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Beauty and the Barbie Doll: When Life Imitates Plastic

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Beauty and the Barbie Doll: When Life Imitates Plastic

There have been hegemonic ideals about feminine beauty throughout history, varying vastly by time period and culture. In fact, for as long as people have been living in communities, there have been communal standards of beauty which have been both arbitrary and hard to attain.¹ For example, in the Middle Ages women who were larger were considered more desirable because it was a sign that they were both healthy and wealthy since it meant they could afford a surplus of food; this made them ideal potential mates and bearers of children. Then in the 1920's the thin shapeless body became highly popular during the flapper era. So when did the model of being super-thin, while still retaining feminine curves emerge? And more importantly, how are real women supposed to attain this new ideal of perfection?

Imagine your twenty-something year old daughter, whom you haven't seen in months, came home to pay you a visit, and yet when she sat across from you on the couch you barely even recognized her because she was so altered by multiple plastic surgeries. When you asked her why she has done this, she responded that she wants to look like Barbie.² This was the case of reality television star Heidi Montag, who received ten elective cosmetic surgeries in one day

¹ Lord pg231

² "The Hills," Season 6 episode 1. <http://www.mtv.com/videos/the-hills-season-6-ep-1-put-on-a-happy-face/1637514/playlist.jhtml> (approx @ 6min)

back in 2009 including Botox, a brow lift, nose job revision, fat injections in her cheeks and lips, chin reduction, liposuction on her neck, waist, hips, and inner and outer thighs, ears pinned back, breast augmentation, and a butt augmentation. This string of procedures was actually her second trip under the knife; a few years earlier she had received a rhinoplasty and much less severe breast augmentation, going from an A to a C-cup. As surprising as this may sound, Montag is not the first woman to vocalize such motives for surgically altering her body. This inspired me to look at the phenomenon of the Barbie doll, and more specifically, why this doll has seemingly more influence on young women's perception of beauty than any other cultural product.

My project will consist of three major parts. I want to take a brief look at how the hegemonic ideals of feminine beauty in the United States have evolved over the past fifty years, since Barbie was introduced in 1959. Also, I will go through a history of Mattel's Barbie doll, including the development of the doll and some of its many different manifestations over the years.³ Then I will use these two components to investigate the relationship between exposure to the doll and young women's perception of beauty, as well as other potentially subconscious ideals they may internalize from her. From there I will explore the idea that Barbie seems to be an especially dangerous phenomenon because she is so prolific and ubiquitous, as both a product and creator of culture. Although I recognize young boys may also play with Barbie dolls, my project will only focus on the relationship females have with the doll. My research will consist of consulting books, scholarly journal articles, and previously conducted experiments that test the affects of exposing children to Barbie. Since actual experiments are extremely rare in sociology, most of the data collected in my sources was done through series of interviews. Additionally, I will be viewing photos of different incarnations of the doll over the past five

³ I will be limiting my focus to specifically the original Caucasian, blonde Barbie, not her "friends" or sister.

decades, and segments of the movies *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, *Legally Blonde*, and *Mean Girls*.

Barbie is a type of doll known as a “fashion doll,” which describes one that is adult female-styled and usually intended for adult collectors. These dolls typically donned a full face of make-up, including red lipstick, and had perfectly plucked and defined eyebrows. Barbie is hardly the first of her kind, as these types of dolls had been being manufactured since the 19th century.⁴ She had a series of both European and American predecessors including Ideal’s Miss Revlon, American Character Doll Company’s Sweet Sue Sophisticate, Vogue Doll Company’s Jill, Horsman’s Cindy, Aranbee’s The Coty Girl, and Madame Beatrice Alexander of New York’s Cissy. Cissy was actually only produced from 1955 until 1962 when other fashion dolls could no longer maintain viable sales against Barbie.⁵ However, Barbie’s closest relative is the German Bild Lilli doll, known simply as Lilli. She looked unmistakably Aryan, with blonde hair and blue eyes, and very curvaceous with a small waist and large bust. She was not originally intended for child’s play, but was a novelty sex toy that German men typically hung in the rearview mirrors of their cars. Lilli was the first prominent example of taking dolls from demure to femme fatale. In an unlikely twist, starting in the post-war period, young girls began buying and playing with Lilli dolls. This made it a viable economic move to start mass producing fashion dresses for the doll.⁶

