

I Can be Anything, Barbie Girl

Jaime Goudreau-Riopel

For generations, girls have had one toy in common that they have played with: Barbie. When I was little, my mom gave me the Barbies that she played with when she was a kid. Barbie has been around for a very long time, and Barbie has gone through many changes since she was first introduced in 1959 (Gerber, 2019) by Ruth Handler through the company she founded with Harold Matson called *Mattel* (Encyclopedia.com, 2019). Barbie's overall popularity has not died even after being around for generations. She is still loved and adored meanwhile influencing children around the world today. Within this paper, we are going to go through various studies and examine how the Barbie doll (a popular icon for decades) affects youth long term when it comes to possible future occupations, self-image and what Mattel has done to try and combat these issues. I will also be providing a small personal reflection throughout the paper pulling from the evidence gathered from these studies and making the evidence come more to life.

When Barbie was first created, she reinforced traditional gender roles by being marketed as a homemaker, just like the family dynamic that was common at the time. Except, as time went on, Barbie was suddenly seen within different roles other than just being a homemaker. Since Barbie was first created, she “has represented more than 200 careers in her lifetime, from a variety of fields (like Teacher, Scientist, and Beekeeper)” (Gerber, 2019, p. 83). Having Barbie assume these different roles within the workforce creates a direct effect on the children playing with them because they can imagine themselves within all these different roles. With this in mind, Sherman & Zurbriggen used data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor that found women are “nearly twice as likely as men to be employed in social service occupations, and nearly 3 times as likely as men to work in personal care, service, educational, or library occupations” (2014, 195). They explain that this could be because of the “impact of gender role socialization” (Sherman & Zurbriggen, 2014, p. 195); this is the “process through which children learn to abide by culturally prescribed norms for behaviours that result in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes” (Sherman & Zurbriggen, 2014, p. 195). As a result in 2014, Sherman and

Zurbriggen conducted a study that looked at children (boys and girls) who played with a fashion Barbie, a Doctor Barbie or a Mr. Potato Head to see if childhood experience may relate to choice of occupation (2014). This is a very interesting study to conduct since Barbie is seen over the years in so many varying occupations. This brings up the question of whether having Barbie in these different job's influences children's choices directly about their desired profession once they are older. They found at the end of Sherman and Zurbriggen's study that the girls within their experiment averaged slightly more towards the female-dominated occupations than the male-dominated occupations as their future job possibilities (2014). Sherman and Zurbriggen (2014) also found that across certain conditions and occupation types, girls perceived those occupations being possibilities for boys rather than were possibilities for themselves (2014). This is very saddening to read since Barbie's whole slogan is based around the fact that you can be *anything* if you are a Barbie Girl (Mattel.com, 2019). Being as popular as Barbie is, you would think that she would have a positive connotation for those who play with her. Even when reflecting on my childhood, I played with the dolls that were similar to my female family members and rejected the ones that would allow me to be in a more male dominated occupation because I could not see myself within those roles, which is the exact same results the study by Sherman and Zurbriggen (2014) demonstrated.

Like many girls across the globe, when I was growing up, I had a large collection of Barbies. When looking at those who own Barbie dolls, we can see the doll ownership rates among different countries. It is estimated that in the United States, girls aged 4 to 7 years old, have an average ownership rate of 59%, and Australian girls aged 6 to 9 years old are estimated to have over 80% ownership rate. (Ricea, Prichardb, Tiggemanna & Slater, 2016) According to Dittmar, Halliwell and Ive in 2006, a Barbie doll was sold somewhere around the world every half-second (p. 283-284). Knowing how popular Barbie is with youth, it is easier to do research and see how Barbie affects a child's self-esteem and their self-image. With this in mind, Ricea et al. sought out to find the answer we are all wondering: does the exposure of the Barbie doll pose any negative allocations on our youth, specifically when it comes to thin-ideal internalization, body esteem, and body dissatisfaction? It is interesting to look at children, because this thin ideal is evident among 5 to 6 year old girls and remains stable throughout childhood into adolescence and adulthood. This is very interesting since the desirability to be thin in 6 year old girls is not evident in their male counterparts (Ricea et al., 2016, p. 143). You may be wondering why this is

