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English 137H

30 November 2012

A Shift in Plastic

Barbie and controversy seem to frequently go hand in hand. As mothers, should you buy Barbie dolls for your daughters or not? These plastic dolls have often been heralded as inappropriate for young girls and a bad role model due to her looks and figure. But Barbie is not the same doll she used to be and that is encouraging for the young girls playing with these dolls. From Barbie's launch in 1959 up to the present she has changed and whereas she had once been a stereotypical version of a woman with traditional femininity she now reflects the value that women are empowered.

Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator, first made the doll with a sexy style. Heavy makeup that featured thick black lined eyes, red sensual lips and red painted nails in addition to sideways glancing eyes and a model stance contributed to this look. Miriam Forum-Brunell, a Ph.D from the University of Missouri, in "What Barbie Dolls Have to Say about Postwar American Culture" says Barbie was modeled after a German doll called Lilli. Lilli was no childhood play thing, though. She was a sexy, voluptuous doll that male bachelors kept. This means that the original Barbie was inspired by a suggestive bachelor's doll. This ultra-feminine look was further enhanced with generous body proportions. Sandra Lee Stuart in the article "Happy Birthday, Barbie" states "That first swim-suited fashion model had measurements the equivalent of 39-18-33. (Two actresses who came close to those proportions were Jayne Mansfield (40-21-36) and Sophia Loren (38-24-38), though both were obviously a lot hipper.) Some people felt Barbie's figure gave little girls an unrealistic ideal." These measurements projected onto young girls, the

target market of the toy, can have an effect on young girls. When every Barbie doll has the same extremely thin but also curvaceous frame what are little girls supposed to think? Where is the evidence that their body can be any different when children are presented with an exaggerated version of the stereotypical woman's body? Barbie did not stay this size, however. Over time, she evolved to fit a more realistic body that indicated a change in society's values. Barbie was soon scaled down to measurements of 38-14-34 in 1967 after people objected to her unnatural size. Even her face was sculpted to look more youthful and natural. Although a step in the right direction, the Barbie of the seventies up until 1997 is frightening when made life sized. CBS News in "Life-Size Barbie's Shocking Dimensions: Would she be Anorexic?" pins her as being about five foot nine inches tall and weighing 110 pounds. The bust would be 39 inches, her waist 18 inches and her hips 33 inches. Her BMI would be 16.24 in the anorexic and underweight range. She would not even be able to menstruate.



http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504763_162-20055694-10391704.html

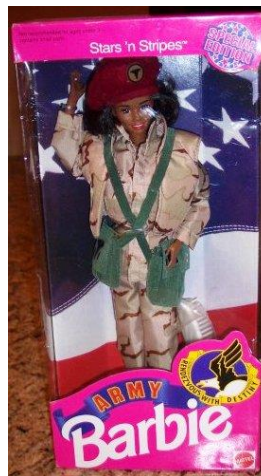
In 1997, the doll underwent more change to make her look more natural and authentic. Her breast size was reduced, her hips slimmed and her waist made wider. The final change in body type came in 2005 when she became a little bit shorter and had measurements of 34-22-33; while not perfect, these measurements are more accurate in terms of achievability or women's bodies. An example of Barbie seeming to promote the thin body was the Barbie Baby-Sits doll from 1963; a book came with the doll that was titled *How to Lose Weight* which actually instructed "Don't eat!" That phrase fostered the thought that women have to be thin. Women come in all shapes and sizes, and this message Barbie was sending was not only dangerous to girls' body images but also to the idea that women can be different. While body size does not solely exemplify a change in valued diversity and empowerment, the nearly impossible standard Barbie had set in its beginnings supported the idea that a certain look was desirable which women did not actually have. The cultural change came about due to the consequences of negative body image, which Barbie had part in, according to a study. Susan Ive and Helga Dittmar of the University of Sussex and Emma Halliwell of the University of the West of England conducted a study *Does Barbie Make Girls Want to be Thin? The Effect of Experimental Exposure to Images of Dolls on the Body Image of 5- to 8-Year Old Girls* with 162 girls, showing some pictures of a plus-sized Emme doll, no doll and a Barbie doll. In their conclusions, they say the following:

First, they showed that very young girls experience heightened body dissatisfaction after exposure to Barbie doll images but not after exposure to Emme doll (or neutral control) images. This demonstrates that it is not body-related information conveyed by dolls per se that has a direct impact on young girls' body image, but by Barbie dolls specifically, which represent a distortedly thin body ideal. (8)

