Ghouls, Dolls, and Girlhoods: Fashion and Horror at Monster High

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In

Generation Z:
Zombies, Popular Culture, and Educating Youth

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This is a preprint; the definitive version is in press at http://www.springer.com/us/
Wohlwend, K. E. (In press). Ghouls, dolls, and girlhoods: Fashion and horror at Monster High. In V. Carrington, J. Rowsell, E. Priyadharshini & R. Westrup (Eds.), *Generation Z: Zombies, popular culture, and educating youth*. New York: Springer.

Introduction

How does a zombie doll in a popular horror franchise for tween girls serve as a productive site of contestation among overlapping visions of girlhood? In this chapter, I examine *Ghoulia Yelps*, a zombie character in the popular Monster High fashion doll franchise, not only as a toy in a global flow of licensed consumer goods but also as a site of identity construction and digital media production where facile notions of girlhoods are both enacted and reimagined (Forman-Brunell, 2012). Monster High is reconceptualized here as the site of converging cultural imaginaries (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014) in which children play in and out of gendered futures around fashion, adolescence, diversity, and schooling. Critical analysis of tween girls' digital play with a zombie doll on social media reveals the resonances, slippages, and paradoxes among identity texts produced about, for, and by girls. After describing the scope of the Monster High franchise and how it materializes expectations for characters, consumers, and players, I next examine how these dolls and identity texts circulate three dominant imaginaries of girlhood. Finally, I analyze YouTube videos of girls' play with the Ghoulia Yelps character to see how tween's foregrounding of horror and wielding of zombie tropes opens opportunities to rupture and reimagine girlhoods.

"We are Monster High!"

Monster High, a toy franchise by Mattel, is a fashion doll series targeted to 6 to 10 year-old-girls. The Monster High dolls are designed to attract girls who have outgrown the massive Disney Princess franchise (also Mattel); the tween market niche previously occupied by MGA's Bratz--"girls with a passion for fashion". Like Bratz dolls, Monster High characters are teenage fashionistas, but with a ghoulish twist. Each character is the offspring of classic cinematic monsters in horror films: Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy, and so on. The 12-inch fashion dolls index their monster parentage through distinguishing features such as distinctive hairstyles, skin colors, clothing, and accessories such as horror-themed pets.

At approximately twenty USD, Monster High dolls are more expensive than Barbie dolls which are marketed to a younger consumer. Furthermore, rather than stand-alone doll clothing and accessories packs to dress a single doll, there are multiple versions of each Monster High doll. For example, there are at least six versions of the Ghoulia doll with different costumes and hairstyles that tie into a film, video game, or themed occasion. One version is dressed for a European fashion spree in "Scaris, City of Fright" while the Dead Tired Ghoulia version is dressed in pajamas for a slumber party or in MH terms, a "creepover". (Punning is a running device for coating Monster High products with a veneer of horror.)

Engaging Doll Players through Character Narratives

Webisodes--two-minute online videos on monsterhigh.com--supply most of the fantasy narratives that revolve around a small set of teenage "monsteristas" and their friendships, shopping trips, parties, concerts, and boyfriends. One of its producers described the tone of a planned film project, *Monster High Musical*, as the convergence of several horror films "*'Beetlejuice* meets *Grease* meets *The Addams Family* meets *Edward Scissorhands"* (Zimmerman, 2010). Rather than a foundational literary or film narrative that provides a cohesive storyline for dramatic play (e.g., anchoring fairy tale films in the Disney Princess franchise), the Monster High characters depend on their parentage and links to classic horror films for doll costumes and character traits: the grayed skin, stagger, and unintelligible groaning of brain-eating zombies, the fur, claws, and howling of werewolves, the pallor, fangs, and Transylvanian accent of vampires, and so on. New characters

are constantly introduced with regular arrivals of "new ghouls" at school, expanding the franchise and narrative possibilities. Although the Monster High franchise includes an ever-increasing number of dolls, the supporting media narratives feature a much smaller set of core characters: Cleo DeNile (queen bee character and daughter of the Mummy and Cleopatra), Ghoula Yelps (daughter of zombies, slave to Cleo DeNile, and the focus of this analysis), Draculaura (a vegan vampire and daughter of Dracula), Clawdeen Wolf (daughter of werewolves), and Frankie Stein (daughter of Frankenstein and Bride of Frankenstein). The social relationships among characters are complex: each character has a sub-group of girlfriends and a boyfriend, marked by pins on her or his Monster High student profile and linked through other fictional social media on the Monster High website.

