discovery Family, 2010–). Shoppers walking through the display could stop at the "Ponyfication Station,"

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69   Parham, "How to Win at Retail."

70   Dekel interview.

71   Allison Ames and Gaye Dean, "Building a DTR: The Brand and Retail Perspective" (webinar, LIMA, February 10, 2015), http://www.licensing.org; Blue, "D-Signed for Girls."

Figure 1. Propability's *My Little Pony* "Ponyfication Station" display (2015) (screen grab from 2017 Propability website, at http://www.propability.co.uk/store-developments-/-my-little-pony-the-toy-store/2017).

an ornate windowsill that allowed onlookers to see them (and parents to photograph them) within the branded world (Figure 1).[72]

Although some of these practices emerge organically as sales staff assigned to particular store sections look to create visually appealing displays, visual merchandising is typically an expensive proposition paid for by brand owners, since retail real estate—especially in highly trafficked areas—is limited and in high demand. Elaborate and interactive shop concepts are typically reserved for flagship stores located in areas where retail has become a tourist destination.[73] In general, cross-category merchandising is incredibly rare at big-box retail because buyers are assigned categories to fill, not brands, and typically category buyers are made to compete with one another for shelf space on the basis of sales.[74]

Simply put, while Disney would love to see a Target display featuring both *Frozen*-themed bedding and pajamas, there is very little incentive for category buyers to construct such a display, because it would necessitate one buyer giving up space for another's merchandise in its own section of the store. As Figure 2 evidences, not only is the girl featured in the *Frozen* bedroom display wearing a generic pajama outfit, but the protruding *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* comforter set stocked alongside the display suggests that there is often a disconnect between how consumer product divisions envision visual merchandising and what actually happens at retail, where competing brands become shelf mates. A 2014 study conducted by the *Licensing Letter* reveals the character licensing industry's anxiety over how merchandise is displayed at retail by noting common assertions that carelessness and lack of clarity over brand messaging

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72   "My Little Pony, Toy Store," Propability, September 2015, http://www.propability.co.uk.

73   B. Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business Is a Stage* (New York: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

74   Hamilton Nolan, "Inside Target: How Buyers Game a Broken System," *Gawker*, June 16, 2014, http://gawker.com /inside-target-how-buyers-game-a-broken-system-1591447916.

impede the ability to tell a complete brand story to consumers.[75] While brand owners pay for visual merchandising opportunities, the extent to which they control the display varies. Most big-box retailers employ visual merchandising experts who are tasked with displaying the retailer's story as much as the franchise's. Retailers are often more interested in demonstrating variety to consumers than brand cohesion, because variety fosters the perception that shopping extends democratic ideals by offering an abundance of choices.[76] Coherence in visual merchandising strategies entails far more than just brand cohesion to include elements like color and size: hence the inclusion of the light purple *My Little Pony* piggy bank on the nightstand rather than an Olaf piggy bank that was also available for sale at Target and also manufactured by the same licensee.[77] Not only does the Twilight Sparkle piggy bank match the purple tones of the *Frozen* comforter, but the shape of the Olaf coin holder is essentially the same as the Olaf stuffed plush doll the little girl is seated next to, which diminishes the illusion of differentiation available within branded lifestyles.

The *Frozen* display at Target is a hybridization of visual merchandising and category ambassadorship, which is a second storytelling device used at retail. Category ambassadorship typically involves the use of a character or franchise as a stand-in for

Figure 2. Target's *Frozen* (Disney, 2014) bedroom display (photo by author, 2015).

75 Ira Mayer, Leigh Ann Schwarzkopf, and Lynn Scott, "TLL Store Check Survey," *Viewing Licensed Goods at Retail and Online* (webinar, May 7, 2014), http://www.licensing.org.

76 Tony Morgan, *Visual Merchandising: Window and In-Store Displays for Retail* (London: Laurence King, 2016).

77 Morgan, *Visual Merchandising*.

an entire product category or subcategory—in this case Target's children's bedroom section. *Frozen* transforms that space from functional to fun. While the *Frozen* display at Target taps into—and tacitly supports—a long history of girls being confined by parents or guardians to indoor and private spaces (supposedly for their own protection), Mary Celeste Kearney has also argued that the bedroom is a significant zone for young girls asserting their independence through self-expression, often with the aid of popular culture artifacts.[78] Thus, the display offers both relief for parents worried about the deleterious effects of the public sphere on their children's development (by unironically positioning popular culture as a fun alternative) and an aspirational image for young girls looking to remake their bedrooms in their own image.

