

Does Barbie hold up a mirror forcing us to look at ourselves, or are we a mirror of her?

"In every second of everyday two Barbies are sold somewhere in the world."

Barbie is everywhere. She is as much apart of modern culture as the television, computer or car. She has certainly made a major impact on western society. The 11.5-inch plastic doll's image is as famous as Madonna or Britney, and has had more image transformations than the two of them put together. She is the most popular woman for sale anywhere in the world. To say that Barbie is controversial is an understatement. She is the ultimate drag queen and at the same time represents white Middle America's concept of femininity. Barbie is a disgrace to feminists and the religious right, she is the glorified bimbo who has done nothing to achieve her place in society. Everyone seems to have their own view as to whether she is good or bad that Barbie gives to society. But the question that I hope to try and understand is whether Barbie is a cause of society's direction or is it a reflection on society. As the title of the essay states, is Barbie just holding a mirror up to us? To try and understand who Barbie is I have focused on the sections of society where her affect is noted. Race, sexuality and social class are all areas that Barbie causes controversy and so these three issues are the of basis of the essay on understanding the cultural icon know as Barbie.

Barbie's History

Barbie was introduced at the 1959 American Toy Fair in New York by Ruth Handler. Originally the toy was just meant to be for Ruth's daughter Barbara, which from who the name is derived. She shared the idea of the doll with the all male board of Mattel who rejected the concept of the doll because of production costs and the final retail price being too high for consumers. She then approached Mattel for second time after coming back from Europe with a doll called Lilli. This German doll was not intended for young girls but rather was originated from a pornographic caricature in a German comic strip. The doll was intended for men to accompany the comic strip. It was very distant from the image of the white middle class all American teenager that Barbie was portraying. The impact of Lilli was a renewed interest in the Barbie doll by Mattel and the modifying of Lilli from the German pornographic princess into the all American virgin princess.

The doll was produced to mixed emotions from the public. It was the age of the teenager.

Everything teen was new and sexy during the post war fifties. The first model of the doll came with black and white swimsuit. This rattled the American public. Was white middle class America ready for a doll with a woman's figure? Some saw Barbie as 'scary and sleazy'. But others saw Barbie in a different light, she was to be the new American dream. This fantasy was seen by parents to be healthy for their children to aspire to.

Barbie is the definitive fashion guru and model. She has the biggest fashion label in the world. This Mattel's philosophy for Barbie, 'the doll sells the clothes and the clothes sell the doll.' The designs for Barbie's clothes were based on many trips by Charlotte Johnson a designer who was hired by Ruth to the European fashion houses. Bridal gowns, tennis dresses, ballerina outfits and pyjamas for slumber parties were all part of the wardrobe that made up Barbie's fashion collection.

'Handler wanted to create a stunning wardrobe from which each child could chose an outfit to create her own personality for Barbie; therefore she had to develop fashions to coordinate with society's expectations and aspirations.' (Riddick)

Barbie main aim in the early fifties and sixties was to teach young girls what was expected of them by society. This was the message that Handler was telling mothers of the young girls who were purchasing Barbie. Barbie was to teach a generation of young girls how to act and behave in middle-class America. Even in the early sixties she was not only a fashion model but could also be a homemaker. This was the lesson being given to the youth of America.

Her body stayed pretty much the same through the turn of the decade although her face was remodelled from the sophisticated look of the late fifties to a more natural look during the sixties. The biggest change of her life was the introduction of Ken in to the fold. Ken was introduced into

the Barbie world in 1961, which was very much against Mattel wishes but it was public that had the final say. Ken was to be a fixture in Barbie's life. Barbie and Ken had matching outfits whether they were going to a lawn picnic or a fraternity party. Barbie was by no means a feminist but the role that Ken played did not do Barbie feminist street cred any harm. Society's attitude at the time was still that the woman relied on the man. Barbie changed the woman's worth, Ken was hers rather than him owning her. Ken was just another one of Barbie's accessories, another fashion accessory. Barbie portrayed an alternative lifestyle. While most women's concept of a career was to be a homemaker, Barbie was out there earning a living and getting a career.