In 1959, Barbara Millicent Roberts: “The Original Teenage Fashion Model” was born, or actually, manufactured for the first time. She was a fashion doll meant to reflect aspects of French Haute Couture. The original Barbie came in a strapless black and white striped one-piece

⁴ Peers pg15

⁵ Peers pg150-155

⁶ Peers pg139-150

bathing suit, but was also packaged with a black mermaid-style evening gown that she could be changed into, with additional matching accessories. Over the years she has taken on a multitude of other looks, including a myriad of professional roles ranging from teacher to astronaut. Although, much like her German counterpart, when she was created she was not intended to be a child's play toy. She is not a traditional doll that is a baby to be mothered, but cold, hard plastic.⁷ She is a fully-formed adult female that is meant to be styled as such as opposed to a baby doll that is meant to be coddled. The word "doll" is derived from the Greek word *eiddon*, meaning idol. Dolls are a type of toy "designed to be [a prop] in the game of make believe."⁸ However, as a doll not actually intended for play, Barbie complicates this relationship. As author of *The Wonder of Barbie: Popular Culture and the Making of Female Identity* notes, "Barbie dolls represent self-sustaining human beings, and, therefore, they generate fictional truths about real women." The doll, therefore, is not a real woman, but merely represents one for the purposes of play and girls begin associating a set of beliefs about what a woman necessarily is and must be through this process. Pre-18th century dolls were designed to replicate classically ideal proportions; the Barbie does not.⁹ However, perhaps one of the best kept secrets about the doll is that her measurements were no accident. Her infamous tiny "twist-and-turn" waist, so often denounced as unhealthy and unnatural, was designed that way for a very specific reason. It is molded extra small so that there will not be a build-up of fabrics around her waist when she is fully dressed.¹⁰ More specifically, author M. G. Lord explains, "she is one sixth the size of a person, but her fabrics are suited for people. Barbie's middle... had to be disproportionately narrow to look proportional in clothes. The intersection of a waistband of a skirt involves four

⁷ Wanless pg125

⁸ Wright pg6

⁹ Norton Pg293

¹⁰ Peers pg161

layers of cloth—and four thicknesses of human-scale fabric on one-sixth-human scale doll would cause the doll’s waist to appear dramatically larger than her hips.”¹¹ Even the finest of fabrics would appear disproportionate on the dolls frame. Therefore, in order to compensate for this disparity Barbie has to be molded disproportionately to display the fashions designed for her, since her original intention was as a sort of miniature mannequin.

Although the physical design had a pragmatic purpose, there were factors other than Barbie’s notoriously unattainable measurements which, over the years, have caused the doll to be associated with unhealthy body image problems in women. For instance, in the early 1990s the My Size Barbie was created. This is a Barbie that is thirty-eight inches in height and is designed with the intent for young girls to be able to share the doll’s clothes. This teaches girls at a young age to aspire to look and dress like a Barbie doll. My Size Barbie, just as regular Barbie, is a fully formed adult female with a full face of make-up, and yet the doll is recommended for children three years old and up.¹² But probably the most egregious offense came in 1965 with Slumber Party Barbie. This version of the doll came with a scale that was permanently set to 110 pounds and came with a manual titled *How to Lose Weight*, which instructed “don’t eat.”¹³ By today’s standards, a doll that advertised such behavior would never be released. Although a causal link between Barbie and eating disorders has been hotly contested for years, this version of the doll certainly does not encourage a healthy body image. The statistics on eating disorders are frightening. Researchers estimate that symptoms of mild versions of anorexia, bulimia, and