High school is simply the backdrop for the parties and social dramas that happen in webisode narratives. Common in children's media, the high school setting sets up the doll characters as older girls that tweens might admire...and want to purchase. The dolls are designed to appeal to young girls beyond preschool age by eschewing the friendly innocent ingénue typical of princess characters and offering an edgier "cool girl" character, signaled through the fashion choices that mix teen vogue and horror motifs. For example, innocence and a princess motif in one of Mattel's most recent Disney Princesses doll, *Frozen's* Elsa, manifest in a wide-eyed expression with friendly smile, thick blonde hair, and Barbie-doll body in a rigidly upright pose, hands lifted slightly away from her sides, fully-clothed head-to-toe in glitter-encrusted tiara, pastel blue ballgown, and translucent snowflake-speckled cape. By contrast, a Monster High doll's is more uncovered than covered, exposing the midriffs, shoulders, or thighs of body with a model's anorexic torso and long legs, topped by a very large head with heavily-mascaraed eyes, full and unsmiling lips, and colorful highlighted hair. The characters' costumes are hip with intentional juxtaposition of fishnet, plaids, sequins, fur, and lace, with accessories and patterns stylized from monster features: stitched flesh, claws, fangs, unraveled bandages, dripping blood, exposed brains, and so on. Regardless of the gruesome undertones, the characters' activities largely focus on familiar Barbie territory: shopping, clothing design, hair styling, and makeovers. Despite the ostensibly scholastic setting, the webisode narratives largely feature extra-curricular activities such as parties, rock concerts, and dating. In short, this is schooling and horror in the service of a fashionable teenage popularity.

Reaching Child Consumers through Flows of Commercial Goods and Digital Media

As a top-selling toy line for Mattel, Monster High is a highly successful franchise that blends character narratives and advertising messages with children's everyday uses of consumer goods. These products make up the stuff of imaginative play and storying as characters materialize through tween's interactions with the extensive Monster High line of products that promise an edgy allure, capitalizing on the desires of teen wannabes for fashion design, jewelry, crafts, cosmetics, and new media:

- Dolls and accessories
- Crafting kits for fashion accessories such as headbands and jewelry
- Doll-making and clothing design sets: "Create a Monster"
- Cosmetics
- Halloween costumes
- Clothing: pajamas, underwear, tunics, leggings, hoodies

- Accessories: jewelry, hats, earmuffs, gloves, baseball cap, fishnet tights, leg warmers, arm warmers
- Electronics: karaoke machine, cell phone and tablet cases and skins, headphones, digital alarm clocks, cameras

Each Monster High product is an intertext (Kinder, 1991) that connects to and must be read with other commercial products in the scope of the brand's transmedia (e.g., toys, video games, school supplies, snacks, vitamins, shampoo, and other goods linked by the same anchoring media characters and narratives). The transformative power of the transmedia comes from the repetition across time and space where products are taken up, read, played, and used all day, every day-- each use a remaking of the toy's meaning (Collier, 2012; Pennycook, 2010). "Transmedia franchises place co-branded content, and with it their ideological messages and inducements to consumption, throughout our virtual and spatial environment, where our individual traversals will encounter it again and again" (Lemke, 2009, p. 292). Lemke argues that we traverse these new kinds of texts in far-reaching flows, rather than as individual instances. Finally, these pervasive and persistent transversals with multiple flows of transmedia produce contradictions and incongruities, which offer opportunities for critique and remaking during children's play (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014).

