



Barbiemedia. Mattel, 2016.

THE EVOLUTION OF AN ICON

A COMPARISON OF THE VALUES AND STEREOTYPES
REFLECTED IN THE ORIGINAL 1959 BARBIE DOLL
AND THE CURVY 2016 BARBIE DOLL

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Abstract

In January 2016, Mattel introduced a new Barbie doll that comes in three different body types: petite, tall and curvy. After many years of critique on Barbie's unrealistic body, the introduction of the curvy Barbie is seen as a radical change by many. This thesis analyses the original 1959 Barbie doll and the curvy 2016 Barbie doll together with one commercial from both time periods in order to see what cultural values and stereotypes are embedded in the dolls and whether these values and stereotypes have changed or not. The 1959 Barbie doll reflects progressive values, such as an independent and unmarried life, but at the same time the doll also creates a stereotypical image of women by overemphasizing the importance of appearance and beauty. The 2016 curvy Barbie doll shares this focus on looks, but beauty as defined by this doll is a broader concept because of the addition of different ethnical features and body types. However, the body of the curvy Barbie differs very little from the original Barbie and therefore the term curvy is problematic. The changes in the values and stereotypes reflected by the Barbie doll in 1959 and 2016 show us that the Barbie doll is changing into a more inclusive toy, but this change comes in small, not radical, steps.

Keywords: Barbie doll; gender studies; women in popular culture

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Introduction

“My whole philosophy of Barbie was that through the doll, the little girl could be anything she wanted to be. Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices.”

- Ruth Handler in the documentary *Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour* (2003)

On March 9, 1959 the Barbie doll was born. Up until then, most dolls available to young girls were baby dolls. Inspired by the paper dolls her daughter played with, Ruth Handler came up with the idea of a three-dimensional fashion doll. As the quote above illustrates, Handler wanted to provide girls with a doll through which they could enact their own future lives as adult women. The Barbie doll quickly became an American icon and a symbol of the feminine ideal: skinny, tall and blonde. Today, more than sixty years after she hit the shelves, her iconic appearance is known all over the world. Approximately every three seconds a Barbie doll is sold somewhere (Kuther and McDonald 39). She is not only a beloved toy for young girls but also a popular collectible for adults, given the success of Barbie collector clubs and conventions. However, for every fan that Barbie has, there is probably also a person who hates her with a passion and would definitely disagree with Handler's idea as quoted above. The doll's unrealistic body proportions and supposedly detrimental influence on young girls has been met with a lot of criticism. Together with the lack of diversity in Barbie doll lines and the stereotypical image of women she represents according to some, the Barbie doll is one of the most controversial and most widely discussed toys in the world. Throughout the years, Mattel, the multinational toy manufacturing company that produces Barbie, has responded to these critiques by adding changes to the dolls image and body. In 1968, for example, Mattel answered the calls for more diversity by adding the first African-American Barbie doll to its line. In 1997, Barbie's body mold was redesigned so that her waist was widened and her breasts and hips were made smaller. Apart from some of these minor changes however, Barbie's appearance remained largely the same through the years (Urla and Swedlund 286).

In January 2016, Mattel launched a new line of “Fashionistas” Barbie dolls, including dolls with curvy, tall and petite body types. After many years of critique on Barbie's body proportions and declining sales for Mattel, the company has moved beyond Barbie's original body shape. This development is dubbed by some as the most radical change in Barbie history. The introduction of curvy Barbie dolls has taken quite a long time if we consider the fact that Barbie's thinness was already a controversy in her early years. Still, initial reactions

to the curvy dolls are predominantly positive and have lauded Mattel for finally diversifying the Barbie doll line.

Now that Mattel has taken the step to introduce what some call a radical change in the world of Barbie, in this thesis I will examine the original Barbie doll and the curvy Barbie doll to reveal what values and cultural stereotypes were and are embedded in these dolls and link them to the critiques and controversies that have surrounded the doll. I will examine the 1959 and 2016 doll and packaging and one TV commercial from both periods. By comparing these analyses, we can see how the values and cultural stereotypes reflected in Barbie dolls have changed or perhaps remained the same. Ultimately, we might be able to assess whether the new curvy dolls really signify a radical change in the representation of women by Barbie dolls. Furthermore, by analyzing these icons of American culture we can get to know more about important values linked to women's roles in society and representations of women in American media and popular culture in both decades. My final aim is to answer the research question:

What cultural values and stereotypes are reflected in the 1959 original Barbie doll and in the 2016 curvy Barbie doll and what do the differences and similarities in these values and stereotypes tell us about the way representations of women by Barbie dolls have changed?

Theories of gender and popular culture

In my analyses of Barbie I will draw on concepts from gender studies and popular culture studies. By analyzing Barbie dolls from a gender studies perspective, we can see what image of women the Barbie doll creates in the minds of young girls and other consumers. As Trier-Bieniek and Leavy note, gender is socially constructed and consists of the ideas we link to masculinity and femininity and how we apply these notions to people (2). Those ideas often become stereotyped and as a result some roles, activities, feelings and appearances are viewed as distinctly male or female. These gender norms are mainly learned through our interactions with other people and cultural objects and texts (4).

Popular culture representations play an important role in constructing gender identities (Milestone and Meyer 1). We can think of popular culture as a site of struggle between dominant and alternative definitions of gender. It is through popular culture that women and men are confronted with the dominant definitions of themselves (Gamman and Marshment 2). At the same time, popular culture also provides people with opportunities to subvert those dominant definitions by creating alternative meanings: there are numerous examples of

playing and transforming Barbie dolls in ways that subvert Mattel's intentions for the doll, such as "torture-playing" (e.g. burning the doll, ripping off its limbs) (Kuther and McDonald 42). This constant struggle makes popular culture a highly valuable area for research on gendered representations.

In popular culture, icons inhabit a particularly important place. Nachbar and Lausé define icons as "three-dimensional objects which are visible, concrete embodiments of the myths, beliefs and values which form a culture's mindset" (170). Examining icons can therefore reveal a lot about a culture's dominant values and stereotypes. In my research I will use the definition of cultural values as described by social psychologist Shalom H. Schwartz in his article "A Theory of Cultural Values and Some Implications for Work": "cultural values represent the implicitly or explicitly shared abstract ideas about what is good, right, and desirable in a society" (25). Next to cultural values I will mainly look at the gender stereotypes as reflected by Barbie, gender stereotypes being the "beliefs about the behaviors and characteristics of each sex" (Eagly and Mladinic 544). Often, these beliefs are overgeneralizations about the roles men and women (should) have in society. The Barbie doll, being a dominant cultural icon in American popular culture, signifies certain values and stereotypes about women and thus serves as an interesting case study of female representations in popular culture.

Methodology

In order to answer the research question, we must both look at the criticisms and controversies that surrounded Barbie and the values and stereotypes she reflected to the audience in 1959 and 2016. In Chapter 1 we will look at the launch of the 1959 Barbie doll and examine the context in which Barbie was born by discussing the position of women in American society at the time as well as early critiques on the doll. The 1959 original Barbie doll and packaging will be visually and textually analyzed, paying special attention to notions of femininity, gender roles, appearance and body proportions. I will answer the following questions to guide my analysis: How is the doll packaged? What are the main body and facial features of the doll? What accessories and/or clothes are added to the doll? What do the packaging, characteristics, accessories and clothes imply about the Barbie doll? This analysis will be complemented by an analysis of the first Barbie commercial to see how the doll was marketed to the audience, paying special attention to what image of Barbie was created. I will focus on questions such as: What words and expressions are used? What kinds of people and places do we see in the advertisement? What do the Barbie dolls in the advertisement look like? My

hypothesis for the 1959 Barbie is that she communicates an image of women that focuses on domesticity, motherhood and beauty.