¹¹ Lord pg12-13

¹² Online Advertisement: My Size Barbie

http://www.jcpenney.com/jcp/X6.aspx?DeptID=77742&CatID=77742&Grptyp=PRD&ItemId=196d081&cm_mmc=S hoppingFeed- -Google- -Toys- -38%22%20My%20Size%20Barbie%20Doll

¹³ Lord pg229

various other eating disorders occur in about 10% of all US adolescent girls, with more serious cases of anorexia occurring in approximately 0.5%, and bulimia in about 2%.¹⁴ However, many doctors believe that cases are severely under-diagnosed.¹⁵ In a short movie directed by Todd Haynes entitled *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* [1988], mutilated Barbies are used to depict the death of 1970s pop star Karen Carpenter due to her struggle with anorexia. The “Karen” doll’s face and arms are actually whittled down in order to indicate the weight Carpenter continued to lose due to her battle with her eating disorder. However, the distribution of the movie was stopped shortly after it was made because A&M Records would not give them the proper licensing of the Carpenters songs that were used.¹⁶ This is one of the few examples where a Barbie is used to depict something that is not beautiful, but due to the cease and desist order to stop distribution of the film, these dark and manipulated images of Barbie are largely unknown in today’s popular culture.

Over the past half-century, a plastic sexless object has become the ultimate sex icon. The real question is, knowing how inhuman Barbie’s body type actually is, why do we find her so attractive? In an article written by Albert Magro, he claims human evolutionary developments as the answer. He argues that while computer generated “average” faces are perceived as beautiful, when certain traits are exaggerated such as larger eyes, higher cheekbones, and a shorter distance between the nose and mouth, the face is considered to be “exceptionally beautiful.” Magro goes on to explain how as humans developed into bipedal animals, new traits were valued to advance the species. For example, longer legs, square shoulders, large eyes, and a v-shaped torso were among a few traits that were developed as the human began to walk upright. A sample of 495

¹⁴Wanless pg126

¹⁵ Rogers pg122

¹⁶ Lord pg235

individuals were shown pictures of characteristics, such as large eyes versus smaller eyes, and given no other information, and subsequently instructed to choose which image they found to be more attractive. The study showed that an overwhelming majority found the aforementioned evolutionary developed characteristics to be more attractive than their more primitive counterparts. The Barbie doll is the ultimate illustration, but also exaggeration, of all of the anatomical traits we see as naturally beautiful and wish to have.¹⁷

If scaled to human size, (original) Barbie would be 5'9 and would measure 36-18-34.¹⁸ In a study done in 1996, the dolls' head, neck, chest, waist, hip, thigh, mid-thigh, calf, ankle, upper arm, forearm, and wrists were measured; in order to save against minor differences in dolls, five of each was measured. For the real women, these same types of measurements were taken from 135 eighteen to thirty-five year olds, eleven professional models, and anthropometric data on sixteen anorexic women. The measurements were scaled to a standard deviation and all of the subgroups were compared against the group of "real people" participants. The results of the girth comparisons of female subgroups compared against the "real women" were: models -0.76, anorexics -1.31, and Barbie -4.17. The two most extreme sites of ratio differences were the waist to hip and chest to waist ratios. The chest to waist ratio was over a thirteen. Essentially, what these measurements showed was that Barbie's body type appears in less than 1 in 100,000 women.¹⁹ It should be no surprise that Barbie's measurements are not consistent with real women, but what is surprising is the extent of just how disproportionate she really is in comparison. Moreover, if she were really flesh-and-blood she would only be about 10% body

¹⁷ Magro, Albert. "Why Barbie is Perceived as Beautiful." *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 1997. 85. Pgs 363-374.

¹⁸ "Barbie undergoes plastic surgery" <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/32312.stm>

¹⁹ Norton, Kevin. "Ken and Barbie at Life Size"

fat so she would be too lean to menstruate.²⁰ Therefore, if she were human, not only would she not look like a healthy woman, but her body would not function like one either.

