ONCE UPON A TIME:
UNVEILING THE SOCIAL AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICES OF CHILDREN'S MEDIA TEXTS

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1. Introduction

This article underlines the importance of recognising the new multimodal structures applied to the composition of contemporary children's media texts, such as advertisements. It focuses particularly on the advertisements devised for children, as they consist of representations directed not only to children but also to their parents, a process regarded as 'double addressivity'. As vehicles of persuasion, the advertisements for children's products, especially toys, help to promulgate ideologies such as consumption and lead to the creation of mythic views about the female identity, most times associated to appearance, as it is the case of dolls' advertisements, which predominantly rely on issues such as beauty, fashion and physical attributes.

2. Advertisements, Children and the Consumer Culture

Recent figures have substantiated the force of advertising as a medium of influence and persuasion in underlying its role as both a "creator and a perpetuator of the dominant attitudes, values, and ideology of the culture, social norms, and the myths by which most people govern their behaviour" (Wright, 2003, pp. 4-5). This seems to be particularly true in the case of children, who represent a potential consumer market of an annual 130 billion-dollar-investment by the advertising industry (ibid. p. 5).

As a potential, lucrative target market, children are not different from adults in their 'appetite' for consumption (Seiter, 1993). Advertisements ideologically work upon the enhancement of their consumerist desires by creating necessities for consumption through, for example, the promotion of toy extension lines which offer them an endless array of versions and accessories of their preferred product lines.

For the toy industry, advertisements have become key elements mainly due to their two core functions: firstly, because they announce "the availability of the product, differentiate it from other products in the market, and make its ownership desirable" (Kline, 1993, p. 237). Secondly, because they show children "what they are to do with the product, how to play with it and what the benefits of having it are" (ibid.). To be successful, advertisements must be as direct as possible, attract children's attention, and "deliver the product concept" (ibid.) by creating in children the deep desire to request and ultimately acquire the product.

Despite being conventionally classified as an inexperienced and vulnerable consumer group, incapable of resisting or "rejecting the cultural messages produced by advertising" (Wright, 2003), mainly because of the typical insecurities that they face during this phase of life, children have been differently described by Seiter (1993) as a 'complex' and 'sophisticated' target consumer for they are fickle and many times hard to be manipulated.

Seiter's (ibid.) main argument is that children are in fact, 'media wise' in that their ability to recall commercials, demonstrate product awareness, repeat jingles, catch phrases and identify misuse of slang and poor production values, has, throughout the years, changed their passive status as an audience to a status of 'media experts', able to critically evaluate the quality of the product being advertised. In that respect, Kline (1993) seems to align with Seiter's (ibid.) viewpoint while drawing attention to children's marketing awareness which posit their understanding of the media communications aimed at them:

> (…) Research has shown that by five years of age about 50 per cent of children understand the persuasive purposes of advertising. By eight, almost all know that advertising is intended to make them buy things. Moreover, they do have the ability to formulate product choice: they think more than one attribute of a product, and in certain product areas they base their decisions on product information. (Kline, 1993, p. 169)

Important, though, is to perceive that children are not the only potential target aimed at by the market. Their parents, as the ones who ultimately decide whether or not a given product will be purchased, are also implicated in the careful construction of media texts by advertisers. For this reason, through a process regarded as 'double addressivity' (Seiter, 1993), advertisers aim at speaking to these two audiences of consumers: parents and their children.

Their goals, however, differ considerably. Whereas parents seem to be more interested in the educational value (s) of an advertised product like a toy, children make their own judgement about it based on its appeal to their peers (Seiter, 1993, p. 5). Bearing that in mind, toy advertisers are pushed into a creative process of design of advertisements so as to work on a handful of motivations implicitly aimed at ultimate parental toy buying. Among the most appealing motivations, according to Seiter (ibid.), are the ones which operate at the level of parents' desires for their children, such as "that children have fun, that children get ahead in life, that children achieve in school, that children grow up to resemble their parents, that children be active rather than passive, that children amuse themselves without attention" (p.53-4), all of which can be translated into product claims such as "toys that create happiness; toys that teach skills; toys [that] bring parents and children close together; toys [that] keep children busy, toys [that] inspire activity"(ibid.).

Thus, apart from emphasising toys' educational values to fulfil parents' purchase requirements, media texts to children also promote ideologies many times made unnoticeable within their discourse. Some of these ideologies, as pointed out in this section, are related to stimulus to excessive consumption or concern with beauty and fashion, as it is the case of toys like fashion dolls, whose media texts help to promote a somehow mythic view of the female identity.