Such category associations are carefully cultivated and serve important functions for brand owners regardless of how well represented their products are at retail. *Sesame Street* merchandise was not ubiquitously present at Target. There were only a dozen *Sesame Street* items on sale, the vast majority of them intended for toddlers and very young children, including bibs, potty seats, birthday cards, toothpaste, coloring books, plush toys, and several variations of Talking Elmo. While the lack of *Sesame Street* merchandise hints at stiff competition over limited shelf space, it also communicates something to in-store shoppers regarding the brand's selectivity. Seiter has argued that the distinctions between mass market and educational toys are primarily about marketing to different demographics and that selective product extensions and limited availability are strategies employed to convey notions of quality.[79] *Sesame Street*'s selective product mix at retail is intended to interpellate a particular brand community that recognizes itself in this story.

Although *Sesame Street* had only a handful of items stocked on Target's shelves, *Sesame Street* characters were featured on several banner signs throughout Target (see Figure 3). *Sesame Street* characters served as ambassadors on signs that read Infant Toys, Infant & Toddler Books, DVDs Featuring Characters That Kids Love, and the seasonal Easter Baskets Full of Books. The latter calculatedly communicated how Sesame Workshop's anticonfection licensing policy offered alternatives to parents concerned with the amount of candy their children consumed. Such product ambassadorships grant *Sesame Street* an authoritative role in delineating particular aspects of children's culture and approaches to parenting without needing to actually supply products that promote these ideals. As a standard-bearer for child rearing, *Sesame Street* also grants Target—and other entertainment brands available at Target—the ability to blur boundaries between commercialism and education, which in turn allows *Sesame Street* to seem hip without having to sacrifice selectivity. In other words, while Disney or Nickelodeon brands benefit from *Sesame Street*'s ambassadorial endorsement, the residual transference works both ways and helps *Sesame Street* cement its position as harmonizer of populism and pedagogy.

A very different narrative emerges if we look at *Frozen*'s product mix, which is one of abundance and ubiquity. There were hundreds of *Frozen* products on the shelves:

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78   Mary Celeste Kearney, "Productive Spaces: Girls' Bedrooms as Sites of Cultural Production," *Journal of Children and Media* 1, no. 2 (2007): 126–141.

79   Seiter, *Sold Separately.*

dolls ranging from three inches to three feet tall, as well as costumes, karaoke machines, microphones, purse-shaped boom boxes, and board games. There were logical products, such as snow-cone makers, and unlikely merchandising choices, such as swimsuits, not to mention bed sets, dishes, tricycles, bicycles with training wheels, scooters, bike helmets, school bags, lunch bags, thermoses, luggage, chocolate Easter eggs, clothing for both boys and girls, underwear for both girls and women, a Disney Infinity video-game figure, and nearly two dozen books. One of the ironies of *Frozen*'s cultural omnipresence during the mid-2010s is that Disney was apparently unprepared for the merchandizing frenzy when the movie was first released, leading to an initial scarcity of products.[80] Part of the story Disney is now telling through overcompensation is that it listens to its consumer base.

Figure 3. Target's *Sesame Street* (Sesame Workshop, 1969–) brand ambassador display (photo by author, 2015).

Yet even as retail environments facilitate the possibility of linking brand stories with those constructed for consumers, store spaces also mitigate the possibilities of complete lifestyle brand integration through their segmentation of consumer experiences. Perhaps the greatest limitation is retail's rigid adherence to age and gender categories and the assumptions that category buyers make about what each group wants to buy.[81] The Jim Henson Company's head of global licensing Melissa Segal laments that in dealing with licensees, she is often forced to choose between a property's appeal to boys or to girls. Even though both might like *Dinosaur Train* or *Sid the Science Kid*, "[w]hat aisle are the toys going to be in? Because there is a boy's toy aisle and a girl's toy aisle, but not one for both."[82] Meanwhile, DWA's Rekedal has argued that typically the toy buyer at retail is really the "boy's action [figure] buyer," because the category is dominated by products pitched at an imagined male demographic.[83] Rekedal's assertion suggests three intersecting challenges for entertainment brands directed at both boys and girls:

80   Beth Snyder Bulik, "How Disney Has Managed to Keep 'Frozen' Red Hot," *Ad Age*, September 3, 2014, http://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/disney-managed-frozen-red-hot/294757.