Barbie's body is the foundation for most types of play associated with the doll. Perhaps the most popular type of play when it comes to the Barbie doll is changing her outfits, and over her pasty fifty years she has had plenty to choose from. Barbie has had a relationship with the fashion world since her inception as a fashion doll, but in more recent decades Mattel has continued to make this association more explicit. For instance, Barbie, much like high-end fashion lines such as Chanel, Gucci and Fendi, is recognizable by her logo.²¹ Both the font and shade of pink are distinctly Barbie. In celebration of her thirty-fifth birthday in 1994, *Vogue* did a two page spread documenting the "growing collector and cultural scene" and "affirmed that Barbie's earliest garments were drawn from showings of Paris collections and 'modeled after Christian Dior, Balenciaga, Yves St Laurent creations.'"²² This makes sense as Charlotte Johnson, Barbie's first "fashion designer," attended Parisian shows from the mid to late 1950s and took notes on what would eventually become Barbie's wardrobe.²³ Since the doll and its high-end fashion tradition are so inextricably linked, it should come as no surprise that in the new millennium Mattel began having luxury fashion designers create special edition Barbies. Such designers have ranged from Juicy Couture to Vera Wang to Christian Louboutin.²⁴ Some of these special edition pieces cost upwards of \$200, and are clearly meant as adult collector items. This brings Barbie back to her roots as a fashion icon for adult women instead of a play toy for children.

²⁰ Lord pg225; Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive pg284

²¹ Peers pg179

²² Peers pg182

²³ Peers pg183

²⁴ Designer Barbies: <http://www.barbiecollector.com/shop/category/designers>

Although there is an inherent paradox in fashion in the tension between expressing one's individuality and the intrinsic push to social conformity,²⁵ fashion by its very nature is the enforcement of hegemonic norms. A small sector of powerful people in the industry decides what is going to be popular and from there the designs eventually trickle down, even into the inexpensive stores. Clothes do not simply serve as protective coverings from the elements for our bodies anymore, but another expression of culture. Most real women find shopping off the rack to be very challenging due to the standardized cuts and sizing of mass-produced garments, since every woman's body is different. Clothing stores use mannequins to display their fashions, but if one were to take a closer look, the clothes almost always have to be folded and pinned to properly fit the dummies. This is because beginning in the 1950s, fashion mannequins began being designed with a body type very similar to how Barbie would eventually be manufactured. For three decades before that, mannequins appeared much stouter.²⁶ Nonetheless, Barbie's clothes *always* fit-- even though a woman of her 36-18-34 proportions would never be able to buy clothes off the rack. This is because all of Barbie's clothes are specifically designed and manufactured for her and her alone. One cannot take clothes from a different doll and try to put them on a Barbie because they simply will not fit; it is not like swapping clothes with a friend. However, somewhere along the line women began to expect that they should be able to buy clothes from the store and the garments would fit them, without any alterations, just like how Barbie's clothes always fit her. Barbie does not have to shop for her particular body type because every clothing option she has is for her body type. Barbie never needed to get a bigger size shirt so that the buttons would close properly, or her pants hemmed because they were too long. Because fashion is such a strong enforcer of hegemonic ideals, and therefore, defines

²⁵ Rogers pg 117

²⁶ Lord pg225

communal standards of beauty and body type, women began believing that the problem was with their own bodies as opposed to faults in the design or manufacturing of the garments when things do not fit properly.²⁷ In a study done by Gagne and McGaughey called “Designing Women,” many of the women with whom they talked to elected to have breast augmentations in order to wear, or feel more comfortable, in different fashions.

What is interesting is the fact that despite multitudes of protests by feminist groups over the years, there have been relatively few alterations to Barbie’s form. This fact says a lot about the power of the hegemonic ideals about feminine beauty in this society. It was not until 1967, eight years after the first Barbie was released, that the doll was revamped with her “twist-and-turn” stomach. The new joints allowed for her to move at compound angles, meaning not simply perpendicular, permitting more human-like movement. After that it took another forty years, but in 1997 Barbie received some more plastic surgery when her famous “twist-and-turn” stomach was ditched for a smoother and more natural looking tummy featuring slimmer hips and a wider waist; her bust was also slightly reduced.²⁸ However, even in her new form she is still the equivalent to a US size 2.²⁹ Therefore, not only does a fashion doll like Barbie reify culture’s idealized woman, but commonly leads to women striving to become real life versions of the standards the doll represents³⁰ While it has become even more common in recent years with the development of new technologies that allow for extensive manipulation of the body, women have expressed interest in mimicking Barbie’s look for decades. Although I have already addressed the case of reality television star Heidi Montag, she proves to be far from the only woman who has publically announced such motives for going under the knife. By 1993, a