Barbie had always been up with the times as far as fashion was concerned. This was certainly the case in relation to sixties. Twiggy was the fashion icon and trendsetter of the time and so it was that Barbie and her friends had to get in on the act. Just like Twiggy Barbie went Mod. Barbie donned a mini skirt with her newly designed bent legs. Barbie cousin Frankie and Ken were also in on the Mod era with new haircuts and faddish clothes. The seventies and eighties were no different from the sixties. Mattel saw the trends and fashion of the time and transmitted those styles to Barbie. Mattel were looking for a new direction in the seventies. The times were a changing and political and social instability was constant in America, which caused Mattel to re-evaluate Barbie. The company nearly went bankrupt in 1974 after which new faces took over and got the ball rolling again. In 1976 Barbie was established as a national icon after being placed in the 'America's time Capsule' at the nation's bicentennial celebration. In 1976 Barbie and Ken again got their new image from the public superstars when they became extremely glamorous in the forms of Robert Redford and 'Charlie's Angels' Fawcett. They also had new licensed friends, Donny and Marie Osmond. It was time for Disco and Barbie was not going to miss out. The eighties saw Barbie yet again rising with the times. Astronaut Barbie and Dr Barbie were introduced in 1986 and 1988 respectively. Women were moving into the work force all over America and with the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher in UK there was no doubt that Mattel were going to get in on the act. Barbie also managed to take up the yuppie lifestyle which dominated the cities during the eighties. Day and Night Barbie was introduced in 1985. Barbie came with a complete set of office equipment and was able to switch to her evening gown for a night out on the town after working hours.

Mattel saw that Barbie was just not strong enough to hold the market by herself and decided to widen its range of dolls, which included an international line. The dolls included Italian, Oriental and Hispanic Barbies which broke all of Barbies cultural, ethnic and racial boundaries. Mattel did not give any of these new dolls alternative personalities but rather just changing the skin of the Barbie doll. Sales were increasing and seemed to show a greater acceptance in America of all races and nationalities.

Barbie in the nineties became the ultimate material girl. She was yet again a product of her times. Parents had now started to be aware of the message that Barbie was giving to their kids and were no longer giving Barbie to their children. Parents did not want their children to believe that as long as they were blonde and beautiful they would be able to get a career or boyfriend with out any effort. Mattel opposed the attack on Barbie submitting the wrong values and so in 1990 got thirty children from around the world to meet in New York City for a Barbie Summit on world hunger, environmental degradation, and war and peace. This was meant to show the world that Barbie was like a mini united Nations, who was breaking societies cultural boundaries. This later resulted in a Barbie Summit doll and UNICEF Barbie. Mattel in an effort to try and break those ethnic boundaries, saw the opportunity to capitalise on ethnic spending power and geared a lot of their dolls throughout the nineties to black and Hispanic communities.

Consumerism in the nineties took on a new look with many brands collaborating together and the forming of major super companies. McDonalds, BayWatch and Lee jeans all became apart of the Barbie world. Just as Barbie was a popular image Mattel tried to imploy other popular images into the Barbie's world to try and increase sales.

Barbie's sales reach billion dollars in 1993 which accounted for 34% of all Barbie sales. She was now firmly established as modern icon throughout America and the globe.

'The reality is the reproduction. Most human icons are possessed only through film or audiotape; the 'original' forever eludes ownership. Barbie, however is meant to be owned, not by a few, but by everybody. She is the ultimate piece of mass art' (Lord 73)

Sexuality and Ethnicity

As has been stated above Barbie does breach boundaries but also has the appeal of other groups from within society. Although she does represent Middle class white suburbia she does not adhere to the life style of that society. Barbie is not the classic heterosexual, she has no kids and she is independent of the restrictions of the homemaker. Her wardrobe and figure suggests not only that she is not the classic image of the curvy Marilyn Munroe female but that she is the personification of the ultra feminine drag queen. Her sparkly beauty queen dresses and tiaras together with her boyish hips and elongated legs have caused the attraction of many gay men.

' the world of Barbie is relatively free of such heterocentrism and heterosexism and thus holds relative appeal for nonheterosexual people, especially gay men.' (Rogers 41)

Barbie seems to be as much an icon to gay men as Madonna or Kylie. The text in which Barbie character is written does not mention any concrete relationship but rather just refers to Barbie as having friends or mates. There is no suggestion of marriage or finding a partner. This is one of the main reasons for the dislike of Barbie among the Christian right of America and other religious groups.

