

# Exposing the Barbie Empire: A content analysis of Barbie commercials

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## **INTRODUCTION**

It has been estimated that more than a billion Barbie dolls, produced by Mattel, Inc., have been sold across the world within their 57 year streak of dominance in the doll industry, and Mattel claims that 3 Barbie dolls are sold every second (Hart 2016). Barbie was introduced to young girls in 1959 and has since built an empire, becoming the most popular and best-selling doll of all time. This study aims to employ the unobtrusive method of content analysis to analyze how Barbie reinforces hegemonic feminine ideals in the form of commercials within the past 16 years.

According to Rogers (1999), 99% of 3 to 10 year-old girls own at least one Barbie doll, and an average of eight Barbie dolls each just in the United States. Not only is the influence that Barbie has on young girls quite significant considering their young and impressionable age, but it also affects virtually all young girls, all over the world through commercials. Barbie products are sold in more than 150 countries worldwide (Hart 2016) with a wide range of variety including Barbie dolls, Barbie jeeps, Barbie dream houses, books, clothing, accessories, video games, sports gear and movies just to name a few.

The portrayal of hegemonic feminine ideals in media and in this case, children's toys, is an important sociological issue that has accumulated a lot of research over the years by sociologists. Considering Barbie's extreme popularity as a cultural icon and the target audience being as young as 3 years old, Barbie dolls require further sociological analysis in order to assess their harmful influence of hegemonic feminine ideals on the next generation of girls. Without further studies on this prevalent issue, gender inequality will continue to be exacerbated by these ideal states of femininity being imposed on young girls while hiding behind the facade of a

Barbie doll. In the following section, I will discuss a brief understanding of the existing literature regarding Barbie and the feminine ideals she emphasizes, and in the following paper I will explore how Barbie reinforces hegemonic feminine ideals through commercials.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review for my research proposal on how Barbie reinforces hegemonic feminine ideals through the form of commercials provides insight into Barbie's impact on children and produces a better understanding of the issue. I reviewed six articles on Barbie's sociological influence on young girls and their body image. The controversy over the unrealistic body image portrayed by the culturally iconic Barbie doll has been a topic of interest in sociology for many years. The research on this subject aims to study the role that Barbie plays in the prevalence of negative body image and self-esteem issues in young girls. The Barbie doll, introduced by Mattel, Inc. in 1959, can easily be considered the most popular doll in the world with 99% of 3 to 10 year-olds owning at least one Barbie doll, and an average of eight Barbie dolls each just in the United States (Rogers, 1999). Barbie has received extensive criticism over the years for her ultrathin and highly unattainable body proportions. A majority of the relevant literature has focused on the influence of body ideals on adults, and not enough has been directed towards the impact it may have on children (Brownell & Napolitano, 1994). Some overall trends in the research on the influence of Barbie on young girl's developing body image and

self-concept include Barbie's role in socializing young girls, scaling Barbie dolls to an adult height in order to compare body proportions to real life adults, and conducting studies to assess the impact on body image that exposure to Barbies may produce. The following section will elaborate on these key themes in the current research discussing how the female body image is unrealistically depicted by Barbie dolls.

One key concept in the research is the important role that Barbie plays in the socialization of young girls. According to Anschutz and Engels (2010), children are socialized through watching and imitating behaviors they observe in their environment. Fantasy and play are main contributors to the socialization of young children by allowing them to internalize ideals and values (Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive, 2006). This makes dolls particularly salient in the socialization process because they provide children with the means to imitate and eventually internalize those behaviors, ideals and values. Barbie dolls also participate in socialization by providing young girls with an aspirational role model to look up to, which results in that internalization through fantasy and play (Dittmar et al., 2006). The problem with this socialization by Barbie doll is that young girls are internalizing the thin ideal body image that Barbie represents, resulting in an increased incidence of body image issues and consequently, eating disorders (Norton, Olds, Olive & Dank, 1996).

