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Mattel's Barbie: An Exploration of Consumer-Brand Worldbuilding and the Ethics of Female Fantasization

In 1959, the United States of America was in the middle of the Golden Age of Capitalism. Characterized by postwar economic expansion and new methods for mass production, this age also gave birth to a figure that would change mainstream culture forever: Barbie. From the moment of her inception, Barbie was extremely polarizing. In a toy market where only baby dolls existed, she was a complete original, the first fashion doll modeled after an adult woman advertised towards young girls in the U.S. When Ruth Handler first debuted this groundbreaking creation at the American Toy Fair, she was faced with skepticism and backlash. Indeed, how could an adult female figure inspired by a quasi-erotic Bild Lilli collectible from Germany be a success amongst children? Yet, over sixty years and over a billion sales later, Barbie has effectively crushed every expectation of her downfall, becoming the globally recognizable name she is today. This does raise one critical question, however: Who is Barbie?

For decades, Mattel's agenda for Barbie has been crafted by a continuous conversation between brand and consumer about what it means to be a girl and, more specifically, what image of girlhood is most marketable. The result of this inconsistent dialogue is a doll that represents a distorted mirror of societal standards, one that complies with social norms, yet deviates in ways that are "fresh" and "in style." But, Barbie's potential as a worldbuilding project expands far beyond what Mattel envisions; the Barbie identity is also formed by how she is adopted culturally.

As a doll marketed to reflect the “limitless potential” of young girls, Barbie has been commodified into a blank canvas for feminist and queer worldbuilding, a tool used to envision a realm that liberates oppressed people (Mattel, Inc. “Barbie”). However, turning the figure of a woman into a moldable, ambiguous plaything still has problematic implications; the once “limitless” world of Barbie becomes instantly narrowed when considering the specific suggestions of womanhood that Barbie inhabits. This paper aims to analyze the dynamic between two terms I have coined as “Proto-Barbie” and “Socio-Barbie,” as well as consider the shifts in Barbie’s worldbuilding project during the following time periods: 1959-1969, 1970-1989, and 1990 to now. I will specifically be looking at Barbie’s expressions of femininity during these time periods to determine how they have conversed with and impacted her target consumer audience, which may reveal the larger repercussions of projective, plastic womanhood in the context of American capitalism, traditional gender norms, heteronormativity, neoliberalism, and cross culturalism.

I. Barbie as a Commodity: Socializing Young Girls (1959 - 1969)

To start, it is important to distinguish between the two sides of Barbie that I will discuss. The first is “Proto-Barbie.” This is the Barbie created solely by Mattel, and the ideas surrounding her that have been reinforced and outwardly promoted by the brand. The other is “Socio-Barbie.” This is the Barbie that is adopted, morphed, and understood by our culture; in other words, it is the image of Barbie that society has developed independent of Mattel. Though “Socio-Barbie” is subject to a variety of differing perspectives and interpretations, it could be generalized as the public opinion of Barbie. The narratives of “Proto-Barbie” and “Socio-Barbie” are separate but still intertwined, interacting and conversing with one another as their distinct identities are formed. “Proto-Barbie” and “Socio-Barbie” are also more fluid concepts than they are particular ideas, and have undergone changes throughout the decades.

When Barbie was first created, the defining trait of “Proto-Barbie” was untamed materialism. The first commercial developed for the original 1959 Barbie visually presents its audience with footage of different Barbies modeling clothing, glamorizing her and the plethora of clothing sets that were advertised alongside her. A song plays in the background of this footage, with the lyrics, “...her clothes and figure looks so neat...at parties she will cast a spell. Purses, hats, and gloves galore; and all the gadgets gals adore...” (“First Barbie Commercial” 00:00:18 - 00:00:29). Mattel’s initial image of Barbie is clear: a privileged, upper class socialite who was created to consume. In fact, Mattel’s initial marketing strategy with Barbie was to make the base doll cheap, advertised in the commercial to be “only three dollars,” while the clothes and accessories were meant to be what actually made profit. Some were priced even more than Barbie herself and many were inspired by high fashion such as the debut-accompanying “Commuter Set,” a midnight-blue suit directly inspired by Coco Chanel (Tosa 68). Right off the bat, Mattel creates a woman with an idealized life, fully able to enjoy the liberties of the rising consumerist culture that was spreading across America in the late 1950’s. Mattel also opens the door for young girls to entertain themselves with this inherently capitalist-centric lifestyle, channeling Barbie’s unending desire to consume by actually consuming themselves. The first Barbie commercial directly hints at this, with its concluding lyrics stating, “I’ll make believe that I am you.” (“First Barbie Commercial” 00:00:53 - 00:00:57). This primitive “Proto-Barbie” effectively informed what would become the primitive “Socio-Barbie.”