²⁷ Gagne and McGaughey pg 831

²⁸ “Barbie undergoes plastic surgery” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/32312.stm>

²⁹ Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive pg286

³⁰ Rogers pg115

woman named Cindy Jackson had undergone more than twenty operations totaling over \$55,000 to turn herself into a living doll. Her procedures included chemical peels, tummy tucks, face-lifts, breast implants, and liposuction, among others. Jackson has made a career out of her quest to look like a real life Barbie and is the founder of the London-based Cosmetic Surgery Network; she is registered with the British Internal Revenue as the Bionic Woman.³¹ Author of *Barbie Culture*, Mary Rogers, explains how in one of her interviews with a Barbie lookalike the woman claimed, “if [she] didn’t look like Barbie [she’d] be just another nobody.”³² For these women the Barbie doll becomes the essence of their identity. While these examples may be Barbie-specific, there are plenty of other women in the public eye that also look like real-life imitations of the doll, even though they may never explicitly invoke Barbie’s name. One does not have to look that hard to see that Hollywood and the media value most everything the doll’s image projects about female body image.

The Gagne and McGaughey study also explains how one of the most important parts of feminine culture is the sharing of beauty tips.³³ This means anything from make-up, to hair styling, to clothing choices, to fad diets. While the initial intention may be women trying to empower other women to take control of their own well being, which more often than not is equated to their physical appearance, this practice instead standardizes what is considered to be beautiful. In *Barbie Culture* Rogers also details how when speaking to 150 different women regarding the topic of body image only two claimed their weight was not currently and/or had never been a subject of concern to them.³⁴ This is slightly over one percent of her sample. In today’s society being fat is equated to being lazy, a lack of will power, and essentially a failure.

³¹ Lord pg244

³² Rogers pg116

³³ Gagne and McGaughey pg 832

³⁴ Rogers pg119

But in the struggle to achieve the perfect body, women soon learn that breasts shrink with body fat loss. So how are women supposed to attain this ideal Barbie body shape? It would seem that unless a woman is naturally programmed by genetics to have this form, which is highly rare, the only answer would be surgical enhancements.

So how has the body-altering technology available in today's world reinforced these ideals? It has been argued that ideas of self, truth, and reality are complicated by our immersion in technology.³⁵ In fact, this phenomenon has become so prolific that a new term was coined to describe it called somatics. Somatics is characterized as a technology of the body driven by the idea that our bodies can be whatever we like if we devote enough money and attention to them, of which the Barbie doll is the ultimate icon.³⁶ Simply put, nowadays if you do not like something, anything at all really, you can change it if you have the resources to do so. Even those women that would not normally be able to afford cosmetic procedures find ways of going under the knife by financing it through loans, receiving procedures as gifts, and most recently, through participation on reality television shows. Does this mean women are turning themselves into commodities in order to achieve this seemingly impossible standard of beauty? The Barbie doll, as a plastic manufactured good that is sold, is a commodity, and advertised as such. With the introduction of the redesigned 1967 Barbie, her kick-off television promotion featured a swarm of young girls racing to trade in their old Barbies for the new and improved one.³⁷ Simply throwing her out for something better. While Barbie is a plastic toy, she is also representative of a woman's body, and that too was being thrown out by these young girls. This

³⁵Toffoletti pg58

³⁶Rogers pg112

³⁷Lord pg86

mentality has only been carried on throughout the decades, and now real women apply it to their own bodies, treating them like dolls that need remodeling.

