

Running Head: BARBIES EVOLUTION INTO BEING INCLUSIVE

Psychology 258: Barbies Evolution into Being Inclusive

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Mattel's infamous Barbie Doll is an incredibly polarizing topic. The company in the past has been criticized for being exclusionary in regards to body image, race and gender. Despite this, their fashionista doll is a staple toy for millions of children. With the introduction of new inclusive and celebratory lines, Barbie is trying to regain their footing. There are many opinions about the scandalous doll and it's got many conflicting messages. This paper will discuss both these outlooks and take a critical look at the evolution of Barbie from being controversial to rebranding.

Ruth Handler is the creator of Barbie and Co-founder of Mattel. (Mattel, 2016) Her inspiration for Barbie was from watching her children play with paper dolls and wanted to create a 3D version for them. (Mattel, 2016) Barbie is named after Ruth's daughter Barbara and debuted in 1959 at a toy fair in New York. (Mattel, 2016) At this point Barbie has had over 180 careers in her lifetime, ranging from Astronaut to game developer. (Mattel, 2016) She moved ahead with her vision despite pushback from pretty much everyone. (Kahn, 2019) What was most controversial was that she wanted Barbie to be developed just like a real woman. (Kahn, 2019) It seems that Barbie has always faced controversy in regards to her body.

Despite facing criticism, Mattel Inc. is working hard to create collections that are inclusive. It seems that the company is acknowledging the criticism towards them and is making strides to create dolls that diversify their collections. Mattel has been criticized for appearing like they want to cater towards inclusivity to keep Barbie relevant rather than actually believing in the cause. Dickson a representative for Mattel claims "Our brand represents female empowerment," and "It's about choices. Barbie had careers at a time when women were restricted to being just housewives. Ironically, our critics are the very people who should

embrace us.” (Dockterman, 2016) While this may be true that the original motivation of Barbie was to inspire and feel like any job was attainable, the brand stopped there. Sarah Miller throws an offhand comment in her article about Barbie’s body size that Mattel’s efforts are conflicting. She quotes “Mattel obviously wants to keep Barbie around. Partly because it loves her and partly because it loves money.” (Miller, 2016) It’s difficult to tell if it’s a cash grab or genuine want to grow the brand but it’s undeniable that even if it’s a cash grab, the message remains the same. By introducing these new Barbies, she steps out of the fantasy world that she existed in before. In that world she was equipped with endless clothes, friends and job opportunities. Now she is stepping into our world where body types and skin tones vary and getting a job that pays well is a little bit more difficult. With more inclusive and diverse dolls as well as other toys, children will be exposed to open minded values from a young age.

Barbie is the most well known out of Mattel's dolls. With this in mind, it’s reasonable that she is the main representation of Mattel's brand. She is the first of her kind for sure. However, she had to change and even Mattel recognizes that. In 2016, Mattel released three new Barbies with three different body types. This is significant because it was Barbie who was re-released and not just her lesser known friends. The introduction of Barbie in curvy, petite and tall is very symbolic for the new direction that Mattel is heading towards. Evelyn Mazzacco, a higher up for Barbie states “We believe we have a responsibility to girls and parents to reflect a broader view of beauty...” (Entis, 2016) Evelyn explains that the new series was created by looking at the critiques of people who opposed the brands previous actions. (Dockterman, 2016) With the introduction of the new body inclusive lines, this absolutely speaks to what Evelyn is trying to convey. There is not only a want for a diverse Barbie but a need. Entis mentions in their article

that the new Barbies are similar to the goals of their competitor American Girl. (Entis, 2016) For American Girl dolls, they've always had varying skin tones, eye color and hair to make it more relatable for the consumer. (Entis, 2016) This is a great motivation because having representation is vital.

Curvy Barbie appears to be the leader and getting the most amount of reaction from the collection. It is a stark contrast from what Mattel sold in the early 60's called teen Slumber Party Barbie. Slumber Party Barbie was sold with a dieting book that came with the recommendation of "don't eat". (Dockterman, 2016) It doesn't stop there though, because Slumber Party Barbie also came with her own scale set to the weight of 110 lbs. These are both appalling features to come with childrens toys. The scale is especially disturbing because it's set to a certain weight that is deemed "acceptable" but it could be humiliating and isolating for anyone who is anything more than 110 lbs. While the Slumber Party Barbie was also criticized for having stereotypical phrases like "Let's plan our dream wedding" it seems a little less controversial when being compared to the diet book and a scale. (Dockterman, 2016) The notion of enforcing diets and trying to normalize unhealthy eating routines on children is disgusting. In current body standards today, there is a desire to move away from the stick thin models being the token body type. It's not a perfect formula and there is still a ton of work to be done in becoming a more open minded society in relation to body image. There is also a growing evolution in regards to loving curvaceous bodies with spearheaders like Kim Kardashian, Ashley Graham, Rihanna and most recently Lizzo. With the growth of social media, all body types are represented. Everyone gets to choose who they want to follow and this has been increasingly beneficial for lessening the narrative of one specific ideal body image. It

