

## Barbied Dreams, Barbied Lives: On our backs, in the attics of our memories, on the shelves

Hande Bilsel Engin\*

### ABSTRACT

*Over the course of 1980s, Barbie has become a fashion model, a collector's fetish and an object of collective and personal memory as well as that of desire. As a skinny, white and blond glossy figure, Barbie, an icon of femininity to generations of American and America-following nation of little girls. She is also multiethnic and straight- or so says Mattel Barbie's manufacturer. This study elaborates on a few questions such as: Why do particular cultural products become the bearers of so much meaning for so many people? What about Barbie, as opposed to other dolls, toys, books or games, makes her so important? How much can cultural producers direct consumption? How much do children follow cues from Mattel as they play with and think about Barbie? To what extent does Barbie's popularity come from the doll itself rather than from Mattel's successful marketing strategies? In this light, corporate marketing strategies used to recreate Barbie's versatile but nonetheless premolded and still predominantly white image have been put under analysis. The study also tries to tackle how pre-teen girls interact with and within the world of Barbie through participant observation in their games and try to read this context by also making reference to its global marketing strategies.*

**Keywords:** Consumerism, Tween Marketing, Icons of Femininity, Cultural Imperialism

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\* Bahçeşehir University, Department of Advertising

## INTRODUCTION

For Hall, culture is not something to simply appreciate or study, but a "critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled" (Procter, 2004, p.2) and our Barbie already looms large on the battlefield of cultural politics. Feminists and anti-racists have long debated Barbie's controversial effects on innocent little girls. Queer activists wear "I cross-dressed my Barbie" T-shirts. Loggers accuse Mattel, the producer of Barbie, of promoting leftist eco-values when a commercial shows children at the Barbie Children's Summit singing about saving the trees. Mattel has been trying to manipulate political trends ranging from liberation discourse (doctor, teacher, flower kid Hippie Barbie and a new line of African American fashion dolls who "proudly" wear "ethnic print" clothing) to pro-military patriotism. And Barbie consumers have told countless childhood stories of forming their political, sexual and gender identities in reaction to Barbie and conversely of transforming or discarding Barbie to suit those identities, to indicate that Mattel and its critics have good reason to be concerned about the politics of Barbie.

The political battles over Barbie raise many questions about how culture affects politics. Why do particular products become the bearers of so much meaning for so many people? What about Barbie, as opposed to other dolls, toys, books or games, makes her so important? How much do (can) cultural producers direct consumption? How much do children follow cues from Mattel as they play with and think out Barbie? To what extent does Barbie's popularity come from the doll itself rather than from Mattel's successful marketing strategies - like the recently developed Wall of Pink, which entails packaging the dolls so that rows of bright pink boxes attract the eye in toy stores in terms of the concept of shelf space?

How influential can individual products really be? Each of many stories told by feminists about being oppressed by Barbie as a child at once testifies to Barbie's influence and provides evidence that it might be short-lived; after all they have been told by people who developed a stance of political consciousness from which they rejected the Barbie ideal. There is also a chicken-and-egg issue about the causal relation between the popularity of Barbie and the continuing value emphasized on white, skinny, voluptuous, blue-eyed, blond females: Do people like Barbie because she reflects values acquired elsewhere, or do they learn first to value Barbie and then to value what she represents?



### **Making Barbie: Who is this “Blondie” anyway?**

Barbie is one of the world's most recognized toys. Since debuting in 1959, Barbie has revolutionized the doll world, reinventing herself, and the notion of what girls can become, along the way. Even today Barbie's popularity remains relatively strong, which can likely be attributed to the fact that she has represented so many cultures and nationalities, and celebrated many regional holidays.