3. Web Advertisements: Representations in the Electronically Mediated World

As contemporary signification modes, multimodal structures such as *websites* recognise in the screen their new space of representation (Kress, 1997, p. 72). This change in the 'semiotic landscape', as Kress contends, "relates to other [fundamental] changes in social, cultural, economical and technological domains" (p. 74) taken that the growing production of multimodal and multimedia texts alongside with the profusion of *hypertexts* not only offer new paths to the structural organisation of information (Djonov, 2005) but also reflect contemporary means to construct new interaction relations among its participants.

Taking the case of children's *websites*, there are three distinct human participants involved in such interaction relations:

1. *people* who design and maintain the website;
2. *children*, for whom the website is designed;
3. *caregivers* (parents and teachers) who control the activities children play on the www world. (extracted and adapted from Djonov, 2005, p. 64)

In effect, as already stated, not only children but also their caregivers are kept in mind when designers are producing media texts, hence the 'double addressivity' of websites' hypertexts by offering not only entertainment but also educational activities to children (ibid.).

According to Burbules (1997), whereas printed texts are by nature, 'selective and exclusive', *hypertexts* on the web are 'inclusive', as they offer multiple ways of organising the message by means of changes in the size of the text and *links* to innumerable other texts (p. 103). In this respect, *links* play a key role in the organisation of *webpages* in that they promote choices made on the basis of the viewer's meaningful relations, which, in turn, not only trigger new reading practices but also new *consumer* practices [my italics] fostered by the electronically mediated world.

In being structures exclusively existent online, *hypertexts* offer "different pathways to users" (Snyder, 1997, p. 126), by providing the means of arranging information in a non-linear manner and allowing for the accommodation not only of "printed texts but also [of] digitalised sound, graphics, animation, video and virtual reality" (ibid.).

Indeed, the composition of *web pages* goes beyond the use of a single semiotic mode (Kress, 1997), According to Kress (ibid.), contemporary technologies try to effectively orchestrate sound and visual modes with a view to superseding what he calls 'older textual organisations' (p. 66). To do so, he adds, they make use of resources such as *arrangement* and *display*, as these constitute "essential features of the logic of the visual" (ibid., p. 69).

The nature of the language of *web pages* is also worth to be emphasised. Its linguistic structures are generally characterised by their simplicity, which typically serves to encourage informality and social proximity (Kress, 1997, p. 54) and posits its potential user and/or consumer. The *websites* of toy manufacturers which include toy advertisements constitute a good example. Despite being essentially characterised by non-linguistic communication and reliance on sophisticated iconography – which children adeptly absorb – whenever these *web advertisements* present linguistic structures, this is often done in a rather simple manner, since children's vocabulary is usually limited to fully process complex language and understand its abstract concepts (Kline, 1993).

Conversely, just like their websites, toys web advertisements need to be doubly addressed, intelligible and appealing not only to an audience of children but also to their parents, the actual 'consumers' who ultimately are going to purchase the chosen item. As Crouse (2003) has pointed out in her article about the hit of *The Bratz* dolls:

> (…) the makers of *The Bratz* dolls, *MGA Entertainment*, has racked up $ 1 billion in sales since the dolls' introduction in 2001, and (…) their market research indicates that mothers of pre-teens are the prime customers (p.1).

Comparing the advertisements found in toy catalogues, which place sheer reliance on the visual component, *web advertisements* generally integrate the visual and the verbal component, corroborating the idea that they are indeed also targeted at parents, commonly interested in reading about what the toy includes, what it offers, how it is played, that is, its educational and instrumental properties (Caldas-Coulthard & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Furthermore, the so-called web advertisements are fundamentally distinct from the ones found in print media in that they contain information with many communicative functions (e.g. entertainment, instructional, factual, etc.), presented to the viewer in a variety of modes (Geest, 2001, p. 14). Putting it simply, web advertisements not only target at the viewer in verbal and visual terms, but they are also intentionally designed to appeal to other senses, such as sound.

According to Kline (1993), stylistic preferences identified in toys' advertisements such as visual and musical detailing are, in fact, the result of a careful research carried by the toy and the advertising industry, as the design conveyed by music and graphic elements are crucial not only for communicating the 'affective aspects' of the toy's identity but also for "reaching the right audience segment" (ibid., p. 246). As he contends, music plays a rather relevant role in toys' advertisements "not just as background or simple theme tune but as means of organising (…) [their] narrative dimension" (ibid.).

