

Barbie:

The Icon, The Image, The Ideal

*An Analytical Interpretation of the Barbie Doll in
Popular Culture*

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Chapter One

Introduction

Statement of Objectives

This thesis is a cultural analysis of: a) women's idealized perception of the Barbie doll, and b) the construction of the Barbie doll image through marketing. In addition, both areas will provide a concentrated emphasis on "respectability." The analysis will be focused on Barbie's creation in 1959, and on the current practices of representations in 1999.

The thesis is divided into two phases. Phase one illustrates the interpretation of how women perceive Barbie, and how they see themselves in her likeness. It further explores the determined impression of the doll as "respectable." Phase two examines the way that Barbie is presented in the market and the techniques used to formulate the intended representations of the doll. The analysis of the thesis focuses solely on her introduction in 1959, and on her current distinction.

The Barbie doll is an iconic image. The symbol of the "feminine ideal" which has caused women to perceive and recognize this figure in a personal light. Further, her existence in the marketplace creates a continual awareness in women to identify and evolve with this object as she captures the culture.

It is critical to examine the conception and portrayal of an icon such as the Barbie doll. As a predominant feature in American culture and society, she is a fictitious character that many have contrived into a reality. She is a name that strikes instant familiarity, and she is a name that evokes controversy, emulation, and success. This thesis achieves a comprehensive look into her importance to women, and the ways in which her corporate creators make her

accessible to fulfill this need. Therefore, this thesis accurately makes a connection between the marketing of the Barbie doll, and the building of an icon.

Background

“Barbie You’re Beautiful” is the 1959 theme song that introduced this 11 ½ inch doll into our lives 4 decades ago. It is also an accurate description of the distinctive product ascendancy and the reasoning behind the symbolic impact on women. For many years, the continued phenomenon of the Barbie doll has sparked unequivocal contention, and has led to the development of an idealized icon that women have challenged or accepted.

“She is a universally recognized image, but what she represents to women everywhere can be as personal as a fingerprint” (Lord 1). The construction and creation of the Barbie doll in 1959 marks not only the beginning of a thriving product, but the start of a model image that women have continually viewed as superior, unrealistic, or quintessential.

The presence of Barbie is pervasive throughout American society. She has taken on the appearances and vocations of many, and has therefore attempted to become an ideal. The attention and scrutiny that this doll has received, whether positive or negative, demonstrates to be exceptional. The resounding efforts of communications practitioners both in business and in the media, as well as in cultural studies, have established a world-wide recognition, debate, and

adoration of the Barbie doll. She has acquired a human-like identity within our culture, and has spawned a historical sensation whose ability to captivate is timeless.

The address read 6058 South Western Street in Los Angeles, CA. This was the location where Ruth and Elliot Handler, and intimate colleague, Matt Matson, joined in 1945 to begin their own establishment. They proclaimed that with Elliot's designs, Matt's fabrication skills, and Ruth's marketing expertise, they had all of the central elements of a promising venture. By combining "Matt" and "El," they became Mattel, a contemporary, billion-dollar corporation. However, they were unaware that the individual left out of the naming of the profitable firm, would be the mastermind behind their most valuable product (Cook 1).

Ruth Handler devised and created the prototypal Barbie doll. After watching her daughter Barbara, from whom Barbie received her name, and her small friends behold ceaseless enjoyment from paper dolls, an idea occurred to Handler: "Why not mass produce a three-dimensional, sharply dressed version of these paper commodities?" Shortly after, on a trip to Germany, she came into contact with "Lili." She reigned as the star of an existing German cartoon, who was constructed into an 11 ½ inch beauty, designed for the primary pleasure of men as a "comical gift" (Groves 8).

By this time in 1958, Mattel had become a leading maker of action toys for young males, and Ruth saw the concept of Lili as an infallible way to even the

market and collect a greater share for the enterprise. The rights to Lili were soon purchased, and the blonde bombshell was turned into the original brunette Barbie. Immediately, Mattel marketed her as the super model who had everything that little girls should crave: fame, wealth, and attention. “Successful gimmick, obviously” (Schneider 2).

