

Winter 2016

# Barbie: The Real Enemy?

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## Repository Citation

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# Barbie: The Real Enemy?

By: Shelby Wolfinger

## Barbie: The Real Enemy?

### **Introduction**

Barbie has been the subject of many debates about body image dissatisfaction and the negative impacts this doll has on adolescent children; my thesis will expand upon this and explore the possibility that the Barbie Doll can create long lasting effects on women throughout their adulthood. This argument examines the scholarships which suggests that Barbie has negative effects on young children. I then conduct primary research in the form of detailed surveys with women aged twenty-one and over. Using this mixed methods approach, I determine whether or not the problems created by Barbie among young children will affect women in their teenaged years and into adulthood. I am specifically looking at cross-sections within the lives of various women to see the perception of body image. By obtaining and analyzing this data, I form the conclusion that body image and its connection to early childhood play and engagement with the Barbie Doll does not create a body dissatisfaction among adults.

### **A History of Barbie**

Inspired by her daughter, Ruth Handler created the Barbie doll to be used as a medium for children to imagine different careers and paths in life. Handler's daughter, Barbara, used to play with paper dolls. She would pretend that they were cheerleaders or college students or professionals in a variety of careers. Ruth believed that this was an important part in a child's early development so she decided to create the Barbie Doll. On March 9, 1959 Ruth introduced the Barbie Doll during the annual New York Toy Fair. The Barbie Doll was unlike any other toy at the time, and many people were skeptical about it. While there were other toddler and baby dolls on the market, Barbie was the first older doll and she had a very feminine figure which

made her stand out. The baby dolls that were currently on the market were also becoming less popular and made this venture a risk that people did not believe in.

While the Barbie Doll is currently receiving a lot of criticism for her unrealistic proportions and the negative effects that she has on young children, the original concept for the doll could not have been further from this fact. Handler had a specific way of looking at the Barbie dolls. She was quoted as saying, “My whole philosophy of Barbie was that through the doll, the little girl could be anything she wanted to be.” Handler wanted to inspire women to explore different career paths. Handler went on to say, “Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices.” The Barbie Doll was created to inspire children to follow their dreams no matter what they wanted or where they came from. It was meant to empower women (The Barbie Story).

### The Problem

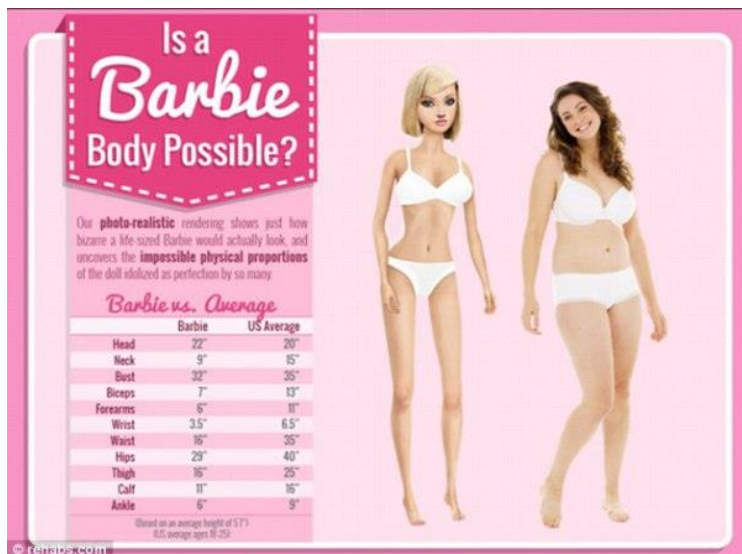


Figure 1: This picture shows the representation of a real life Barbie in comparison to the size of the average woman. It shows measurement comparisons as well as the images.

### The Thin Ideal

Many people have opinions on how Barbie looks. Some people admire her figure while others claim she is too thin and is giving children an unrealistic idea of body image. While her figure may be admirable to some, it is also true that her body proportions are extremely

unrealistic. Figure 1 shows a real-life version of Barbie with her real life proportions.