the case, and it is important to note that there could be a lot of factors contributing to this mindset, like the media and peers. However, it is key to look at what is a prevalent factor in many little girls' lives: dolls that are very thin like Barbie, Bratz and Disney Princesses, which are marketed to young girls (Ricea et al., 2016, p. 143). Perhaps having these dolls are severely impacting the overall health of these girls due to unrealistic body standards that are established because they are simply unattainable. In the study, Ricea et al. found that of those 160 girls (aged 5-8) from Adelaide, South Australia, who participated (2016, p. 142) had higher thin-ideal internalization. So, the next question that comes up is, what does this all mean? Perhaps the next step for parents and teachers is to educate the youth on healthy eating habits, the importance of self-love and acceptance of oneself. The answer is simply not to just eliminate the doll because Barbie will never truly go away since she is such an icon in many of our parents and their parents' childhoods. Parents will want to share their experience with their children and that could simply be through a doll; however, Mattel could try by rebranding Barbie as we know it into a doll with a body positive manner. It would cost Mattel a lot of money and would be a risk, but it would help the generation of tomorrow, and that is more important than money.

When looking at the original Barbie, she does not look like any female figure in my life because her body is not at all life-like. She is lean, extremely tall and has a picture-perfect essence to her. According to Nesbitt et al. (2019), “there are well-documented negative body image effects related to exposure to Barbie, including reduced body esteem and body satisfaction, higher body size discrepancy, thin-ideal internalization and desire for thinness, and restrictive eating behaviour” (Nesbitt et al., 2019, p. 1-2). These negative implications are not newly evident either. In 2006, Dittmar et al. quoted a study from 1996 that found that this overall thin desire not only increased with age within girls, but is not as present in young boys. This study that Dittmar et al. found that 40% of girls from age 8 to age 9 wanted to be thinner, compared with 79% of girls from age 11 to age 12 (p. 284). As for specific behaviours Dittmar et al. observed within the young girls they studied found that they had a lower body esteem, actual-ideal body size discrepancy and actual-adult body size discrepancy (2006, p. 286). Now what does this mean to us reading this data? This means that “both lowered body esteem and wanting a thinner body are indicators of body dissatisfaction, which can lead to serious consequences such as depressed affect and unhealthy eating behaviors, particularly dieting, which, in turn, is a precursor of eating disorders” (Dittmar et al., 2006, p. 290). To address these issues, “Mattel

recently introduced three new Barbie dolls with varying body types: ‘tall’, ‘curvy’, and ‘petite’” (Nesbitt et al., 2019, p. 2). When I first heard about these new dolls that were launched, I was beyond excited since I myself am not lean and tall like the original Barbie, so I felt like I could not relate to her even if I wanted to. Within this article they did a study to see if they were to show 38 children/adolescents these three new Barbies and get them to perceive and evaluate the new Barbie body types on Attractiveness, Pleasantness and Desirability. Nesbitt et al. (2019) study found the following:

The curvy Barbie was perceived as the most pleasant (or “likeable”) body type, but also as the least desirable and the least attractive. In contrast, the original and tall Barbie representations were both rated low for pleasantness, but high for desirability and attractiveness. The petite Barbie, however, was revealed as the most preferred body type overall. (p. 9)

I think that this is very interesting since the petite body probably resembled the girls in question since they were all children/adolescents. Now when we look at the traditional Barbie, Sherman and Zurbriggen’s 2014 study stated all the negative health effects of her image because of the way she was created and Nesbitt et al.’s 2019 study clearly demonstrates the desire for a different type of body for Barbie by young girls/adolescence. This desire even extends to the everyday person like myself, demonstrated by the excitement I had when I heard the news. When looking at both studies, they demonstrate results that change is necessary. As for the new dolls, I wonder if this is a step in a new direction for Barbie or if this is just a way for Mattel to try and maintain their popularity with young girls by getting on the good side of those who are buying their products. When playing the devil's advocate, it could be a way to boost sales and get on the good side of consumers; however, Mattel could generally be trying to do something good to help the generation of tomorrow.

Barbie has been around for 61 years, and it does not look like she is going away anytime soon. When looking at the data presented to us, Barbie poses many issues for the youth that play with her. These issues include lack in self competence when it comes to future possibilities, self-esteem issues that extend to very serious issues regarding self-image and a desire, even after Mattel introduced new dolls, for the original design that reinforces a desire for thinness. Ultimately this leads to a higher body size discrepancy, and potentially unhealthy eating habits

that can severely harm youth. As for Barbie and her popularity, I do not see her going away anytime soon especially since new dolls are introduced every year. As for now, all I can say is to those who are reading this essay, that you can be anything you want to be, without being a Barbie Girl.

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