For example, Monster High transmedia connect to other blockbuster horror franchises marketed to adolescent girls such as Twilight (Meyer, 2005) that include young adult literature, full-length films, video games, blogs, wikis, fanfiction, and other digital media. Monster High's indirect connection to trendy adolescent film and social media further adds to the cachet of the dolls for tweens. Social media and digital media for Monster High are extensive:

- Video games[1]: *Thirteen Wishes, Skulltimate Rollermaze,* and *Ghoul Spirit* (Nintendo)
- Mobile apps: *Sweet 1600, Finders Kreepers* (Mattel) with cross-product promotions through codes packaged with dolls that unlock additional app features
- Webisodes: 200+ two-three minute webisodes
- Music Video: We are Monster High commercial video plus montage version of fan videos
- Website www.monsterhigh.com where registered viewers can:
    - Create a student profile
    - Design, shop for, and dress an avatar at the "Maul"
    - Play web games
    - Post a "scream" [120 character text message] as a Monster High character
    - Compose a memory page with an uploaded photo for the "fearbook"
- Feature-length films: *Frights, Camera, Action; 13 Wishes; Scaris, City of Frights;* and *New Ghoul @ School*
- Social media sites (Mattel):
    - YouTube channel with 351,125 subscribers (http://www.youtube.com/user/MonsterHigh)
    - Facebook account with 2 million likes (https://www.facebook.com/MonsterHigh)

[1] The young adult literature on Monster High is not addressed here as the characters and storylines in the book series by Harrison (2010) differ markedly from the Mattel franchise and are written for a teenage rather than a tween audience.

- Tumblr site for the MH newspaper, The Gory Gazette (http://gorygazette.tumblr.com/)
- @MonsterHigh Twitter account with 37,600 followers "Freaky just got fabulous. Welcome to the official Monster High Twitter! Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster." (https://twitter.com/MonsterHigh)

In addition to this sample of commercially-produced licensed goods and media, fans have created innumerable wikis, blogs, and image- and video-sharing sites for their own child-produced videos, photos, and other digital texts.

Dolls and Identity Texts

The meanings in all the franchise's media narratives and products cluster in the Monster High dolls as *semiotic aggregates* (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). The notion of transmedia as aggregated texts recognizes that material objects can be read as layered assemblages of meanings, modes, practices, histories, and discourses, drawing from Rowsell and Pahl's (2007) theorization of sedimented identities, in which objects concretize their prior meanings, identities, and uses. Furthermore, dolls are identity texts that invite users to project pretend identities on to the dolls as proxies or enact pretend identities in relation to dolls. Toys—and particularly dolls—are designed to exaggerate their expected uses and anticipated identities (Wohlwend, 2009) so that the meanings of the toy are clear and easy for children to recognize and play (Brougère, 2006). This exaggeration is accomplished through material designs and associated discourse that can be analyzed and traced to histories of artifact meanings and uses.

Dolls carry anticipated identities (Wohlwend, 2009), the ideal users and target demographics projected by marketers, are sedimented into the dolls' designs and advertising messages through manufacturers' production practices and distribution processes (Wohlwend, 2012). The anticipated identities of sexy girl, trendsetter, and avid shopper are communicated through explicit directives in tag lines (e.g. "Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster.") but also through product designs. The dolls are differentiated by skin color, hair color, and costume motif but all dolls have an ultra-thin and leggy body clothed in a skimpy outfit, long flowing hair coiffed in ever-changing configurations, and a face with overly-large eyes, full lips, and protruding cheekbones). The projected uses of franchise products (e.g., cosmetics, shampoo, trendy fashions like leg and arm warmers) align with prevailing societal expectations related to gender, beauty ideals (Whitney, 2013), and consumption (e.g., girls are passionate about shopping). Carrington (2003) analyzed Diva Starz dolls (also by Mattel) as identity kits, looking at the dolls' placement against a global "textual landscape" of commercial messages, film narratives, television, music, videogames, and digital websites. Her deconstruction of the dolls' aggregate texts found ideological content in the designs of facial and body features, clothing, and pre-recorded snippets of speech (e.g. "Do you like shopping? What's your favorite store? That's a good one. Let's go to the mall with our friends and buy something we can wear to school" (Carrington, 2003, p. 89). Identity texts in commercial transmedia promote further consumption of products in the franchise through incentives to collect more dolls or to stay in-style by keeping up with the latest fashions or doll versions.

