

The Economics of Barbie: Marketing the Evolution of an Icon Through the Generations

**Donna L. Roberts
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University**

The Barbie Doll is no ordinary toy, but rather, represents a classic American icon. While most toys are popular for two or three years, Barbie has remained relevant for decades. Market analysts attribute Barbie's long-term success to her responsiveness to evolving styles and adaptability to changing trends in American society. However, not all of Mattel's marketing campaigns were successful, despite their efforts to follow societal trends. The Barbie product line has engendered controversy since its first release, and the modern renditions are no exceptions. Yet through it all Barbie has survived decades of changes in the experience of childhood.

Keywords: Barbie, Mattel, toys, dolls

INTRODUCTION

"Most toys are only popular for two or three years, but Barbie has been popular for decades and she shows no signs of weakening."

- Frank Reysen, Editor, Playthings (ABC News, 1998)

"We know we're going to have to stay on our toes to keep up with what girls want, Barbie has always reflected what girls are interested in. Today that is fashion, hair, activities and technology. We've got very cool products that appeal to these girls right now."

- Adrienne Fontanella, President, Mattel Co. (Collector Dolls, 2000)

"In every second of every day, two Barbie dolls are sold somewhere in the world"
(Olds & Olds, 2006, p. 2).

What Harold Matson and Elliot Handler first began as a garage workshop in 1945 has risen to become the world leader in the design, manufacture and marketing of children's toys – Mattel, Inc. In its earliest days the toy company's first products were picture frames and dollhouse furniture. As time went on, pop culture began to exert its influence and Mattel branched out to produce a wider variety of products. Among these was the doll that would forever change the modest toy company, who humbly emerged when, while watching her child play with paper dolls, Ruth Handler envisioned the idea of a three-dimensional adult doll and suggested the name "Barbie" after their daughter's nickname. Barbie now

represents the major product line for Mattel and accounts for over 50% of their total sales (Lord, 2004; Olds & Olds 2006; Subhadra, 2003).

The Barbie Doll is no ordinary toy, but rather, since her creation in 1959, she has become a classic American icon. She is sold daily in over 150 countries and is recognized, in both name and image, by almost every child and adult worldwide. According to manufacturer Mattel, the average American girl between the ages of 3 and 10 typically has at least 9 Barbies. Her influence on millions of little (and perhaps not so little) girls is indisputable, albeit somewhat controversial (Lord, 2004; McDonough, 1999; Subhadra, 2003).

Though Barbie was originally intended primarily as a toy for children, much of the attention she has received over the years has been generated by the secondary role she plays in popular culture—as an icon of female representation.

Barbie is no ordinary toy. She *mimics* the female form. She *stands for* woman within the games of make-believe in which children involve her. She *functions* as a tool for self-imagining. It is Barbie's secondary nature as a representation of woman that creates special quandaries for feminist aestheticians, quandaries that are both cultural and philosophical. (Weissman, 1999, p. 27)

BARBIE – THE EVER-EVOLVING ICON

Barbie is inarguably the most popular fashion doll of all time and has represented to the world the flamboyance and luxurious lifestyle of Americans. At best, she has been regarded as a role model to inspire young girls to become independent and self-reliant. At worst, she has been regarded as a dangerous reinforcement of unrealistic expectations and female exploitation. In any case, Barbie has survived through three decades of political, social, and cultural change. Market analysts have attributed Barbie's long-term success to her responsiveness to ever-changing styles and adaptability to changing trends in American society. Mattel's marketing and advertising techniques have centered on following these cultural patterns (Lord, 2004; O'Neill, 2000; Subhadra, 2003; Weissman, 1999).

Over the years, Barbie has faced a great deal of criticism for allegedly sending wrong messages to young girls – and rightfully so, for on a human scale Barbie would measure 39-21-33, a physiological impossibility for a healthy real woman. From the very beginning Barbie faced critical opposition from mothers who thought that the doll's adult proportions, make up and appearance would have a negative influence on children. However, she immediately caught the imagination of young girls with her black eyeliner, pearl earrings, zebra striped bathing suit and high heels. Likewise, Mattel's introduction of Ken, Barbie's boyfriend, originally met with widespread criticism from feminist groups. However, Mattel countered that Ken's introduction only reflected American society in the early 1960s (Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003; Weissman, 1999).

To further counter criticism of Barbie being a sex symbol, Mattel introduced Midge, a friend of Barbie, in 1963. Midge was the epitome of the all-American girl with a freckled face and a tomboy figure. In the late 1960s Mattel began to add new features to Barbie to sustain the interest of young girls. For example, in 1966, Barbie accessories included a "magic" solution that would change the color of Barbie's hair and clothes. In 1967, Mattel revolutionized the toy industry when it introduced "Twist and Turn" Barbie who was able to move at the waist, bend, grasp, and tilt her head. To popularize Barbie's new features, Mattel launched "Total Go," a campaign with a \$12 million budget, focusing on the new features of Barbie in both the print and electronic media - press, television, and radio. Before launching any advertisements, Mattel tested them on children and aired only the ads for which the children indicated preference (Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003; Westenhouer, 1999).