To see how unproportioned Barbie is, we look at Barbie's proportions from a statistical point of view. The average woman has a bust of 34 to 35 inches while Barbie would have a 32 inch bust, with an astounding 16 inch waist – half the size of the average women. Barbie's head is 22 inches in circumference which is average size. However, her neck is about half a foot narrower than the average women's neck, and Barbie's neck is twice as long. According to Infographic, Barbie was so unproportioned that she would not have been able to lift her head. Barbie's feet are a girl's size three. Because of these proportions, it is extremely unlikely that Barbie would have been able to walk at all ("A New study Reveals . . .").

If the makers of Barbie were going for a representation of someone who didn't eat, it would make sense that the design of the Barbie, void of an intestinal tract, would make it impossible for her to digest food. In fact, the odds of Barbie's manufacturers thinking through this logic, is not too far off. Rehabs.com describes a 1960's "Slumber Party Barbie" that included a weight scale and "How to Lose Weight" book, with the doll ("A New Study Reveals . . .").

These unrealistic body proportions can effect young women in a number of ways. It is giving children a role model to look to and this idolization of Barbie's figure is creating a negative body image perception. Women who want to look like Barbie are constantly struggling to obtain an unobtainable body image. One effect might be disordered eating among younger women.

### Pro Ana

Pro Ana is becoming more relevant to today's teenage generations. Pro Ana includes websites dedicated to the anorexic causes. They teach girls how to start and maintain an anorexic lifestyle. They are composed of tips and tricks; sometimes accompanied by a blogger who posts her anorexic tails. While not every Pro Ana website mentions the Barbie Doll, there are many who do mention or idolize Barbie's plastic figure.

There are two main blogs that have taken the name of Barbie. The first is Princess Barbie. She writes to her fans and followers, "Part of being, Princess Barbie is to undertake the plastic skinny Barbie look, so how to get thin?" The next blogger is Pro Ana Barbie's, a 5'5" female who weighs 145 pounds and wishes to lose another 23. While both of these blogs have stopped posting, many people still blame Barbie for this epidemic. Some posts will look like the following:

Hello my princesses this is a blog dedicated to ana [anorexia], here we will build all future princesses, all who are on the path to perfection, I want to clarify that here we are not to convince anyone to join this lifestyle simply show the beautiful side of it. Here publishes tips, diets, tips, and things that motivate us to move forward in this struggle for perfection. I am also on the way to it and I would like to have your support as you have mine. I leave you my email so add me if you like and can find in my books a mate and not even a good friend (Princess Barbie).

Many people blame Barbie for this Pro Ana movement. It can be seen that Barbie can influence certain people when it comes to their bodies. She also seems to be an idol to some of the Pro Ana members. While Barbie has not been directly tied into the Pro Ana activists, one enraged mother expressed concern in 2007 about a new line of Barbie dolls. Figure 2 shows the dolls in question. The mother states that these are Pro Ana dolls. She declares that this line



Figure 2: These are a line of Barbie dolls based on Cheerleaders. Some people consider them to look and be anorexic.

of dolls were made to directly influence young children to consider anorexia as an alternative to dieting and exercising. The dolls obviously have extremely thin proportions compared to other dolls on the market (Sioux).

My thesis is exploring the possibility that Barbie can cause long term effects on women. If this is true, then there is a possibility that Barbie is a factor in the Pro Ana Movement. Also, if the makers of Barbie are advertising for Pro Ana and people start to see that, it may cause an increased body dissatisfaction within women.

### Negative Effects on Young Children

Many people blame the Barbie doll for a variety of negative effects on children. These effects range from eating disorders to overall body esteem dissatisfaction. People believe that Barbie is the root cause for the effects based on the size of her body. Barbie displays extremely unrealistic body proportions. These proportions are believe to inspire young children to idolize her body shape and aspire to become thinner.