> The texts of consumer culture provide displays of available identities and lives. These texts are built around displays of style and taste, and children are being trained in particular patterns and knowledges around consumption. These texts are what they reflect – they are

> unashamedly commodities to be purchased and consumed, linked to the assumption of particular consumer identities. (Carrington, 2003, p. 94)

These studies suggest the need to look beyond transmedia film storylines and products to consider a doll's meanings that are conveyed through:

- character traits in film as well as film scripts and song lyrics
- implied consumer attributes in advertising images and commercials
- consumer affiliation with brand names
- anticipated player uses in toy designs and video games
- designed: modal meanings in material designs of toys (e.g., colors, fabrics)
- materialized through use: histories of social practices (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007)
- shared among children: knowledge of characters, film scripts, play roles, and local peer culture values (Wohlwend, 2012)
- circulated through global transmedia flows (Lemke, 2009)
- situated in commercial processes of production and marketing
- branded as markers of wide consumer acceptance: Mattel

These messages, verbal and material, must be read as intertexts, to understand how they play against and with one another to make particular ways of "doing girl" seem natural and expected.

Doll Play, Media, and Cultural Imaginaries

When children play with dolls, they access the multiple potential meanings to perform the expected identities and roles in these semiotic aggregates. This makes doll play a key site where children take up and reproduce stereotypical ways of doing *girl* but also where they can use imagination as a social practice to remake and expand ways of participating in childhood cultures. Through play, children easily access, negotiate, and combine the dense meaning potentials in a doll's multiple identity texts for 1) characters in literary and media narratives, 2) consumer expectations in brand identity marketing, 3) social trajectories in peer culture, and 4) shared expectations in children's collective cultural imaginaries (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). In this view, play is a productive literacy with reconstructive potential, both semiotically and socially (Wohlwend, 2011; in press).

Semiotically, children at play detach the taken-for-granted meanings of ordinary objects and attach a pretend meaning to create props, toys, and dolls, or whatever is needed for the immediate play scenario. For example, a child at play can remake a cardboard gift box designed for a dress shirt and remake it into a pretend laptop computer by flipping open its unhinged side and tapping away on an imaginary keyboard. In the same way, a producer's design for a fashion doll embedded in its smiling plastic features, sleek hair, and silken gown can be easily replayed and shifted from glamorous princess to powerful superhero by a player's reimagining that swoops the doll through the air (Wohlwend, 2011). For young children, these improvisations lead to re-negotiations of who-is-playing-what when roles are contested or confusing and players need to stop to question, clarify, or revise the meaning of a particular prop or action. Playful literacies enable children to draw upon their rich cultural repertoires (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003), build upon familiar ways of making meaning with ordinary artifacts (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007) and imagine together to mediate global media flows (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014) and.

> . ...the mass media construct the *social imaginary*, the place where kids situate themselves in their emotional life, where the future appears as a narration of possibilities as well as limits. (Aronowitz, 1992, p. 195, emphasis in the original)

Socially, children at play are purposive cultural participants and producers who are capable of not only remaking the meanings of identity texts of dolls and toys but also wielding these texts to access and participate in social groups and peer cultures. Young children's peer cultures are powered by desires to belong, which often involves popular transmedia valued by children as markers of social status, tokens of shared affinities and friendships (Pugh, 2009), and the material stuff that creates scarcity economies in classrooms (Fernie, Madrid, & Kantor, 2011). One of the forces that binds peer cultures together is children's desire to keep adults out (Kyratzis, 2004); in this sense the gross and the gruesome (e.g., garbage pail kids) provide valuable boundary markers to repel adults and enforce a child-only space (James, 1998).

Further, girlhood studies show that doll play is pedagogical, teaching girls about possible futures though not necessarily in desirable ways (Wertheimer, 2006). For example, fashion dolls point to gendered futures for girls as fashion-forward shoppers who keep up with the latest trends and relentlessly consume.