In a humorous article by Time magazine, Sarah Miller writes from the point of view of Barbies long time love interest Ken. The article titled *Ken Speaks: I Will Always Love Barbie, No Matter Her Size* points out how the unrealistic body image that Barbie in the past has been idolized for, has to change. (Miller, 2016) As society moves in the direction of being body conscious, it's unrealistic to believe that Barbie's unattainable bod could last. The article speaks to how Barbies image doesn't belong in the real world but with these changes it's a step towards her feeling relatively normal. (Miller, 2016) Miller or in this case Ken, mentions that even with the new looks, she will still be Barbie. "Yes, Barbie is going to represent even more races and cultures. Yes, she will wear bigger clothes, and yes, not all her friends will be able to borrow them." (Miller, 2016) This is an imperative message because it speaks to the need of diversifying Barbie and not just her friends.

A doll modeled after Barbie by the name of Razanne was in production in 1996 but not by Mattel. Razanne was produced by a Muslim couple in the United States. (Yaqin, 2007 p. 174) The companies goal was for Razanne to be a role model for Muslim children during the difficult political climate. (Yaqin, 2007) Her style and looks are meant to have Muslim fashion and identity be normalized. (Yaqin, 2007) Yaqin describes the dolls political influence by stating "Razanne embodies the modest Muslim woman who retains her cultural and religious values while living in the west" (Yaqin, 2007, p.174) These dolls were ahead of their time because it took until 2017 for Mattel to release a Muslim doll. (Finney, 2017) Within their "Shero" collection, Mattel produced a doll to honour Ibtihaj Muhammad. Ibtihaj is an Olympic fencer who won a bronze medal in 2016. (Finney, 2017) By 2017 Mattel released the doll and it was an exciting progression of their brand. "Muhammad worked with designers at Mattel on mock ups

of the doll, helping them with decisions such as styling the hair underneath the scarf and showing them how to tie the hijab correctly.” (Finney, 2017) This is important because for Muhammad it likely made her feel like her culture was being recognized and fulfilled. Having a doll with a Hijab on is revolutionary for the brand. It shows that they are taking strides towards creating a brand friendly for everyone.

2019 seems to be the year for Mattel to make major leaps for their collections. Mattel introduced the Role Model Series in March of 2019 to celebrate their 60th anniversary of Barbie and to honour International Women's Day. On Mattel's website they express their excitement for the series by stating “We’re committed to highlighting empowering role models as a key part of the Dream Gap Project—our ongoing global initiative aimed at giving girls the resources and support they need to continue believing that they can be anything.” (Role Models: Inspiring Women: You Can Be Anything, 2019) Each doll is based off of real women who may or may not be public figures but are accomplished. The introduction of the series is a great way to encourage the younger generations that with the right motivation and resources they can carry out their goals. Having a role models to relate to is a great step in inspiring people. Similar to the Role Model Series, Mattel introduced another line in August called the Inspiring Women Series. (Jones, 2019) The collections features inspiring female public figures such as Frida Khalo, Rosa Parks, Sally Ride and Katherine Johnson. (Inspiring Women™ Series, 2019) The beauty of this series is to commemorate these highly relevant public figures. Due to it having a vast array of female role models, there is a doll for everyone with any interest. When it comes to children's imaginations, the sky's the limit. By owning toys that feel relatable to them, it can carry on to feel like they belong and are apart of something bigger than themselves.

## Running Head: BARBIES EVOLUTION INTO BEING INCLUSIVE

Most recently, Mattel announced their new line of gender neutral dolls called the Creatable World series. (Dockterman, Bakalar & Tsai, 2019) In hopes of being the first line ever to create gender fluid dolls, Mattel released the series in September 2019. (Dockterman, Bakalar & Tsai, 2019) In a Times article about the dolls, they describe them as “Carefully manicured features betray no obvious gender: the lips are not too full, the eyelashes not too long and fluttery, the jaw not too wide. There are no Barbie-like breasts or broad, Ken-like shoulders. Each doll in the Creatable World series looks like a slender 7-year-old with short hair, but each comes with a wig of long, lustrous locks and a wardrobe befitting any fashion-conscious kid: hoodies, sneakers, graphic T-shirts in soothing greens and yellows, along with tutus and camo pants”. (Dockterman, Bakalar & Tsai, 2019) This is great news because there is a hole in the market for gender fluidity. Mattel’s slogan for the collection is “A doll line to keep labels out and invite everyone in.”. (Dockterman, Bakalar & Tsai, 2019) The collection is meant to feel engaging for children who are nonbinary or transgender. (Dockterman, Bakalar & Tsai, 2019) With this in mind, it seems to be a giant step in the right direction for blurring the lines between typically “feminine” or “masculine” features. Mattel is an incredibly influential company and for them to acknowledge and celebrate the LGBTQIA+ community it could potentially spearhead a huge shift in removing the stigma around transgender and nonbinary people. Hopefully, this also leads to a morphing of the gendered segregation of toy aisles.