While the argument can be made that decisions to change one's appearance by processes such as plastic surgery are up to the agency of individuals, what they may forget is that no one lives in a world free from the hegemonic ideals imposed upon them through the mass media. Media outlets, such as women's magazines, play on and magnify the insecurities in women with the majority of articles focused on improving their image as well as honing their sexuality. Additionally, these same magazines are sold with women on the covers who are airbrushed to perfection. Sadly, with the development of better technology and programs like Photoshop, such practices have certainly become more of the rule than the exception. Thighs, arms and waistlines can be slimmed down, breasts enlarged, and skin blemishes erased. Therefore, although a woman may decide she wants to get a breast augmentation to make herself feel better, and not to attract the attention of a man, she learns what is "normal" and beautiful through the ideals manifested in the society where she lives.³⁸ This mentality is dangerous to teach children, and in the minimal empirical research that has been conducted on the topic thus far, it seems as though exposure Barbie at young ages has a strong correlation with those girls fostering more dissatisfaction with their bodies than those that have not been. In study done by Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive, girls from five to eight years old were separated into three groups and given an illustrated story book. The illustrations were the only part of the book that varied from group to group; one group had different pictures of Barbie to accompany the text, one group had a larger size doll equivalent to a US size 16,³⁹ and the control group had generic pictures that did not include visuals of any dolls or people. After viewing the book the girls were asked questions

³⁸ Gagne and McGaughey pg 827

³⁹ Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive pg286

about how they felt about their bodies, asking them to compare themselves to how they feel they actually look to how they wish they looked. The study showed that in the girls that were given the book with images of Barbie, their level of body dissatisfaction was higher, meaning they wished they had a different body type than the one they had. Older girls reported an even higher rate of dissatisfaction between actual and ideal body sizes, indicating that they wished they were thinner.⁴⁰ The problem here is that if girls as young as five to eight years old are already learning that the bodies they have are not beautiful, or subpar in any aspect, than they may never learn how to accept themselves the person they are.

Beginning in 1961 with RN Barbie, Mattel has developed a series of career dolls. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, the Barbie advertising slogan was “we girls can do anything.”⁴¹ Nonetheless, through all of the different incarnations of the Barbie doll, she has always looked ultra-feminine, even when she was designed in outfits that were typically masculine or potentially androgynous, such as a police officer, computer engineer, doctor, or an astronaut, there was no mistaking that Barbie was female.⁴² In a 1965 school teacher Barbie, she was dressed in a tight sweater and skirt and the box read “I chalk it up to my Ph.D in fashion.”⁴³ The unfortunate message that this sends young girls is that no matter what profession they chose, they must conform to standards of traditional femininity and that how they look doing the job is the most important part. In this way, many of the versions of the doll that were designed during the Women’s Liberation Movement that may have been produced with the goal of being empowering, inadvertently end up being cultural reifications of what a women necessarily must

⁴⁰ Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive pg290

⁴¹ Peers pg 187

⁴² Rogers pg14

⁴³ Image: Student Teacher Barbie

<http://media.photobucket.com/image/1965+barbie+teacher+/toyworldusa/Dolls/Barbies/Barbie1965FavoriteCareerStudentTeacher.jpg>

look like. Rogers explains how despite men's ability to hide behind large paychecks that "no matter what their accomplishments, women need to conform to the 'right' body in order to appear fully successful,"⁴⁴ and claims that Barbie "belongs to that chorus of voices extolling not only slimness, but also beauty and youthfulness as requisites of feminine success."⁴⁵ Barbie is now fifty-one years old, and though she has evolved many times over, has not aged, developed wrinkles, or gained any weight. Obviously this fact rests on the sheer reality that she is a plastic doll and not a real woman, but her status as an icon has set the standard of what a professional woman necessarily should look like. This, coupled by the fact that the generation of women that grew up with the first career Barbies were subconsciously fed these ideals, and even the most recent of career oriented Barbies stick to the same fashion-minded mold, means young girls are indoctrinated with the same superficial values.