Part of the research conducted on Barbie's influence on young girl's body images has focused on scaling the dolls to a real-life height in order to compare their body proportions to real adults. Brownell and Napolitano (1994) used hip measurements as a constant in order to calculate a ratio between Barbie and Ken dolls, and two average-sized young adults (one female and one male) to examine how much Barbie dolls' body proportions differ from young, healthy adults. Their results revealed that the female subject would have to increase 24 inches in height, 5 inches in the chest, and decrease 6 inches in the waist to attain Barbie's "ideal" proportions, and the male subject would have to increase 20 inches in height, 11 inches in the chest, and 10 inches in the waist to attain Ken's "ideal" proportions (Brownell & Napolitano, 1994). Norton, Olds, Olive & Dank (1996) and Pope, Olivardia, Gruber & Borowiecki (1999) conducted similar studies of comparing body proportions of dolls to adults, but instead used anthropometry and the rules of allometry to scale the dolls to an adult height. Norton, Olds, Olive & Dank (1996) compares Ken and Barbie dolls at an adjusted adult size to actual proportions of several representative adult groups, including university students, professional models, anorexic patients and professional football players, and their findings reveal that the criticism about the doll's inappropriate body images were justified. Their results were shocking, indicating that the probability for a body shape such as Barbie's is less than 1 in 100,000, and for Ken it was 1 in 50. As for Pope, Olivardia, Gruber & Borowiecki (1999), instead of comparing adult

measurements with dolls, they focused on the unrealistic body image portrayed by action figures which faces the same issue. The study consisted of the most popular American action figures over the last 30 years, and they used waist, chest and bicep measurements scaled to the height of an adult male to assess how the figures have grown in muscle over the years. The researchers address action figures and the growing unattainable ideal body image for males as a possible cause of male eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder, and muscle dysmorphia (Pope et al., 1999). The findings concluded that many of the action figures portrayed the body images of advanced body-builders, and some of the levels of muscularity well exceeded the limits of possible human attainment (Pope et al., 1999). This study shows that the unrealistic portrayal of body image is not only an issue for young girls, but for boys as well, and can be found in multiple types of media.

The other half of the existing research concerning Barbie's effects on body image and self-esteem include three experimental studies that assess the impact Barbie has on young girls. Worobey and Worobey (2014) used toy dolls to indicate the girl's views about different body shapes ranging from thin, to average, to fat. Forty girls aged 3 ½ to 5 ½ were asked to assign various traits to the different sized dolls, ranging from positive to negative characteristics (Worobey & Worobey, 2014). The results were unsurprising, most girls assigned the positive characteristics to the thin or average shaped doll, and the negative characteristics to the

fat-shaped doll. One of the more astonishing results were that when asked who the girls would like to play with, 70% chose the thin doll. The most jaw-dropping statistics was when asked which doll was “pretty”, two-thirds of the girls chose the thin doll despite the dolls having identical heads and clothing. Next, Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive (2006) investigated the Barbie doll as a possible cause for body dissatisfaction in young girls by exposing images of either Barbie dolls, Emme dolls (a full-figured body size representing a U.S. dress size 16), or no dolls as a control in a picture book, and then asking the girls to complete a questionnaire on their body esteem, ideal body image and ideal adult body image. The findings were consistent with what the researchers expected, body dissatisfaction was significantly higher after girls had been exposed to the Barbie doll images, but not after exposure to the fuller-figured Emme doll images (Dittmar et al., 2006). These findings are important because body dissatisfaction can lead to depression and eating disorders. Most importantly, Dittmar, Halliwell & Ive (2006) note that if these negative effects on the girl’s body images can be found after a single exposure to Barbie dolls, then repeated exposure is more likely much more harmful and should be further studied. Lastly, Anschutz & Engels (2010) decided to attempt to replicate and extend Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ives’ 2006 study by using real dolls instead of just images of them in a picture book. The girls were randomly assigned to play with a thin doll, an average-sized doll or legos as a control and after 10 minutes, they participated in a taste test and filled out body image questionnaires (Anschutz &

Engels, 2010). The results were conflicting with Dittmar, Halliwell & Ives' (2006) study because no differences were found between any of the dolls for body image, perhaps due to the difference of using a picture book of dolls versus playing with the dolls. However, the girls who were exposed to the average sized dolls were found to have eaten significantly more than girls with the thin dolls or legos (Anschutz & Engels, 2010). Perhaps because the average sized doll caused a relief effect allowing the girls to feel better about their bodies and eat more, and the girls with the thin dolls ate less because they were inspired by the Barbie to be ultrathin like her (Anschutz & Engels, 2010).