In this way, tweens' play with dolls can be understood as cultural production in which their pretense as Monster High characters is shared through digital media in participatory cultures such as affinity groups on fan websites. Understanding tween's Monster High doll play as digital participation and cultural production means locating the sites where children come together (i.e., moving from classrooms to online spaces), where they can reimagine the worlds they know and play the worlds they imagine, such as media, fashion, and adolescence in a future high school. For tweens, Monster High doll play merges digital literacies, fashion design, doll collecting, and media production as play moves out of school into after-school programs, YouTube media sharing sites, and fan wikis for digital affinity groups.

The meanings and uses of Monster High products shift across the multiple cultural contexts that children travel every day. For example, in the course of the day, a tween might dress in Monster High clothing, go to school, play with friends in an after-school program, shop at the mall, all the while texting, updating friends on social media, and uploading a selfie to the Monster High website. In the span of one day, children engage transmedia across social spheres of home, school, consumer, digital and peer cultures (Wohlwend, 2013). In this perspective, the multiple identity texts in the semiotic aggregates of Monster High dolls enable pivots in and out of converging imaginaries (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014).

Nexus analysis, a form of mediated discourse analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, 2004), is useful for tracking how Monster High doll play fits into the imagined trajectories for girls that cycle in and out of a moment of digital media. Nexus analysis is action-oriented. This orientation situates the handling of dolls, making of digital video, and posting to social media in cultural spheres of accepted and expected social practices with valued artifacts that are used in particular ways to pull off particular identities. It also tracks global trajectories by following the echoes and emanations of consumption and production practices with transmedia, with an eye toward identifying small points of rupture as opportunities for transformation (Wohlwend, 2014). Elsewhere, my colleague Carmen Medina have argued that the ways children play media represent their understandings and remakings of cultural imaginaries; that is, the way they use media toys both replay stereotypical identities but also transform identity texts to better represent their realities and purposes (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). In the next sections, I examine four imaginaries—imagined futures for girls

anticipated by Mattel--that converge around the dolls and future girhoods: fashion, adolescent sexuality, diversity, and schooling.

Girlhood Imaginaries: Anticipated Futures in Monster High

Anticipating Fashion Consumption: Monsteristas and Makeovers

Monster High is all about fashion, circulating a well-worn post-feminist trope: fashionistas (e.g., *Clueless*, 1995) who want to stay current by buying the latest trends with a crossover subtext that staying in style is the key to popularity in high school. Like Bratz, Monster High dolls are fashion dolls that "emphasize girls' future roles as consumers of the various products and services required to produce normative femininity: hairstyle, makeup, clothes, and accessories—ranging from jewelry to flashy cars—are critically important" (Hains, 2012, p. 123). In addition to postfeminist discourse about gendered futures, the desire to own the latest fashion (dolls as well as articles in the tweens' clothing line) circulates consumerist discourse through a neo-liberal imperative to continuously consume (McRobbie, 2004). This need to keep up also promotes identities as collectors as fans seek to purchase not only the extensive range of doll characters but also to keep up by purchasing the most recent version of each doll.

Monster High transmedia invites girls to produce and to imagine themselves as fashion designers, re-semiotized via the horror theme as mad scientists in Create-A-Monster kits in which children design a customized doll by combining body parts, clothing, and accessories.

> Monster High creator Garrett Sander and designer Rebecca "Robecca" Shipman share their in-the-coffin tips and tricks for creating your own scary-cool student bodies with Monster High™ Create-A-Monster™ Design Lab. Mix and match heads, arms legs, ears, wings, fashions, wigs and shoes to customize your very own monster creation. You'll be sparking new life in no time. (from the Monster High website: http://www.monsterhigh.com/en-us/freaky-fab/bring-your-monster-to-life.html)

The Create-a-Monster kit and similar jewelry and headband accessory-making kits connect to histories of girls' crafting and dollmaking. Similarly, the website encourages children to create avatars and play dress-up games.