In his study, Kline (1993) has associated "cute and melodic nursery songs" to the "caring-friendship feelings (…) destined for the younger audiences" (ibid.) as well as "pop-rock female vocals [and] rock video special effects" to audiences of girls older

than six years of age. Kline (ibid.) has also related the common use of basic pastel colours to younger girls' advertisements and the use of "star-burst colours to convey the glamour and excitement of [older] girls' fashion dolls" (ibid.).

With a view to unveiling these structures of signification in the homepages of the manufacturers of the dolls under investigation, the next section presents a brief analysis on some of their prominent features such as their visual and audio resources as well as their arrangement and display elements.

4. Analysis of *Estrela* and *MGA* Homepages

Designed to look appealing to a large number of children and teenagers, the *homepages* of *Estrela* and *M.G.A.* – the toy manufacturers of fashion dolls *Susi* and *The Bratz*, respectively – make use of a vast range of visual, verbal and auditory resources to attract their contemporary, multicultural young audience.

Estrela, whose homepage is presented in Figure 1, for example, draws on the traditional song of the brand to greet the viewer/user[1] and mimicries the sounds of a laboratory in a fictional toy factory before the viewer actually makes his way towards the link to the toy of his choice. The predominant use of vibrant colours such as blue, yellow and pink are also aimed at greeting and attracting the viewer's attention in visual terms, taken that in hypermedia design, colour-coding, as a "specific interface design element" (Djonov, 2005, p. 9) has been claimed to "support orientation by making the organisation in hypermedia texts explicit" (ibid).

The main link within *Estrela* homepage guides the user to its toys by picturing a toy-making machine that keeps producing a series of different toys such as trucks, dolls, robots and cars. Within this link, *Estrela* toy categories are organised in alphabetical order not until the category 'Lançamentos', which refers to the latest released toys by

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[1] The terms 'viewer' and 'user' will be used interchangeably in this section.

Estrela, is strategically placed at the top of the list, followed by other categories ranging from electronic games to teddy bears.

By selecting a toy category, the user is guided towards the pictures related to that category, which commonly display the product in a variety of versions. Next, in choosing to look for the details of the product, the user finally finds his/her way to the toy web advertisement, which not only presents a picture of the product (its visual part) but also comprises its verbal description of how it can be played, what it includes, etc.