As a plastic doll, Barbie has no heart, no mind, and no soul. But she also unfortunately, and probably unintentionally, teaches girls that the heart, mind, and soul are subordinate to the body by perpetuating an image of the doll that, despite whichever career she depicted in, is first and foremost concerned with her appearance. Her superficial nature was actually satirized in a highly successful pop song by the band Aqua in 1997, simply titled "Barbie Girl." Mattel was especially outraged by this parody of the doll and sued Aqua's record label, MCA Records, claiming that since Mattel owned the trademark to Barbie, the song constituted infringement.⁴⁶ However, the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit held that since the song was not purely commercial it was protected under the First Amendment as freedom of speech. When Mattel tried to appeal this decision to the Supreme Court they were denied a *writ of certiorari*,

⁴⁴ Rogers pg116

⁴⁵ Rogers pg123

⁴⁶ Mattel, Inc. v. MCA Records, Inc.

meaning the court did not review the case another time and let the lower court's ruling stand.

The lyrics portray the doll as a bimbo and Ken's sex object, stating "You can brush my hair/ Undress me everywhere." As a play toy, the doll exhibits no personal autonomy, and the song explains how Barbie can play however the owner chooses. The problem here is that the back and forth between male and female vocals suggests that the male "Ken" voice is this Barbie's owner, and that he can treat her however he sees fit. Through its catchy tune and use of humor, this seemingly harmless pop song subconsciously teaches young girls, who were frequently its listeners, that such behavior is desirable. In fact, at the end of the song, the voice that is meant to represent Barbie exclaims "Oh I'm having so much fun!"

Despite the fact that many women aspire to look like the doll, there is a question nowadays as to whether or not being called a Barbie is a compliment or an insult. Physically, the remark implies someone is telling you that you have the ideal feminine body type. But emotionally and intellectually it suggests something else entirely. As author of *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*, Kim Toffoletti explains "calling someone plastic is to demean them by questioning the very core of their real self."⁴⁷ And is that not exactly what Barbie is, plastic? This phenomenon has recently been documented in popular culture. The 2001 box office smash *Legally Blonde* details the story of a young woman named Elle Woods (played by Reese Witherspoon), who is the epitome of a real life Barbie but striving to be seen for more than just her physical appearance. She is a blonde haired, blue eyed beauty, with the small waist and large bust to match; she is also incredibly popular as the president of her sorority. At the outset of the movie, Elle has her Ken-equivalent of a boyfriend as well whom she thinks is going to propose. When he ends the relationship instead, claiming that she was not a serious enough

⁴⁷ Toffoletti pg70

match for him intellectually, she decides to follow him to Harvard Law School. Despite scoring a 179 (out of a possible 180) on her LSATs and being accepted to an Ivy League institution, none of her peers there takes her seriously. It is not until the end up the movie when Woods solves the murder case she is interning on as a first year law student that her peers begin to look at her differently. Another example of the Barbie mold being treated as a negative trait in Hollywood came three years later with *Mean Girls*. In the movie, the three most attractive and popular girls in the high school are labeled “the plastics,” with the blonde haired Barbie lookalike, Regina George, as the leader of the clique. Although everyone in the school seemingly admires her beauty, Regina happens to be one of the meanest and most manipulative girls in school and people only like her because they are actually afraid of her.

The question still remains, however, as what the solution is to this complicated struggle to balance ideals about body image projected by Barbie and the need to be a substantive individual. There is also the question as to whether or not can it be combated at a young age. Essentially, Barbie is just a toy but “unlike any other kind of toy, a doll can look back when it is regarded by its owner; it elicits a strong personal attachment. This attachment occurs not because of the particular way it is produced or dresses, but because of the way human beings operate psychologically. Children have a built-in urge to attribute feelings to objects that even vaguely resemble human physiognomy—an urge to attribute ‘aliveness.’”⁴⁸ This innate fact about dolls complicates the relationship women of any age have with the Barbie doll. One seemingly legitimate practice would be to have young girls play with a toy that did not, or was less likely to, foster body dissatisfaction at such a young age. This was the thought behind the 1991 release of the *Happy to be Me* doll which claimed to be better proportioned and boasted more realistic