Today, 39 years later, Handler says that “Barbie is an institution, and has been copyrighted as a work of art.” In addition, critical author M.G. Lord has stated that “Barbie is a direct reflection of the cultural impulses that formed us. Barbie is our reality. And unsettling though the concept may be, I don’t think it’s hyperbolic to say: Barbie is us.” Therefore, in order to accurately assess the presence of Barbie in the market and in our minds, this analysis is properly divided into two major classifications: cultural and corporate. The organization of the thesis is comprised of the following elements.

The analytical perspective, focused on in the discussion, examines how and why women cast themselves into the image of Barbie. This includes why they feel the compulsion to identify with this doll, and how she is conceived within our culture. In addition, this idea is expanded further to discover her representation, and define the semblance of Barbie culturally and perceptively through the eyes of women. This features the means that women exclusively embrace to position themselves into the image of Barbie. This is a significant portion of the analytical section. However, a specific look into the life of Cindy

Jackson, a woman who has modeled herself into a living Barbie doll, is also examined (Berens 1).

Why would anyone want to completely reconfigure their face and body, and risk their life to many complicated and dangerous surgical procedures just to look like *someone* else? Jackson not only aspires to do this, but she resolves to look like *something* else—a Barbie doll. To her, this is the ultimate woman, and to look like her is the ultimate power. Therefore, she is on a quest for domination and control over men and over society. She says that “life rewards you for who you are, not what you are.” If her look ever fades, she discerns that she will be forced to abandon this world. The one where only the Barbie mask is acceptable. This is her perception of beauty and achievement in the current culture, and she does not endure alone. Since her reformation, Jackson has inspired a recognizable “army of clones” (Harris 2).

Following this segment, the marketing analysis begins by discussing the development of Barbie through the Mattel corporation in 1959. It also examines her statistics as a business toy product. This includes her profits, product position, and consumer demand.

Barbie remains “immune to the ravages of time” which is one reason for her powerful command (Chamberlain 59). Mattel has made sure that she can consistently adapt to the culture, and to the target audience. The product is flexible enough to accept the transition within society, and correlate all consumer needs. In addition, corporate facts such as her creation as a \$2 billion industry, the realization that there are

more Barbies in existence than people, and that close to every young female owns approximately eight of these dolls, greatly contributes to this business revolution (Mattel 1). Each of these issues are further addressed in the discussion.

The discussion begins to look more closely at the production aspects of Barbie and prove her marketable strengths. It analyzes where she falls in the market today and how she establishes her prominence. It also includes the manufacturing of not only a wide variety of dolls, but the popular culture that Mattel has created with this icon.

Other areas explored throughout this theme are her reliability in the toy world, the creation of her “classic image,” and the brand loyalty that she has gained from consumers everywhere viewing her as the “All American Doll.” Also, it is important to mention the way that Mattel has designed her instant recognition through packaging, style, and marketing mix. Even the color pink, that has prevailed unaltered throughout the years, serves as an identifiable factor which accompanies her consistently in some way (McKenzie 1).

The expanse of Mattel’s reach is ardent and vast. There is a variety of Barbie dolls that converge consumer tastes and needs from children to collectors. The final point that is illustrated in this selection is the new Barbie currently in the design stage. For 40 years, this doll has remained physically the same with different accessories, and for the first time, a more lifelike dimensional Barbie will be introduced (McKenzie 1).

This is a precarious approach for Mattel because although they are implementing the assertion that they are more socially aware, they are also tempting the idea that if something works, why change it?

Finally, this thesis connects both the business and analytical perspectives. The examination of the longevity of Barbie in the market place is united to the ways in which Mattel has facilitated women's identification with this doll. Also, it incorporates how Mattel focuses on this desire within women, and apprehends their interest through marketing. Therefore, does the image of "Barbie You're Beautiful" simply say it all? To study the Barbie doll, one must have the ability to hold seemingly contradictory ideas in one's head at the same time— which, as F. Scott Fitzgerald has said is "the test of first rate intelligence" (Lord 2).

Outline

The outline of the thesis has been presented and interpreted in the "Background" section stated above. However, a brief description of later chapters is provided for clarification and understanding.