Subsequently presented, Figure 1 further illustrates the referring virtual paths by using the links to *Susi*'s collection as a reference:
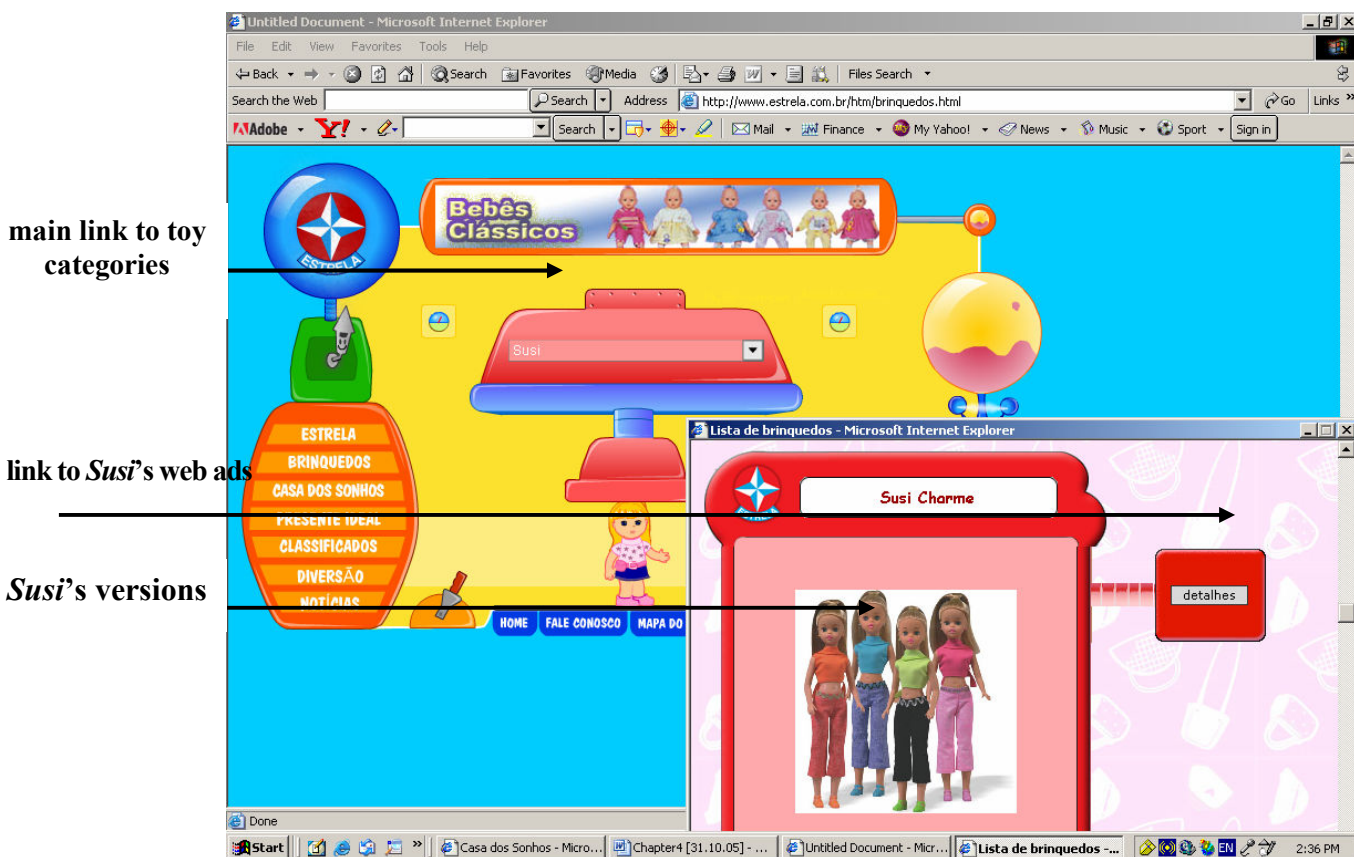

Figure 1: *Estrela* homepage and the links to *Susi*'s web advertisements

Due to her importance as *Estrela*'s 'poster girl' and its best-selling doll, *Susi*'s collection is presented to the user as a toy category apart, separately from other dolls.

Her varied most recent versions are updated on a regular basis, following the trends of the fashion world, the characters of TV series and soap operas as well as the models of the sport, music and cinema industry, thus establishing a phenomenon which Fleming (1996) has described as 'total multimedia marketing', namely, the powerful connection between the toy market and media networks.

Apart from navigating through the main link to the selected toy categories, the user might as well choose to visit virtually any of the following seven options displayed at the left-hand side of *Estrela* homepage:

(1)   *Estrela*, aimed at providing the viewer/user with historical information about the toy manufacturer;

(2)   *Brinquedos*, aimed at guiding the viewer/user towards the newest toy categories released by the toy manufacturer;

(3)   *Casa dos Sonhos*, aimed at presenting information about *Estrela* Toy Museum, its location and visiting times;

(4)   *Presente Ideal*, aimed at helping the viewer/user to find the most appropriate toy to give as a present, by filling a form with the receiver's profile;

(5)   *Classificados*, aimed at promoting interaction among the users of the website by encouraging them to exchange toy items as well as to find toy rarities;

(6)   *Diversão*, aimed at offering entertainment options whereby the user can play games, solve quizzes and send e-cards;

(7)   *Notícias*, aimed at keeping the viewer/user updated about the current events in his/her city/town. It includes options of the leisure activities available such as cinema, museum exhibitions, theatre, circus, book fairs, etc.

In stark contrast with *Estrela* homepage, *M.G.A* homepage welcomes its viewer/user by showcasing its products in five different boxes which resemble a TV screen, placed in central position within the main viewing area, against a black backdrop. The largest box, positioned in the middle, features the *Bratz* collection, one of *MGA*'s most successful products.