In chapter 2 we will look at the launch of the Fashionistas curvy Barbie dolls and the context in which these dolls were launched. A similar analysis for the 2016 curvy doll will then be conducted, again looking at how the doll reflects values and cultural stereotypes through its main characteristics, guided by the same questions we asked for the 1959 Barbie doll. We will focus on curvy Barbie dolls (and leave out the tall and petite dolls that are also part of the new Fashionistas line) since these seem to best reflect the call for more realistic and diverse representations of women in Barbie dolls and are deemed the most radical change in Barbie history by many. The accompanying television commercial for the Fashionistas Barbie doll line will be examined as well. We will look at how these new curvy dolls are marketed and what image is created by Mattel, again guided by the same questions we used in the analysis of the 1959 Barbie commercial. My hypothesis for the 2016 Barbie doll is that she reflects an image of empowerment, while at the same time appearance and beauty remain an important focus. Furthermore, if we look at the dolls more closely, they still present us with a fairly unrealistic body and do not differ that much from the original doll.

In chapter 3, we will connect the analyses and contexts of the 1959 and 2016 dolls by discussing the changes and continuities in the values and stereotypes reflected by the dolls from two different centuries. We will look at what these differences and similarities can tell us about representations of women by Barbie dolls and whether the introduction of curvy Barbie dolls can really be called a radical change in Barbie history. My hypothesis is that the message Barbie sends has altered on at least one aspect, namely from motherhood and domesticity to a more empowering image of women. However, after nearly 60 years I expect that the Barbie doll still affirms other stereotypes, such as a focus on beauty and appearance and unrealistic body types.

Chapter 1: 1959 original Barbie

Barbie was introduced at the 1959 New York Toy Fair. For the first time, girls could move beyond playing with baby dolls and pretending to be mothers into playing with an adult doll through which they could envision their future selves. This concept of identifying with the doll and acting out adult lives proved an instant success. Ruth Handler modeled the Barbie doll after the German “Bild Lilli” doll which she brought back home from a trip to Europe in 1956. Lilli was originally a cartoon character created in 1952 for the German *Bild* newspaper and as the cartoon gained popularity a doll of this character was produced. The Lilli doll was mainly sold as a gift to adult men and viewed as a sexualized doll (Whitney 39-40). Ruth Handler and the designers of Mattel adapted this Lilli doll into the version of the Barbie doll that we now know. Barbie soon became a popular toy all over the country. Born on the brink of the second wave of feminism and the sexual revolution in America, the Barbie doll and its reception can tell us a lot about the society and time period she comes from.

In 1963 Betty Friedan released her revolutionary book *The Feminine Mystique* about “the problem that has no name”: the widespread unhappiness experienced by many American women with their “perfect” suburban lives. Gradually, more and more of those women became vocal about their positions in society and started questioning the dominant gender roles of the time. The “happy housewife” image created through advertisements and women’s magazines was condemned by many women who felt trapped inside the gender roles of the time. Interestingly, even before Friedan wrote her famous book, the Barbie doll already subverted some of the gender roles criticized in the book. According to feminist political scientist Anita Brill, for many girls and their mothers in the 1950s Barbie served as a liberator:

Barbie’s initial pre-feminist appearance signaled for us the universe of other possibilities [...] Gone from our agenda were the eternal rounds of playing mommy and daddy and baby doll [...] With Barbie acting for us we could be exciting and interesting women in the world. (qtd. in Reid-Walsh and Mitchell 182)

The doll showed women a different world outside of their suburban homes where they were confined to the sphere of domesticity. Barbie was marketed as an independent woman with a career of her own. For example, even though her boyfriend Ken was introduced in 1961, they were never officially married and neither did they have children. Lacking any family- or

housewife related responsibilities, Barbie thus gave a glimpse into a lifestyle that had been unattainable to many women in the 1950s.

Besides positive reactions about the empowering side of Barbie, some people were very critical of Barbie's appearance instead. Mattel's marketing team conducted primary research with mothers and daughters before launching the Barbie doll. They found that most young girls loved the doll, but the majority of mothers absolutely hated it: in their eyes Barbie was too sexy, too grown-up and too flamboyant (Scott 155). Some mothers also feared that the doll would make young girls "less able to achieve the emotional preparation for being a wife and mother that they received from baby dolls" (Winick 208). These reactions reflect the conservative notions about women that were very prevalent at the time, namely that a girl should prepare to become a woman who was above all a mother and a wife, who was dependent on her husband and always stood in the service of her family. The fact that the mothers in Mattel's research found Barbie's sex appeal inappropriate and even shocking is also reflective of how women's sexuality was seen at the time: it was a very sensitive topic that made many feel uncomfortable.

It is clear that Barbie has faced different critiques from the very early beginning. While some found her too sexy and independent, others saw her as a toy that liberated women from the oppressing gender roles of the time. In order to see what values were presented through Barbie, we must now turn to an analysis of the doll, the packaging, and the first TV commercial.

Doll & Packaging

The very first Barbie doll came in a box decorated with illustrations of Barbie dolls in couture fashion outfits (see Fig.1). The text on the box reads "Barbie – Teen Age Fashion Model". A booklet was included inside the box that showed the dolls and outfits available. There were 22 different sets of clothing that could be bought separately from the doll. The 1959 Barbie doll had blonde or brown hair, white irises and blonde or brown eyebrows. Her hair was in a curly ponytail with curly bangs, which reflected the hair trends of the time. Her skin had a very pale pink shade and she wore red nail polish. She had red lips, black eyeliner with blue eyeshadow and was dressed in a white and black striped swimsuit and black open toe shoes. Barbie



Fig. 1: 1959 Barbie doll and packaging
Prochaska, Suzanne. *Fashion Doll Guide*. N.p, 2006. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.

wore gold hoop earrings and a pair of white sunglasses were included separately in the box. The doll had holes in her feet and shoes, so that she was able to be put on a black plastic disk stand that was included in the box.



Fig. 2: “Commuter Set” clothing set
Prochaska, Suzanne. *Fashion Doll Guide*. N.p, 2006. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.

First, looking at the box in which Barbie was packaged, we immediately see an emphasis on fashion and clothing, which suits the image of Barbie as a “Teen Age Fashion Model”. The box showed Barbie in different outfits that could be bought separately. Together with the booklet included, this encouraged young girls and their parents to buy more outfits for their Barbie doll. These outfits tell us a lot about the way Barbie portrays women.

In the article “Domesticating Barbie: An Archaeology of Barbie Material Culture and Domestic Ideology” Pearson and Mullins provide an interesting analysis of Barbie’s original wardrobe: they note for example that most clothing sets were made for a special occasion reflected in the name of the set as well, such as “Cruise Stripes”, “Picnic Set” and “Suburban Shopper” (233). Among the 22 outfits, there was one career outfit named “Commuter Set” which included a navy suit and a light blue blouse and suggested that Barbie did office work (see Fig.2).