⁴⁸ Wright pg7

measurements equivalent to 36-27-38.⁴⁹ Despite the fact that the Happy doll was embraced by National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders and all types of media outlets, from *People* to *Allure*, by 1994 the toy flopped. Unlike Barbie, she was very cheaply made. For example, the doll appeared to have a receding hairline, with the strands coming out in scattered clumps.⁵⁰ The creators of the *Happy to be Me* doll apparently forgot that in order to attempt to compete with Barbie, their doll must also be as aesthetically pleasing. Therefore, even though Happy was critically acclaimed, mothers continued to buy their daughters Barbies instead. Then in 2002, the Emme doll, which is modeled after the real-life plus size supermodel of the same name, was released. Emme's proportions would make her the equivalent of a US size 16.⁵¹ This doll has also failed to materialize economically over the past nine years.

These Barbie alternatives cannot even begin to challenge Barbie's dominance. Between 1961 and 1965 Mattel's sales doubled to \$100 million. Today a Barbie doll is sold approximately every half-second somewhere in the world, and contributes about \$1.5 billion a year to Mattel's annual sales. The average three to ten year old girl owns eight Barbies, and only 1% of that age group does not own any at all.⁵² These staggering statistics show that even fifty years later, Barbie has not gone away. In fact, her cultural empire continues to expand into movies, video games, both children's and women's clothes, and even high-end jewelry lines. It is her intergenerational status as an icon over the past half-century that makes her presence particularly dangerous in terms of body image. It is not because she has the particular figure that she does, but the fact that when a person says a woman "looks like a Barbie," there is no further description that is needed. Despite a myriad of other examples of skinny-yet-curvaceous women

⁴⁹ Lord pg227

⁵⁰ Lord pg229

⁵¹ Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive pg286

⁵² Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive pg283

in the media, the Barbie is used to label a particular type of figure, the ideal female figure, without requiring any further elaboration on specific features. Knowing all of this, coupled with Mattel's apparent resistance to changing the dolls body, as evidence of the fact that it took forty years in order for them to make her appear more natural looking, it seems hard to imagine that the company would ever drastically remodel Barbie's proportions. As I have already demonstrated, the doll is inextricably linked to the high-end fashion world, a place in which models are hardly ever criticized for being too thin, and so enlarging Barbie's proportions to make her a more standard size, as opposed to model-sized, could potentially create a backlash in the fashion community. Even if this did not occur, surely Barbie fans across the globe would question as to why their beloved model of all-things-feminine-and-beautiful had suddenly gotten fat, especially those fans that have gone to great and painful lengths to replicate Barbie's body for themselves. But regardless of any potential backlash by adult consumers, would children react positively to playing with a Barbie that was proportioned more like an Emme or "Happy to be Me" doll? Most likely, the only way to combat the problem of the image Barbie portrays effectively, would be to change Barbie's image, since none of her competition even remotely comes close to challenging her several decade long dominance. In 2010, new developments in technology of fabric looms surely must make the initial challenge of making clothes in fabrics proportionate to the doll less of an obstacle. And if in fact this is true, then it is no longer necessary for Barbie to be disproportionately narrow in the waist to compensate for any fabric related disparity.

Modern women find themselves needing to fit into a myriad of different molds, just as Barbie has over the years, resulting in a need to negotiate the superficial and substantive aspects of their character in order to successfully adapt to each new niche. Unfortunately my project

cannot come to any definite conclusions about a resolution to this ongoing battle that women have been fighting with the Barbie. Instead, it sought to explore the superficially simple relationship and explain how it is in fact much more complex than it seems at first glance. The complexities arise in the negotiation between a body that is idealized and what is attainable, what is healthy and what is not, and being substantive human being versus being externally beautiful. While there proves to be no simple answer to this dilemma, it seems as though the only real hope is to stop teaching such contradicting lessons about what women must necessarily act and look like to young girls and remind them at a young age that Barbie is just a doll, not an identity.

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