81   Seiter, *Sold Separately*; Daniel Thomas Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

82   Melissa Segal (head of global licensing, Jim Henson Company) in discussion with author, July 11, 2012.

83   Rekedal interview.

1. Toy buyers privilege products and franchises pitched at boys or at least imagined as appealing to them.
2. That appeal is supposedly rooted in stereotypical assumptions about boys' desire for action, which elevates the desirability for certain products like action figures and toy cars.
3. Such logics in turn contribute to a configuration of so-called girls' toys either in opposition to selective understandings of "action" or as improved by their affiliation with boys' action categories.[84]

Although retailers and brand owners have slowly recognized that girls might appreciate play traditionally imagined as boyish (and that many parents are open to these shifting play patterns), there is no space at retail for toys typically marketed to girls that are intended for all children.[85]

For entertainment franchises, particularly animated or action-adventure ones, the retail toy aisle is key to an extensive consumer product release, because toys are typically considered a bellwether of a property's resonance with young consumers.[86] Thus, brand owners and licensees often play to toy-buyer perceptions of the market to gain entry. In recent years, Disney has been faulted for not including female characters in merchandise for films like *Big Hero 6* (Don Hall and Chris Williams, 2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015), and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (J. J. Abrams, 2015), all of which featured prominent female heroines, the latter in a leading role.[87] My goal here is not to absolve Disney of its complicity in minimizing the availability of merchandise featuring female characters from these franchises. After all, industry analysts have speculated that Disney's acquisitions of Marvel Entertainment and Lucasfilm was largely intended to strengthen its appeal among "boys and geeks," a pair so intertwined in Disney's perception of its consumers that it employs an entire licensing unit to court this demographic pairing (Disney's licensing division is organized into four units: Infants and Children, Boys and Geeks, Girls and Tweens, and Adults).[88]

84 Derek Johnson argues that the insistence by GoldieBlox (a manufacturer of STEAM toys for girls) on calling its girl engineer doll line "action figures" reveals a deeply gendered bias in favor of so-called masculine toys. Johnson, "Calling 'Action' in the GoldieBlox Franchise," *Flow* 21, no. 2 (2014), http://www.flowjournal.org/2014/11/calling-action-goldieblox-franchis.

85 Peter Callan, "Leading Ladies, Kicking Ass: Licensors Vie for Retail Interest and Market Share in Rapidly Emerging Girls Superhero Category," *Kidscreen*, October 13, 2015, http://kidscreen.com/2015/10/13/a-crop-of-new-girls-superhero-ips-line-up-to-kick-some-retail-butt.

86 Callan, "Leading Ladies."

87 Joanna Robinson, "Why Is Scarlett Johansson Missing from the Avengers Merchandise?," *Vanity Fair,* April 21, 2015, http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/04/black-widow-avengers-sexist; Cindy Davis, "Here's the Ugly Truth about Why Rey Was Missing from 'Star Wars' Merchandise," *Pajiba*, January 21, 2016, http://www.pajiba.com/star_wars/heres-the-ugly-truth-about-exactly-why-rey-was-missing-from-star-wars-merchandise-.php; Melissa Atkins Wardy, "Mom Contacts Company over Missing Girl Characters, Company Responds It Is Because Boys Think Girls Are Gross," *Pigtail Pals & Ballcap Buddies*, April 9, 2015, http://pigtailpalsblog.com/2015/04/mom-contacts-company-over-missing-girl-characters-company-responds-it-is-because-boys-think-girls-are-gross/#.V5drGWU4S-I.