However, not all of Mattel's marketing campaigns were successful, despite their efforts to follow societal trends. In 1967, when racial equality was dominating America's political and social agenda, Mattel introduced a black Barbie called Francie. This doll did not perform well in the market. Caucasian parents were not ready to buy a black Barbie for their children, and black parents did not readily accept

Francie, as she was criticized for not possessing true African American features. As a result, the doll had low sales and was discontinued within a few months of its launch. In 1968, Mattel introduced Christie, a black friend for Barbie. Christie represented the changing social scenario in the US during the late 60s and was relatively successful compared to Francie. Mattel continued innovating and in 1969 introduced Talking Barbie, who spoke about new clothes, hairstyles and Ken (Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003; Weissman, 1999).

In the 1970s, Americans experienced turbulent times, both socially and politically. The women's liberation movement and the sexual revolution challenged the values and traditions of the 1950s. In addition, society became more materialistic. Mattel realized that to suit the changing times, Barbie needed to look more assertive. In 1971, Mattel introduced "Live Action Barbie" to portray the liberated woman. In 1975, Mattel associated Barbie with the Winter Olympics and a new athlete Barbie was launched. The athlete Barbie had the clothes and accessories of a swimmer, a skater and a skier. Along with the new versions, Barbie's face underwent several changes. In 1975, she got a warm grin and by 1977 she sported a full permanent smile. In the 1980s, Barbie came with wide smile and winged hair, riding on the disco wave of the early 1980s (Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003; Weissman, 1999).

By the mid-1980s, while American women were exploring different careers, Mattel realized the need to change Barbie's image yet again to boost its sales. Mattel realized that young girls were becoming more techno savvy and career oriented. Thus, Barbie was launched as an astronaut (1986) and as a doctor (1988). In 1985, Mattel introduced Day to Night Barbie, depicting the busy lifestyle of working women. Mattel also revived the image of Barbie as a fashion doll by introducing Crystal Barbie, Puerto Rican Barbie and Great Shape Barbie. In 1992, Mattel launched Presidential Candidate Barbie, on the premise of inspiring young girls to opt for a career in politics (Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003; Weissman, 1999).

Barbie's sales had started declining in 1997. Market analysts pointed out that while Barbie's target market had consisted of young girls between 3-12 years until the 1980s, the target group was reduced to girls between 3-8 years by the late 1990s. They observed that in the late 1990s, girls were not continuing to play with traditional toys such as dolls into their pre-teen years. Analysts also indicated that young girls in the late 1990s they felt that playing with dolls was childish (Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003; Weissman, 1999).

In response, Mattel redesigned Barbie in 1998. The new doll was launched with slimmer hips, a wider waist and smaller breasts. According to Mattel sources, the new Barbie reflected society in the late 1990s. By this time the reports that the earlier Barbie's measurements were improbable for humans had led to a great deal of backlash throughout the market. According to Mattel, the newly aligned Barbie would fit into the fashion outfits of the 1990s, which did not suit the earlier Barbie. To support the image overhaul of Barbie, Mattel launched the Be Anything campaign in 1999. The advertisement showed a girl staring into the camera with untamed hair and a confident look, holding a hockey stick behind her head (Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003; Weissman, 1999).

In March 1999, Adrienne Fontanella took over as Mattel's girls' division president and announced another total overhaul of Barbie's image. To improve Barbie's sales, Mattel adopted two strategies. The first strategy involved introducing more brand extensions for Barbie and segmenting the market according to age. The second strategy involved targeting older girls by stretching the Barbie doll to other products such as perfumes cosmetics and music. Analysts were initially skeptical of this approach as Barbie would face stiff competition from established brands in cosmetics, music, fashion and electronic games. Mattel also announced that to increase profits from Barbie it would create two distinct personalities of Barbie, one career oriented and the other, a glamour Barbie that would specialize in the traditional gender role (Collector Dolls, 2000; Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003).

In 2000, Mattel launched Jewel Girl Barbie, which was promoted as being able to move in a more realistic way. According to company sources, Jewel Girl Barbie's waist was more soft and fleshy and would twist and bend to give a more realistic feel. Jewel Girl Barbie also had a soft smile and an oval-shaped face. The doll was launched with approximately 20 outfits including slim pants, long spilt skirt, colored vinyl jacket and stick on fashion jewels. Due to these initiatives, by 2000 Barbie's sales

reportedly increased by 9%. However, in 2001, Mattel announced that Barbie's sales declined by 12% in domestic markets due to a decrease in demand for the collector series and the Holiday Celebration' series (Lord, 2004; Riddick, 2001; Subhadra, 2003).