Anticipating Adolescent Bodies: "Be Yourself. Be Unique. Be a Monster"

Monster High characters are designed to be teenagers, slightly older than the target tween demographic. The adolescent future depicted for tween girls is one of exaggerated sexualization, commonplace in tween doll digital media. For example, in analyzing Mattel's bargiegirls.com virtual world, Black (2013) found girls' avatars had

> a highly sexualized appearance (form-fitting and revealing clothing) ... The "identity kit" available for the avatars also sends the message that physical appearance, particularly markers of feminine beauty that conform to traditional Western standards such as long hair, makeup and enhanced features, is most valued in this space. (p. 10)

Beyond promoting a homogenizing and impossible beauty ideal to young girls, the hypersexuality of teen fashion dolls resonates with a tween's desire for more power and independence.

> This sexuality, or sartorial gestures toward it, [that] encodes a sense of autonomy and personhood and has been sought after and welcomed by girls even as it is promoted by certain corners of the industry and decried by social commentators. An aspirational social identity, the tween, by definition, seeks to move out of 'tweenhood' and thus up the age prestige ladder. (Cook & Kaiser, 2004, p. 206).

With Monster High's body ideal comes anticipation of imperfection as girls aspire and fail to look like the impossibly thin fashion dolls. The material bodies of the dolls impose a desire for anorexic bodies as the narrative imposes a demand for a normative self-gaze in which girls' bodies are constructed as flawed. Girls are encouraged to "celebrate your own freaky flaws" in an overarching discourse of acceptance of selves and others, timely in Mattel's view "especially as bullying has become such a hot topic" (Mosbergen, 2013).

> "Celebrate Your Imperfections
>
> Hey ghoulfriends! Do you feel freaky fabulous when you look in the mirror? Monster High and WeStopHate are helping ghouls rewrite how they see themselves – from the inside out – with a ferociously fierce vocabulary! Those who are happy with themselves are less likely to put others down, so click below to resurrect your clawsome self-reflection." From Freaky Fab 13 tab > Behind the Screams on www.monsterhigh.com

However, the discourse of acceptance and diversity in Monster High is strategic, differentiating dolls and creating product recognition through iconic identifiers (Wohlwend, 2009) through each character's signature skin and hair colors in ways that convey no cultural identity, that is, difference that connotes no difference (McAllister, 2007; Orr, 2009). Like Bratz dolls' manufactured racial ambiguity, the impossible skin colors of green, blue, brown, merge with white, tan, brown, and black colors to convey difference in Monster High's fantasy racial identities and a marker of an exoticized sexuality. "The stereotypes of the overly-sexualized woman of color are well-established. In the case of the Bratz dolls, their colour stands as one more signifier for sexy" (Orr, 2009, p. 24). A quick reading of the characters' bios on the website further troubles the function of this faux-diversity, revealing boundary work that upholds separateness of monster racial categories through the pairings in which monsters only date the same kinds of monsters: vampires date vampires, werewolves date werewolves, zombies date zombies, and so on.

Anticipating High School Cliques: "Ghoulfriends", Boyfriends, and Social Dramas

The Monster High website, through elements that mimic Facebook and Twitter pages, focuses on a group of girls and their social relationships. For example, each character's friendships and social status are marked by pins on the website profile. Ghoulia Yelp's pins include Cleo De Nile, Frankie Stein, and Clawdeen Wolf; Cleo's reciprocal pin on Ghoulia's page marks their (queen bee/slave) friendship. Following familiar clique and "mean girls" tropes that permeate girls' popular media, belonging is of paramount importance so that a dominant theme in webisodes is making and keeping friends, with sub-texts about maintaining in-group status and sufficient popularity. This fashion troupe of friends are sexualized schoolgirls whose focus is on dating,

parties, and concerts with popularity as the ultimate goal. However similar to Ken's long-standing irrelevance in the venerable Barbie franchise, boyfriends are mostly beside the point and serve as accessories, useful as points of tension and competition among girls.

