



“Collect ‘em all”

Gender, consumerism and the Shopkins phenomenon

BY LAURA ELIZABETH PINTO

For decades, collecting and trading have been part of kids’ play-lives — from baseball cards (and other trading cards), to marbles, to garbage pail kids, Beanie Babies, and Smurf figurines of more recent decades. In fact, educational researchers have been studying children’s interest in collecting since the early part of the 20th century (Mcgreevy, 1990; Whitley, 1929; Witty & Lehman, 1930). Influential researcher and psychologist Caroline Burk identified a “collecting instinct” based on her research with children in the U.S. She reported that 90% of children surveyed collected something, and most had several collections. She also noted that the desire to collect began as early as three years old and intensified from ages eight to 10. Collections were influenced by friends, family, and fads. Compared to the early 20th century, collections are less about nature (leaves, shells, etc.) and more about consumer goods (Mcgreevy, 1990).

It’s no surprise that marketers have capitalized on the urge to collect. Many products aimed at children over the years encouraged collecting and trading — from Beanie Babies to Garbage Pail Kids, and a host of other successful collectible toy brands. Most recently, Australian toy maker Moose Toys hit the jackpot with Shopkins,

named the Toy Industry Association toy of the year. Shopkins are small toys that represent items a person might shop for — but presented in a “cute” anthropomorphic format (guitar-playing broccoli, a giggling mushroom, a pear wearing sunglasses). “Play” involves kids collecting the toy figurines, and trading with peers in an attempt to achieve a full set. Shopkins produces the toys in varying quantities so that some are “rare” and “exclusive” (which can be determined using the Shopkins List application) making them more valuable in kids’ eyes, and therefore more tradeable. By selling “blind bags” and “blind baskets,” the company can add to the intrigue and “hide” the rare pieces for buyers to discover. Even adult toy collectors are participating Shopkins collecting — posting “unboxing” and “haul” videos.

Ultra-cutesy Shopkins are very obviously marketed to girls, evident by the very pink packaging and frequent occurrence of female product-toys (e.g., tiny make-up items). Marketing Shopkins to girls was a deliberate plan based on Moose Toys’ success with a similar collectable line, Trash Pack toys, which was marketed to boys by promoting monster-like creatures.

The fact that Shopkins toys are marketed in a cloak of pink may not be a problem, but a broader issue in the gendered nature of toys is. Play is an important part of childhood — how we play and what we play as children helps us to make sense of the world around us, it is an important part of socialization (when play involves others) and identity formation. Shopkins implies that “shopping is for girls/women,” a stereotype that is not necessarily positive. Stereotypes like this one conveyed by toys and the way that they are marketed correspond to inequalities we see in adult life. With respect to gender, the inequities work both ways: on the one hand, the Shopkins-Trash Pack dichotomy reinforces stereotypes that girls “ought to” like shopping and things that are pink, thus limiting their perceived choices. On the other hand, the stereotypes are also potentially damaging for boys, who might conclude that a boy “ought not” like shopping if he is to be masculine, undermining the confidence of boys who might not be drawn to “gross” or “rough-and-tumble” toy categories and themes. And boys are more likely than girls to be stigmatized when crossing gender boundaries with respect to play and toys (for example, consider the “Princess Boy” phenomenon a few years back). As a consequence, the social nature of the “get and trade” concept of collectable toys like

Shopkins leads to single-gender play if the gendered-marketing is successful. If girls in a school are engaging in Shopkins play, but boys are reluctant to participate, then less interaction will occur among kids of different genders.

Collection-based play can actually be beneficial to younger children. It aids in developing some executive functions, such as learning concepts of sorting and similarity and applying rules to determine sets (for example, stamp collecting helps children to examine, explore, and develop criteria) (McAlister, Cornwell, & Cornain, 2011). Trading can play a role in learning about value, and the process of trading and bartering can contribute to socialization: when participating in a barter, the child is honing a theory of mind, which can contribute to the development of prosocial behavior (McAlister, Cornwell, & Cornain, 2011). However, when play becomes all about buying and accumulating, it reinforces lessons about the accumulation of things for the sake of things, not about finding beauty in treasures that might not be mass produced (such as the nature-based collections of years passed).

The Shopkins world reinforces — even glorifies — consumer culture. The entire toy brand, including its name, is about shopping. The collect-and-trade aspect of the toy guarantees repeat purchases — strengthened by the toy brand's core premise of play being about shopping itself. Kids can use various Shopkins apps and website tools to create shopping lists, play games that involve virtual shopping, and so forth. That play is part of identity formation, and so Shopkins contributes to tying one's identity to being a consumer. This, itself, is problematized by many scholars. When people define themselves by their spending habits and things they own, they attempt to spend more and accumulate more as a pursuit of happiness — but research has repeatedly shown that conspicuous consumption does not lead to personal fulfillment.

Shopkins were undoubtedly found beneath many Christmas trees this season. But as with any toy, parents can turn Shopkins' shortcomings into "teachable moments" with their children. Shopkins can open up multiple discussions about gender stereotypes, about consuming and shopping, and about value. Parents can engage children in repeated conversations about rewarding leisure activities that don't necessarily involve spending money or being in a store, and experience some of those with their children. Parents can also augment Shopkins play

and talk with interesting stories aimed at the Shopkins demographic. For example, the Dr. Seuss classic *The Lorax* (Random House) could open a discussion about parallels between Shopkins and Thneeds — including what raw materials go into each, and where they wind up. Shel Silverstein's *The Missing Piece* (HarperCollins) in which a circle seeking its missing piece decides that it was happier when searching for the piece than having it. Finally, while much more nuanced and complicated, Gertrude Stein's *The World Is Round* (Harper Design 75th edition) is a picture book that can open discussions about exploration of the world and identity.

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