Being marketed as a woman that girls can aspire to be like, Barbie has held more than 80 careers. These careers span many fields, including medicine, education, public service and politics. Some of Barbies most well-known careers include elementary school teacher, doctor, nurse, veterinarian, president, police woman, firefighter, lifeguard, paleontologist, dog-trainer and McDonald's employee. In addition to timeless careers such as nurse or

doctor, Barbie has also taken on jobs that reflect what the nation is currently talking about. She has been a Spice Girl, Olympic athlete, Disney princess and astronaut. There is also a series of Summit Barbie dolls, which according to Mattel, recognize the Cold War ending between America and the Soviet Union. Barbie has also served in Desert Storm, and has been in many branches of the military, including the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force. Barbie has five sisters named Skipper, Tutti, Stacie, Kelly and Krissy, ranging from oldest to youngest. Barbie's boyfriend is named Ken. Her best friend's name is Midge. Over the years Barbie has had more than 43 other pets, including dogs, cats, horses, a parrot, giraffe, zebra, panda and chimpanzee. If Barbie were a real woman, she would be 1.70 cm weigh 50 kg. Her proportions would include a 99 cm bust, a 46 cm waist and 84cm hips.



Barbie's full name is Barbie Millicent Roberts. She is from Wisconsin and attended Willows High School. Barbie is sold in more than 150 countries and has represented 45 nationalities. According to Mattel, two Barbie dolls are sold per second. Barbie doll was introduced in Europe in 1961. Italian was the first nationality Barbie doll represented in the Dolls of the World Collection.

The Barbie doll is currently marketed in more than 150 nations around the world. Placed head to toe, Barbie dolls and family members sold since 1959 would circle the earth more than seven times.

One of the latest nationality Barbie dolls from the Doll's of The World Collection is Princess of the Incas Barbie, released in 2001 wearing an ensemble inspired by the Inca tribe and is authentic in every detail right down to her headdress. Barbie doll has represented 45 different nationalities. The first black and Hispanic Barbie dolls were introduced in 1980. 2002 marks the debut of Kayla, Barbie doll's new multi-cultural friend. Freundshcafts (Friendship) Barbie was introduced in 1990 to commemorate the tearing down of the Berlin Wall. The best selling Barbie doll ever was Totally Hair Barbie, with hair from the top of her head to her toes.

Barbie doll's boyfriend, Ken doll made his debut two years after Barbie in 1961 and in 2011 marks his 50th anniversary. The first celebrity to join the Barbie doll family was fashion model Twiggy in 1967 and the M. C. Hammer doll, complete with a cassette of his songs, was added in 1991. Doll collecting is second only to stamp collecting as the most popular collecting hobby in America -- Barbie doll is collected by women, men and children around the world. Over 1 billion fashions have been produced since 1959 for Barbie and her friends.

More than 105 million yards of fabric have gone into making Barbie doll and her friends' fashions, making Mattel one the largest apparel manufacturers in the world. Barbie doll has had more than a billion pair of shoes and over one hundred new additions to her wardrobe annually. Barbie doll's signature color is Barbie pink. Barbie doll's collection of couture includes designs by Givenchy, Versace, Dolce & Gabana, Vera Wang and Gucci. The Barbie clothing line for real girls includes knit tops, bootleg pants, backpacks, sleepwear and accessories. The inventor of the Barbie doll is Ruth Handler, co-founder of Mattel. She named the doll after her daughter, Barbara. The first Barbie doll sold for \$3.00. During the first year of her introduction in 1959, 351,000 Barbie dolls were sold.

### **About Mattel Girls Division**

Barbie doll is currently a \$2.5 billion dollar-per-year industry including licensed products under Barbie Consumer Products. In 2001, Barbie doll

stared in her first movie, Barbie in the Nutcracker. Barbie CD ROMs have been the best selling children's software titles. Barbie.com is the number one girls' site with logging over 8 million monthly users who spend an average of 42 minutes on the site per visit.

Since the Barbie doll's creation in 1959 as a paper-doll-inspired friend, she has firmly established herself as the most popular fashion doll ever created. For more than five decades, Mattel has maintained Barbie doll's popularity by adapting her look, lifestyle and fashions to meet changing times while evolving her world into an overall lifestyle brand for girls. While the Barbie Brand represents Mattel's initial roots in girls' toys, the girls division now dominates the market with several best-selling brands including American Girl, Diva Starz and Polly Pocket. A natural extension of the brands to the online world, Mattel's Girls Interactive Group provides girls of the 21st century a new way to interact with their favorite playmates. A natural extension of the brands to the online world, Mattel's Girls Interactive Group provides girls of the 21st century a new way to interact with their favorite playmates through web sites and licensed Mattel-branded interactive software and video game titles. Mattel, Inc., (NYSE: MAT, [www.mattel.com](http://www.mattel.com)) is a worldwide leader in the design, manufacture and marketing of toys and family products. With worldwide headquarters in El Segundo, Calif., Mattel employs more than 27,000 people in 36 countries and its products are sold in more than 150 nations throughout the world. Mattel's vision is "to create and market the world's premier toy brands --- for today and tomorrow."