88 Sarah Vizard, "Disney's Licensing Boss on Star Wars, Frozen and the 'Disney Machine,'" *Marketing Week*, October 26, 2015, https://www.marketingweek.com/2015/10/26/disneys-licensing-boss-on-star-wars-frozen-and-the-disney-machine/.

Nevertheless, it is important to point to an industrial context that structures the forms of agency both consumer product managers and buyers are willing to exercise. Under pressure to secure limited toy shelf space in advance of a film's release and given the choice between pink and blue gendered toy aisles and the shop talk regarding boy's play preferences, licensor decisions about which products and characters to license are largely driven by efforts to give retail buyers, not consumers, what they want. It is worth noting that for all three of the films mentioned earlier, Disney did promise to release products featuring female heroes for these franchises, but always in response to consumer complaints, which they use as leverage with retailers, and always with the caveat that future releases are dependent on healthy sales of current products. This response places pressure on consumers to buy existing merchandise, in turn strengthening retail buyers' resolve that they can predict what brand loyalists want to buy.[89]

As we have seen, negotiations among retail buyers and consumer product divisions over how brand stories might be told on store shelves both actively produce and exploit gender categories, but other categories of identity remain largely unacknowledged as frameworks through which retail stories might link brands and consumers. In the following section I turn my attention to how the near-complete absence of race as a consumer category at big-box retail affects how entertainment properties featuring racial minorities are extended as lifestyle brands, as well as how these practices contribute to stories about race told through consumer product extensions.

Targeting *Annie*. In 2014, Target partnered with Sony on a DTR initiative to create a tween clothing line based on the remake of *Annie* starring Quvenzhané Wallis. Sony initially approached Target about a cobranded clothing line with Hello Kitty (an idea likely generated because of Wallis's professed affection for the not-actually-a-cat character, which consumer product experts likely saw as a bridge between the character Wallis portrays and her real self).[90] Instead, Target proposed a clothing line inspired by outfits Wallis wears in the film to be designed by *Annie* costumer, Renée Elrich Kalfus.[91] Kalfus admitted that where the costumes in the film were intended to capture a hand-me-down look emblematic of how girls growing up in foster care might actually dress, for Target, she designed "pieces meant to look like the styles Annie and the other foster children would pick out themselves if Mr. Stacks [the updated version of Daddy Warbucks portrayed by Jamie Foxx] had taken them shopping."[92]

This approach fit Target's refurbished brand story. In the 1990s, the retailer distinguished itself from competitors like Walmart by focusing on exclusive partnerships with designers to sell affordable yet trendy lifestyle items, including clothes and kitchenware. By the mid-2000s, Target had drifted away from this model in favor of

89 Cassidee Moser, "Rey to Be Featured in Second Wave of 'Star Wars: The Force Awakens' Toys," *IGN News*, January 12, 2016, http://www.ign.com/articles/2016/01/12/rey-to-be-featured-in-second-wave-of-star-wars-the -force-awakens-toys.

90 Ames and Dean, "Building a DTR"; Mark Shrayber, "Quvenzhané Wallis Is the Only Actual Child at Kitty Con," *Jeze-bel*, October 30, 2014, http://jezebel.com/quvenzhane-wallis-is-the-only-actual-child-at-kitty-con-1652627064.

91 Ames and Dean, "Building a DTR."

92 Rachel Lee Harris, "Clothes and Character: 'Annie,'" *New York Times*, January 2, 2015, https://carpetbagger .blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/02/clothes-and-character-annie/.

emphasizing low prices, which resulted in a steep decline in shoppers (nearly three million fewer shoppers visited Target during the same four-week window in 2014 than in 2007).[93] The *Annie* DTR agreement was part of the retailer's efforts to return to its signature approach and lure back consumers. Target had stores construct a special shop concept for *Annie*, cordoning off a small but prominently featured corner lot in its girls' clothing section. Marketing for the collection stressed how tween girls could mix and match clothing to express their individuality and drew inspiration from the character's do-it-yourself spirit.