In conclusion, although the research on this topic used different approaches, they all came to the same conclusion that the ultra thin "ideal" body image portrayed by Barbie dolls is highly unrealistic, unattainable, and most likely harmful to young girls' developing self-esteem. Considering the overwhelming popularity of Barbie, who dominated the multi-billion dollar a year industry (Norton et al., 1996), it's easy to understand the major role Barbie can play in the socialization of young girls eventually the internalization of thin ideals and values. Some of the research used allometry to scale Ken and Barbie's body proportions to an adult size to reveal how impossible it would be to achieve that ideal body shape (Pope et al. 1999) (Norton et al. 1996) (Brownell & Napolitano, 1994). More of the research conducted studies on how Barbie directly affects young girls self-esteem, views, and body image (Worobey & Worobey 2014)



(Dittmar et al. 2006) (Anschutz & Engels 2010). Because Barbie dolls are marketed to young girls, it's important to increase our sociological research on the subject in order to assess their impact on the standards of beauty and body image, and perhaps generate a positive change in the toy industry.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

This study utilizes the unobtrusive method to analyze how does Barbie reinforce hegemonic feminine ideals through the form of commercials. I conducted a content analysis of 60 Barbie commercials released within the last 16 years. Content analysis studies pre-existing, non-interactive data such as documents, music, and movies, therefore it is the best method to use to analyze Barbie commercials. I collected my sample of 60 Barbie commercials from Youtube.com where they are easily accessible to the public. For the purpose of this study, I only used commercials that advertised the individual Barbie dolls and did not analyze any commercials that included advertisements of any other Barbie products such as the Barbie jeep or dream house.

Being by far the best-selling doll ever to hit the doll industry, Barbie dolls were chosen to study specifically because they have the most significant impact and young girls are most exposed to them given their popularity in today's society. Because I was interested in how Barbie commercials portrayed physical appearance, careers in the public sphere and relationships

in the domestic sphere, content analysis was the most appropriate methodology for my research question: How do Barbie commercials reinforce hegemonic feminine ideals.

I watched 60 commercials advertising individual Barbie dolls released within the last 16 years multiple times each, observing and taking notes on the lyrics in theme songs as well as dialogue, physical appearance, profession and what type of doll was being advertised which I used to analyze the data. After data collection and initial analysis, I began the coding process using descriptive and literal codes. Coding enabled me to develop 3 main themes or analytical codes from recurring patterns I identified in the data.

It's always important to acknowledge any limitations associated with research studies. One major limitation is that there are many different types of dolls other than Barbie dolls such as Bratz dolls, and without including them in the study I have missed valuable data that could have provided more insight to the issue. Another limitation of this study is the lack of different Barbie products being evaluated. For example, a broader examination including the dolls as well as the clothing, Barbie jeeps, dream houses and many other Barbie products would provide a deeper understanding and more findings to answer the research question. The last limitation of this study is a lack of mixed methods and triangulation. With the use of other methodologies such as focus group interviews or in-depth interviews to analyze the data, this study could be more accurate and significant. Despite the limitations, content analysis was adequate to answer

my research question on how Barbie reinforces hegemonic feminine ideals through the form of commercials.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this study was to examine how Barbie commercials reinforce hegemonic feminine ideas. To answer this question, I studied 60 Barbie commercials advertising individual Barbie dolls released within the last 16 years. Some of the Barbie commercials I analyzed include Barbie Fab Girl dolls, Barbie Top Model Resort dolls, Barbie Endless Curls dolls, Barbie Dreamtopia, and Barbie Fashionista BFF dolls. My analysis of these commercials helps to gain a broader understanding of how Barbie commercials reinforce and fail to challenge hegemonic feminine ideals. The findings answer my research question: how does Barbie reinforce hegemonic feminine ideals through the form of commercials.

Upon completion of data collection and analysis, three major themes emerged. (1) Every single commercial displayed a heavy emphasis on hegemonic feminine beauty ideals. (2) Some of the commercials exhibit Barbie with a career, however these careers still abide by dominant feminine roles in a patriarchal society. (3) Barbie's friendships and relationships in the commercials show a lack of depth in the relationships as they are primarily centered around physical appearance and gossip. Every Barbie commercial reinforces hegemonic feminine ideals

in one or more of the ways listed above. Below I will discuss each theme in detail and provide readers with an opportunity to reevaluate Barbie through a critical perspective.