'Even though our Barbie (I say our Barbie, dear sisters, for some of you out there must have had the same experience of having one as I), tried to impress that femininity was the perfect form, the perfect clothes, and the perfect face, wouldn't it be safer to say that now, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, true femininity isn't anything to do with ANY of these things? Isn't true femininity what Barbie sought to take away, that of nurturing and giving love and care to all we are responsible to?' (Neumas)

Barbie does not stick to stereotypical jobs. She, like much of the gay community, does take on jobs that are befitting to societal norms for a model teenage girl. Ballet, hairdressing are apart of Barbie's world just as much as the military and being car mechanic. Barbie magazines have gone one step further by offering the Gay community gay themed Barbies.

Lesbian communities, who seem to be generally inclined more towards feminist ideologies, are more likely to reject to the philosophies that Barbie portrays. The attention of Barbies world does not centre upon the male being the dominant feature and so there seems to room in the world of Barbie for the non straight, non heterosexual world to participate. Barbie's sexuality is not defined and for this reason the gay community take an interest, but for the lesbian communities without the definition of feminism or other narratives it is more difficult for them to associate with Barbie.

Barbie appeal has always been something that concerned Mattel and their approach to marketing Barbie. She has a defined look and image, the American teen princess with her long blonde hair, blue eyes and pale white skin. But in the 1960s she had an addition to her world, an African American doll called Frankie. Although Mattel introduced Frankie in to Barbie's world, they still gave the message that Barbie represented white middle class America. In 1959 the first Barbies came with the text, *'Your Barbie doll is made of sturdy flesh tone vinyl plastic.'*

Barbie has almost always remained blonde, on a few occasions she has deviated to a brunette or redhead. Mattel's introduction of Frankie in the mid sixties was a bold step, due to the political climate of the time, but the lipstick coloured lips and the blacken hair are just Barbie but darker. No attempt has been made by Mattel to try and create or form a new doll that has a greater similarity to African American woman than it does to Barbie, the white princess.

Just like in the rest of Barbies world, she is always the centre of attention, she is the perfection. Whether it be her relationship with Ken or her relationship with the rest of the society she is still the focus. Barbie is egocentric, that is her personality. She is girl that has everything and that will

always has everything without doing a lot to achieve this. Likewise her relationship towards her friends has always been one of superiority and grandeur. If this is a reflection of society then the only message being given to kids playing with Barbie is that of 'white is better'.

'Elaine Sciolino (1997) reports that even though Islamically correct versions of Barbie are sold in Iran the preferred Barbies are the important ones – that is, the white ones in western clothing.'
(Mary)

The racial connotations are massive; the American dominance throughout the world seems to be reflected in Barbie's world. America's and the west's superiority comes through in the world of Barbie. Yet again Barbie is reflecting the world like a mirror with nothing to hide.

Although it may be a subconscious act on Mattel part, the reflection that Barbie 'ethnic friends' give is one of a much lesser being with respect to opportunities that are available to them. An example of this is Barbie's Hispanic friend Teresa. Teresa comes in a number of different forms but they all are contained around the same themes. Sex object, athlete and shopper are all that Teresa can achieve. Teresa is a Barbie wannabe. Barbie opportunities far out weigh that of Teresa. Even when Teresa is seen as a sex object she is still restricted by being a 'beach princesses'.

Mattel have one of the most difficult tasks in trying to create a balance between creating 'ethnic' or 'racial' dolls and not stereotyping these dolls. The efforts that have been made so far have seriously lack the attention that is necessary to correct the lull that Mattel finds themselves in as a result of this challenge. The challenge has been made even more complex and difficult as a result of Barbie's image, the white middle class princess. On the one hand Mattel need to create dolls that are not just replicas of Barbie with a different tone of skin and that they also do not stereotype the 'ethnic' or 'racial' image.

Youth and Consumption

Barbie's message is one that is particularly complex and ambivalent. Just as the title of this essay suggests, she may not even be giving a message at all but merely reflecting a confused and unjust society. But even with this complex message what example, if any, is being given to the girls that play with Barbie. What is the message that they are being given?

Barbie has no mother and no father, she has no brothers and only recently has she acquired a sister. She had a set of grandparents but they came and went. She will always be eighteen and that will never change, she is ageless. Mattel never intended her to have any concrete family, but at the same time she is the girl that has everything. She has had houses, cars, ponies, dogs and enough adoring friends to never feel insecure. All her careers have been successful, whether it be high powered business woman or roadside worker. Barbie has all the material wealth that could ever be desired but seems not to possess emotional or spiritual wealth. Even the relationship that she has with her boyfriend is one of convenience; he is there when ever she needs him.