Monster High engages cultural imaginaries of future girlhoods, including anticipated worlds of fashion-forward consumption, adolescent sexuality, and popularity at school. These imaginaries are filled by post-feminist discourses that promote continual fashioning of bodies, clothing, profiles, and relationships to achieve ideals of the self-pleasing modern girl-woman circulated by lifestyle experts or celebrities (McRobbie, 2004; Tasker & Negra, 2007). Convergences among cultural imaginaries can produce amplifications when their associated identity texts (e.g., daughter, student, shopper, tweeter, and friend) resonate or distill into a unified theme. However, cultural convergences also produce slippages and contradictions that can rupture or transgress identity expectations for that social space (e.g., a texting student at school). Slippages among transmedia intertexts make their identity texts visible and available for remaking during children's improvisation during play or media production (Medina & Wohlwend, 2014). Tween girls' engagements with transmedia and their production of zombie texts enact their shared understandings of expectations for participation in media imaginaries of adolescent girlhoods, schooling, and fashion. However, these engagements of cultural imaginaries of popular media can clash with dominant imaginaries of childhood as a space of innocence (e.g., when children's media worlds are viewed as too sexual, violent, or vulgar and banned from early childhood education as corrupting influences). Monster dolls like Ghoulia violate these visions, rupturing dreams of children as innocents and so on.

Tweens and Zombies: Ambiguous Identity Texts with Rupturing Potential

In conceptualizing tween girls' relation to media, Cook and Kaiser (2004)

> recognize the complex negotiation that occurs between capital interests and girls' agency in their articulations of gender and sexuality. Girls may have little control over media representations, but they do exercise agency in the representations they create in the daily process of contemplating and dressing their bodies. Ultimately, this agency cannot be separated from the marketplace and the cultural spaces it generates – strategically, ambiguously. (Cook & Kaiser, 2004, p. 206)

In this cultural space of ambiguity lies the rupturing potential of the tween and the zombie. In the next secion, I examine websites and YouTube videos to see how girls actually take up the imaginaries in their digital play and online text-making with the zombie doll, Ghoulia Yelps.

Zombies are essentially a paradox—the living dead—and the Ghoulia Yelp character is no exception. Ghoulia is a brainy brain-eater, a fashionista with a zombie's hunched posture and an occasional fly buzzing around her face, the "smartest girl in school" who can only mumble and grunt, "Uhh ughh (Translation: I think fast but move in slow motion)", an outsider yet part of the in-group (www.monsterhigh.com). She is a chic zombie whose skimpy outfits cling to broken body, a decaying beauty, reminiscent of Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005). She is other to the rest of the monster girls' group with marginalized status as slave to the queen bee. The zombie character's intellect and love of reading is signaled by her cat's eye glasses and adds to her abject positioning by indexing the undesirability of a girl geek. As a zombie, she is sub-human with super-human strength.

But are girls making use of these paradoxes as opportunities for rupturing and remaking pre-conceived commercially-driven girlhoods? As girls move through childhood, princesses, fairy tales, and playrooms are left behind for these edgier fashionistas, social media, and girls' cultures in high school. Against this landscape of monstrosity, children play in and out of the convergences of horror, fashion, adolescence, and schooling to share their own imaginaries, depicted in their digital texts on social media.

Wielding Zombies and Horrifying Imaginaries

Dressing Up as Zombies, Sharing Ghoulia Collections, and Recruiting Digital Friends

"She has light blue hair with dark blue highlights, fishnet arm warmers, and sneakers are lace-up boots. Omigosh, they're so beautiful. I absolutely love them."
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DQySrNEiQA

Playing dress-up as zombies is a common theme in YouTube videos by tweens who collect Monster High dolls. Girls describe Ghoulia's costume in detail in these character reviews and often share their doll collections. In one video with 36,069 views, six-year-old Jade is dressed as the zombie doll and describes her own costume and each of seven Ghoulia dolls, "She has a brain headband and she has green glasses, a brain skirt, and germs on her um, some [bodice]. Her skirt can come off. And she has bloody high heels. And she comes with a drink, a postcard, and a brush." A key purpose of tweens' video posts is to recruit other Monster High fans to subscribe to a girl's YouTube channel and to like the review or leave comments, apparent in the description that introduces the video (posted by Jade's parent):