With an eye toward increasing market share, Mattel recognized an expanding market opportunity based on the nostalgia of several generations of Barbie fans, that could run alongside its standard toy line targeted to young girls. The creation of sophisticated designer lines of collectible dolls was aimed at adults who loved the doll as children and wanted to recapture the Barbie magic in a more grown-up manner. Various collections emerged which included both new lines and retro reproductions, many with the higher collector price tags. Barbiecollector.com, the official Barbie Collector website, showcases the elegance and glamour of this specialized nostalgic line. Dedicated to the adult Barbie doll collector, this site features a comprehensive searchable doll showcase that contains all collector dolls back to 1980 (Collector Dolls, 2000; Lord 2004).

In 2000, in response to feedback from collectors Mattel reduced the quantity of its collectible Barbie dolls. These limited-edition dolls were now to be produced in quantities of 35,000 or less and were sold in specialty and boutique stores. Among the most successful of the Collector Series dolls, the Fashion Model Collection, designed by Robert Best, featured a new body material known as Silkstone, vintage face molds with makeup, and glamorous, high quality fashions. Other collector series include, the Hollywood Movie Star Collection, Dolls of the World, The Princess Collection and Fantasy Dolls (Collector Dolls, 2000; Olds & Olds, 2006).

Concurrently with updating the traditional Barbie look and attempting to appeal to the nostalgic collector market, modern times have required yet another, perhaps even more drastic makeover for the iconic doll. In fact, Mattel, in an attempt to keep market share of an increasingly sophisticated target market, has even tried introducing completely new lines of girl dolls - dolls that look very different than the traditional Barbie. First among these new lines were the Generation Girls released in 1998. They appeared in three editions for a total of eight dolls which were marketed as representing students at an International High School. Early editions of Generation Girl Chelsie sported a trendy nose-stud, which was removed in later production runs due to unfavorable parental response. After three years the line was discontinued and replaced by the My Scene dolls (Costilla & Poppins, 2005).

The Diva Starz doll brand launched in October 2000. The promotional campaign centered upon these dolls each having a unique personality, which was expressed through their accessories and further developed on the website devoted exclusively to the dolls – www.divastarz.com. This line of dolls differed greatly from the traditional Barbie in fundamental ways. Each doll was only 9 inches tall and spoke recorded messages. Additionally, the first line released included plastic clothing that snapped on and off. A second line was launched that sported fabric clothing. Although Mattel hoped this drastic Barbie makeover would capture the attention of a waning market, the Diva Starz line enjoyed only limited popularity and was discontinued after a few short seasons (Aerodeon, 2006).

In a further attempt to capture the attention of an increasing savvy young market, the Diva Starz line was followed in 2002 by the My Scene fashion dolls. Like Diva Starz, these sassy, hip dolls were aimed at so-called 'tweens' - girls aged 8 to 12. While not replacing the traditional Barbie, these dolls held shelf space alongside their predecessors and featured edgy fashions, extra-pouty lips and oversized eyes that were inspired by the popular Japanese-style anime cartoons. Public Relations at Mattel described My Scene as the "new tween-targeted brand from the makers of Barbie," arguing that it "captures the spirit of today's informed, independent and fiercely individualistic urban girl like never before. Inspired by the fashion-forward, high-energy, chic attitude of the big city, My Scene features three 'it' girls – Barbie, Madison and Chelsea. These girls each express their individuality through personal style that's defined by a slice of metropolitan living. Each doll comes with two complete on-trend fashions and their own funky accessories" (Man Behind the Doll, n.d., http://www.manbehindthedoll.com/MY_SCENEmain.htm).

The original release included three dolls – Barbie, Madison and Chelsea – and Mattel again attempted to interest the more sophisticated market by attaching ethnicities, personalities and individual characteristics (including astrological signs) to each doll. As the dolls gained popularity, Mattel expanded the line to a total of ten 'friends', including two boys and four limited editions. This line has proven

relatively successful and provided strong competition for the popular Bratz dolls manufactured by MGA Entertainment, a line that grabbed significant market share beginning in 2002. Mattel released new models of this line, with changing face molds, every year from 2003 until 2011, though the company stopped selling the dolls in the US in 2008 (Man Behind the Doll, n.d.).