Such findings roused the need for change. With an estimated seven million women in America suffering from eating disorders, Barbie could not stay the same. Paige MacDougall, who completed research on Barbie dolls to receive her MA in Cultural Anthropology at Concordia University, says “The naturalization of this body form and hair and eye color could be seen as promoting ageism, sexism, and the general perception that a woman’s beauty is her most important feature. Women who are unable to achieve Barbie-esque characteristics may feel subordinate in a society that values the Barbie doll image” (260 *Transnational Commodities as Local Cultural Icons: Barbie Dolls in Mexico*). So because of those effects of Barbie’s image, Mattel had to reconstruct Barbie’s body demonstrating the new cultural value of women empowerment. A more realistic body type for Barbie, although still not perfect, is a step signifying to the cultural change.

Apart from body type, the outfits and jobs Barbie has gone through delineate the path to diversification and empowerment. The original Barbie was broadcasted as a teenage fashion model. Her looks were in line with one type of fashion: traditional feminine styles. *The New York Times* article “Barbie (Doll)” by Yona Zeldis McDonough describes “Early outfits produced by Mattel had names like Theatre Date, Movie Date, Party Date, Friday Nite Date and Sorority Meeting, all of which suggest that Barbie was not about to challenge anyone’s idea of traditional femininity.” These outfits portray a particular type of woman, a traditional domesticized one, and have no variation to fit all types of girls; however, there were improvements on the job front. Dr. Susan Ferguson of the Wilfrid Laurier University-Brandtford in Canada, an associate professor in Journalism, gave a speech at the International Symposium “Transformations in the Cultural and Media Industries” about children’s culture. Dr. Ferguson notes “They accepted the challenge

Barbie posed to traditional domestic values...” but you may wonder what are the careers and outfits deviating from the traditional role. In 1961 Barbie was a nurse; a clichéd woman’s job. By 1988, though, Barbie was a doctor. Barbie began to enter the science and engineering fields when in 1997 she was a paleontologist, a computer engineer and an architect in 2011. These jobs are usually male-dominated, because according to I Seek Careers, a job resource organization, men outnumber women in science, technology, engineering and math careers. Barbie began to make headway late in the game regarding these careers. While some of these jobs are still stereotypically feminine, such as the ballerina, nurse and flight attendant, the doctor Barbie pushes the doll into a new scene of women empowerment. 1989 entered Barbie into the Navy, Army, Air Force and the Marines.



<http://www.worthpoint.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/army-barbie.jpg>

This deviated a lot from the original intent of Barbie’s model career and style. 2004 Barbie was a presidential candidate and 2012 brings the I Can Be President Barbie into play, making political statements that women have political worth and possibilities. Barbie breaking out into different jobs that are usually male dominated reflects the values of women’s empowerment. Helen Stevermer, contributor to *The Christian Science Monitor*, explains that Barbie’s extensive career

experiences demonstrate “qualities of resilience and fearlessness” (6 “In (Modest) Praise of Barbie). Now Barbie dolls are being created now that diversify even the look so that she is not just the typical blond haired and blue eyed doll. Tokidoki Barbie Doll released in 2012 features pink hair, big tattoos and edgy, punk-rock clothing.



<http://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2011/11/04/examining-cultural-change-childrens-tattoo-toys/>

She has come a long way from the singularly glamorous doll to any style possible in 2012. In 2013, a bald doll will be released through the Children’s Hospital Association, CureSearch for Children’s Cancer and the National Alopecia Areata Foundation for children with cancer. These two examples, tattoos and baldness, exemplify the change in Barbie’s look. She does not have to have long blond hair, dress as if she is looking for a rich husband or do conventional women jobs; Barbie, and therefore girls and women, can do anything.

All of these changes are wonderful, but Barbie must sell to actually prove that society really has changed what they value. Sean Poulter from Dailymail relates that Barbie doll sales rose by twenty three percent in one year, despite the lag in sales a couple of years ago. So while recently people were not accepting of Barbie’s new image, they have now embraced it. Through

the change in body size, outfits and careers, Barbie's gradual shift reflects society's value of empowered women. The changes had often been slow and have been taking place for more than fifty years. Barbie no longer has to be the dangerously thin, blond model many people grew up with; she can have any career, have tattoos or a different look, or other things that challenge the concept of traditional femininity. So when you come across Barbie dolls in the toy store, with your little girls begging you for a toy, you do not need to be so afraid about the negative effects of Barbie on your child. The questions of "Will my little girl think she is too fat" or "Will she wish she looked differently" will not be so applicable. While valid concerns, Barbie is transitioning into a new era of girl-power.

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