Dating back to the 1920s comic strip in which she debuted, Little Orphan Annie's brand story has advocated unfettered entrepreneurialism and antiwelfare sentiment.[94] In the 2014 film, the foster-care system is depicted as corrupt and Annie's self-reliance is key to her overcoming her impoverishment. While at its core this is a conservative message, it is also one that was likely believed to appeal to middle-class African American audiences thought to be more willing to accept that systemic racism requires personal accountability to rise above economic and political marginalization.[95] Whether attracted to the film's message, its cast, its endorsement by its star African American producers Jay-Z, Will Smith, and Jada Pinkett Smith, or its retelling of an iconic American character's story from an African American perspective, polling prior to the film's release suggested that 63 percent of African Americans were "definitely interested" in seeing *Annie*, as compared with only 24 percent of Caucasians.[96]

And yet Target's marketing for the clothing line downplayed the film's African American cast, instead featuring a multicultural group of models and showcasing a Caucasian child wearing Annie's signature red party dress (see Figure 4). Ignoring African American complaints about the clothing line's erasure of the film's protagonist, Target insisted that the outfits appealed to tweens from diverse backgrounds, as reflected in their promotional materials—which, the retailer was quick to point out, included an African American model.[97] Target re-reimagined Annie as an iconic fashionista who appealed to tweens of all ethnic backgrounds rather than a black girl with similar appeal. Thus, rather than make Wallis the central focus of the campaign, she instead became an example of just another girl inspired by Annie's style.

To understand how retail shaped the possibilities for *Annie* as a lifestyle brand, it is necessary to place the film's consumer product extension strategy in conversation with ongoing debates about diversity at retail. Donica Belisle's history of Canadian

93 Phil Wahba, "Target Has a New CEO: Will He Re-Energize the Retailer?," *Fortune*, March 1, 2015, http://fortune .com/target-new-ceo.

94 Bruce Smith, *The History of Little Orphan Annie* (New York: Ballantine, 1982).

95 Michael Eric Dyson argues that this rhetoric is often espoused by middle-class African Americans as a means of shaming and distancing themselves from lower-income African Americans, whom they accuse of failing to rise above systems of oppression and thereby perpetuating them (i.e., poor Blacks are accused of perpetuating stereotypes that diminish all African Americans). Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (New York: Basic Cevitas Books, 2006).

96 "*Annie* Target Audience Media Profile Roadmap," *MarketCast* (2014), https://wikileaks.org/sony/docs/03_03/Mktrsch /F%20I%20L%20M%20S/ANNIE/DOMESTIC/Audience%20Report/Annie_Media%20Profile_Client.pdf.

97 Quinn Costello, "Target's Ads for New 'Annie'-Inspired Collection Draw Controversy," *Hollywood Reporter*, December 30, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/targets-ads-new-annie-inspired-760742.

department stores addresses how early twentieth-century store catalogs differentiated white consumers, who were depicted wearing advertised clothing, from people of Asian and African descent, who were typically represented as authenticating the merchandise through their roles as laborers. These representational practices

Figure 4. Target's *Annie* (Sony, 2014) clothing collection display (2017 screen grab from blog post by Rachel Garlinghouse at *My Brown Baby*, 2014, http://mybrownbaby.com/2014/12/comes -annie-target-hard-knock-life-black-girls/).

aligned the act of shopping with European civilizing and modernizing sensibilities, and while they initially discouraged nonwhite shoppers from participating in these consumption rituals, they eventually provided the foundation for constructing retail as an environment in which all could become consumer-citizens by acquiescing to shopping norms rooted in whiteness rendered invisible and thereby normative. Or, as Belisle states, "One's ability to conform to prevailing fashion norms marked one's membership in modernity."[98]

Although Belisle's research focuses on the Canadian retail environment, similar trends prevailed in the United States. During the civil rights era, department stores became strategic sites for nonviolent protest precisely because they served the movement's argument for equal treatment under the law as both citizens and consumers.[99] Retailers in the post–civil rights era selectively interpreted this demand by developing a color-blind philosophy when it came to product acquisition. While color blindness rhetorically gestures at inclusiveness, it tends to devalue difference in favor of commonality resulting in most products continuing to be directed at white shoppers whose whiteness is rendered invisible and who thus stand in for generic American consumers. As a result, most retail product selections do not take into account the differentiated taste cultures, body types, or color palettes of shoppers from diverse backgrounds.[100]

When race as a consumer category is acknowledged at retail, products designated for shoppers of color are often marked as exclusive, resulting in this merchandise being segregated from other sections of the store, isolating shoppers of color and ignoring the potential broader appeal of these products to all consumers. Indeed, the only areas where big-box and department stores typically designate products as intended

98   Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), 106.

