

'Curvy' Barbie: a step in the right direction, but is it far enough?

Barbie has been a familiar face in homes worldwide for generations. However, despite her popularity, she has also received her fair share of criticism. Many argue that the doll's appearance promotes an unrealistic image of feminine beauty. In response to this, Mattel released a new range of 2016 Fashionista Dolls, with three new body types. Hannah Jarman examines the impact of Barbie on young girls' body image

Body image concerns are becoming increasingly prevalent in young children. Research has shown that, by the age of 6 years, girls start to express concerns about their body weight or shape (Dohnt and Tiggemann, 2006). Some 40–60% of girls aged 6–12 years are dissatisfied with their weight and/or appearance (Smolak, 2011).

Although there are likely numerous societal and developmental factors contributing to this, a number of commentators, including Dittmar (2012) and Tiggemann (2011), have suggested that Barbie dolls may promote internalisation of the thin ideal in young girls.

Unrealistic ideals of beauty

Barbie has now been a household name for over 50 years and is sold in over 150 countries worldwide (Mattel, 2016). According to Nairn (2015), 90% of US girls under 10 years old own at least one Barbie. Furthermore, British girls own an average number of seven dolls per child (Nairn, 2015).

However, despite having an iconic status, Barbie has been criticised due to her unrealistic body proportions. If made to scale, Barbie would be 5 feet and 9 inches tall, with a 32-inch bust, a 16-inch waist, and a neck too thin to support the weight of her head (Rehabs, 2012). In fact, Barbie would lack the 17% body fat required for women to menstruate (McDonough, 1999). Consequently, Barbie has been accused of giving young, impressionable girls an unrealistic idea of what the female body should look like (Turkel, 1998) and, in doing so, may contribute to body dissatisfaction among young girls.

Impact of exposure

Despite claims that Barbie promotes an unrealistic ideal, only a handful of experimental studies have examined the impact of exposure to Barbie (the 'original' doll) on body image-related outcomes. These findings have produced mixed results.

The first experimental study to examine Barbie as a possible cause for young girls' body dissatisfaction was conducted by Dittmar et al (2006). They exposed 162 British girls aged 5–8 years to one of three conditions, including images of Barbie, Emme (an average-sized doll) or no doll. They found that exposure to images of Barbie resulted in lower body esteem and a greater desire for a thinner body than girls exposed to the other conditions. However, this immediate impact was not present in the older girls. This research provided initial evidence that exposure to Barbie may be detrimental to young girls' body image.

Anschutz and Engels (2010) replicated this research with 6–10-year-old Dutch girls. However, this time, exposure involved 10 minutes of actual play with Barbie, Emme or Lego. They tested the effects of play with each doll on body image and food intake. Contrary to Dittmar et al's (2006) findings, Anschutz and Engels (2010) found no effect of exposure condition on body image. They did, however, find that girls who played with the average-sized doll (Emme) consumed more food than in the other conditions. Although this research found no support for the influence of dolls on body image, the dolls were found to impact actual food intake.

Gender roles and aspirations

In recent years, researchers have started to explore the influence of Barbie on gender roles and career aspirations. Sherman and Zurbriggen (2014) investigated the impact of dolls on career aspirations among American girls aged 4–7 years. Girls were randomly assigned to 5 minutes of play with either Barbie or

Mrs Potato Head. They found that playing with Barbie, compared to Mrs Potato Head, significantly reduced the number of careers that girls saw possible for themselves compared to the number they perceived as possible for boys. Therefore, brief exposure to Barbie limited these girls' career aspirations.

Broader view of beauty

In January of this year, Mattel unveiled a new range of dolls—2016 Fashionistas Dolls. Barbie now has three new body types, including 'tall', 'petite' and 'curvy', as well as seven different skin tones, 24 hairstyles and 22 eye colours. In response to some of the criticism of the original Barbie, Mattel claimsto have developed this range to reflect a broader view of beauty. However, it appears that this move was more than just to diversify Barbie; despite Mattel's historic success, sales have plummeted, with a 7% drop in Barbie sales in 2014 (Mattel, 2014).

So how comparable is curvy Barbie to the average women? According to the BBC, not very (Bates, 2016). Curvy Barbie would be a UK size 6–8 waist and size 8 hips—three sizes smaller than the average British woman (Moody, 2012). Although curvy Barbie does have a more rounded stomach and wider hips, she still has a pert bottom and chest and a slim figure. These dolls still conform to societal ideals of feminine beauty and are a long way from representing the average woman's body.

Something which is also particularly concerning is how these dolls have been labelled. By naming these dolls by their body type, it could be argued that Mattel is reinforcing an old stereotype—that women are defined by their appearance. Perhaps the range would have benefited from giving the dolls names and personalities rather than placing emphasis on the way they look. The message this sends to children is that you are defined by your body and your appearance rather than the person you are and the things you do. This is not a good message to send future generations.

Although these dolls are not representative of real women, it is important to remember that the original Barbie would be a UK size 2 waist and hips, so curvy Barbie is a vast improvement on the original doll. It appears encouraging that Barbie is now being sold in a range of body types, skin tones, eye colours and hairstyles. This range has made an important step in promoting diversity, rather than upholding only one idealised image of feminine beauty. This shift from the White, blonde, blue eyed beauty ideal should be welcomed.

Furthermore, this move may increase pressure on other corporations to offer a broader variety of toys to give children more confidence in their own body shapes.

Conclusion

The impact of Barbie is not clear cut. It seems that, in younger girls, original Barbie may have a negative impact on body image; although this effect is not evident in older girls. Furthermore, Barbie may be influential in terms of how girls interact with food, as well as their career aspirations. However, further research is necessary before any substantial claims can be made.

Although the new range of Barbie dolls still has room for improvement, Mattel has begun to take a step in the right direction. Whether or not these changes have come about for the right reasons, these new dolls do promote a slightly more diverse picture of Barbie.

Despite the worldwide news coverage regarding Barbie's new look, empirical research is necessary to accurately assess the impact of this new range of dolls on young girls. At this moment in time, people can only speculate the impact that this new range may have.