> Hi Everyone! This time we wanted to show you Jade's Ghoulia Collection. (We forgot Gloom Beach Ghoulia, Sorry!) Jade dressed up like Ghoulia to do the video. We are still new at the makeup... We will do similar videos on the other Ghouls! Please leave sweet comments. Jade is only 7 years old. Please Subscribe and Thumbs up! http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWt758eANs4 [168151 views, 243 likes, 93 dislikes, 6603 subscriptions]

The horror here is tame, made innocent by stylization that turns brains into pink fabric dotted with red squiggles that ever-so-slightly resemble brain tissue. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the focus is on being pretty—as edgier and older versions of themselves. Tweens in these videos are clearly enjoying playing with makeup and carefully employing teen cosmetics: blending gray foundation, brushing on black eyeliner and mascara. But not all child-made videos align so neatly with corporate visions of the dolls' uses as markers of post-feminist taste, neo-liberal consumption, and digital popularity.

Zombie Attacks at School: Rupturing Imaginaries through Death and Destruction

A search of YouTube reveals a range of Monster High dramas filmed by tween fans using dolls in various scenarios that go far beyond the bland storylines depicted in the webisodes. Dolls are smashed together in plastic embraces or physical fights over love triangles and dismembered (removable forearms and feet make this possible) and slaughtered in zombie attacks. For example, in one video series, various Monster High dolls are thrown into tall grass, buried in mud, or launched off a deck into the pond below and fished out of slimy water (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIcn73oHoAY).

One common theme is the sleepover that goes awry when Ghoulia goes on a brain-eating rampage and spreads the contagion by turning other dolls into zombies. In one video, five Monster High dolls discuss their options during a zombie siege. Girl players narrate off camera:

"We've got a bathroom and water, that's all we need...until we die of starvation. DIE."

"Nobody said anything about dying in my contract."

"Orrrrr we could just eat each other."

"Oh, that's—"

"Why would you say that??"

"Eeewww." [chorused]

"Girrrrl."

In the next scene, Ghoulia doll zombies attack the Monster High boy dolls, with much groaning and munching, while Cleo and another doll watch from their perch on the dollhouse wall, "Oh, no. The men are gone. I'm not sacrificing myself to try to help them."

Finally, one of the besieged dolls reveals that she is in fact a zombie and turns on the survivors. "And now I'll kill all of you next because *I* am not who you think I am. *I* am different. I'm [voice drops to sinister whisper] a zombie!" The Cleo doll shakes violently creating a blurred image and the Ghoulia doll [also missing forearms] quickly appears in her place onscreen. The zombie continues attacking the other dolls, continuing the massacre.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mErgdGzB21o

Tweens' plot dramas--and countless other Monster High fan videos--are very different than the insipid school-based crises on webisodes. Children are improvising dire perils and near-escapes to add suspense to their videos, creating gruesome (and giggly) dramas that are fueled by their knowledge of horror films and their awareness of peer viewers' preferences. The closing tag lines on videos urge viewers to subscribe, revealing the critical importance of recruiting other fans as digital friends, markers of cultural participation common on social media. Digital doll play is cultural production, connecting with other fans via the popular dolls and using their familiar characters to attract viewers and anchor cohesive stories. When girls collaborate to produce videos as in the zombie attack video, their filmed doll play captures moments of improvisation as they work within an emerging text and negotiate conflicting perspectives in-character, "Why would you say that?"

These tween videos rupture visions of children as zombie consumers in market worlds, passively eating hyper-feminine fashion identity texts in a stupefying progression from innocent princesses to mean girls. Instead, children play what they know, drawing on their understandings of the world around them, pulling in zombie media and cannibalistic themes in horror genres to stage their own versions of destruction in a high school overrun by zombies.

These films also trouble visions of children as zombie literacy users in need of a mind-numbing and dumbed-down pre-programmed curriculum. Instead, tweens demonstrate their literacy expertise and media savvy, inventing and sharing their stories with digital tools, manipulating cameras and screens as well as social media to create the biggest impact. The complexities in tweens' digital doll play invites critical comparisons of children's vibrant popular media narratives with the zombified writing that happen in school to see how we might bring schooling back to life by allowing children to play what they know, to negotiate, collaborate and represent realities with selves and with dolls, and to share their texts onscreen and online.

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