The first perspective that amalgamated into “Socio-Barbie” was that Barbie was a helpful tool for the socialization of young girls. This was a reaction to Mattel’s marketing: to eradicate any pushback against Barbie for being over sexualized, Mattel convinced mothers that Barbie could model the proper way to dress and act in social occasions. According to Ernest Dichter, who

spearheaded the 1959 marketing campaign for Barbie, the best way to rid of any apprehension about Barbie being too “adult” was to “convince Mom that Barbie will make a ‘poised little lady’ out of her raffish, unkempt, possibly boyish child.” (Lord 40). This puts the phrase “I’ll make believe that I am you” in a whole new context; Mattel was also appealing to the parental desire for the assimilation of their young girls into proper society. If young girls wanted to go on a picnic, they had “Picnic Set” to emulate; if they wanted to go shopping, they had “Suburban Shopper” (Pearson & Mullins, 223). For the most part, this marketing ploy worked; 300,000 dolls were sold in the first year of production¹. “Proto-Barbie” and “Socio-Barbie” then coexisted peacefully; mothers were reassured that their girls had a proper role model for social integration while Mattel financially profited by instilling consumerist ideology into their customers.

With the 1959 Barbie, Mattel effectively created a reinforcer of patriarchal structures, pandering to the popular mid-20th century vision of the traditional, nuclear family. As an “ideal,” Barbie’s sole purpose became imposing harmful gender stereotypes and expectations onto a new generation of girls. As identified by historical archaeologists Marlys Pearson and Paul R. Mullins, this purpose continued into the mid-1960’s with the “What’s Cookin?” and “Leisure Hours” packs, both of which contained accessories inherently tied with domestic labor such as culinary tools and a broom, respectively (Pearson & Mullins 238). Now, not only was Barbie a figure of social aspiration, she was also a figure of domestic duty, an eerie parallel to the roles linked with traditional womanhood. Though Barbie did don a few careers in this era, they were mostly² all feminine, whether they were performance based like the nightclub chanteuse “Solo in the Spotlight” and the self-explanatory “Ballerina,” or they held subordinate positions. In their quest

¹ This figure comes from the 1959-60s History tab of [barbiemedia.com](http://www.barbiemedia.com), a website run by Mattel. This is the direct link to the site: <http://www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/history/1960s.html>

² There is one exception to this: the 1965 “Miss Astronaut,” an unexpected move by Mattel to dress Barbie in a NASA spacesuit. This came two decades before any woman was sent into space (Tosa, pp. 116).

to model societal standards, Mattel created a Barbie-sized glass ceiling; while Ken was “Dr. Ken” and “American Airlines Captain,” Barbie was only ever “Registered Nurse” and “American Airlines Stewardess,” unable to climb the ranks like her male counterpart (Pearson & Mullins 240). Through the worldbuilding of children’s play, Barbie served as an image for young girls to project their fantasies onto. However, the boundaries of womanhood that Barbie set in this era were precise and calculated; girls were given pretty dresses and domestic chores to yearn for, while any ambition for leadership in the workforce was crushed by patriarchal expectations.

The educational femininity that Barbie exhibits parallels the conclusions of Simone de Beauvoir’s 1949 novel *The Second Sex*, which has become the basis of contemporary feminism. She argues that the “body of woman,” though important, is “not enough to define her as woman”; rather, the “limitation of [a woman’s] various powers” are “manifested by the conscious individual through activities and in the bosom of a society” (Beauvoir ch. 1). In a similar sense, Barbie’s status as a woman was never really defined by her female form; it was defined by the uniquely feminine world that Mattel created for her in the form of adverts and clothes sets. In turn, Barbie became a golden standard to inform young girls of their place and conserve ideologies of womanhood and gender. As Beauvoir asserts, to be a “woman” is not biological, but learned and reinforced by societal cues; Barbie, in this case, is the societal cue. This revelation brings to light a unique kind of worldbuilding, one that is conversational. Mattel feeds Barbie idealistic feminine characteristics, young girls adopt these characteristics to integrate into society, social norms inform Mattel of what characteristics are distinctly feminine as well as how Barbie is received, Mattel tweaks Barbie accordingly, and so on. “Proto-Barbie” and “Socio-Barbie” live in perfect harmony, building the world of “Barbie girlhood” in tandem and effectively trapping young girls in a cycle of conservatism. However, with the Women’s Rights Movement growing in the late

1960's, the diffusion of Barbie into queer and feminist spaces suddenly made both "Proto-Barbie" and "Socio-Barbie" much more nuanced.

