

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

Avi Santo, Old Dominion University

I am interested in understanding the creative and cultural work performed in licensing and consumer product divisions as constitutive for cultivating investment in character and entertainment brands. Or, to put it another way, I want to know why are there *Love Boat* action figures but no Superman condoms? In part, I want to take Amanda Lotz's conceptualization of "branded entertainment" and explore how it is operationalized by different entertainment and character IP owners targeting different consumer groups. How are Hasbro's strategies different from LEGO's when it comes to developing film franchises that showcase their products and properties? How might Mattel and Sanrio, whose Barbie and Hello Kitty lines are primarily directed at girls, approach branded entertainment differently than Hasbro with Transformers? How are born-digital IP like Angry Birds, Moshi Monsters and Star Doll translated to tangible products, and on the flip side, how do they encourage consumer investment in digital forms of product acquisition. In part, I am interested in exploring how film franchises, TV series and web platforms designed to showcase character brands also function as sites designed to teach consumers how to engage with and ultimately work (together) for branded characters.

I am also interested in exploring the appeal of owning a T-shirt with Walter White's face on it or a Duck Dynasty bottle opener. While these items certainly allow for the extension and personalization of a media experience, I also contend that they serve as cultural commodities designed to communicate certain branded sensibilities that are at the heart of the entertainment experience. In a flooded market, I am interested in how certain products function as status symbols and forms of social and cultural capital within ever-expanding notions of "fandom." I am particularly interested in the gray economy of sites like Etsy, where opportunities to own OoAK (one of a kind) items crafted by fannish artisans (or, to borrow Suzanne Scott's term, "fantrepreneurs") are instrumental in crafting alternate consumer lifestyles that are no less branded than investing in officially sanctioned lifestyle brand extensions, but yet somehow are branded more authentic for "true fans" than their officially licensed counterparts (pew!).