Three outfits stand out as placing Barbie in a domestic sphere. The first one is “Sweater Girl”, which suggested that Barbie took on the traditional household skill of knitting (235). The second one is “Suburban Shopper”, which put Barbie at the center of the emerging suburban consumer culture and reinforced the image of women as the most important consumers of the American family. The last one is “Barbie-Q”, a set which consists of an apron and kitchen utensils (see Fig.3). On the one hand, this created the image of Barbie as the perfect house-wife who spent a big part of her time in the kitchen. However, barbecuing is an activity that is very much linked to masculinity, so on the other hand this outfit can be seen as one that actually subverts traditional gender roles.



Fig. 3: “Barbie-Q” clothing set
Prochaska, Suzanne. *Fashion Doll Guide*. N.p, 2006. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.

The original 22 outfits that were available for Barbie reflect several important notions. First, it is clear that for every occasion, Barbie should look good and thus she also has a special matching outfit. Second, most of the outfits available for Barbie place her in an environment of leisure time and have a strong focus on fashion and beauty. Thirdly, we still

see links to domesticity in three of the outfits, but Barbie is never shown as a stereotypical housewife or mother. Lastly, the fact that there was only one career outfit (namely “Commuter Set”) available for Barbie in 1959 bears a resemblance to the hesitant attitude many people had toward the entrance of women in the workforce at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s. At the time when Barbie was introduced more and more women took on jobs, but this development was not yet fully embraced by everyone in society. This could have been a reason for Mattel to include only one career outfit, despite the fact that they wanted Barbie to stand out as a career woman.

Looking at the original Barbie body, it is not hard to see that she has very unrealistic body proportions (see Fig.4). According to an article in *TIME* magazine, the original Barbie had a 36-inch bust line and an 18-inch waist if we would convert her measurements to those of a real woman (Grodén n. pag.). Her swimsuit reveals a lot of her body, and it is not surprising that many found her too sexy in 1959. Especially if we take into account her origins in the Lilli doll, we can see why some people perceived her as a highly sexualized doll. It is also striking that while she is marketed as a “Teen Age Fashion Model”, her body looks much more mature than that of an average teenager (of course, it is impossible to define what the “average teenager” looks like, but Barbie’s hourglass body reminds us more of an adult woman than a teenager). The swimsuit seems to reinforce her body proportions, making her waist look even tinier and her breasts even bigger. According to Swedlund and Urla in their article “The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture”, the average American woman was getting heavier in the sixties, whereas the idealized images of women’s bodies were becoming increasingly thin (293). Barbie is a good example of such an idealized image of the female body, but of course she did not stand alone: women in advertisements and fashion models also reflected these desired female bodies. In that sense, Barbie was and still is part of a bigger problem concerning images of women.

Barbie’s face is fairly heavily made-up, but if we look at the 1950-60s trends in make-up for adult women we see that her make-up is in line with those trends, namely a pale skin with rouge cheeks, baby-blue eyeshadow, heavy eyeliner, high arched eyebrows and classic red lips. Her make-up look reminds us of classic beauty icons of the time such as Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth. Her eyes are positioned in a sideways glance, which makes her



Fig. 4: 1959 Barbie doll
Prochaska, Suzanne.
Fashion Doll Guide. N.p,
2006. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.

look kind of demure (as if she is afraid to look straight into someone's eyes) but at the same time some may read it as a sign of her playful character and see it as a flirty glance.

What is especially striking about the 1959 Barbie doll (and the Barbie dolls that came after) is that she cannot stand on her own feet. She can only stand up with the help of the stand included and the holes in her feet and shoes. This reinforces the image of the doll as a mannequin, a doll that is exhibited for her beauty and the fashion she is wearing. The fact that she cannot stand up without any help makes us question whether she is meant to be an active agent or whether she is bound to be displayed and looked at only. Of course, this fits her image as a "Teenage Model", but at the same time it undermines the idea of Barbie as a doll through which girls can act out their future lives and dreams, since it limits the ways in which young girls can play with the doll. Furthermore, the Barbie doll is very inflexible as she can only move her arms and legs up and down, not sideways. This gives her a kind of stiffness that again reminds us of a mannequin. The possibilities of playing with the doll are thus centered more on the beauty, appearance and model-like qualities of Barbie instead of the doll as an active agent in her own life story.

In summary, the 1959 Barbie doll reflects several values, some of which are embedded in the prevalent notions of the time period, while others are quite progressive for her time. Even though Barbie was marketed as an independent career woman, only one of her 22 original outfits places Barbie in a working environment. The doll thus only slightly hints at career opportunities for women. However, Barbie is childless and unmarried, which leaves her free from the responsibilities that 1950s housewives and mothers had. This creates the opportunity for young girls to imagine their future lives as independent women. Although three of the outfits reinforce conservative notions of women in the domestic spheres, we never see Barbie as a typical housewife or mother. We can definitely see how the Barbie doll subverts some of the stereotypical values linked to women in the 1950s. On the other hand, the emphasis on beauty and fashion reinforces the notion that women derive their power and self-worth from their appearance only. The fact that she cannot stand on her own feet also reflects the passiveness and maybe even helplessness that was stereotypically linked to women. The message that Barbie sends thus has two sides, one that can be called progressive and maybe even radical, and one that is still linked to stereotypical images of women.

Commercial

“Barbie, you’re beautiful” is the song with which the Barbie doll was introduced into American households (see Appendix 1 for the full song text). Two aspects stand out most in the song text: the emphasis on beauty and consumerism, and the identification with Barbie. Beauty is not only (over)emphasized, but linked to a “small and petite” body as well. Besides beauty, fashion and shopping also seem to take on a pivotal role in Barbie’s life: she has “all the gadgets gals adore” (BarbieCollectors, “First EVER Barbie Commercial”) and we see many clothing items and accessories moving across the screen. The last part of the song clearly tells us how Mattel envisions “Barbie-play”: girls want to be like Barbie when they grow up, but until then they will pretend to be like her through playing with the doll. Being like Barbie mainly involves being beautiful: “Barbie, beautiful Barbie, I’ll make believe that I am you” (BarbieCollectors, “First EVER Barbie Commercial”). This commercial thus shows young girls that the Barbie ideal, namely being petite and beautiful, is something they should strive for. Of course, in and of itself there is not really anything wrong with wanting to be beautiful, but there are many more ways to reflect beauty that are totally absent in Barbie’s 1959 world.

Visually, the commercial posits Barbie in several different ways. First, the Barbie dolls are exhibited on a staircase as if they are participating in a pageant or fashion show (see Fig.5). Clearly, they are meant to showcase clothing and accessories rather than be played with. In a different shot, we see a Barbie next to a microphone in a sparkly dress, conveying the image of Barbie as a singer. Next, we see two Barbie dolls in more traditional dresses with one holding a tray, suggesting she is a waitress or perhaps a housewife. The next shot is one of a Barbie doll in a chic ensemble with several clothing items and accessories next to her: here we see a celebration of the woman as consumer. In the final shot, we see several Barbie dolls exhibited on the staircase, with one of them in a wedding dress. In this commercial we have thus seen Barbie the

model, the singer, the waitress or housewife, the consumer and finally Barbie the bride. On the one hand this shows us that Barbie is quite a successful woman (as a singer and model) and that she is independent and can take care of her own business. On the other hand, Barbie only takes on jobs that were viewed as feminine and together with the great emphasis on her



Fig. 5: Barbie dolls on a staircase in the 1959 commercial

BarbieCollectors. "1959 First EVER Barbie Commercial High Quality HQ!" Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Oct. 2008. Web. 6 Mar. 2016.

beauty, especially textually, the commercial creates a stereotypical image of women that seems to value their looks over their brains.