Trixie Mattel’s name pays homage to the corporation that produces the cherished Barbie dolls which she is infatuated with. With 1.8 million Instagram followers, two network shows, a #1 charting album and a Rupaul’s Drag Race win under her belt, Trixie Mattel is considered one of the most successful drag queens at the moment. (About Trixie Mattel, 2019) She is open about

her biggest inspiration being Barbie and attributes her fashion sense to Barbie as well. (Mattel, T. & Bobb, 2019) While growing up in conservative Milwaukee, it likely wasn't socially acceptable for a young boy to receive or play with a Barbie doll. Trixie discloses that her parents mightve had an inkling to her being gay and to curb this, they bought her a Ken doll. (Mattel, T. & Bobb, 2019) While Trixie did enjoy the ken doll she describes “in hindsight is kind of funny, because if you think your kid is gay, why would you give him a toy of a man whose clothes you can take off?” (Mattel, T. & Bobb) This speaks to how there are strong beliefs about gender roles that intertwine with sexuality in children's toys. Most likely, Trixie's parents believed that Barbie was reserved for young female children and a Ken doll was a substitute for young boys. For Trixie though, a Ken doll was likely a way for her to explore sexuality innocently. Trixie considers Barbie to be one of the first feminist icons who went against the norm at the time. (Mattel, T. & Bobb, 2019) Trixie admires her for changing the market during a time where toys were targeted mainly towards boys. (Mattel, T. & Bobb, 2019) She claims “Before this doll existed, the best things that little girls had to look forward to were paper dolls or baby dolls, because at that time little girls were told that the only thing they were allowed to pretend-be was a mom. Then, Ruth Handler created Barbie in 1959 and she was sexual and womanly and she had a career and no husband and no children; she lived alone.” (Mattel, T. & Bobb, 2019)

In a controversial episode of the 90's sitcom Friends, there's an episode where gender roles are debated at length. In this case, it's not Mattel who is enforcing social commentary about gender roles but it's hard to ignore the cultural significance and impact that Friends would have during this time period. Barbie in this scenario is used to drive a narrative. Ben, who is Ross's child chooses to play with a Barbie doll. Ross is convinced that his lesbian ex-wife is influencing

## Running Head: BARBIES EVOLUTION INTO BEING INCLUSIVE

Ben. Ross spends most of the episode attempting to sway Ben towards playing with G.I. Joe; which he considers a more appropriate toy for boys. (IMDB, 1996) This episode may feature Barbie but it's main focus is the discussion of gender roles in relation to toys. The episode has mixed reviews of whether it's problematic or has a great underlying message. The Independent rated the top 10 moments in Friends that wouldn't fly today and this episode made the cut.

(Kaplan, 2019) It criticizes the show for the running theme of being vaguely homophobic towards Ross's ex wife. In this instance, Ross believes that it's Susan and Carol who are the cause of their child wanting to play with dolls. (Kaplan, 2019) However, in an article by Hello Giggles it praises the show for openly discussing that it's okay for boys to be interested in toys that aren't typically assigned to their gender. (From Our Readers, 2015) By the end of the episode they acknowledge that Ben chose the Barbie and that it's okay for children to experiment with non-gender conforming activities. They also mention how when Ross was a child, he would dress in his mother's clothes and would have people address him as B, something that was also not gender conforming. (IMDB, 1996) While this episode may not go over well now, it seems like a pretty subtle but revolutionary gendered moment in television.

In conclusion, Mattel seems to be a bit behind on the times but in recent years they have been making choices that cater towards the public social growth. It seems like they are finally listening to the criticism about the brands lack of representation and being out of touch with social standards. While this critique has been directed towards them for decades, it seems like they finally took a critical look at where there was weakness in their brand and worked to change them. With this in mind, some may say it's better late than never, while others might consider it to be too late for the brand. Barbie is a powerhouse and has been since 1959. Despite being so

controversial, Barbie continues to trek on regardless. She has been the source of a lot of discussion in regards to gender and her messages are sometimes mixed. This paper evaluated the controversies surrounding Barbie and assessed her journey in becoming a more inclusive.

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Running Head: BARBIES EVOLUTION INTO BEING INCLUSIVE

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