Mattel's attempts at remaining modern and relevant have not stopped at the design and re-design of the doll itself, but rather have extended to its marketing campaigns as well (Mothersbaugh, Hawkins, & Kleiser., 2020; Nudd, 2017). In 2017, the brand debuted the Dads Who Play Barbie campaign with the tagline "*Because dolls and dads do go together,*" during the AFC Championship game between the New England Patriots and the Pittsburgh Steelers (Pittman, 2017). The campaign highlighted shifting gender roles with respect to childcare by featuring actual fathers and daughters playing with the dolls. Michelle Chidoni, the Vice President of Mattel's global brand communications, spoke of the intent of the campaign, saying its purpose was "to reappraise the role of Barbie in their world and to really see Barbie as a vehicle for storytelling and imagination" (Monllos, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The Barbie product line has engendered controversy since its first release, and these modern renditions are no exceptions. Backlash, criticism and complaints centering on the argument that these dolls represent negative role models for children has been again echoed in response to Mattel's aforementioned efforts to modernize the icon and extend the brand. Specifically, intense controversy ensued when Mattel released the Butterfly Art Barbie, which was packaged with stick-on tattoos, forcing consideration of repackaging and recall of the offending doll. While Mattel argued that the doll merely reflected the increasing popularity of body art, various parents' groups insisted that tattoos represented an unhealthy counter-culture and a lifestyle inappropriate for presenting to young consumers. Instead of recalling the dolls, Mattel halted plans for additional production lots and, in response to the complaints, curtailed plans for the release of Generation Girl lines that included piercings and nose rings – trends that are also popular among young people (Lord, 2004; Van Patten, 1999).

In retrospect, controversy about the Barbie doll seems almost as predictable as the release of a new line for each Christmas season. However, despite various examples of marketing missteps that could have marked the demise of a less entrenched brand, Barbie has survived – as both a toy and an icon of American culture – throughout decades that marked real changes in the experience of childhood. Perhaps it is Mattel's ability to capture so much of the experience of young girls – from the aspirations to the rebellion – and ride the wave of sociological change that keeps Barbie as a popular product for both young and grown-up girls.

REFERENCES

- ABC News. (1998). *Mattel relies on dollhouse diva Barbie's big business*. Retrieved October 18, 2018, from www.abc.com
- Aerodeon. (2006). *Case study Mattel: Fashion Diva Starz*. Retrieved October 30, 2018, from <http://www.aerodeon.com/>
- Collector Dolls. (2000). *The Barbie doll marks the new millennium with a hipper look, logo and attitude*. Retrieved October 27, 2018, from www.collectordolls.about.com
- Costilla, Z., & Poppins, L. (2005). *The Generation Girl collection*. Retrieved October 28, 2018, from http://site.voila.fr/generationgirl/GG_FanList_Index.html?0.7110797145460506
- Hawkins, D.I., Best, R.J., & Coney, K.A. (2003). *Consumer Behavior Building Marketing Strategy* (9th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Lord, M.G. (2004). *Forever Barbie: The unauthorized biography of a real doll*. New York: Walker & Company.
- Man Behind the Doll. (n.d.). *My Scene fashion dolls*. Retrieved October 9, 2007, from http://www.manbehindthedoll.com/MY_SCENEmain.htm

- McDonough, Y.Z. (1999). *The Barbie chronicles: A living doll turns forty*. New York: Touchstone.
- Monllos, K. (2017, March 13). Why Barbie Wants to Show Dads Playing Dolls with Their Daughters: Mattel eyes relevancy and inclusiveness. *AdWeek*. Retrieved from www.adweek.com
- Mothersbaugh, D., Hawkins, D., & Kleiser, S.B. (2020). *Consumer behavior: Building marketing strategy*, 14e. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Nudd, T. (2017, January 23). Dads Play Barbie with Their Daughters in the Doll's Latest Charming Effort to Modernize. *AdWeek*. Retrieved from www.adweek.com
- Olds, P.C., & Olds, J.L. (2006). *The Barbie doll years: A comprehensive listing & value guide of dolls & accessories*. Boston: Collector Dolls.
- O'Neill, C.O. (2000). *Barbie: A visual guide to the ultimate fashion doll*. London: DK Children.
- Pittman, T. (2017, January). This Ad Is for All the Dads Who Play Barbie with Their Kids. *Huffpost*. Retrieved from www.huffpost.com
- Riddick, K. (2001). *Barbie: The image of us all*. Florida Atlantic University. Retrieved October 12, 2007, from <http://www.fau.edu/library/barblink.htm>
- Subhadra, K. (2003). *The success of Barbie*. New York: Center for Management Research.
- Van Patten, D. (1999). Doll collecting: Dolls this week. *About.com*. Retrieved October 26, 2007, from <http://collectdolls.about.com/library/last/blweek.htm>
- Weissman, K.N. (1999). *Barbie: The icon, the image, the ideal: An analytical interpretation of the Barbie doll in popular culture*. New York: Universal Publishers.
- Westenhouer, K.B. (1999). *The story of the Barbie doll*. Boston: Collector Books.