An especially important moment in the commercial that I want to highlight is the last part. As the woman sings “Someday I’m gonna be exactly like you” (BarbieCollectors, “First EVER Barbie Commercial”), the camera zooms in on a Barbie in a wedding dress (see Fig.6). Because of the combination of this song text with the image of the bride Barbie, it seems as if young girls were encouraged to get married, just like Barbie in the commercial. Thus, this commercial reflects the suburban ideal of married life that women like Betty Friedan started to criticize and question. The appearance of the bridal Barbie in the



Fig. 6: Barbie as a bride in the 1959 commercial

BarbieCollectors. "1959 First EVER Barbie Commercial High Quality HQ!" Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Oct. 2008. Web. 6 Mar. 2016.

commercial is especially striking because Barbie was never actually married, even though Mattel did produce Barbie dolls in wedding dresses. Furthermore, Ken, who was introduced as Barbie’s boyfriend in 1961, had not yet been born at the time this commercial aired, so Barbie did not even have anyone to get married to. It seems that Mattel did not want to market Barbie as a married woman because she was supposed to remain independent, but in order to silence conservative critiques and attract more conservative buyers they did produce bride Barbie dolls.

Overall, the 1959 commercial mainly focuses on Barbie’s appearance and invites girls to strive for Barbie’s look: white, thin and always well-dressed. Even though we see Barbie in different career outfits, these are mainly “feminine” careers. The Barbie in the wedding dress plays an important role in the commercial, which is surprising because it undermines the image of Barbie as an independent woman that Mattel wanted to convey. In summary, the message that the Barbie doll and the accompanying commercial send can be seen as two-sided. On the one hand, she gets rid of stereotypical images of women as housewives and mothers in a time where these images were still widespread and can therefore be seen as a very progressive doll. Some may even see her as a doll that helped bring forward the problems that were also addressed in “The Feminine Mystique”, since Barbie did not comply with society’s standards. On the other hand, the 1959 Barbie also has a stereotypical side to her because she reflects the notion that beauty and appearance are the most important aspects in a woman’s life.

Chapter 2: 2016 curvy Barbie

In the previous chapter we have seen that the 1959 Barbie doll was a progressive toy because she did away with the image of the woman as a housewife and mother, but at the same time she reflected the stereotypical notion that women should derive their self-worth from their appearance. In this chapter, we will look at the 2016 curvy Barbie dolls to see whether this doll reflects a different image of women. The change in Barbie's body type did not come out of the blue: the doll has been criticized for decades and Mattel saw their sales and popularity decline heavily in the last years. Criticism on the doll focused mostly on her unrealistic body and the stereotypical image she represented of women, namely that beauty, fashion and appearance are the most valued aspects of a woman's life. In 2015, Mattel executives decided that they had to take a whole new turn with the Barbie doll and initiated "Project Dawn". Mattel's designers were invited to think about what they would do with the Barbie brand if they could start with a clean slate (Dockterman n.pag.). This project resulted in the creation of the 2016 "Fashionistas" Barbie line. The line includes three new body types (petite, tall and curvy), seven different skin tones and twenty-four hairstyles. Together with the launch of the new Barbie dolls Mattel also released the "Evolution of Barbie" commercial, showing the new Barbie dolls and the story behind the change.

Since her debut in 1959 the Barbie doll underwent some minor changes and additions over the years, often fueled by criticism surrounding the doll. Mattel launched the first African American doll, named "Christie", in 1968. Barbie's original sideways glance was replaced so that she looked straight ahead in 1971. In the 1970s Barbie also took on more jobs, including male-oriented ones such as doctor and Olympic athlete (Swedlund and Urla 283). Hispanic Barbie dolls were introduced in the 1980s, soon followed by other multicultural Barbie dolls from all parts of the world. In 1997 Barbie's body mold was redesigned and her waist was widened. These minor changes did not radically differ Barbie's appearance however: her iconic figure has largely remained the same over the past decades.

Of course, the curvy Barbie is launched in a very different time than the first Barbie in 1959. A lot has changed for women since the 1950s: today it is very common for women to have a career and be (financially) independent. However, women still earn less on average than men and continue to do most of the childcare and domestic duties (Milestone and Meyer 100). If we look at the way women are represented in popular culture, we also see that there is more work to be done: women are still very much defined by their appearance and gender stereotypes continue to perpetuate modern popular culture (93-4). Being thin and white is still

the beauty standard we see most often in the media, but some companies have expanded their marketing campaigns to include plus size models and women with different ethnical backgrounds. As the curvaceous bodies of celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Beyoncé become popular images and “body acceptance” and “body positive” movements take ground, we see that the American beauty ideal is perhaps slowly evolving to include women of all body shapes and ethnicities. An iconic figure like the Barbie doll cannot stay behind on this development.

The first reactions on the curvy dolls were mainly positive, lauding Mattel for adding diversity to Barbie’s world. However, some also see it as a cheap marketing ploy, pointing towards the fact that this change comes very late and that Mattel had no choice but to drastically alter its image because of the company’s deteriorating reputation. Whether Mattel really had good intentions of empowering young girls is something we will probably never know, but we do know that Barbie is still a very influential and important toy and artifact of American popular culture. She still tells us a lot about the time we live in and especially about the way women are portrayed and looked at. We will now look at the 2016 curvy Barbie, its packaging and the accompanying commercial to see the values and stereotypes reflected by the 2016 curvy Barbie doll.

Doll & Packaging

The packaging clearly highlights the new diversity in Barbie’s world. The front displays a picture of the doll in the packaging together with two different dolls from the Fashionistas line, a dark-skinned petite one and a white original one (see Fig.7). The doll is placed against a black-and-white backdrop with a heart motif and the packaging is less girly than previous boxes. Mattel is known for marketing Barbie dolls with their “wall of pink” strategy, filling the walls of toy stores with pink boxes, but the new packaging takes on a more minimalistic and modern look. At the back of the packaging we see all the new dolls in the Fashionistas collection with the text “You can be anything” and “Collect all the Barbie Fashionistas dolls!” Especially the picture in the back shows us that the new line is much more diverse in terms of clothing, hairstyles, hair colors and skin tones (see Fig. 8 on next page).

Taking a closer look at the variety of the line, we see that all of the outfits featured on the back of the packaging include either a dress



Fig. 7: “Chambray Chic” Barbie and packaging
Picture made by author

or a skirt, but none of the Barbie dolls wear pants. There are a few dolls that come with additional outfits that do include pants, but the majority of these new dolls wear skirts and dresses as primary outfit. It seems that being a “fashionista” means wearing clothes that are considered feminine, like skirts and dresses, as supposed to clothes that are not typically feminine such as pants.



Fig. 8: Back of the 2016 Fashionistas Barbie dolls packaging

Picture made by author

The names given to the dolls also reveal a lot about the values they reflect. Most of the names allude to something they are wearing, for instance “Sweetheart Stripes”, “Love That Lace” and “Chambray Chic”. Some point to the hair color of the doll, such as “Va-Va-Violet” and “Blue Violet”. What is striking about these names is that a lot of them seem to reflect either a kind of “cuteness” (such as “Dolled Up Denim”), or are very much focused on looking beautiful (“Pretty in Paisley”, “Pretty in Python”). Overall, a lot of words associated with femininity are used in the names of the Barbie dolls (“pink”, “pretty”, “floral”, “sweetheart”, and “chic”, to name a few). Since these names mostly allude to something the dolls are wearing, it is also true that the dolls wear very feminine outfits. As mentioned earlier, they all wear either a skirt or a dress, and the majority of them also wears heels. Every doll comes with one accessory that is linked to their outfit, which can be a piece of jewelry, a pair of sunglasses, a bag or a belt. When we look at the “Fashionistas” line overall we see that being “fashionable” and looking good is defined as wearing very feminine clothes. It seems that Barbie is still as preoccupied with appearance as she was in her first years. There has been an improvement however: beauty as defined by Barbie now also includes different skin tones and body types. Still, a definition of beauty that only considers skirts and dresses as

fashionable or desirable clothing for women is a fairly narrow one compared to the diversity of beauties that we see in the real world.