The basis of my hypothesis revolves around the fact that there are negative effects resulting from early childhood play with Barbie dolls. There are many studies that analyze the effects of Barbie on young children, however, I look at three of the more well-known studies. These studies will look at body satisfaction, body esteem, and even food intake levels based on people's play with Barbie as children. With these studies, I will provide adequate proof that Barbie can cause negative effects in young children.

#### *Study 1:*

In 2006, a study titled "Does Barbie Make Girls Want to Be Thin? The Effect of Experimental Exposure to Images of Dolls on the Body Image of 5- to 8-Year-Old Girls" was conducted by Helga Dittmar (University of Sussex), Suzanne Ive (University of Sussex), and Emma Halliwell (University of the West of England). This study was conducted among 162 girls

aged from five to eight years old. There were three groups of children made from these girls - a Barbie group, an Emme group, and a neutral (control) group.

The study created picture books using images that went along with a story that would be read aloud. The pictures in these books differed depending on the group the girls were in. For example, the Barbie group featured pictures of Barbie and her friends while the Emme group featured pictures of Emme, who is proportioned to have a more normal body type rather than the thin body type that Barbie has. After the story was read and the images were observed, the girls' body images were assessed. They did this by asking the girls to pick out a doll that represented their current body image, their desired body image, and their desired body image as an adult.

The study's first major result was that girls who saw the Barbie Doll images had an increased body dissatisfaction compared to the girls who saw other images. The next major result was that girls who were exposed to images of Emme had the same body dissatisfaction as the girls in the neutral group. However, it seems that the effects are dependent on the age of the girls. The older girls, aged seven and a half to eight and a half, saw less of a detrimental impact.

### *Study 2*

Another study titled "Early Adolescents' Experiences with, and view of, Barbie" by Tara L. Kuther and Erin McDonald looked not only at how Barbie affected children but how the children viewed the Barbie doll including playing habits. This study was broken down into two individual studies. The first study had focus groups of twenty 6<sup>th</sup>-grade girls to see if they have any ambiguous feelings toward Barbie or a feminine sexualized body image created by the doll.



The second study was essay based. They collected essays from fifty boys and girls in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade. This was to see their experiences about the Barbie doll.

In the first study, there were two 10-week support groups created. Each group met once a week during lunch to discuss issues that were important to the children, and to promote a healthy and positive outlook on themselves. During these meetings, the children were encouraged to talk about their experiences with Barbie and other toys. Barbie dolls were also provided to the students during the meetings so that they could show how they played with the dolls.

According to the results, all of the girls reported that they owned at least two Barbie dolls, however, many of the girls reported owning many more than that. One girl admitted to owning over fifty Barbie dolls. While the girls stated that they no longer play with their Barbie dolls, a large number of the girls were excited and enthused when the group facilitator produced Barbie dolls for the children to use. The girls stated that while they do not currently play with the Barbie dolls, they still like to dress up the doll and enjoy styling her hair.

When analyzing the girls playing habits, there seemed to be only three groups – those who used imaginative play, those who used torture play, and those who used anger play. Imaginative play includes playing make-believe with the Barbie dolls. One girl was quoted as saying, “One day we had a wedding for Barbie and Ken. So I went and got all the [stuffed] animals from my room as an audience”. All of the girls reported this kind of play. Another kind of play was torture. This included any form of play that damaged the doll such as painting her, cutting off her head, or removing body parts. Most of this play was reported to have occurred during older years of Barbie play. Another fact in torture play was that it was

often initiated by a boy or in the presence of a boy. Most of the girls viewed torture play as something that was comedic.

I stripped them and threw them in the snow. When it became spring and they all thawed, I picked them up and my brother and my sister and I, because they didn't like Barbie either, took my mom's [chicken] bones scissors she used to cut bones and so we cut them in half (Kuther & McDonald 2004).

When asked about torture play, many of the girls stated that this kind of behavior only occurred with the Barbie doll. The girls came to the conclusion that they only tortured the Barbie dolls because Barbie is the only doll that looks perfect.