99   Traci Parker, "Southern Retail Campaigns and the Struggle for Black Economic Freedom in the 1950s and 1960s," in *Race and Retail: Consumption across the Color Line*, ed. Mia Bay and Ann Fabian (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 77–98.

100 Gwendolyn S. O'Neal, "African-American Aesthetic of Dress: Current Manifestations," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 16, no. 4 (September 1998): 167–175; Lillian O. Holloman, "Catalog Retailing That Targets African Americans," *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences* 89, no. 4 (1997): 13–19.

for minority consumers is women's beauty, including makeup and hair products. However, these sections of the store usually comprise only a handful of shelves and are also often differentiated from traditional conceptualizations of beauty via their ethnic designation. While cosmetics companies like SheaMoisture have argued that these shelving practices "ghettoize" nonwhite consumers and undermine their ability to feel included in hegemonic definitions of beauty, it is perhaps more accurate to state that such practices undermine SheaMoisture's ability to market their products to a broader consumer base. After all, the company does not claim that its products are exclusively for African American women, but merely inspired by skin treatments originating in West Africa.[101]

Retail's occasional recognition that shoppers of color want products reflecting their appearance or experiences rarely includes the possibility that blackness might serve as an aspirational "brand" for all shoppers (a point I explore in greater detail later).[102] In the toy aisles, minorities might be included if they are members of a diverse "team," although typically their action figures and dolls are stocked in lesser quantity, and although their teammates typically venture into other product categories, nonwhite characters rarely do. Thus, while one could find a Falcon action figure included in an *Avengers* five-pack or a Princess Tiana doll alongside Elsa, Anna, Ariel, and the other Disney princesses, Falcon and Tiana were nowhere to be found in the rest of Target, while Captain America and other Disney princess merchandise could be found throughout the store. None of the consumer product representatives I spoke with would concede racial bias when it came to placing products with retailers. However, it was also clear that the absence of race as a retail category both diminished diversity as a priority and confounded strategies to differentiate properties featuring nonwhite characters from brands that did not. Whereas the same consumer product representatives placed tremendous focus on how gender binaries drove—and even limited—licensing strategies, there was virtually no discussion about how race either shaped or hampered creative product extension. When asked specifically about ethnic diversity, some respondents claimed that while it was important for nonwhite kids to see products featuring characters that looked like them on toy shelves, children "in general" (i.e., non–African American children) didn't see "difference" the same ways adults did. Therefore, these respondents were disinclined to make race a factor in toy acquisitions.[103]

However, the belief that children do not see race leads not to more racial diversity in the toy aisle but to an assumption that toy choices are made on the basis of the play patterns they engender. To that end, skin tone becomes merely one design element among others. While Doc McStuffins's $500 million in merchandise sales is considered an industry record for an African American property, Doc's blackness is not believed

101 Amanda Moore Karim, "SheaMoisture Commercial Asks Why 'Ethnic' Beauty Aisles Exist," *Fashionista*, April 6, 2016, http://fashionista.com/2016/04/shea-moisture-commercial.

102 Hip-hop- and reggae-inspired products are perhaps exceptions to this claim, as these items are widely marketed to young white shoppers as signifiers of rebelliousness available for appropriation from black culture. See bell hooks's interview in *Cultural Criticism & Transformation* (Sut Jhally, 1997), documentary produced by Media Education Foundation.