When discussing the body of the curvy Barbie, we must first take a look at what curvy actually means in order to be able to compare this definition to the curviness that the new Barbie doll reflects. There is no widespread agreement on the definition of a curvy body. The term is often used to describe an hourglass figure with a well-defined waist, wide hips and a proportionate bust, but it is also used as a euphemistic alternative for fat. Curvy can thus be used in a positive as well as a negative context. Curvy is also often linked to plus-size bodies, a term used in clothing stores and the modelling industry to describe women with American clothing size 12 and up. One thing that is always evident in the different definitions of curvy is that the body has distinct curvy shapes, such as breasts and hips that are bigger than average. In my analysis of Barbie's body, I will mainly focus on the definition that links curvy to plus-size women, since plus-size women have the most distinctly different bodies compared to the original Barbie. The hourglass figure definition of curvy does not fit my approach: we could then even consider the 1959 Barbie curvy since she has a well-defined waist with proportionally large breasts and hips - in other words, an hourglass body.

Turning to the body of the curvy Barbie, it is obvious that there is some difference compared to the original Barbie. If we take a closer look at the curvy Barbie however, we see that it is mostly the lower part of her body that is bigger. Her bottom, hips and upper legs are distinctly bigger, but her waist, shoulders, arms and even her breasts are still very thin, especially in proportion to her lower body, and her belly has remained flat (see Fig.9). We could definitely say that the curvy Barbie has a pear-shaped body: her curviness is mostly centered at her hip and bottom area. In an article on *BBC News*, Claire Bates describes how she has measured the curvy Barbie and converted those sizes to that of a real life woman. The article reports that if curvy Barbie were a real woman, she would have a waist of 63 centimeters, which is 9 centimeters bigger than the original Barbie, and hips of 91,2 centimeters, an addition of 13,2 centimeters to the original (Bates n.pag.). The head of the curvy Barbie has exactly the same size as the original. A real woman with the body of the curvy Barbie doll would not be considered curvy or plus-size; in fact the same article says that curvy Barbie is significantly thinner than the average British woman. Considering that the average American woman is heavier than the average British



Fig. 9: "Sweetheart Stripes" Barbie
Picture made by author

woman, we can see how the curvy Barbie is actually not that representative of curvy or plus-size American women at all. Mattel has thus made curviness into another version of thinness by labelling the new doll, which is hardly bigger than the original one, as the curvy version.

The curvy Barbie dolls come in two different body poses: one where both arms are placed straight next to the body and the other where one hand is placed on the hip (see Fig.7 and Fig.9 for the two different poses). Especially the latter reminds us of the origins of Barbie as a “Teenage Model”: it is a pose that we often see on the runway and in many fashion magazines. Despite of these poses the doll is a lot more flexible than the 1959 one, as she can move her arms and legs in different directions and she can even stand up straight without any help (even though the back of the package says “Dolls cannot stand alone”). This gives her a more active image and adds new opportunities to play with the doll.

The new Barbie doll also comes with many new facial features, such as different kinds of eyes, noses and lips. These features add to the diversity of the line and move the Barbie doll further away from the standard white woman with blonde hair stereotype to include women with different kinds of ethnicities in the line. The first African-American Barbie dolls only differed in their skin tones, but now we can clearly see ethnical differences in Barbie’s face as well. The dolls all have a friendly smile on their face, and while some are clearly made up, others have a more natural look. These subtle differences are a good step in making Barbie’s world more inclusive.

Overall, we see that the Barbie doll has definitely evolved in some aspects. By including many different hairstyles, facial features and skin colors, this line is the most inclusive Barbie doll line so far. The dolls all look very different, especially when we look at their faces and we clearly see the ethnical diversity in Barbie’s world. The new line puts a great emphasis on wearing feminine clothes and creates a stereotypical image of what a fashionable woman should look like. Looking at the body shapes, we see that the curvy Barbie is very much pear-shaped but does not differ that much from the original Barbie doll. If the curvy Barbie were a real woman, she would even be thinner than the average American woman and therefore the label curvy hardly suits this new doll.

Commercial

The “Evolution of Barbie” commercial mixes images of young girls playing with the new Barbie dolls and their reactions to the dolls with images of designers and executives at Mattel explaining the new Barbie doll line. The commercial emphasizes the diversity of the new “Fashionistas” line. Diversity is also evident in the group of young girls we see in the

commercial: there are African-American, Asian, Hispanic and Caucasian girls with different body types.

The first shot we see is that of a group of young girls playing with the new dolls in a room filled with toys (see Fig.10). We hear one of the young girls say “it is important for Barbie to look different, you know like the ... real people in the world” (Kennedy, “The



Fig. 10: Young girls playing with Barbie dolls in the 2016 commercial

Kennedy, Rory. *The Evolution of Barbie*. BarbieMedia. Mattel, 28 Jan. 2016. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.

Evolution of Barbie”). The term “different” is one that often comes back in the commercial and is described as something that is “cool” The importance of diversity should be shown to young girls, as the director consumer insights of Mattel argues that “we have to let girls know, it doesn’t matter what shape you come in, anything is possible” (Kennedy). Here, it seems that

Mattel wants to communicate that they feel it is their shared duty to introduce girls to diversity in body shapes and ethnicities at a young age. For many years, Mattel has denied this aspect of the Barbie doll, claiming that it was not their intention to create a realistic doll or provide girls with diverse images of women. Now, it seems that Mattel has moved away from that idea. The new Barbie doll is introduced as a toy that can teach girls about different kinds of women.

Another important notion that comes back is the ability to relate to and connect with Barbie. Because she is more “real” now, girls can identify very easily with her, is the thought that runs through the commercial. Again it is clear that Mattel wants to show the link between the real world and the new Barbie dolls. For example, we hear the senior director product design of Mattel say “this is what our future looks like, because this is what the world looks like” (Kennedy). In other words, the video creates an image of the new Barbie doll as being more representative of what (women) in the real world look like. The doll does not only educate girls about difference, but they can also connect more easily with the doll. The young girls in the commercial also affirm this, as they notice that the new dolls look like their friends, relatives and themselves.

Whereas the new Barbie doll itself does not have anything to do with careers, in the commercial we are briefly reminded that “girls can do anything” (which was the slogan for

the 2015 marketing campaign) and we hear the future career aspirations of two young girls: “when I grow up, I want to be a teacher, if I have time” and “I like being a scientist, that makes me feel like I can do anything” (Kennedy). This part seems a little out of place because it does not really have anything to do with the new doll, but showing young girls what careers they can aspire to is of course not a bad thing at all. The link between these careers and the new dolls is missing however.

Overall, the commercial shows how the new Barbie doll can be empowering for young girls (and women in general) by highlighting the diversity and more realistic side of the “Fashionistas” line. Of course, to some this can feel like a cheap marketing trick that is not really heartfelt, since the commercial remains a kind of shallow collage of girls playing with Barbie dolls together with some empowering one-liners that are sometimes not even really linked to the doll itself. However, the commercial does have an empowering atmosphere that values the diversity of the Barbie dolls over their looks. The commercial creates a narrative of empowerment and opportunity around the new Barbie doll that might positively influence young girls.