### **Playing With Barbies on a Moving Equilibrium**

How Mattel gets so many people around the world to buy this "good girl" who doesn't wear panties has been one of the most crucial questions that arouse in my mind as an eager ex-Barbie player and dreamer and now a desperate mother of a handful girl at the very delicate age of 6. Mattel's Barbie production merits study as an example of successful hegemonic discourse, and some words are in order concerning the term hegemony and its appropriateness here. Dick Hebdige provides a useful definition of hegemony as a "moving equilibrium" (1984, p.15-16):

'The term hegemony refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain groups can exert 'total social authority' over the subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas, but by

'winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural.'

From this standpoint calling Barbie production hegemonic may appear to be both overdramatic - Mattel's power over individual being of very limited scope- and a fancy way of stating the obvious. Getting someone to buy Barbie is clearly different than getting someone to obey orders from a dictator under death penalty. Mattel promotes Barbie to consumers the way capitalists promote capitalism to people who least benefit from it. The discourse maintains that the limits come only from within you - you can be rich if you set your mind to it; you can turn Barbie into anything you want her to be. The goal of the discourse is to mask external limits so that you have appeared to choose on a free will basis - Your parents might be working for low wages making ends meet barely each month, but do not somehow fail to buy you the Malibu Barbie you have been yearning for. This surely will benefit the discourse spinner.

And that will not so obviously benefit you. On the other hand, Mattel's discourse also typifies hegemonic discourse because it is designed partly to address the consumer who suspects that buying Barbie may be harmful to the child. Not every consumer sounds like this reluctant mother: "We struggled for three years over whether to buy Derin a Barbie doll or not; she finally we gave in and she won and convinced us that she would be more damaged by ban and refusal than by owning this lousy little role model." But Mattel's promotions always have in mind the skeptical savvy consumer whose consent must indeed be "secured" or "won". When critics complained about the fantasies that Barbie's sexy figure might engender, Matter portrayed her as a flower kid; when critics complained about Barbie's antifeminist message, Mattel turned her into the carefree girl "who can do anything". As a result, the history of Mattel promotion reveals a relation between seller and buyer that operates like hegemony's "moving equilibrium". As Stuart Hall explains about the way in which dominant classes preserve their power over subordinates in a hegemony; "This operates, not because the dominant classes can prescribe and proscribe, in detail, the mental content of the lives of subordinate classes (they too 'live' in their own ideologies) but because they strive and to a degree succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range, bringing all alternatives within their horizon of thought" (Hall, 1979, p.333).

This is just what Mattel does strategically: the company periodically adapts its line to bring up competing definitions of convenient role model and acceptable fantasy object within the premises of its own conception of Barbie and to launch its offerings as those that fulfill consumer “needs”.

According to Erica Rand, Despite Mattel’s repeated claim, presented throughout most of Barbie’s history, that Barbie is meant to serve as a catalyst for children to fantasize about whatever they want to be, the company has always had an “artistic intention”, that is not confined to abdicating authorship (Rand, 1995, p. 91). Both by assigning Barbie with demographic modifiers or behind and by means of biographical vagueness and the discourse of infinite freedom – and usually by playing both ends at once- Mattel has been working, since 1958, to locate Barbie in diligently crafted, if purportedly volatile, relations to both fantasy and reality. Mattel has continually adapted its account of Barbie’s “invention” and identity as its marketing and sales objectives have changed over time, as its presumptions about what constitutes a blank slate have changed and its consumer profiles and perceptions of dominant consumer ideology have changed.