103 David Niggli (former CEO, FAO Schwarz) in discussion with author, May 26, 2016.

to be its selling point at retail among non–African American shoppers. Rather, it is her aspiration to be a doctor that is understood as opening up differentiated play scenarios in the girls' aisle that appeals across racial lines.[104] At the time of my visit to Target, the two most recognizable and widely merchandised character brands featuring fictional persons of color—Doc McStuffins and Dora the Explorer—were popular enough to escape the toy aisle because they possessed dual appeal in the eyes of licensors and category buyers. That is, African American and Hispanic shoppers were thought to appreciate products branded with nonwhite role models, while Caucasian shoppers were thought to look past these characters' racial markers to their play potential and educational value. At best, the characters' black and Hispanic identities were perceived as value added for white consumers with liberal sensibilities rather than central to their marketability.[105]

To summarize, unlike age and gender, race is not a consumer category at big-box retail because licensors and category buyers presume that average (i.e., white) shoppers don't buy things on the basis of the race of the persons they are shopping for. But race is most definitely a story told at these sites, one that typically privileges consumerism as a great equalizer. In the case of *Annie*, Target desired to promote diversity by sublimating it into tween fashion sensibility. This strategy affirmed that the store could attract a multiracial clientele through products that appealed to girls of a certain age across ethnic lines. If race is not a consumer category recognized at big-box retail, then it is equally the case that blackness is not perceived to be a marketable lifestyle attribute. To focus a merchandising campaign on Wallis's portrayal of Annie would have required that her blackness be foregrounded as essential to the products associated with her, thereby supposedly limiting their appeal. A clothing line inspired by Wallis's version of Annie would have undermined the color-blind logic endorsed by Target wherein racial and ethnic differences were secondary to the *Annie* brand appeal.

The *Annie* DTR program at Target toned down the character's blackness (and, by association, her portrayal by Wallis) to subsume it within a broader appeal to diversity and inclusivity, wherein all racialized identities were simultaneously welcomed as consumers and silenced as producers of particular meanings and experiences that might inform and inspire shoppers' identification with a particular brand. These observations support and advance Katherine Sender's assertion that marketing directed at gay men employs a strategy of "contained visibility" that tones down sexual desire and plays up shared consumer impulses to unite that community with their straight shopping counterparts. Sender suggests that marketers regard this strategy as necessary to avoid

104   Eliana Dockterman, "Disney's Perfect Answer to Barbie Is Doc McStuffins," *Time*, August 4, 2014, http://time .com/3079446/disneys-perfect-answer-to-barbie-is-doc-mcstuffins; Elizabeth Harris and Tanzina Vega, "Race in Toyland: A Nonwhite Doll Crosses Over," *New York Times*, July 26, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/27 /business/a-disney-doctor-speaks-of-identity-to-little-girls.html; Niggli interview.

105   Niggli interview; also see statements made by *Doc McStuffins*'s creator Chris Nee and general manager of Disney Junior Worldwide Nancy Kanter about differences in how black versus white children appreciated the property in Harris and Vega, "Race in Toyland." Disney's tacit endorsement of color blindness by white shoppers is rebutted in Jennifer Harvey, "Why We Need to Talk about Doc McStuffins and Race," *Huffington Post*, September 30, 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jennifer-harvey/why-we-need-to-talk-about-doc-mcstuffins -and-race_b_5636342.html; and Kate Tuttle, "If the Kids' TV Show 'Doc McStuffins' Is Teaching White Kids to Be Colorblind, I Want None of It," *Alternet*, July 31, 2014, https://www.alternet.org/education /if-kids-tv-show-doc-mcstuffins-teaching-white-kids-be-colorblind-i-want-none-it.

alienating heterosexual consumers while courting homosexual ones.[106] The result is more visibility of gay men in advertising but with limited articulation of same-sex desire as a core tenet of gay identity. So long as gay people shop like—or even better than—straight people, then queer desire can be subsumed into consumer culture and overcome through erasure.

Similarly, this suggests that blackness as a brand attribute is never benign, and unless it is believed to be offset by another salient feature that will cause non–African American shoppers to disregard it, retail environments like Target will largely seek to suppress it in the name of diversity. Ultimately, in choosing to diversify the types of girls inspired by *Annie*, blackness was excluded from the brand story as a distinct source of inspiration for consumers. If brand stories seek to resolve cultural tensions through appeals to consumerism, then the sublimation of blackness within a consumer-friendly construction of diversity seemingly offers up a narrative of postracial harmony by excluding African American characters as sources of inspiration for branded lifestyles. This is likely not the brand story Sony wanted to tell at retail, but it is one inscribed through an asymmetrical negotiation process with store buyers and merchandisers that establishes the storytelling conventions available to brand owners and licensees.[107]

