

## Doll wars: Fashion Dolls come in a Variety of Images

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NEW YORK — Not that long ago, a fashion doll meant Barbie wearing a taffeta gown and driving a pink Corvette.

This holiday season, there's a range of fashion dolls marketed in a variety of images. At one end of the spectrum are Disney Princesses that are all about fantasy, and the popular American Girls that serve as ways to teach children history lessons. At the other end are dolls like Bratz, Flavas and My Scene Barbies with voluptuous bodies and come-hither fashions like leopard print bustiers and skin-tight, low-rise jeans. Their accessories include black stretch limousines.

In the middle are Zodiac Girlz, named after the 12 zodiac signs, aimed to help girls develop their inner selves. There are also Groovy Girls, cloth dolls that are wholesome versions of some of the trendiest fashion dolls.

And Barbie, still glamorous, still swathed in pink packaging.

"Girls used to have one doll on whom they projected any kind of fantasy," said independent toy consultant Chris Byrne. "Now there is a doll for almost every mood or personality that the little girl might imagine."

Elizabeth Furey, a 12-year-old from New York, enjoys collecting the historic American Girl Dolls, like Kit from the Depression era and Felicity from the colonial period.

"Their stories are really interesting, and they have nice outfits," she said. As for buying anything Bratz, she says she's not interested.

"They're weird looking. Their clothes are kind of trappy," said Elizabeth, who also likes to play computer games.

But Abby Smith, 9, from Abbottstown, Pa., is keen on anything Bratz. "They're cool," she said. "It makes me feel like a teenager."

In buying dolls, parents must decide what message they want their children to get from their toys. Patricia Farrell, a psychologist based in Englewood Cliffs, N.J., says the choice of a doll "will tell you what the little girl's aspirations are, how she is being pushed by her family."

And sociologists stress how important a role dolls play in shaping a girl's values. "Dolls are part of one's identity," said Patricia Leavy, a sociology professor at Stonehill College in Easton, Mass. "Popular girls tend to pick having the right doll and all the accessories that go with it."

Leavy and other critics argue that some of the dolls are inappropriate. She calls the trendier dolls, particularly Bratz, which were released by MGA Entertainment in 2001, "hyper-sexualized."

Joanne Oppenheim, co-author of the annual Oppenheim Toy Portfolio, an independent toy guide, says, "There's a lot more cheesy taste out there, and I don't understand the mind set that would want to bring that into the home."

But Mary Dolheimer, Abby Smith's mother, doesn't mind her daughter playing with Bratz.

"I see her just role playing, doing her hair, dressing her. I don't see (Abby) commenting on the social context of the doll," she said. "It is more or less a toy that she manipulates."

Bratz are a big hit. The dolls, and Mattel's My Scene Barbies, feature oversized heads and pouty lips, with lots of makeup. Flavas, the latest fashion doll from Mattel, are hip-hop-inspired and feature big gold chains.

While observers are heartened that there's more diversity in terms of the dolls being multicultural — a big contrast to Barbie, who dominated fashion dolls for 40 years — it's still hard for dolls that don't fit the American ideal to be accepted.

Tonner Doll Co., which has had success with its collectible \$125 Emme doll, named after the popular full-figured model, is not sure whether to press forward with a mass market version for girls.

"Emme is a plus-size woman who is a symbol of beauty and fashion. Try to put it against dolls with fake fur and glitter, and I'm not sure how it will do," said Tom Courtney, director of marketing at Tonner in Hurley, N.Y.

However, 3 Muses LLC, which developed the Zodiac Girlz concept, is diversifying its dolls beyond ethnic backgrounds — one of the Zodiac Girlz comes with a wheelchair. The doll line, made by Integrity Toy, is sold only at K-B Toys.

"I wanted to make something that was sweet and wholesome but still cool," said Rosina P. Rothman, president and creative director of 3 Muses.

Copying the strategy that Mattel has used with Barbie, the toy makers are producing more than dolls; they're also creating merchandise such as clothing and full-size bicycles under the Bratz, American Girl and other brands.

The American Girl line features clothes for girls that match some of the dolls' fashions. Mattel sells the merchandise through catalogs and online and at stores in Manhattan and Chicago. Bratz maker MGA Entertainment has produced a line of flashy bikes and phones shaped like lips.