What remains as a constant is that no matter how many consumers Mattel expands its infinite possibility line to bring in, Mattel, and Barbie always remains faithful to those who buy into the prevailing idea that the best thing to be is white, skinny, blonde, glamorous, rich, mainly apolitical and heterosexual, although it caters to some of these values more “subtly” than before. Racist consumers now have to face a Barbie living in racially mixed world from time to time. But dolls of color still remain Barbie’s “others”: defined against the white, blond norm as different, lesser and occasionally, “outrageous” (Rand, 1995, p. 92).

I argue that Mattel’s marketing success, particularly in the past 20 years depends on its mastery of hegemonic discourse content and strategies, which wink at the mainstream, as well as accommodate the margin.

### **Meanings attached to Barbie: Girls’ (in)famous cultural beauty icon**

I have fond memories of playing with my Barbie dolls as a child. I remember the over-the-door shoe holder that had twenty-four pockets packed with Barbie-dolls and her many accessories. I recall playing in the tub with my



Mermaid Barbie, and coming home from gymnastics class and acting out what I watched older girls do with my Gymnast Barbie. I also recollect the Christmas that I got my first Ken doll; finally, I could play house with Barbie and Ken like I did at my friends' homes! Another, less sweet, memory of Barbie I have was when I tried to demolish my doll with fireworks that my older (male) cousin provided me with. That was the summer I decided I was too old for Barbie, and my collection was sold at my parent's garage sale. It is typical that women my age, older, and younger would have memories of Barbie linked with their childhood and adolescence. Whether they be fond recollections like those I have of my Mermaid and Gymnast Barbies, or ones in which they were rebelling against Barbie, like my (semi-successful) attempt to destroy her with Black Cat fireworks, Barbie lives on in toy stores as well as the memories of her old friends and enemies.

In a society weaved with gender binaries, complexes, racism, classism, hetero-normativity and most of all under Western affectation, it is no surprise that a white, well-off, self-assured doll who possesses all the codes of Western feminine "beauty" would do well in an unsaturated market. Officially, Barbie entered the Turkish toy market in late 80s. During more than 20 decades on the market, the Turkish consumer also met with multiple personae of Barbie ranging from home maker, career woman, fashionista, feminist, Ken's soul mate etc. The more attempts Mattel makes to spice up Barbie craze, the better sales turn, as they have proven over the years. This ever-evolving icon which has been disseminated to global consumer base through various product ranges and media mix. Barbie advertising does not merely lure the consumers into buying Barbies but obviously to buy into the Barbie universe, per se. As we clearly see on the pink-washing shelves of the Turkish toy retailers, she is positioned as a role model and idol, rather than a toy.

Mattel has often been questioned by cultural critics who critique Barbie as typifying hegemonic aesthetic ideals reinforcing the codes of patriarchal society, mainstreaming heterosexuality and white Anglo-Saxon values of the Western world. Apart from these scholarly claims, marketing consumer insight based on ethnographic research conducted among Barbie consumers also emphasize this point. Mary Rogers, in her book *Barbie culture*, refers to an interview with a student where the student recalls her sister giving her Barbie a hair cut and the fact that she "demoted it to a 'Ken' Barbie-doll, probably because it no longer fit the perfect dream-girl image" (p.13). The words "dream, image and perfect" have been emphasized in the writing of

Rogers who suggests that these concepts that makes many girls bond with their Barbies also that these common associations made by Barbie players connote that they never can measure up to these limits. In her ethnography Rogers notes that both ex-Barbie playing women and girls generally use adjectives like “ideal” and “beautiful.”