II. Barbie as an Activist Figure: Queer and Feminist Neoliberalism (1970 - 1990)

By the 1970s, America was fresh out of the Civil Rights Movement³ and well into two others: antiwar campaigns in the wake of the Vietnam War and second-wave feminism. The rising unease from activists swept the nation, only to be escalated by the 1969 Stonewall riots which boosted the fight for gay liberation. Amidst this polarizing social landscape, "Proto-Barbie" began a very specific metamorphosis. According to investigative journalist M. Lord, Mattel was careful not to be caught in the crossfire of the antiwar demonstrations, pushing Barbie into a fantasy world that was detached from the real one. Barbie's outfits were self-referential, with names such as "Knit Hit" or "Snug Fuzz," and the activities she participated in were not grounded in reality, such as "Color Magic" Barbie, who magically transforms when exposed to a special solution (Lord 61-62). However, though it was easy for Mattel to push "Proto-Barbie" away from modern political conflicts of the time by trapping her in a peaceful, fantastical bubble, there was one thing Barbie could not escape: her identity as a woman. And, in a way, Mattel addressed this, most notably with the release of Sunset Malibu Barbie in 1971.

Often regarded as the most important Barbie redesigns, Sunset Malibu Barbie (or Malibu Barbie) not only transformed "Proto-Barbie" and her worldbuilding narrative, but also pushed Mattel into a more progressive direction. This new rendition of the doll rebranded her from a high fashion socialite into a trendy, beach-loving Californian. Gone was the "Proto-Barbie" that modeled womanhood and in was a "Proto-Barbie" that modeled girlhood, reflecting what was popular amongst the youth at the time. The idea of Barbie as a Malibu native stuck, permanently

³ It is important to note that no piece on contemporary feminism is complete without the mention of race. Due to space limitations, this essay is unable to dive deep into Barbie's history with race, but there will be some analysis of race in Section III.

changing the course of her narrative worldbuilding for the rest of Barbie history. The physical change in this redesign is most notable, however; alongside her uncharacteristically sun-kissed skin was a new face mold, one whose gaze faced directly forward. For Barbie, this was a big step; even after a decade of changes to her sculpt, Barbie's piercing blue eyes always remained in a submissive side glance. M. Lord argues that Barbie's forward stare was Mattel's way of referencing the "sexual revolution," stating that the modification demonstrated America's recent acceptance of unashamed female sexuality (Lord, 12). Her once averted eyes now declared her presence, a silent and subtle indication of empowerment. Silence also came from Mattel's end. While it is widely advertised today that Malibu Barbie was groundbreaking,⁴ the 1971 Malibu Barbie commercial makes no mention of her forward-facing eyes, instead emphasizing her other new qualities like her straight hair and golden tan skin ("Malibu Barbie" 00:00:00 - 00:00:30). Mattel's decision not to overtly advertise the feminist feature reveals their deeper intentions; this act of solidarity with the feminist movement was not an overt declaration of alignment, but rather a reflection of changes in popular opinion. In order to not over-politicize Barbie (thereby disengaging the conservative market) while still turning Barbie into a modern girl, silence was absolutely necessary. But, brand silence definitely does not equate to consumer silence.

As a contrast to the subtlety of the new "Proto-Barbie," changes in "Socio-Barbie" would prove to be more radical as Barbie iconography began to circulate in queer circles. Though radical feminists rejected Barbie, sociology professor and social justice scholar Mary F. Rogers identifies that Barbie had become an icon in drag culture due to the nature of her artificial femininity (Roger ch. 2). In fact, M. Lord also notes that Barbie herself has drag proportions with her oversized breasts and unnaturally cinched waist (Lord 14). Ironically, the hyper-feminization of Barbie,