Conclusion. In this article, I have sought to establish several interlocking claims that will hopefully encourage further study of retail as a contested storytelling medium for extending entertainment brands and media franchises into lifestyle brands. It is imperative that scholars look at several dynamics that shape both the availability and presentation of content at retail. These include both the asymmetrical power dynamics between channel owners (stores) and content providers (brand owners and licensees) as well as the ritualistic affirmation through shop talk of popular genres (product categories) and desired audiences (consumer demographic categories). It is also necessary to consider how a retailer's brand image might affect the brand story that consumer product divisions are seeking to tell. Licensors and licensees look to tell their stories through a variety of retailers, from big box to category killer to specialty shop, and increasingly online as well. It would be useful to compare how *Sesame Street*, *Frozen*, or *Annie*'s stories were presented at Toys "R" Us versus Hot Topic and Amazon .com versus ShopFlyJane.com (an online retailer focused on clothing and apparel for African Americans).

It seems fitting to end by considering online shopping and its potential to shift shop talk about race and merchandise. As of 2016, online shopping accounts for 7.8 percent

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106 Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 129.

107 Alternately, this story might well have suited Sony's ambivalent position on the film, which oscillated between playing up its African American influences and supporting a color-blind narrative in which Annie was an all-American girl who just happened to be black. The blog *Black Girl Long Hair* noted that many billboards for *Annie* simply included the title character in silhouette without any mention of Wallis. This allowed Sony to have it both ways, making Wallis's blackness a salient paratextual feature for certain audiences and erasing it entirely from the equation for others. BGLH Staff, "Representation Matters: Why Is DreamWorks Hiding Their First Black Main Character?," *Black Girl Long Hair* (blog), March 19, 2015, http://blackgirllonghair.com/2015/03 /representation-matters-so-why-is-dreamworks-hiding-their-first-black-main-character.

of total sales in the United States, which is a 15.1 percent increase over the first quarter of 2015.[108] Depending on how one chooses to interpret these numbers, they either confirm the continued dominance of bricks-and-mortar retail or point to a gradual but meaningful incursion into retail spaces—or both. That ambiguity points to the current struggle in merchandizing; online shopping has generated a great deal of shop talk about how retailers and brand owners might recalibrate their storytelling strategies to reach consumers in both environments. Significantly, the brand-marketing-strategy firm WD Partners claims that "retailers need help innovating" and it is the brand owner's job to "inspire the retailer to inspire the shopper" by "help[ing] them deliver" new experiences for consumers.[109] In other words, WD Partners presents the perception that retailers must adjust their approaches to hold off online competitors as an opportunity for brand owners—who supposedly have a better understanding of how brand communities engage with their properties. This allows them to reclaim some of their authority in negotiating with retailers, although the latter are still clearly regarded as clients who need to be impressed.

Will such strategies generate new ways to tell transmedia stories and present extractable merchandise as immersive lifestyle opportunities? Possibly. Will such strategies generate new approaches to aligning minority-centered brands with consumer-centric lifestyles? Probably not. Even as they recognize that many nonwhite consumers prefer online shopping over unwelcoming store environments, brand owners and strategists remain (color) blind to race as influencing factor in retail stories.[110] While WD Partners advocates for brand owners to stop selling "in-store stor[ies]" and instead focus on "total shopper journey stor[ies]" that "transcend the store," shop talk still constructs consumers according to preconstituted identity categories built primarily around gender and age.[111]   ✴

108   "Quarterly Retail E-Commerce Sales 1st Quarter 2016," *US Census Bureau News*, May 17, 2016, https://www.census.gov/retail/mrts/www/data/pdf/ec_current.pdf.

109   Schroff, "Third Wave Retail."

110   Nadra Nittle, "Online Shopping While Black: Until Racial Profiling Stops, the Internet Has an Edge over the Mall," *Racked*, November 25, 2015, http://www.racked.com/2015/11/25/9769638/cyber-monday-shopping-while-black.

111   Schroff, "Third Wave Retail."