

Shopkins is the popular new toy both collectible and affordable

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A selection of Shopkins, called the hottest toy in toyland. Photo: Bill O'Leary, The Washington Post.

Vicki Vanilla. Susie Sausage. Buncho Bananas.

If these names sound unfamiliar to you now, consider yourself warned: There's a good chance you'll soon be on a frantic hunt to get them under your Christmas tree.

These tiny plastic characters are part of an explosively growing line of toys called Shopkins. They can perhaps best be described as personified versions of items you'd find at the grocery store or the mall — miniature pastries or high heels with cute faces.

After just over two years on store shelves, Shopkins has become a huge business: Market research firm NPD Group reports that a 12-pack of assorted Shopkins was the single best-selling toy in 2015, edging out items from popular properties such as Star Wars and Barbie. The line's U.S. market share rivals that of established brands such as My Little Pony and American Girl, according to Euromonitor. And so far this year, Shopkins has seen a 98 percent increase in sales.

As with earlier toys like Cabbage Patch Kids, Tickle Me Elmo and Skylanders, it's hard to pinpoint why these characters have captured so much attention. But industry analysts say that much of it has to do with finding a niche in the toy marketplace that wasn't being filled.

Popular New Girl-Themed Line Of Toys

Shopkins are designed to be collectibles. Like baseball cards or Pokémon, you trade them with your friends. There are rare characters that keep you constantly scouring the toy store, hoping to add to your trove.

Prior to Shopkins' arrival, "there really hadn't been a strong collectible for girls," said Laurie Schacht. She is co-publisher at toy review site The Toy Insider.

Indeed, that was an opening that executives at Moose Toys noticed when they decided to develop Shopkins, whose primary audience is 6- to 10-year-old girls. The Australian toy company had seen some healthy sales for a boy-centric line called Trash Pack. It's a collectible set of what chief executive Paul Solomon describes as "gross little characters who live in garbage cans."

"We saw the opportunity to come out with more of a girl-skewed or girl-themed line," Solomon said.

At a time when properties such as Lego, Star Wars and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are relying on movie tie-ins to boost sales, Shopkins has taken a different tack. It uses YouTube to connect with kids. From the get-go, the brand has posted one- or two-minute cartoons on the video site — short bits that can easily be watched on a smartphone or tablet. Collectively, the videos have been viewed some 100 million times.

"We call it snackable content," Solomon said.

Using YouTube To Connect With Kids

That's not the only way YouTube fueled the rise of Shopkins: They have also become popular subjects for so-called "unboxing" videos, in which people film themselves opening a new item. The company has recently pushed to expand its media tie-ins, releasing a full-length movie on DVD this fall.

In this era of same-day delivery, Shopkins has made it a practice to introduce new toys at a breakneck pace. It rolls out an army of new characters about every six months, betting that freshness is important when kids and parents have so many programming and toy choices. Jim Silver, chief executive of toy review site TTPM, said this strategy may be another reason the brand has gained popularity.

"You can go back to Beanie Baby, how that lasted for many years," Silver said. "What was part of the key is continually refreshing the lines."

Kids Can Buy It With Their Allowance Money

The price point doesn't hurt either, Silver said. Some items in the line are priced at \$2.99, and Solomon says 80 percent of sales are on items that cost \$19.99 or less. That means it's the kind of thing kids can buy with their allowance money.

It's hard to know whether Shopkins has sparked a wave of interest in collectibles or has simply benefited from it. Either way, NPD has found that the collectibles group is strong heading into the important holiday selling season, with sales up 64 percent so far this year. Juli Lennett, NPD's toy industry analyst, says there is especially strong growth in sales of what are known as "blind bags." Those are toy packs you buy without knowing which characters are inside.

Retailers appear to be anticipating a big holiday season haul for the brand. Wal-Mart, Toys R Us, Target and Kmart each have some Shopkins property on their "hot toy" lists for the season. Toys R Us has also launched "store within a store" areas for Shopkins at all of its locations that peddle Shopkins and Shopkins-decked bedding, jewelry, bicycles and other goods.

To be sure, though, the tiny toys will be up against some stiff competition. "Rogue One: A Star Wars Story" is set to hit theaters December 16, providing a boost to that property. Old-school toys such as games and puzzles have seen monster sales growth so far this year, so items such as Pie Face and Pie Face Showdown are likely to draw big dollars, too.

And then there's Hatchimals, a new toy from a company called Spinmaster in which a fuzzy, dancing-and-singing creature hatches from an egg. Stores were starting to run out of Hatchimals in early November, and the \$59.99 toy is already popping up on eBay with three- and four-figure price tags. Silver said he predicts Hatchimals will sell three times as many units as Tickle Me Elmo did in its 1996 holiday heyday.

Quiz

- 1 The central idea of the article is developed by:
 - (A) describing how Shopkins YouTube videos are engaging for kids
 - (B) showing how and why Shopkins toys became such a best-selling brand
 - (C) highlighting how Shopkins toys rely on constantly creating new characters
 - (D) illustrating the unique designs of most Shopkins toys

- 2 Which paragraph in the section "Popular New Girl-Themed Line Of Toys" BEST reflects the central idea that Shopkins uses unique methods to get kids interested in these toys?

- 3 Read the section "Popular New Girl-Themed Line Of Toys."
How are kids MOST exposed to Shopkins toys?
 - (A) by watching movies
 - (B) by shopping on store websites
 - (C) by viewing YouTube videos
 - (D) by talking with their friends

- 4 Read the section "Using YouTube To Connect With Kids."
Jim Silver would most likely agree with which of the following statements?
 - (A) Shopkins toys are popular because they create new characters quickly.
 - (B) Shopkins toys are popular because they have been around for many years.
 - (C) Shopkins toys are popular because they look like Beanie Babies.
 - (D) Shopkins toys are popular because they release DVDs with their toys.