Coherently articulated with the *Bratz*' style, *M.G.A* homepage relies on less infantile tones to adopt stronger, darker and somehow more 'aggressive' hues that help

to convey the idea of the hip-hop culture of contemporary teenagehood, which can be better visualised through Figure 2 displayed as follows:
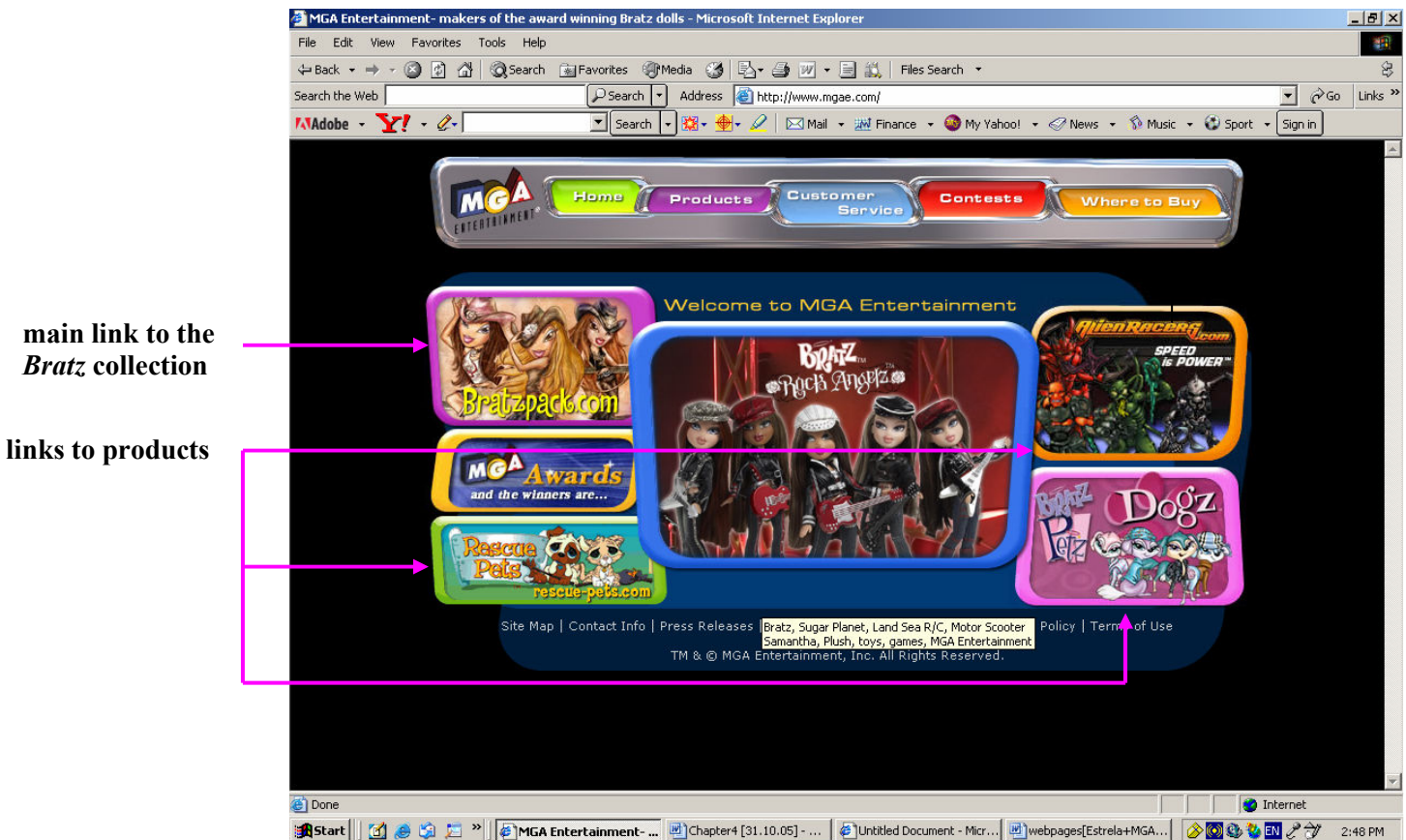

main link to the *Bratz* collection

links to products

Figure 2: *M.G.A* homepage and the link to *The Bratz* web advertisements

By clicking on the small *Bratz* box situated at the left-hand side of the viewing area, users are transported directly to the www.bratz.com homepage, which offers information about latest released *Bratz* products as well as a number of entertainment activities such as games, videos and music.

While accessing this homepage, users get the chance to play games, watch The *Bratz* TV commercials and listen to their featured hip hop songs which rely on elements such as solidarity and identification with the 'cool', contemporary, teenage culture of the 21st century to attract its target consumer group.