So what is the message that is being given to the youth that play with Barbie? What do they understand through these mixed indications.

Just like in true post modern culture Barbie is a consumer but at the same time she is an independent woman. She does not rely on anyone and is not supported by anyone either emotionally or materially. Even in the early sixties she was depicted wearing a suit and portfolio as a fashion designer. This has always been the aim of Mattel since just after Barbie's launch, that she was not going to fit into the heterosexist mentality of the woman chained to the sink but rather that she would have the alternative lifestyle and be her own bread winner.

'Barbie, on the other hand allows a young woman to dream about all the possibilities open to her. Barbie can be a doctor, an astronaut, a banker or lawyer, a flight attendant, a fashion designer, a nurse, a gymnast, a horse woman, a whale trainer, a veterinarian, a personal trainer, a Arctic explorer, a teacher, a circus star, a nightclub singer and now, a member of the Star Trek crew.'
(Moore-Henecke)

Even though the message that 'independent Barbie' is giving, is one of feminism and girl power, there is still a major element of the blonde bimbo being placed into the Barbie working world. Barbie also sends the message that women need to have the right look or body in order to be successful. Barbie's main focus is still her looks and cosmetics. Even when working as a policewoman she still has no gun or weapon and wears a short skirt. Her main aim is always to look good rather than to achieve justice as a female police officer.

Malls, fast food, the beach and clothe shopping are all part of the Barbie makeup. Which seems to be the other side of the coin. Not only is it the age of the consumer, but the consumer is no longer the people with the most wealth, but rather it is the youth and the aged that are consuming more. Yet again, is Barbie encouraging middle America to become a wasted consumer culture or is she just reflecting what that society has become?

Society tells us that we should 'choose life'. We should choose a job, a house, a television, a car e.t.c. Barbie is no different. She magnifies these values that society is pushing down our throats. It was Barbie in the 1960s and 1970s that started this push towards consumerisation of the youth. Barbie was not just a doll with a vast wardrobe of clothes but now also comprised as having the teen dream. This dream came in the form of a Teen Dream Bedroom and Fun Cooking Kitchen as well as Fire light living room. It was not long before the introduction of Dream furniture collection in the early eighties.

People in throughout the world have always been fascinated by the celebrity and what they represent in modern culture. In the 21st Century the celebrity has become just another consumer product. Barbie is no different in this respect. She is as much a consumer product as Britney or Madonna. Just like Barbie the merchandising for Britney is mammoth and just like Britney a young girl has to have all the Barbie products available.

Barbie world is a mini consumer world, where parents will buy their child products depending on their own wealth. It is interesting to note that adults who had Barbies as children not only want to give the whole Barbie world to the kids but that they want to fulfil those aspirations which Barbie represents. And this usually comes in the form of material possessions such as cars and houses.

Barbie represents the dream that most Americans have for and about their children despite their society's neglect of millions of it's children, (Rogers 84)

It is no surprise that when Barbie was introduced it was during the civil rights movement and after World War Two. Youth markets and youth culture was emerging at the time and there was an increase in the youth job market. It was one of the first times that the youth of America had the opportunity to work for and have their own income. They did not have any responsibilities and so their income was also dispensable. Barbie similarly has her own dispensable income and no family or other responsibilities to support. Youth culture was developing during the late fifties and early sixties in parallel to the rise of the youth consumption. All of Barbies past times were being taken up by the teens of the time, fast food, music, magazines, cosmetics and jewellery were some of the interests of the youth of the time. It was the age of the teenager, which is best described by the designer Billy Boy,

'Teenage would have the a new meaning, and Barbie was a leading representative of its positive new definition.'

Plastic Fantastic – the Barbie Body

One of the most controversial and noted issues which surrounds Barbie, is her body and figure. Barbie's body is an impossibility as far as the natural world is concerned. Young girls up till the age of five or six are given baby dolls to play with and mother. When Barbie is introduced in to them there is contrast and confusion. Again the same question is asked as to what is the message that being given to the youth through the body and image of Barbie.