Chapter Two is comprised of the **Literature Review**. This chapter extensively examines the previously written works in the field, and states their contribution and relevance to the topic.

Chapter Three is the **Methodology** of the thesis. This describes how the thesis was performed, and what approaches and techniques were maintained.

Chapter Four provides the **Discussion and**

Analysis. This chapter shows what was discovered throughout the thesis.

Chapter Five addresses the **Conclusions**. This determines the final outcome of the analysis.

Chapter Six presents the **Bibliography**. It is a collection of both primary and secondary sources which have contributed to the extensive knowledge of this thesis.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The mass media— As a primary and effective communicator to society, it depicts the representations of ideal images for women and for men. The mass media establishes ideological standards that if achieved, will equate with happiness and acceptance. Currently, the construction of gender as a paradigm of visual imagery, continues to dominate the scope of media representations. Therefore, the media could be characterized as being aggressively motivated by the conceptualization of gender in addition to race and class.

Presentations in the media concerning the gender issues of popular culture have been widely discussed. The analytical field of research continues to be vast, and it establishes a common recurring theme that can be contradicted by individuals, but is widely performed by the masses. The following will review the theories and studies of several who have contributed to the examination of cultural ideals, images, and media representations.

Gender, Expectation, Ideals

The recognition of a woman is defined by a man's level of attraction (Berger 46). This is the stimulating force behind the predominant media interest in relation to gender and specifically, to women in society. Rita Freedman explains in her book, Beauty Bound, that this gender difference in physical attractiveness between men and women is widely accepted as a fact of nature (1). She further states:

The expectation of feminine beauty, inflates its importance, making women more vulnerable to 'lookism,' a stereotype similar to ageism or racism. Lookism is a form of social control that influences how people see themselves, and how they are seen by others (2).

In the widely acclaimed text Ways of Seeing, John Berger strengthens the analytical description of differences between the genders. Rosalind Coward supports Bergers' theories in her work, Female Desires. The western visual culture depends on the relationship between the image and the viewer. It is the expected role of the man to assume the controlling position in society, and demonstrate the continuous production of the male gaze. It is of crucial importance how a woman appears to a man, and the appreciation of herself is granted only by her acceptance from the dominant male. She now begins to graciously stand in the light of the eyes of men, and allow their watchful glance to measure and calculate her worth. "And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman" (Berger 46).

Coward adds to this by examining the male gaze as a camera, used to depict the mental ideal images as perceived by men. She states: "The camera in contemporary media has been put to use as an extension of the male gaze at women on the streets. Here, men can and do stare at women; men assess, judge, and make advances on the basis of these visual impressions" (75).

In modern society, looking is a natural practice. However, to look is to dominate. It is a critical aspect of human relations which establishes the positions of control and subordination.

Therefore, the woman in western society is a sight. She is a sight for the pleasures of men, constructed and driven by the ideals and desires of men. Her quest for acceptance is a continuous journey of creation, reconstruction, and conceptualization of beauty ideals, all of which will assist in the recognition of her place in society. In the text, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women, Naomi Wolf explores how western women have escaped from “one form of enslavement into another.” It discusses how the images and definitions of beauty limit women in every event of their lives. It states that “the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance” (14). An advertisement for the fragrance “Cabriole,” featured in the Elizabeth Arden cosmetic line, was presented in the text, Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture by Judith Williamson. It is a representation of the media implications of what it means to be a woman in Western society. The fragrance allows the woman to identify with not the modern female that she is today, but with the modern female that she must become tomorrow. The advertisement reads as follows:

There is this woman. Watch her.....She is a tapestry of delicious contradictions. Capable of laughter that all the world may witness. And of

tears that no one will ever see. A swimmer who may never enter the water. A musician who may choose to listen rather than to play. A wife who feels like a lover. A mother who remembers what it was like to be a child. There is this woman. And here is the fragrance that defines her. We call it-Cabriole— because never before has there been a more rewarding time to be a woman (27).