Visually displayed next, Figure 3 captures the main structure of The *Bratz* homepage:

link to
***Bratz* ads**

link to *Bratz'*
new products

***Bratz* news**
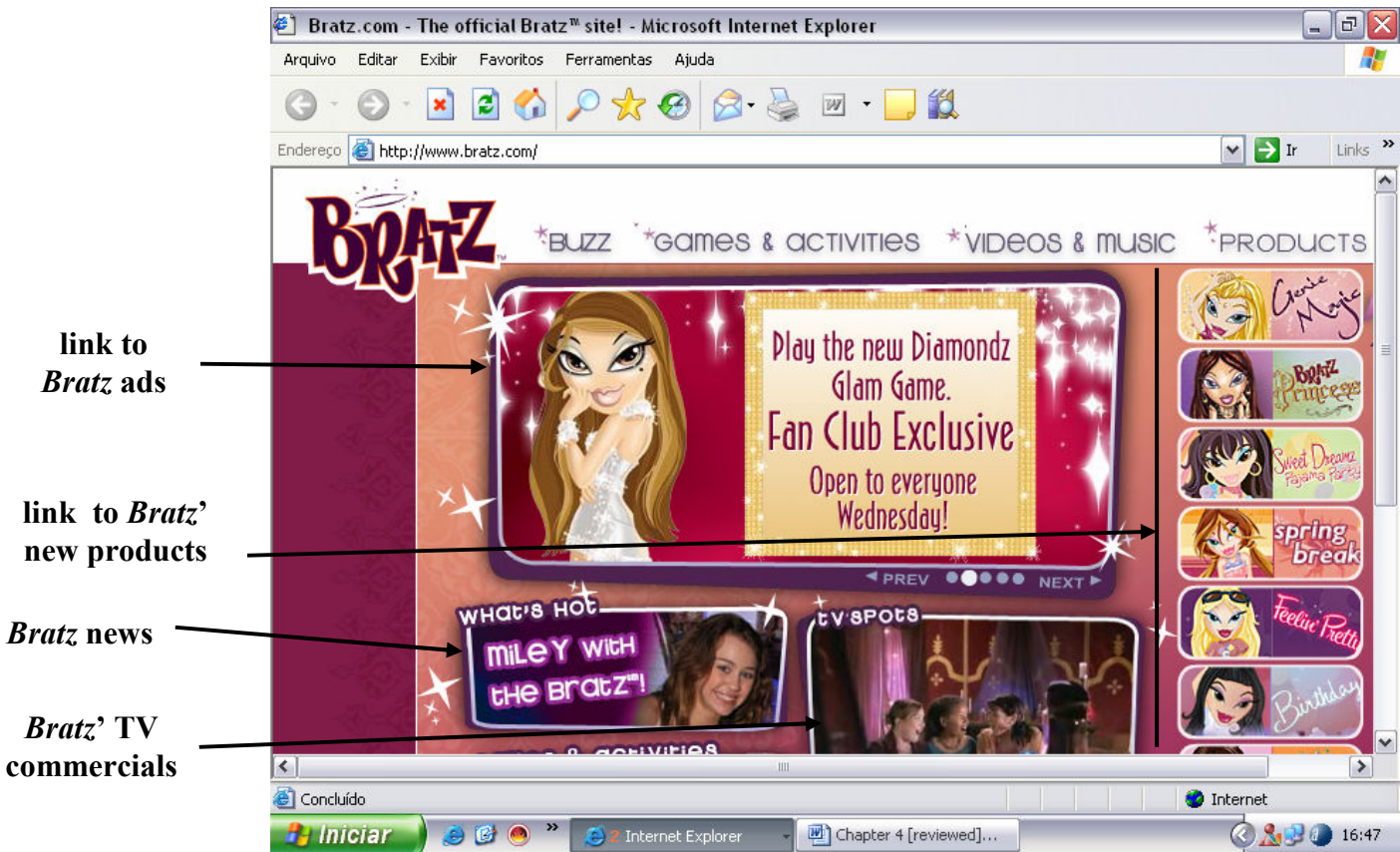
***Bratz'* TV**
commercials

Figure 3: Structural organization of The *Bratz* homepage

It was through the main link, which leads the viewer/user to the *Bratz'* advertisements, that the data for the present analysis were retrieved.

In a nutshell, by acknowledging toys' new multimodal representations - e.g., web advertisements – as resulting products of the pervasiveness of computer-based practices and media technologies in the child-related universe, toys' potentiality as meaning-making 'significant cultural assets' (Caldas-Coulthard & van Leeuwen, 2002) could therefore be further explored.

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