The last type of play was anger play. This kind of play involved using the dolls as a way to release emotions. It seems that most of the anger play revolved around the girls pretending the doll was someone who angered them. The girls would hurt the dolls in order to get revenge on the people who angered them. They would feel better about themselves and they would not harm anyone else.

The last part of this study was seeing how the girls viewed Barbie. Some of the girls thought that they should make a fat Barbie or one that is not too skinny – because it is offensive to fat people. However the over view of Barbie was that she was “perfect”. She is the ideal body image and physically beautiful.

The next part within this two part study was conducted as a two question survey. This study was conducted with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls. They were asked to write about their experiences with the Barbie doll. This included how they played with the doll. They were also asked to write their thoughts about the Barbie doll. The results were separated into two sections depending on the child's sex.

Similarly to the first part of this study, the girls stated that they spent a considerable amount of time with the Barbie dolls during their childhood. Many of them reported imaginative play with the Barbie dolls. This included a long list of scenarios including dances, shows, and other events. The study showed that there was a variety of results about the doll. There were many reports of aggressive or torturous play with the dolls as well, but this was less common.

Many of the boys denied having any experiences playing with Barbie dolls, however, throughout their responses, they indicated several times that they did indeed have experiences with these dolls. Of all the boys, very few of them confessed to imaginative play with the Barbie dolls, and they were usually doing so as a request by a female sibling or while playing in an aggressive manner toward the doll.

When I was younger I would take my sister's Barbie and make up different ways she got hurt. Sometimes I would take balls and throw them at her, pretending it was a meteor shower. I would also make her get hit by her Barbie convertible (Kuther & McDonald 2004).

While this is aggressive play, it is different from torture play because they are using aspects of the imaginative play. They are creating different storylines for the dolls that just happen to mostly include Barbie being injured in different ways. That being said, torture play was common with the boys.

I have had many experiences with Barbie as I have a six-year-old sister I have done experiments with Barbie. Can she fly out of a second story window? Is her hair flammable? And at Boy Scout camp every scout brought a Barbie, and we had a Barbie torture session. My job was to fuse Barbie and Ken together. We also burned her at the stake, upside down. I would attach the explosives to Barbie and watch what effects more explosives would do. I also launched them into the air and shot it with a slingshot (Kuther & McDonald 2004).

The next question on the surveys looked at the children's view of Barbie. The results concluded that many of the children, both boys and girls, had their self-esteem impacted by Barbie. One boy talked about how the Barbie was pretty and lovable and could do many different professions. He said that even though she was anorexic, the doll gave girls the chance to use Barbie as a tool in imagining things. He expressed that it gave them the opportunity to be anything that they wanted. This was interesting to me, because this was the original goal of Barbie. The creator wanted this doll to be used to inspire young girls to reach for their dreams and to aspire to be what they wanted. Some of the girls shared the opinion of this boy, and they saw the doll as a positive role model.

Most of the children however, saw the Barbie doll as a bad role model for children. The boys talked about how Barbie creates an unrealistic body image, and that she would only inspire children to lose weight instead of thinking about the important things in life. One girl even talked about how Barbie creates a false stereotype for people. She talked about Barbie's body being impossible for girls to obtain. She even states, "There wouldn't be enough room for organs and other necessary things."

I blame Barbie for the Britney Spears and Jennifer Lopez craze. I also blame Barbie for the craze in implants and liposuction to become good looking. I also think that Barbie has made a demand . . . for beauty salons and operations to become beautiful (Kuther & McDonald 2004).

The girls were more confused about the effects of Barbie. Many of the girls had fond memories of playing with the Barbie dolls as children, however, they also did not like the representation of Barbie's body. Barbie's perfection was one of her most hated designs.