⁴ This is a reference to the 1970s History tab of [barbiemedia.com](http://www.barbiemedia.com). This is the direct link to the site: <http://www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/history/1970s.html>

which was meant to heterosexualize her and inform the femininity of young girls, instead turned her into a model of femininity for queer people. At her core, Barbie is a doll with no real sex or genitals; therefore, she is a pure expression of gender identity. As a result, “Socio-Barbie” could be used as a guide by anyone who identified as a woman, allowing them to escape into a world where they were not dictated by their biological sex just as this sexless doll was not dictated by hers. Gender and sexuality professor Erica Rand attributes queer projection onto Barbie as a product of Mattel’s “heterosexual presumptions” (Rand 43). Known today as heteronormativity, this phenomenon occurs when heterosexuality is deemed as the only normal expression of sexual orientation.⁵ For Mattel, the assumption that Barbie is innately heterosexual led to the release of unintentionally queer-coded merchandise. Rand references the 1963 “Barbie and Midge Travel Pals case,” a bag depicting Barbie and her friend Midge embracing with a sly, “homoflirt” wink on their faces (Rand 43). Mattel’s heteronormative idea that women showing affection was solely a sign of friendship backfired; as a perpetuation of female fantasization, Barbie was easily co-opted into a narrative that pictured the two as girlfriends. Still, for many non-femme lesbians, a queer interpretation of “Proto-Barbie” was not enough. Rand interviews butch lesbians who, as children, mutilated Barbie in some way to make her more masc-presenting, whether it be cutting her hair or burning off her breasts (Rand 120). This destruction of Barbies by young queer girls could only be described as one thing: worldbuilding. Queer worldbuilding with Barbie as a medium not only manifested itself in the queerification of her story, but also the altercation of her look, a kind of play that physically morphed her to fit the intent of the worldbuilder. By the 1980’s, the once harmonious brand-consumer worldbuilding was disrupted; “Socio-Barbie” profoundly escaped “Proto-Barbie” and became its own distinct identity, leading to Mattel’s need to take action.

⁵ Adapted from the Oxford English Dictionary definition of “heteronormative.”

In the wake of social change, Mattel attempted to re-marry “Socio-Barbie” and “Proto-Barbie,” launching the 1985 “We Girls Can Do Anything” campaign. Suddenly, Barbie’s focus shifted to her versatility as an imaginative toy, a model not only of femininity but also of the potential that young girls have. According to the first commercial of this era, girls were encouraged to “dream dreams and make them come true,” with the overarching message that if a young girl can imagine Barbie doing it, they can do it, too (Mattel 00:00:42 - 00:00:46). This optimistic view of girlhood was meant to encourage the new generation of girls to pursue what they want unapologetically and expect the equal treatment that they deserve, a mirror of the second wave feminist movement that was just concluding. On the surface, it was praised; for years, “Socio-Barbie” was already viewed as a role model for young girls. So, by directly and outwardly claiming that “Proto-Barbie” was an example that could aid in the empowerment of young girls, Mattel was taking an even more progressive stance than before. But, Mattel’s true aim with this campaign is much more nuanced, eventually manifesting into neoliberal feminism.

The pivot in both “Proto-” and “Socio-Barbie,” though an attempt to illustrate the new revelations that blossomed from activist movements, still came with inherent ideological issues. The aforementioned neoliberal feminism, explained by sociology professor Vicki Dabrowski as a type of feminism meant to instill a confidence and entrepreneurial spirit into women, is most notable in the 1985 “Proto-Barbie” (Dabrowski). This sentiment appears in the first “We Girls Can Do Anything” commercial, where the “Day to Night” Barbie set is promoted with the lyrics, “We love working from 9 to 5...” (Mattel 00:00:33 - 00:00:36). Here, Mattel reminds consumers that Barbie is a part of a capitalistic agenda, promoting a society where female empowerment could be equated with the enjoyment of labor. Female empowerment, therefore, benefits the sustainment of capitalism, a right-wing sort of feminism that comes with some controversy. Dabrowski argues

that neoliberal feminism “acknowledges inequality... only to disavow it,” framing the success of women as totally reachable and turning a blind eye to systemic, oppressive systems (Dabrowski). In a similar way, Mattel’s “We Girls Can Do Anything” campaign refuses to actively engage in the feminist goal of destroying societal institutions that promote inequality, instead opting to pretend that workplace discrimination does not exist and, actually, “any dream can come true” if girls just tried harder. Even “Socio-Barbie” and the co-opting of Barbie into queer narratives is problematic; queer worldbuilding under such a limited frame does nothing to truly deconstruct the gender binary and dispose of harmful stereotypes. Playing into the polarity of femininity vs. masculinity continues to uphold gender conventions and patriarchal structures, no matter how radical. Despite these implications, Barbie headed into the 21st century with an incredibly strong outreach.