Barbie obviously has numerous myths revolving around her that naturalize these hegemonic ideals in societies. However the “beauty myth” stands out as the most powerful of all. According to Naomi Wolf within the premises of the universal “beauty myth”, women should embody it and men should want to “possess” women who embody it (Wolf, 1991, p.12). The way in which Barbie immortalizes this “beauty myth” is through making her follower-consumers believe that her “standard looks” sets her up as the epitome of ideal beauty and that her extreme femininity is natural. According to many, this template requires that women should be beautiful and that men would turn to women who are attractive and sexy looking. When I asked my younger brother, who today is an orthopedic surgeon in his mid-thirties and with whom I played Barbie games throughout our childhood during eighties, about Barbie’s looks and glamorous life style, he responded, “Wonderful hair and torso. Spotless white skin, perfect breasts and super rich American girl. This impression I got from this doll that my sister was almost worshipping at the time has affected how I perceived what ideal beauty was composed of or how an ideal woman should look like if you will. This impression got embedded in my mind at quite an early age of 7 or so. I could not get enough of looking at her perfect figure.” This scopophiliac tendency many children experience with Barbies in particular appears as a common theme among many narratives recited. My brother obviously bought into the myth, as many do, also due to the incessant bombardment of persuasive images of “attractive” women that appear in almost all forms of media including children’s toys market. As Cannon has pointed out that Barbie could have been modeled after Bild Lili who was a prostitute doll produced for adult men in German post-war era or that “the doll was expressly modeled on a Hollywood ideal of beauty” (Cannon, 2011, p. 4). According to Cannon both claims boil down the fact that Barbie is an object of male gaze.

The scopophilic gazing over Barbie, however, cannot only be confined to boys and men. Many women and little girls define their Barbies as “beautiful”, “glamorous”, “fantastic-looking” creatures. This shows that Barbie appeals equally to the female audience. I conducted informal open

ended-interviews to try to look into and interpret elementary school students' perceptions of and approaches and emotions towards Barbie and her pink world. These were the children predominantly of middle class, white collar households. A girl named Duru, age 8, said "I can play with my Barbies for hours, comb and shape their silky long fair hair, dress them up and then look at them. Then when I am done with playing, before I place them on my library's doll shelf and leave for doing my homework, I just look at them because they always look beautiful and smiling.



As seen on the image above, Duru's Barbie exhibit on her library's shelf is definitely one of the many ways Msttel intends for consumers to make use of her.



In the co-op advertisement above the Barbie is positioned in an extremely feminine way, juxtaposed as the reflection of reality. She slips into an expensive designer evening dress revealing her thin yet curvy body and seems to be ready to do the cat-walk on the red carpet just like its earthly counter-part on the left. Mary G. Lord asserts that Barbie, like a clothing store dummy, is a sculpture meant to display garments (Lord, 1995, p. 226). The juxtaposed image depicted in this piece of advertisement also seems to support Mary Dorsey Wanless' assertion that in the world of Barbie, "the mind, heart and soul of a woman are sub-ordinate to the body - personalities don't count - thinness is everything" (Wanless, 2001, p. 126). Wanless, has argued that Barbie emphasizes thinness as the most important attribute for women to possess, and that she "exemplifies female physical perfection in our society, [and] perhaps [even] globally," despite the unrealistic nature of her measurements (Wanless, 2001, 125). Along with fashion models and movie stars, Barbie and the mass media have idolized thinness and linked it within the public consciousness to desirability. Thus Barbie's body image has become the expected norm for young girls to strive towards and obtain.

## Barbie as one of the Strongest Links at Global Power Branding

Even from the very first launch in the market, Barbie has always been presented as a flawlessly attractive, independent woman that every girl should aspire to. The perennial success of Barbie can probably be attributed to the fact that this almost mythical icon has been cultivated by Mattel for almost 54 years. In time Barbie has obviously become a meta-brand identity. The fads, fashions, accessories, friends, looks that have coated Barbie over the years have changed depending on societal, global and situational issues; yet the halo effect that surround Barbie has always been preserved. The evolving image and developing concept should be managed throughout the product life cycle in order to boost the demand toward the brand. For generating a snowball effect in this direction, Mattel has also established brand alliances and partnered with numerous companies such as Walmart, MAC, Evyap, Volkswagen, Kellogg's, Fiat etc. in order to extend the limits of Barbie experience both through online and retail outlets.









Rogers claims that sustaining the Barbie brand requires a “dense web of products not only with Barbie and Mattel but also with other corporate sponsors and popular culture” (Rogers, 1995, p. 95). These ads aim to promote their own company as well as their co-branding partner which also means that they can share the advertising costs and increase profit even more.