### *Study 3*

A study titled “The Effects of Playing with Thin Dolls on Body Image and Food Intake in Young Girls” by Doeschka J. Anschutz and Rutger C. M. E. Engels looked at how playing with Barbie could possibly have an impact on how children consume food. For this study, girls were placed into three different groups. One group played with the Barbie doll, one group played with an average-sized doll, and the last group played with LEGOs (no doll). After ten minutes of exposure to the dolls, the children were brought into a taste test. Anschutz and Engels wanted to see if the girls displayed lower body esteem when introduced to the Barbie, to see how the girls saw their own body image, and to see how much food consumption took place after playing with the dolls.



Figure 3: From Left to Right: Emme, Tyler, Barbie

Overall, 117 girls participated in this study. All of them were between first and fourth grade. There were three conditions in this experiment. The first condition was having girls play with the Barbie doll. The second condition was having the girls play with the Emme doll, displaying the average size of a woman. However, there is a problem with only comparing the Barbie doll with the Emme doll. Their body image is not the only difference between the dolls. The Barbie doll looks to be about half as tall as the Emme doll. To see if this could be a factor in how children are effected, Anschutz and Engels introduced the Tyler doll as the third condition. The Tyler doll has a similar body image as the Barbie doll, however, her height is more similar to the Emme doll. Figure 3 shows the

three dolls and their size differences. In order to see how the girls viewed the body image of each of these dolls, they were asked to choose a silhouette from a line of nine different silhouettes ranging from very thin to very large.

The study was conducted by taking each individual girl into a separate room. In the room, there was one of four toys – the Barbie doll, Tyler doll, Emme doll, or LEGOS. The girls were asked to dress the dolls for work and for a party. If they played with the LEGOS, they were asked to build a house. After ten minutes, the girls were asked to fill out a survey about their body esteem and their satisfaction with their own body image. After that, the girls were presented with three pre-portioned bowls of chocolate covered peanuts. Each bowl had a different color and the girls were given eight minutes alone with the bowls to taste them and decide which one was their favorite. After the eight minutes, the examiners gave the girls a questionnaire asking about their interests.

The results concluded that the children viewed both Barbie and Tyler as being significantly thinner and slimmer than Emme. Barbie and Tyler had very similar responses indicating that the height difference had little to do with the perception of the dolls. They also found that older girls had less body dissatisfaction than the younger girls. This goes along with Dittmar's study.

While there were discrepancies with body esteem, it seemed to have been related to the girls' BMI and not the dolls. It was found that girls with a higher BMI had lower body esteem. 48.7% of the girls aspired to have a thinner body size, and only 35.9% of the girls were satisfied with their bodies.

When it came to food intake levels, it was found that there was no correlation to BMI

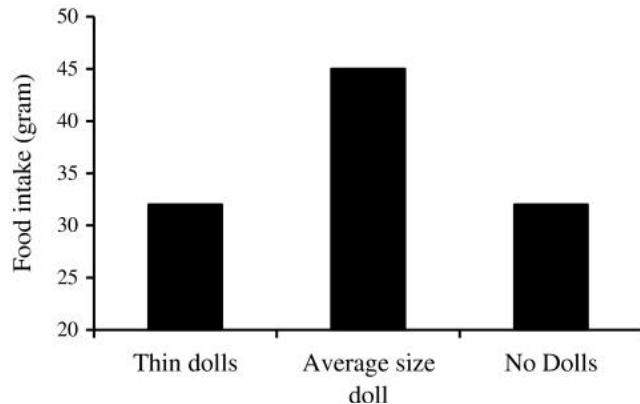


Figure 4: This graph shows the effects of dolls on the food intake of young girls (Anschutz & Engels 2010)

levels. This means that the effects on the food intake of the girls were based solely on the dolls they played with. Age also did not impact whether or not the girls consumed more food. Figure 4 shows the graph used to give the results for the food intake of the girls. It can be seen that the girls who played

with the average sized doll ate a considerably higher amount of food and those who played with Barbie or no doll ate much less.

These three studies are proof that Barbie has an effect on young children. These effects can be damaging to self-esteem and could possible translate into the decision the children make. Many people are appalled by the idolization of Barbie and her figure due to these facts. There are many people who have found ways to speak out against Barbie and the thin ideals that she stands for. A major form of expression for these people is seen within photography.