III. Barbie as a Contemporary Toy: A New Age of Representation (1990 - Now)

By 1990, Barbie had established herself as a global figure, penetrating a variety of cultures and international markets. At that point, Mattel was producing Barbies in a range of different ethnicities, with new face molds that reflected African, Hispanic, and Asian features. Cultural clothing was released as well, dressing Barbie in anything from a Chinese Cheongsam to a traditional Ghanaian tribal dress (Tosa 140-143). This diverse “Proto-Barbie” was accompanied by new iterations of “Socio-Barbie” throughout the world. For example, Japanese Barbies were adopted by Japanese toy factory Takara, created with more subdued features and clothing to reflect the less “scandalous” and more domestic Japanese femininity (Tosa 144). Anthropologist J.P. MacDougall also notes the way Barbie was received in Mexico and how her role as a family figure was placed at the forefront while her career and social life took more of a backseat (MacDougall 266). The recontextualization of transnational commodities like Barbie demonstrates the way her appeal as a blank projective canvas transcends cultural boundaries. “Socio-Barbie” and

“Proto-Barbie” are extremely malleable, able to fit into the boxes of femininity that are presented to her. This is also reflected in the American Barbie, whose transformation only continued.

The aftermath of Mattel’s “We Girls Can Do Anything” campaign completely flipped the American public opinion on Barbie, which was bolstered by the recent creation of inclusive Barbies. In 1997, Mattel released their first Barbie doll in a wheelchair, called “Share a Smile Becky,” a landmark for disability activists. In 2016, Mattel introduced the tall, petite, and curvy body types, meant to transform their “Fashionistas” Barbies into a more inclusive lineup. Marketing researchers from North South University in Dhaka, Bangladesh analyze that this diversification had an overall positive impact on customer retention, sales, and financial success. Mattel’s work culture was also impacted, as employees felt more empowered than ever to continue the brand mission (Ahmed, J. U. et al.). More recently, “Socio-Barbie” has become a positive global phenomenon as fourth-wave feminists have turned her hyperfemininity into an aesthetic to be celebrated. Suddenly, “Proto-Barbie” was catching up with the times. Barbie’s worldbuilding became more inclusive than ever; the focus was no longer on reflecting a generalized girlhood, but instead representing every single child imaginable to make their voice seem heard. This amendment to the harmful messaging that previously plagued Barbie is an earnest attempt, but there are still many innate characteristics that Barbie cannot free herself from.

Despite the clear strides Mattel has taken to diversify, it could still be problematic and detrimental to young girls to project themselves onto a plastic product. In a 2014 study on how Barbie affects career cognitions, feminist psychologists Aurora M. Sherman & Eileen L. Zurbriggen found that girls who played with Barbie “indicated that they had fewer future career options” than boys and girls who played with other toys (Sherman & Zurbriggen 195). Interestingly, the “We Girls Can Do Anything” campaign backfired. Even when dressed in an

outfit that may suggest a career, Barbies are still sexualized, objectified toys, restricting any sense of female possibility by nature. Due to her long history as a white woman, Barbie's attempt at embodying other races also fails to have profound effects. English professor and Black feminist theorist Ann DuCille notes that Black Barbie dolls will never be viewed as the "real Barbie" like her white counterpart; instead, her blackness made her a secondary figure in the Barbie narrative (McDonough 131). Mary F. Rogers also observes that Black Barbie dolls were molded to be attractive by Eurocentric standards, and that Barbie will always carry her white privilege with her no matter what skin tone she inhabits (Rogers ch. 2). As utopic as diversification and representation may seem, Barbie's very existence as a toy continues to spread damaging ideology.

To conclude, Barbie's worldbuilding project is an unbelievably complex, expansive endeavor that has faced a plethora of reiterations throughout the decades. It is defined by Barbie's dual identity as "Proto-Barbie" and "Socio-Barbie," and has been molded by the interactions between Mattel and their consumer base. Though Barbie has evolved into a representative toy that could aid in carrying queer and feminist narratives, she will never be able to escape her plastic womanhood; stripped of her accessories, clothing, and storylines, she is still an objectified woman. However, this paper does not aim to tarnish Barbie's extensive legacy. Instead, this paper hopes to shed light on the importance of acknowledging the problematic past of our societal idols. Though Barbie does come with historical baggage, she still plays an extensive role in our culture; simply dismissing her as controversial does nothing to address the modern systems that continue to make her impactful. Barbie is far from perfect, but as a mirror of our imperfect society, her worldbuilding project serves as an opportunity to dissect and remedy the pitfalls of our modern views of womanhood. And, if anything, Barbie still serves as an incredibly useful historical tool to examine how visions of girlhood have changed throughout the decades.

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