Facebook appears as a strong and popular medium in terms of socialnomics. It is one of the most visited sites in the United States as well as several other countries including Turkey. Among teenage and pre-teen groups, Facebook is one of the most widespread forms of communication and community. “In 1996, John Greenwald reported that 99 per cent of all girls in the United States between three and ten years old [had] at least one Barbie; the average girl [had] eight,” and these statistics remain high today (Rogers, 1999, p. 13).



Facebook and Barbie are almost omnipresent, unavoidable commodities that everyone “will know [enough] to suppose that in various ways [these companies] will infiltrate” the lives of all young consumers (Rogers, 1999, p. 13).



Within this framework Barbie also has a capturingly exciting facebook page where Barbie fans and groupies can interact with Barbie and one another which enables the Barbie brand with vivid personality dimension. On Barbie's Facebook page we can come across a large amount of wall posts by Barbie commenting on current events, giving beauty and date tips. She also has photo albums referring to adult Barbie merchandise such as clothing, shoes, purses, and collectables. On this very site, Mattel's target audience shifts from young girls to teenagers and then to adults. Therefore she is personified in a more “alive” and “mellow” tone than usual for make this demographic scale mellifluously flowing on her site.



The above is one of the profile pictures Barbie has on her profile. When she refers to her “friends” she means facebook friends who most probably know Barbie well. However this “friendship” is imaginary and mass-marketed since Barbie cannot “know” any of her “friends” on facebook. Tens of thousands of likes and flattering statement below her photo advertises her popularity and is meant to “appellate” teens and adults and, make them feel “in the know” and happy being Barbie’s “friend.” Rose defines appellation as a process in which a viewer is hailed by an advertisement (Rose, 2001, p.100). The photo above emphasizing Barbie’s torso in pink reflects her flawless whiteness and impeccable beauty. Her blue eyes and pink lips become outstanding, surrounded by her light skin and finely pony-tailed hair underlined with her right hand extra femininely placed on her right hip. This pose represents how Mattel creates an ideology that white European-American beauty is superior to beauty of women who are of other colors and ethnicities. Even though Barbie has doll friends who come from a variety of ethnicities, it is the mainstream white beauty Barbie who is always in the limelight. This heavy concentration on Barbie and the secondary status of her “other” friends is a way in which Mattel reinforces “white imperialism,” especially in the context of beauty. When I talked to my daughter’s friends, ranging from 5-11 years of age mostly girls, when they came to her birthday party most of them with a Barbie as a present in their laps. Many described Barbie as “beautiful,” “slim,” “gorgeous,” “fun,” and

as an “idol.” They even confessed wanting to be Barbie, and most of all having “that glamour’s Barbie look.” It should be underlined that these little girls are aspiring after a Caucasian doll and dying to look like her.

Two consumer researchers, Jenny Lewin-Jones and Barbara Mitra conducted a study in which they interviewed children about their thoughts on different commercials that targeted children. They concluded that the children “associated certain product-types and colors with specific genders. For example, Harold (age 4) did not like the advertisements for Barbie dolls 'because they are for girls', although he liked 'the fighting ones' that were aimed at boys.” (2009, p. 43) This study also shows that we begin to associate certain colors, attitudes and behaviors as being particularly “for girls” or “for boys” at a very young age, due to non-stop media and retail bombardment.

### **Last, yet not the least words on Barbie**

Barbie seems forever young and forever popular. She is the Coca-Cola of toy universe. After many years of consumer and brand research where all statistics point to Barbie’s giant omnipresence, Barbie still continues to break the cliché that “nothing lasts forever.” It seems that this doll’s global popularity and influence will never wane and also that her influence on culture is as timeless as her plastic figure. More than consumers, Barbie has an extremely large and vibrant fan-base on global scale, which makes her have a profound effect on the culture she resides in and become an all-American icon.

Although Barbie is at times celebrated as the first adult doll for girls and as an icon of “grll power”, she is often criticized for the negative ideologies which she serves in order to keep hold of her influence. Barbie perpetuates hegemony in multiple ways, and it seems that she will continue to do so long as she is worshipped as the most beautiful, popular and desired doll in the world. She is the perfect doll for the all consuming-global kid/citizen and moves with a snowball effect in penetrating the households with young children.

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