We have now seen that the image of the curvy Barbie is one that still focuses a lot on beauty and appearance, while at the same time the commercial adds a layer of empowerment to the story behind the doll. We have also seen that her curvy body is actually still very thin and unrealistic compared to curvy women in real life. The “Fashionistas” line does quite a good job in representing ethnical diversity, however. So even though this new doll moves further away from stereotypical representations of women, it definitely does not get rid of them entirely, mostly because there is still a large emphasis on the doll’s looks.

Chapter 3: comparison of the 1959 and 2016 Barbie

In the previous chapters we looked at the values and stereotypes reflected by the 1959 and 2016 Barbie dolls. Now, we will look at the differences and similarities between the original 1959 Barbie and the curvy 2016 Barbie to see whether the new doll can really be called a radical change in Barbie history. First, we will look at how the bodies of both dolls compare to each other. Next, we will look at the core values that Barbie has reflected or that played an important role at some point in her life, such as the emphasis on beauty and appearance (over personality), independence, consumerism (and/or materialism) and multiculturalism, to see how the 1959 and 2016 dolls compare in terms of these values.

Comparing the bodies of the curvy doll with the original doll, I would like to draw on what Ann DuCille says about comparing the 1991 African-American Barbie “Shani” with the white Barbie in her book “Skin Trade”: according to DuCille, Mattel has “got around the problem by making the other both different and the same” (337). In her article DuCille argues for more realistic representations of ethnical differences as well as the various body shapes that come with those different ethnicities. She argues that Mattel’s attempts to reproduce a multicultural world through its “Dolls of the World” line, which “Shani” is a part of, do not accurately show the differences in real bodies but instead are rooted in simplistic and stereotyped forms. She notes that although Barbie dolls now come in a large range of skin colors, races and ethnicities, the dolls still look virtually the same as the original white Barbie, apart from “a dash of color and a change of clothes”(338). While in the process of developing the Shani doll, Mattel sought advice from African-American parents and specialists in childhood development. DuCille notes that one of those specialists, Darlene Hopson, argued for variations in body types and hair types in the Shani doll (342). However, Mattel did not want to make a new mold for the Shani doll, probably because of financial reasons. Thus, they created the African-American Barbie doll from the same mold as the original white Barbie.

Just like the African-American Barbie dolls in 1991, the curvy Barbie only differs very slightly from the original Barbie, thus undervaluing the distinctions between women with different body types. DuCille points out that what makes the 1991 Barbie distinctly African-American are fuller lips, a broader nose, and wider hips, but compared to the original body only very small changes were made, besides from dyeing the skin (342). This narrow idea of difference that Mattel reproduces through its dolls is something we also see in the curvy Barbie: although this time Mattel did use a different mold, only very little changes have been made to turn the original Barbie into the curvy Barbie. What makes a Barbie curvy according

to Mattel (if we were to convert her measures to those of a real woman) is the addition of 9 centimeters to the waist, 13.2 centimeters to the hips, only slightly bigger arms and legs and a head that is exactly the same size as the original Barbie, as we saw in chapter 2. If we look at the curvy Barbie in general, she does not seem to look like curvy women in real life at all. In fact, the curvy Barbie is even smaller than the average American woman. Her curviness is very much centered on the lower part of her body, whereas in real women curviness often extends to all parts of the body and not just one place. The upper part of the curvy Barbie's body does not differ very much from the 1959 Barbie at all. Overall, the change in her body is not as radical as it could have been, especially if we take into account all those years of critique on the thinness of the doll.

An aspect of the Barbie doll that has remained largely unchanged over the years is her personal identity as marketed by Mattel. Her identity has always deliberately been kept vague by Mattel, in order for young girls to live their dreams and act out their future lives through Barbie. We know that she is dating Ken and that she was an independent woman with a career when she was launched in 1959, but other than that we do not know a lot about her personality. Similarly, in 2016 her personality also remains a mystery: in the 2016 commercial for example, the focus lies more on the girls that play with her than on the characteristics of the doll itself, leaving the opportunity for girls to form a personality for their dolls. Barbie's personality is thus formed through play, through the minds of the young girls that engage with her.

Without a fixed personality, Barbie's body becomes an empty piece of plastic, ready to be filled with whatever fantasies young girls have. In that sense, Mattel's slogan "You Can be Anything" from the 2015 marketing campaign holds true. Ironically, research by Sherman and Zurbriggen showed that girls who played with Barbie dolls reported fewer careers as possibilities for themselves than compared to the number of careers they perceived as possible for boys (9). The researchers argued that this was linked to the fact that the Barbie doll (sexually) objectifies women, leading to a restriction of girls' sense of what is possible for them (11). Perhaps this is also linked to the fact that the narrative of empowerment, of "You Can be Anything", is always accompanied by Barbie's impossibly skinny body and an emphasis on beauty. The fantasies that girls play out with the Barbie doll always reside inside the mold of Barbie's body (Toffoletti 74). Young girls' imaginations are limited because the Barbie doll only provides them with a very narrow idea of what women's bodies look like. Barbie reflects the belief that "the mind, heart and soul of a woman are subordinate to the body - personalities don't count - thinness is everything" (Wanless 126). Thus, even though

Barbie provides a wealth of opportunities for girls to act out their dreams and fantasies, these are always confined to a world where thinness and appearance are dominant aspects.

Now that Barbie's world has been expanded to include curvy, petite and tall dolls, next to several different ethnicities, the Barbie doll represents a broader image of what women look like and more girls will be able to identify with her. The 2016 "Fashionistas" line is therefore a lot more inclusive than the original 1959 Barbie doll, representing a multicultural world of women with different body shapes. However, as we have previously discussed, the curvy Barbie is not really a good representation of curvy women in real life. Therefore, even though Barbie's world has become more diverse, many women are still not represented in the doll. In Barbie's world, curvy is translated into a body that is still quite thin and unrealistic.

Next to the fact that her body is still quite unrealistic and her personality has remained malleable, we do not see a big change in the importance of beauty and appearance between 1959 and 2016 either. Clothing continues to play a pivotal role in Barbie's world. As we saw in Chapter 2, many of the 2016 dolls are named after clothing items they are wearing, which are mostly skirts, dresses and high heels, and many of the names also represent "girly" things. For the 1959 doll, the clothing sets were available separately. The original Barbie doll only came with a black and white bathing suit, but buying clothing sets was very much encouraged in the commercial and the booklet that was included in the packaging. Both dolls are made up, although the make up for the 1959 doll is heavier and much more visible. In 1959 as well as in 2016, the doll also reminds us of a mannequin or model: the fact that she could only stand straight with the help of a stand in 1959 and the pose with one hand on the hip in 2016 contribute to that.

Even though the 2016 line is much more diverse, the different dolls all have an immaculate appearance, just like they had in 1959. The difference is that in 2016, the definition of beauty that Barbie represents is broader than in 1959. When she was introduced, the beauty ideal she reflected was one of youthful, thin, white, middleclass femininity. In 2016, this beauty ideal remains largely unchallenged, except for the "white" part: "beautiful" in Barbie's world now also entails different ethnicities and bodies. Still, the doll continues to reflect an ultra-feminine appearance: even when she is playing sports or working as a police officer, she is made up and wears high heels and glittery dresses. On top of that, Barbie never gets old and has remained wrinkle-free for over five decades. In 1959 as well as 2016, Barbie continues to set very high beauty standards for young girls, namely that to look beautiful is to stay young, skinny and perfectly dressed.