### Barbie Photography

There is a photography teacher by the name of Mary Dorsey Wanless who decided to write about the influences of the Barbie Doll. She talks about how she grew up in the “Barbie Age”, being only ten years old when the Barbie Doll was first released in 1959. She describes how Barbie had an all important figure, and that it was the ideal body image. She felt defeated thinking, “How can I ever compete with Barbie’s bodily perfection?” (Wanless 125).

Wanless uses her photography to deal with the “inappropriate values of the Barbie phenomena” (Wanless 126). Her photos express the theme of accepting your imperfections in order to become real. She blames eating disorders and plastic surgery on people’s attempt to gain access to the perfect body, which Barbie represents, and she claims that the glorification of a thin ideal is to blame for the causes of eating disorders. Wanless states that this glorified thin ideal stems from the Barbie Doll as the root cause of eating disorders and plastic surgery.

These photographs are my attempt to deal with the inappropriate values of the Barbie phenomena: that the mind, heart and soul of a woman are subordinate to the body; that bodies need no heads; that heads are interchangeable; that personalities do not count; that thinness is everything. These are the ghostly body images that haunt my mind and that undermine self-esteem. I have painted out the faces of my dolls to highlight how individuality becomes erased and to deny viewers any sense of access to their souls. The one doll with eyes that I have used has no feet, which is my way of pointing out that only by accepting imperfections can one become real (Wanless 126).

Figure 5 shows an example of Mary Wanless’ photographs. The scene displays the headless corpses of Barbie dolls facing away from the camera. This is a representation of



Figure 5: This is one of Wanless's photographs inspired by the unrealistic values of the Barbie doll.

Wanless’ belief in Barbie’s inappropriate values. She uses this to show how Barbie incorporates “thinspiration” and eliminates the need for individual personalities.

My study will explore these concepts through surveys of women ages



twenty-one and older. I hope to analyze this thin ideal that Barbie produces and the effects it has on women as they become adults. I will use my study to see if these inappropriate ideals truly exist and whether or not they have a severely negative impact on women.

Another photographer who used the Barbie dolls as an inspiration was Tilomas Forsythe. This specific photographer tends to focus his themes on social and political issues. He produced a series of seventy-eight photographs titled "Food Chain Barbie". Within these photographs, he would use one or more nude Barbie dolls and arrange them with different vintage kitchen appliances. The naked Barbie dolls were usually displayed as the food in the photographs. This was his attempt at criticizing the beauty standards and societal acceptance of women as objects - that women need to look and act a certain way.

Mattel was extremely unhappy with the photographs Forsythe released. They sued Forsythe for copyright infringement and won their case. However, the decision was over-ruled



*Figure 6: This picture depicts one of Forsythe's photographs that was a part of his series "Food Chain Barbie"*

by the introduction of the "fair use" laws.

Because of this, Forsythe was able to publish his pictures of Barbie. Figure 6 displays one of the pictures in Forsythe's series. It depicts the Barbie doll in a sauté pan being cooked as stir fry.

### Mind of the adolescent

There are many things that affect children at a young age. Gender identity is a major player in how a child sees themselves. Gender identity is how a person perceives themselves – either masculine or feminine. This corresponds directly with the biological gender of a person.

Females tend to identify more with feminine culture while males are more identifiable with masculine concepts. These identities tend to stay fixed throughout a person's life. While there are differences with a person's identity, most genders share an equal amount of ideals. For example, 90% of Americans believe that both men and women are equally emotional when it comes to how they feel. However, women and men express their feelings differently (Benokraitis 158).

This difference in expression is due to gender roles. Gender roles are behaviors or characteristics that are socially acceptable and expected from a specific gender. While it is becoming more common in today's society for people to pursue a job in a field that is based on their physical or mental abilities, the gender roles are still very present. Gender roles create a very severe gender stereotype. A gender stereotype is the expectation people have when they see someone of a specific sex.