*I'm a Barbie girl: thin, stylish and beautiful*

Theme 1: All Barbie commercials display a heavy emphasis on hegemonic feminine beauty ideals.

The most significant finding of this study is that Barbie commercials are saturated with hyper-feminine beauty ideals. Barbie portrays the ideal girl as an ultra thin, hyper-feminized individual with long blonde hair, stylish clothes and perfect makeup. Barbie adheres to virtually all feminine beauty ideals to create the “perfect” girl. Throughout the commercials, the dolls being advertised are constantly preoccupied with styling their hair, doing their makeup and finding cute clothes. For example, the theme song for the Fashion Photo Barbie (2002) included the lyrics “short skirt, crop top, chic capris, smile please”. All of the song lyrics discussed fashion and outside appearance.

Similarly, the Barbie Endless Curls (2015) commercials places a strong emphasis on appearance, with the opening statement being “Hey girlfriend, ready for a new look?”. These statements prompt impressionable girls to want a “new look” and persuades them to start questioning their own appearance at a young age. They may think to themselves “If Barbie needs

a new look, then I do too!”), and that’s all it takes to convince a girl to change herself in order to comply with feminine beauty standards.

Another Barbie commercial that reinforces hegemonic feminine beauty ideals is the Barbie Fashionista Swappin’ N Style (2011) commercial, which is advertised based on its ability to swap doll heads to create a new look on the same dolls. Once again, the entire purpose of this doll was to change one’s appearance, whether it be the hair, clothing, or entire head in the case. This conveys the message that if you don’t like how you look, you should change it. This message can be particularly harmful to young girls suffering from already low self-esteem issues which are common during adolescence.

One of the most controversial aspects of hegemonic feminine beauty ideals is body image, and Barbie is the posterchild for an unhealthy body image. Not only are the actual physical Barbie dolls’ body proportions highly unattainable, the animations of Barbie present in the commercials display a distorted body image as well. For example, in Chat Divas Barbie Doll (2007) commercial exhibits Barbie with an extremely thin waist, known as an hourglass figure. As previously discussed in the literature review, Norton et al. (1996) scaled Barbie dolls to a real-life adult size and compared the body proportions to female university students, professional models and anorexic patients. The findings were outrageous, indicating that the probability for a body shape such as Barbie’s is less than 1 in 100,000 (Norton et al., 1996).

The hegemonic feminine beauty ideals were by far the most pervasive theme exhibited in this content analysis on Barbie commercials. Not even one commercial out of a sample of 60 was able to refrain from mentioning some aspect of beauty. The fact that feminine beauty ideals occurred in all 60 Barbie commercials reflects how strongly our society clings to feminine ideals and how far it's willing to go to ensure that these ideals are internalized by the next generation of women.

*You can be anything you want: As long as you know your place*

Theme 2: Some of the commercials exhibit Barbie with a career, however these careers still abide by dominant feminine roles in a patriarchal society.

Another recurring pattern in the data is Barbie's careers that seemingly challenge gender roles, but actually still conform to feminine expectations. Despite her presence in the workplace, her professions are still centered around children, adhering to the stereotype of women as maternal beings. For example, in Barbie I Can Be Doctor/Teacher (2009) it seemed as if Barbie was challenging the glass ceiling, known as a barrier to advancing in a career to more prominent positions traditionally held by men, by becoming a doctor. However, when examined more closely I realized that during the 30 seconds of the commercial, every single one of her patients were babies, and her only duty as a doctor was to rock the babies to sleep. This is a perfect example of how Barbie allows women to have careers, but they still must adhere to gender roles,

in this case by remaining maternal even though she has a job. This commercial also advertised Barbie as a teacher, however Barbie was only allowed to become a preschool teacher in which she still cared for small children using her maternal instincts. Instead of being a highschool teacher or college professor, Barbie only had the option to be a preschool teacher which is the most traditionally feminine teaching position there is. This conveys the message to young girls that they can have a career, as long as they know their role and don't challenge these expectations by entering traditionally masculine professions.