However, when we compare the commercials of 1959 and 2016 there is definitely a big difference in how beauty and appearance are used in marketing Barbie. In the 1959 commercial, the emphasis lay on how beautiful Barbie is and how girls want to look like her. In the 2016 commercial, this emphasis on beauty is absent. Instead of talking about how good Barbie looks, the focus now lies on how girls can recognize their friends and family in the new dolls. Mattel clearly wants to send the message that the new dolls look just like the people around us, which is a big change from the way Barbie was marketed in the 1959 commercial. The 2016 commercial thus sends a more positive and empowering message to young girls than the 1959 one did.

Turning to Barbie's image as an independent woman, we do not see very big changes when we compare the 1959 to the 2016 doll. However, in the years in between 1959 and 2016 there have been some interesting changes in this image that are worth mentioning. In 1959, Barbie was introduced to the world as an independent woman with a career of her own. In the following years, Barbie had numerous jobs. In the 1960s she mainly had more feminine jobs like a model or nurse, but starting from the 1970s she gradually took on jobs that were viewed as masculine, such as astronaut or CEO. In the 1990s a President Barbie was even introduced-dressed entirely in pink, which exemplifies the way in which these Barbie dolls are marketed. The empowering message that these career Barbie dolls represent are often overshadowed by the stereotypical girly appearance they have. The fact that Barbie took on more (male) jobs as the years progressed nonetheless shows that Barbie's professional life saw an upward trend. However, if we look at Barbie's relationship with Ken, we see that there have been some fluctuations in how the couple has represented gender roles. Barbie's boyfriend Ken started playing a bigger role in the mid-1960s and the couple clearly represented stereotypical gender roles during that time. In commercials from that time, Barbie was often placed in a subordinate (labor) position in relation to Ken, for example when Ken was shown as a captain and Barbie as a stewardess, or Ken as a doctor and Barbie as a nurse (Pearson and Mullins 240). When Barbie took on more jobs in the 1970s, Ken's importance also started to wane.

Now, in 2016, we see that Barbie has held on to her independence. Just like her counterpart in 1959, Barbie lacks the responsibilities of a housewife or mother: in fact her life largely evolves around leisure activities. Ken also plays a much smaller role than he did in the mid-1960s. There are three new Ken dolls featured on the back of the 2016 box, but nowhere do we see Ken and Barbie marketed together. In fact, very little attention is given to the new Ken dolls at all. Since Ken was never as popular as Barbie, Mattel's executives might have made the choice to focus their marketing campaign on Barbie and give little attention to Ken.

Either way, the image of the couple “Barbie and Ken” seems to have been completely done away with in the 2016 line. Instead of them existing as partners on an equal level, we get the feeling that Ken only serves as an accessory for Barbie (Helen S. Schwartz 44). In 1959, Ken was completely absent (since he was not introduced up until 1961), so the original doll may even be the most independent that Barbie ever was. Either way, both the 1959 and 2016 doll remain unmarried and seem to do fine without a man by their side.

Consumerism and materialism have continuously played an important role in Barbie’s world, in 1959 as well as 2016. Barbie invites young girls and their parents to keep buying: there are always more clothes, a new car, or a bigger house for the doll. In Chapter 1, we saw that there were twenty-two outfits that could be bought separately from the doll, encouraging Barbie owners to keep buying. Over the years, Barbie has acquired an impressive amount of material possessions: she has had no fewer than nineteen houses, she has driven a red Ferrari, a Classy Corvette, a white Porsche, a pink Mustang and a red Jaguar and she has been the proud owner of thirteen horses, three cats, five dogs, a tropical bird, a zebra and a giraffe (Rogers 64). In the 2016 curvy Barbie, this excessive consumerism is less evident than in the 1959 doll, because there are no separate clothing sets for the new dolls. However, the fact that there are so many new dolls who all look completely different can also induce Barbie owners to buy several dolls from the line: on the back of the package they are actually encouraged to do so, as it says “Collect all the Barbie Fashionistas dolls!” Of course, it is quite logical that a company like Mattel wants you to buy a lot of their products, but the fact that Barbie herself is also a conspicuous consumer reinforces the importance of consumerism and materialism in Barbie’s world.

Barbie’s image as a consumerist and materialist is evident in many ways. She seems to be extremely affluent and even though we know she has had many careers, we never actually see her work. Her world consists largely of leisure time, parties, shopping and hanging out with friends. Barbie’s world is, above all, a materialist world: she is the ultimate consumer (Rogers 61). In the upcoming suburban culture in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, women and mothers were seen as an increasingly important group of consumers, but men and fathers were usually the ones providing the money for the shopping. For girls in the 1960s, the fact that Barbie seemed to provide for all her shopping sprees herself was a very progressive element: she did not need a man to support her financially. In the 2016 Barbie doll we also see this consumerist culture, for example in the name of the new line: “Fashionistas” gives us the impression that Barbie is still a frequent shopper. On the one hand, the fact that Barbie is able to provide for herself, without the help of a man, sends an empowering message. On the other

hand, the emphasis on (extreme) consuming can also have more detrimental effects. Her excessive consumerism paired with the fact that Barbie seems to be very happy -she always has a smile on her face and nearly all of her commercials carry a positive vibe with them- sends the message to young girls that buying a lot of things will make you happy, just like Barbie.

Finally, I want to shed some light on how the 1959 and 2016 Barbie doll compare when it comes to multiculturalism. For the 1959 doll, the answer is short and easy: there was no multiculturalism in Barbie's world whatsoever. Barbie was white in 1959, and it was not until 1968 that the first African-American Barbie was introduced. However, the only thing that separated this 1968 doll from the original white one was her skin color; she lacked any other features that made her African-American. Even the 1991 African-American "Shani" doll differed very little from white Barbie as we have seen in the beginning of this chapter. The 1959 Barbie doll was white, affluent and middle-class, and left out all other races, classes and ethnicities. In 2016, Barbie's world is much more diverse and the 2016 line includes several different skin tones and facial features that give the dolls distinctive looks. This is the area where the Barbie doll has made the biggest progress over the years. It is interesting to see that the critiques on Barbie's body were not incorporated into the doll up until now, but the critiques on her lack of different ethnicities were already incorporated quite early, starting from 1968 and continuing throughout the years (even though most of the changes only included a dye job). The fact that Mattel waited so long to go further than a simple dye-job probably has to do with financial and logistical reasons, since it is a lot more expensive for Mattel to produce different body types that come with different sizes of clothing than to dye a doll black or brown.

In summary, we have seen that many aspects of the Barbie doll have remained virtually the same, even though the 1959 and 2016 dolls were launched in very different times. Although her body is curvier now, it is still very far from what curvy women in real life look like. Barbie's personal identity continues to be malleable, creating many opportunities for girls to act out different scenarios with the doll, but these scenarios always remain captive inside Barbie's thin body. Both in 1959 and in 2016, beauty and appearance play a large role. Over the years, Barbie's appearance has always remained immaculate. However, the 2016 commercial focuses much less on beauty in comparison to the 1959 one: the message brought forward in the 2016 commercial is that the new dolls look just like the people around us, whereas in the 1959 commercial the focus lay on how beautiful the Barbie doll looked. The empowering image of Barbie as an independent woman is evident in 1959 and in 2016, but it

remains a problematic image because it is often overshadowed by the shallow focus on women's looks that the doll reflects. The Barbie doll continues to reflect consumerist and materialist values through marketing efforts and through the doll, since Barbie herself is also a frequent shopper. One aspect that has gone through a large change is the notion of multiculturalism. The Barbie doll has really made some progress here since 1959: from the total absence of other races and ethnicities to the 2016 line that includes many different features representing ethnical diversity.