Barbie's body has evolved over the past four decades to become something that does not occur naturally in any female body on the planet, but that it is an impossibility for nature to create such a body. Barbie's fashion has changed also in conjunction to the fashions of the time. Likewise Barbie's body has also changed in relation to the fashions of the decades.

Like in all societies there is pressure on the individual to conform to the norms of society. Social class, age, gender, race and sexual orientation are all part of the Barbie mould which represents her body. Barbie's body symbolises what is better. Youth is better, Middle class is better, white is better and gravity defying breasts are also better. Barbie is perfection, her makeup never smudges and she never gets wrinkles.

The obsession that twenty first century has with fat is mirrored by Barbie. Societies film and music stars are getting younger and younger. The over twenties just cannot make it anymore. Tiny waists and large breasts are what society wants and so that is what Barbie projects. Models for Calvin Klein and Nivea seemingly have not even reached puberty yet. Society is constantly bombarded by images of youth and youthful culture, the quest for eternal youthfulness is never-ending.

"We've let images like Barbie and slender figures on magazine covers tell us what we should look like, and since most of us don't look like supermodels, we end up feeling bad about our bodies," says Linda Brogdon, a licensed psychologist and eating-disorder specialist. In extreme cases, this can lead to eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia. But for most women, it's simply a feeling of inadequency because their bodies don't measure up to an unrealistic ideal." (Cain)

Body-image issues usually come into realisation during young girls adolescent or teen years. This is just after or during interaction with Barbie, where young girls are expected to compare their image and social life with that of Barbie. When they reach adult age their image is then compared to that of supermodels. As has been stated above this has led many women to a lack of satisfaction with the way they look.

This pressure that society places on women has led some women to plastic surgery. After all Barbie has enough to plastic surgery to kill any human being. Women who do not have the economic means to be able to have surgery, have been given access to the surgery through loans or gifts. It brings in nearly half a billion pounds into America each year. It is not the same as reconstructive surgery but rather is constant desire for everlasting youth.

'Barbie is an icon whose "perfect" body is more attainable than ever before. She exists most widely as an icon in those cultures where women can not escape endless messages about how to improve, enhance, rework and even perfect their deficient, flawed bodies.' (Rogers 122)

How much has Barbie affected our Societies?

Some of the issues and arguments that have risen over past four decades have been raised above. The question that was posed at the start of the essay, as to whether the Barbie affected society or that society mirrored Barbie. Barbie is still just a doll, but at the same time her effect is incredible.

'But isn't interpretation what toys are really all about? And Barbie is, at bottom, a toy, despite the paranoid fantasies of conspiracists who'd like us to believe that the doll is an agent of antifeminist mind control. We don't deny that Barbie is the pink-and-lacy epitome of feminine role play. She's a little girl's first brush with the mysteries of grown-up glamour, romance and adventure. She's a powerful indoctrination into the culture of acquisitiveness and its attendant disappointments: You don't get the Barbie Dream House for your birthday, even though you asked and asked for it, and it scars you for life. Later, even more of those Barbie dreams are dashed. You don't grow up to be

a ballerina or an astronaut or a gold medal-winning Olympic gymnast or a Sea World whale trainer, like Barbie. But, then, just look how big and grand those dreams are. Is it just us or is there something a little depressing about Dentist Barbie? Or average-body, flat-footed Barbie?’ (Salon)

Barbie as an icon is complex and with her complexity comes controversy. Like all modern day icons she has had an effect on all areas of culture society. Gender, social class, race, sexual orientation and ethnicity all are part of the Barbie world. Ultimately Barbie seems to both reflect society and also address society. She has managed to form many young girls personalities for good and bad, but also she has changed and evolved over her four decades. She is no different to Madonna or Kylie.

Barbie is both a threat and an opportunity to young girls. She offers the opportunity to be ambitious for those that have the ability to go out into the world and obtain the capitalist ‘American’ dream. But at the same time for those kids that do not have these opportunities or who do not want to fulfil those dreams she poses a tremendous threat.

Her involvement in the modern world is cyclic. Mattel have no doubt always followed the trends of society and transferred them to Barbie, but at the same time young girls have seen Barbie as a part of society and have followed her.

There is no way that Barbie could ever be defined or put into any bracket. For something so small she sure does get a lot of attention. She represents the post modern consumer culture whether she enforces it or not, is a difficult call but there is no doubt that she certainly adds to the philosophies of 21st century.

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