This theme is also found in the Barbie I Can Be Dentist/ Babysitter (2010) commercial in which Barbie does become a dentist, but only because she “loves teaching Kelly to brush her teeth and gargle to keep her smile pretty” which is another maternal expectation. This commercial also exhibits an emphasis on physical appearance as previously discussed because Barbie is teaching Kelly dental hygiene “to keep her smile pretty”. The other part of the commercial is when Barbie becomes a babysitter, which is obviously the most maternal and expected role a woman could fulfill other than becoming a mother.

Barbie continues to fail at challenging hegemonic feminine expectations and gender roles by only choosing careers that perpetuate gender inequality as well as always embodying feminine expectations such as maternalism. Despite all of the career choices Barbie has, the

professions that are most often advertised in commercials are those that support hyper-feminized careers for women in the workplace.

*Best friends let you borrow those shoes*

Theme 3: Barbie's friendships and relationships in the commercials show a lack of depth in the relationships as they are primarily centered around physical appearance and gossip.

Barbie, portrayed as the ideal girl, is supposed to be super popular with lots of friends. In most of the commercials I analyzed, Barbie had many friends but absolutely no depth in the relationships. Despite the many friends Barbie may have, none of her friendships contain any depth and are instead based on physical appearance including makeup, hair and clothing. For example, in the Barbie Fashionistas BFF dolls (2011) commercial, part of the theme song included the lyrics "We share our friendship, we share our stuff". This is the only statement describing friendship in this commercial and it only pertains to physical appearance. This reinforces feminine ideals because the ideal woman is not intelligent, does not think for herself, and instead only cares about trivial things such as appearance in order to let men continue to control everything in a patriarchal society. Barbie's friendships, and perhaps all of her social interactions, are built upon nothing more than the hegemonic feminine ideals she embodies.

In the Chat Divas Barbie Doll (2007) commercial, the doll being advertised can speak with phrases such as "Hey girl, what's up?" and "No way!". These phrases suggest that the



friends may have been gossiping, which is a common female stereotype. This stereotype takes away from girl's credibility and character, and further diminishes the female voice in society.

The fact that Barbie's friendships are only advertised in these commercials as revolving around gossip, looks and clothing further supports feminine stereotypes and hegemonic feminine ideals by sending the message that women are ignorant and shallow, and also reinforcing the stereotype to young girls that friendship is just about appearance and rumors.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to analyze how Barbie reinforces hegemonic feminine ideals through the form of commercials. The analysis of 60 commercials advertising the individual dolls released in the last 16 years produced three significant themes. These themes are supported by examples using phrases directly from the commercials, also known as literal codes, as well as images.

The first theme is that every commercial displayed a heavy emphasis on hegemonic feminine beauty ideals. This finding is recurring and reinforced almost constantly in all 60 Barbie commercials by focusing on physical appearance including hair, makeup and clothing. It consistently promotes the harmful notion that appearances are all that matters to young girls.

The second theme was that some of the commercials exhibit Barbie with a career, however these careers still abide by dominant feminine roles in a patriarchal society. At first

glance it may appear as if Barbie is challenging gender roles in these commercials by having careers, but in reality Barbie is still conforming to society's sexist expectations of women by only occupying hyper-feminized and maternal careers.

The third theme was that Barbie's friendships and relationships in the commercials show a lack of depth in the relationships as they are primarily centered around physical appearance and gossip. This lack of depth in relationships portrays Barbie as unintelligent and unable to think about anything other than typical "girl things", enabling the patriarchal society to proceed as is.

In conclusion, the reinforcement of hegemonic feminine ideals is disturbing because real woman can never live up to the ideal woman, and what's more is that we shouldn't. When women feel the need to strive for these unattainable feminine beauty ideals, refuse to challenge their sexist gender roles, and allow this patriarchal society to invalidate the female voice, the entire female population suffers. The promotion of feminine beauty ideals may result in eating disorders or depression because the physical appearance that Barbie portrays is highly unattainable. The complacency that Barbie displays with careers that still conform to feminine role expectations results in the intensification of gender inequality. Lastly, the invalidation of female voices that Barbie contributes to by portraying her friendships as superficial and only concerning appearance and gossip leads to the preservation of patriarchal societies.

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