Wolf also discusses the structure of the differences seen between the genders. She points out that men are one of the most imminent and powerful reasons that women yearn to be beautiful. Men have placed the limitations on appearance, and they know the essence of beauty that is desirable. Wolf also relates to the above mentioned concept that men calculate and measure a woman's worth in society, and that they have used women's "beauty" as a form of currency in circulation among other men.

These ideas about the definition of what is considered to be beautiful have continued to evolve throughout history side by side with ideas about money. Therefore, the two are seen as virtual parallels in our consumer economy. "A woman looks like a million dollars, she's a first-class beauty, her face is her fortune" (Wolf 20). To add to this theory, it can be simplified by returning to the original images and thoughts of Berger who stated that, "Men act, women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47).

The attraction to the image of a woman's body, presented as an ideal form, is the natural response to the attraction of a pleasurable sight (Coward 77). Wolf continues by stating that the "culture alienates women from their own bodies and sexuality, and how little choice women really have about obsessions with appearance" (277). Wolf explores how women recognize the importance that they place on being beautiful, and that they are beginning to wonder if they aren't alone in this feeling, but that "something important is at stake that has to do with the relationship between female liberation and female beauty" (Wolf 9).

In addition, females are considered to be the "fair sex," however is there empirical evidence to suggest that this is true? Freedman poses the question, "What facts support the premise that beauty is gender bound?" The answer that she discovers is that "although few studies have specifically focused on beauty as a masculine or feminine trait, gender differences have emerged nevertheless." Research continues to indicate that "attitudes about attractiveness are applied differently to each sex. Beauty counts for everyone, but more so for women" (Freedman 9).

The Beauty Myth

What does it mean to be beautiful when being examined by the glare of the male gaze? "The beauty of a woman is naught but a delusion of the masculine brain clouded by the fumes of instinct" (Freedman 13). The word "beauty" contains a meaning that is complex yet

simple. It is an outward appearance, a feeling, and a fact of social change. A woman who desires to be beautiful is trapped in the confines of the structured definition of what beauty should comprise.

Therefore, she consistently struggles with the complex, and continually attempts to master the grace of simplicity. The beauty myth is the cultivating extreme of the picture of women in society. It is this facade between the outward visual presence and the inner destruction that is created and reinforced by the culture and the media.

Myths help us to clarify perplexing events. They develop an understanding of what society forms as reality. Freedman explains that “cultures grow and mature as do children. Myths are to culture, what cognitive errors are to children’s thought” (15). She further describes the relationship between myth and gender by stating:

In fact, myths about gender, like myths about beauty, are often linked in just such counterbalanced pairs. Together, contrary myths create an equilibrium that helps preserve them both. Women are crowned with beauty precisely because they are cloaked in difference. The idealization of female appearance camouflages an underlying belief in female inferiority. Just as excessive narcissism has its roots in self-loathing, the myth of female beauty grows from the myth of female deviance. Beauty helps to balance

woman as a misbegotten person. It disguises her inadequacies and justifies her presence (18).

Wolf adds to this link between beauty and mythology by saying that “while culture works out of moral dilemmas, ‘beauty’ is amoral. From the beauties in male culture, women learn a bitter amoral lesson—that the moral lessons of their culture exclude them” (Wolf 59). Also, in the text Femininity, author Susan Brownmiller states that “women in our society are forced daily to compete for male approval, enslaved by ludicrous beauty standards that we ourselves are conditioned to take seriously and to accept” (25).

In contradiction to this “beauty myth,” Karen Lehrman, in her book The Lipstick Proviso, explains that if a woman is not considered to be beautiful in society, she will be labeled as “deficient, defective, a failure” (66). These are extreme words that women have come to use to describe themselves if they do not meet a certain cultural standard. Lehrman analyzes Wolf’s concept of the “beauty myth,” and what she comes to realize is that “beauty is not a myth, an arbitrary cultural convention, an ideological fabrication. Beauty is a reality, a gift of God, nature, or genius that, to some extent, transcends culture and history” (68).

However, she does continue in support of the previously stated theories, and points out that although different cultures and eras have emphasized different features and body types, the common thread is that physical beauty is of the highest importance. The female body is acclaimed for its appeal. Again, Brownmiller