The change in Barbie's body is one that many have been waiting a long time for. Now that Barbie finally comes in different body sizes, it is seen as the most radical change in her history. However, if we take a closer look at Barbie's history and put the curvy Barbie in perspective, we see that the change is not really radical. Especially when we keep in mind that her thinness has been under heavy criticism for decades, we notice that the new change in her body has taken a very long time. More importantly, Mattel could have gone much further by creating a Barbie doll that really represents curvy women. Instead, the term curvy is now used to describe a Barbie doll that is still very thin.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have sought to define the differences and similarities in the values and stereotypes reflected by the 1959 Barbie and the 2016 Barbie. My research question was:

What cultural values and stereotypes are reflected in the 1959 original Barbie doll and in the 2016 curvy Barbie doll and what do the differences and similarities in these values and stereotypes tell us about the way representations of women by Barbie dolls have changed?

In order to answer my research question, I examined the 1959 and 2016 Barbie doll and packaging together with one commercial from both time periods, paying special attention to notions of femininity, gender roles, appearance and body proportions.

In chapter 1, I analyzed the 1959 Barbie doll and packaging together with the first Barbie commercial from 1959. My hypothesis for the 1959 Barbie doll was that she communicates an image of women that focuses on domesticity, motherhood and beauty. This hypothesis was (partially) disproven: we saw in Chapter 1 that there was indeed a large focus on beauty, especially in the 1959 commercial, but the Barbie doll did not create an image of domesticity or motherhood. In fact, the 1959 Barbie doll can be seen as an empowering toy for women. The doll subverted the stereotype of women as housewives and mothers by representing an independent, unmarried and childless woman with a career of her own. After examining the 1959 Barbie doll and packaging we saw that she also reflected an occupation with fashion, beauty and thinness. We saw that the doll was surrounded by a narrative of beauty in the 1959 commercial and that the commercial invited girls to strive for the Barbie ideal, namely being thin and beautiful. Despite of this shallow focus on beauty and appearance that the 1959 doll reflects, Barbie was a revolutionary toy for her time and served as a liberator for many young girls and women.

In chapter 2, we looked at the 2016 curvy Barbie doll and packaging, complemented by an analysis of the 2016 “Evolution of Barbie” commercial. My hypothesis for the 2016 Barbie doll was that she reflects an image of empowerment, while at the same time appearance and beauty remain an important focus and that furthermore, if we look at the dolls more closely, they still present us with an unrealistic body and do not differ that much from the original doll. My hypothesis was proven right. First of all, we saw that the 2016

commercial creates an atmosphere of empowerment around the new dolls by sending the message that “girls can be anything”. Furthermore, the commercial focuses on the diversity of the 2016 “Fashionistas” line and emphasizes that the new dolls look just like people in the real world. Looking at the 2016 dolls and packaging, we saw that beauty and appearance is still an important aspect. The names of the dolls were linked to beauty, fashion and femininity. Furthermore, all of the dolls wear clothes that are considered feminine, namely skirts, dresses and high heels. Turning to the body of the 2016 curvy Barbie, we established that her curviness is mostly centered at her hip area and that the changes between the original and curvy body are indeed not that big at all. The 2016 “Fashionistas” line is the most inclusive so far because it consists of many different hairstyles, facial features and skin colors that help create distinct (ethnic) looks for the new Barbie dolls. The addition of three new body types also contributes to the line’s inclusiveness, but after examining the curvy Barbie we saw that her name is problematic. The label curvy misfits the 2016 curvy Barbie doll because she is still very thin and hardly differs from the original Barbie.

In chapter 3, the analyses of the 1959 and 2016 Barbie dolls were compared to examine the differences and similarities in the values and stereotypes reflected by the two dolls. My hypothesis was that the message Barbie sends has altered on at least one aspect, namely from motherhood and domesticity to a more empowering image of women: however, after nearly 60 years I expected that the Barbie doll still affirms other stereotypes, such as a focus on beauty and appearance and unrealistic body types. The first part of my hypothesis was disproven. As mentioned earlier, the 1959 Barbie doll subverted images of motherhood and domesticity, so there was no shift to a more empowering image from 1959 to 2016: instead, this image was already evident in 1959. We saw in Chapter 3 that Barbie remained an independent, childless woman in both 1959 and 2016. The second part of my hypothesis was proven right: in both time periods, beauty and appearance play a pivotal role, but in 2016 this beauty is more inclusive because it includes different body types and ethnicities.

Next to these values of independence and an emphasis on beauty and appearance (over personality), we also looked at consumerism (and/or materialism) and multiculturalism in Chapter 3. The importance of consumerism in Barbie’s world remains unchanged and both in 1959 and in 2016 the doll is not only an excessive consumer herself but also invites parents and their children to keep buying. Multiculturalism is the aspect that has seen the biggest change between 1959 and 2016. Whereas in 1959 the Barbie doll was available in white skin only, in 2016 there are many different skin colors as well as facial features that represent different ethnicities. Of course, we also compared the bodies of the 1959 and 2016 Barbie

dolls. We concluded that Mattel has created a curvy Barbie that actually still represents a thin beauty ideal, since the curvy doll does not differ much from the original Barbie.

In conclusion, the answer to my research question is that the 1959 doll reflects the value that beauty and appearance are the most important aspect of a woman's life and that beauty and thinness are things that girls should strive for, while at the same time reflecting the importance of independence in women's lives; the 2016 doll also emphasizes the importance of beauty and appearance, but multiculturalism and curviness now also belong to what is seen as beautiful in Barbie's world. These changes in values tell us that the Barbie doll is developing into a toy that is more inclusive, but as we have seen in the case of the curvy Barbie this development comes in very small, not radical, steps.

As one of the most widely discussed and criticized dolls in the world, the Barbie doll provides us with a myriad options for future research. In my research, I have only looked at the original 1959 Barbie and the 2016 curvy Barbie, but it would be interesting to examine other Barbie dolls that have been sold between 1959 and 2016 as well to look at the values and stereotypes reflected by those dolls and see what this can tell us about women's roles in popular culture and society at that time. I have left Ken out of my analysis for the largest part, but his position vis-à-vis Barbie over the years could also serve as an interesting research topic. Overall, there are plenty of aspects in Barbie's world open for examination and I believe the Barbie doll will continue to be a heated topic of debate for many more years.

Appendices

Appendix 1: 1959 TV commercial full text

Woman's voice: "Barbie, you're beautiful / You make me feel / My Barbie doll is really real / Barbie's small and so petite / Her clothes and figure look so neat / Her dancing often rings some bells / At parties she will cast a spell / Purses, hats and gloves galore / And all the gadgets gals adore"

Man's voice: "Barbie dressed for swimmin' fun is only three dollars / Her lovely fashions range from one to five dollars / Look for Barbie wherever dolls are sold"

Woman's voice: "Someday I'm gonna be exactly like you / Till then I know just what I'll do / Barbie, beautiful Barbie / I'll make believe that I am you"

Man's voice: "You can tell it's Mattel, it's swell"

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