

Toys, T-Shirts, and Tumblers: These Are Not the Paratexts You Are Looking For
(Hint: The Films Are)

Disney Channel Franchises & the Fashion Paratext

Morgan Genevieve Blue, Independent Scholar

I would like to develop this topic in a few directions relative to my interest in girls' media culture and Disney Channel franchises. First, I think one of our aims here is to expand our notion of the franchise. This roundtable's driving concern complicates the typical assumption that a media franchise originates with or extends from one or more theatrically-released feature films. In my work on girls' media, I explore franchises that originate with Disney Channel's talent-driven television sitcom series, and in which a theatrical film might better be understood as a rare paratext—possible only for the most lucrative franchises. To date, *Hannah Montana* is the only such franchise (out of about a dozen) to include theatrical film releases (*Hannah Montana & Miley Cyrus: Best of Both Worlds Concert*, 2008 and *Hannah Montana: The Movie*, 2009). Furthermore, this roundtable requests us to consider media franchises that are built around a central concept, character, or narrative, rather than a particular text or technology. This stretches the notion of the franchise to better accommodate multiple types of paratexts and a variety of franchise formations. To avoid generating false distinctions between paratexts and their originating pieces of intellectual property, we also must continue to position paratexts as productive agents of the central concepts or stories that they help to produce, reproduce, and extend.

Second, we might explore the different industry logics and relationships that contribute to the kinds of paratexts that are produced as part of a given franchise. In Disney's case, Disney Consumer Products partnered with an apparel manufacturer, Disney Channel, and Target stores to create and sell Disney Channel themed fashion lines for tween girls, inspired by the wardrobes of Disney Channel characters. In 2010, they launched the D-Signed collection, which works as an umbrella brand that can easily accommodate fashion lines for each new female protagonist of Disney Channel's series and made-for-TV movies, as well as seasonal updates to some lines. D-Signed allows Disney to capitalize on the creation of a lifestyle brand for tween girls, rather than simply licensing logo-heavy fashion, cosmetics, and toys as it has for previous franchises, including *Lizzie McGuire*, *That's So Raven*, and *Hannah Montana*. Disney's development of proprietary (rather than licensed) character-based (rather than logo-based) fashion lines for girls, marketed using Disney Channel stars' likenesses, can provide insight into the strategic development of merchandise with greater paratextual power than the usual logo T-shirt. Efforts such as Disney's D-Signed collections can contribute new avenues for marketing to children and families beyond the seemingly straight-forward licensing of logos or likenesses. As such, they provide great examples of how different strategies

might allow for the development of different paratexts. Additionally, they might shift our thinking about the role(s) of paratexts in franchise-audience relations.

This brings me to my third point. Considering television franchises, and paratexts like Disney Channel's fashion lines, can add texture to our understanding of the labors of merchandise, talent, and audiences. T-shirts and tumblers plastered with film titles, produced and distributed by myriad license-holders, might work to bring audiences into the world of the film-as-franchise-strategy. But such products do not exactly provide entry into the story world of the film. Toys, however, can function as technologies for experiencing and expanding the world of the film, whether we consider the toy the originating text or a franchise paratext (or both). I'd argue that the D-Signed fashion collections can act as technologies for everyday identity production through the story-worlds of their related series and star personae. The D-Signed collections mark Disney Channel's investment in girls' identity production through typically feminized activities such as watching TV, shopping, daily dressing, playing dress-up, and identifying with stars. They enable some audiences and consumers to position themselves within the Disney media universe by bringing elements of the story into their daily lives. If, as our guiding topic suggests, franchises are often developed for their potential to sell toys, it isn't much of a stretch to think that Disney might begin to develop television series with greater potential for selling D-Signed apparel. Certainly, the tween girl fashion market existed long before Disney developed D-Signed, and before series like *Hannah Montana* aimed to grab viewers' attention with mechanized closets and extensive, intricately styled wardrobes. For these franchises, a film may never factor in as primary text or as paratext, but fashion—not only Princess dress-up play, but wardrobe shopping and everyday dressing—seems to be taking center stage as the way to target tween girl television viewers, while extending multiple Disney brands.