A good example of a gender stereotype is that men should not be stay at home dads. Many people find that women should be the parent who stays at home to watch the children and maintain the house. This is a gender stereotype because people view the stay-at-home parent as a feminine job, therefore, a woman should complete the task. The men are stereotypically put in the role of the breadwinner – the person who makes the money. This is a gender stereotype because people view men as having to work instead of the women.

During an exam, a student wrote the following response to gender roles:

Some parents live their lives through their sons by forcing them to be in sports. I disagree with this but want my [9-year-old] to be "all boy." He's the worst player on the basketball team at school and wanted to take dance lessons, including ballet. I assured him that this was not going to happen. I'm going to enroll him in soccer and see if he does better (Benokraitis 159).

This passage is also an example of a gender stereotype. In this case, it is stereotyping the activities a male child and female child should partake in. Boys are seen as having to play masculine sports such as basketball or soccer while girls are seen as having to learn dance. “Thus, our social roles are gendered in that males and females are often treated differently because of their sex” (Benokraitis 159).

All of this gender identity, stereotypes and roles leads to sexual scripts. Sexual scripts are the norms that people find socially acceptable when it comes to sexual activity and finding “eligible sexual partners” (Benokraitis 165). These socially acceptable sexual scripts are reaching younger audiences, girls aged seven and eight. These scripts are reinforcing the ideals that women should be valued on their beauty instead of their brains or personality. An example of this is padded bras. In retailers such as Abercrombie & Fitch and Amazon, there are padded bras being sold to seven and eight year olds.

These fashion trends along with the hypersexualization of girls in the media is enforcing thin ideals. The people benefiting from this are the marketers who have convinced these young girls that being beautiful requires the proper look – the right hairstyle, clothes, and makeup. Galia Slayen took a unique concept during National Eating Disorder Awareness Week (NEDAW) at her high school. She built a life sized Barbie doll, using the doll’s measurements as if she was a real person. Figure 7 shows a picture of the doll in comparison to Slayen.

Once a year, at the end of February, Barbie comes out of the closet to meet my friends, strangers, and those apathetic onlookers. During NEDAW, she reminds people that eating disorders and body image issues are serious and prevalent. Holding an awareness week in high school or college is just one way to get students to discuss these important issues. However, constant discussion and education is key to dealing with and overcoming eating disorders (Slayen 2011).



Figure 7: This is Galia Slayen with her life-sized Barbie recreation

Children learn from a young age the socially acceptable roles that they must fulfill.

Industries are marketing to younger generations, instilling thin ideals into them.

Girls are born biologically striving to be an acceptable form of beauty. Dolls like Barbie are enforcing bad concepts in young girls by portraying an unattainable standard of beauty. From a young age, girls are very impressionable. They cling to what people consider acceptable.

Parents are forcing their children

into stereotypical gender roles, and the marketing industries are playing on those stereotypes to make money. This is installing a preconceived idea of beauty. Girls are brought up into thinking that thin women with big breasts are what men look for. Therefore, biologically, that is what they strive to be. By giving them a role model such as Barbie, it is only putting an image to the socially acceptable standards.

There are many different experiences that cause girls to relinquish their true selves. In early adolescence girls learn how important appearance is in defining social acceptability. Attractiveness is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for girls' success. This is an old, old problem. Helen of Troy didn't launch a thousand ships because she was a hard worker. Juliet wasn't loved for her math ability. - Mary Pipher

## The Body Image Surveys

### My Hypothesis

While the study of Barbie's effects on young children proved that Barbie did not affect the older children as much as the younger children, it also proved that Barbie does have a serious impact on young children and how they see their bodies. Because of this fact, I explore the possibility that the Barbie Doll can have a long term effect on women. I hypothesize that Barbie will have a long term negative effect on women who played with the doll while growing up. These effects include body dissatisfaction and unhealthy dieting. It seems that women believe that the Barbie Doll has caused many negative effects in women as they grow up, and I explore this possibility. Figure 8 represents a timeline of the effects I hypothesize Barbie will have on women.

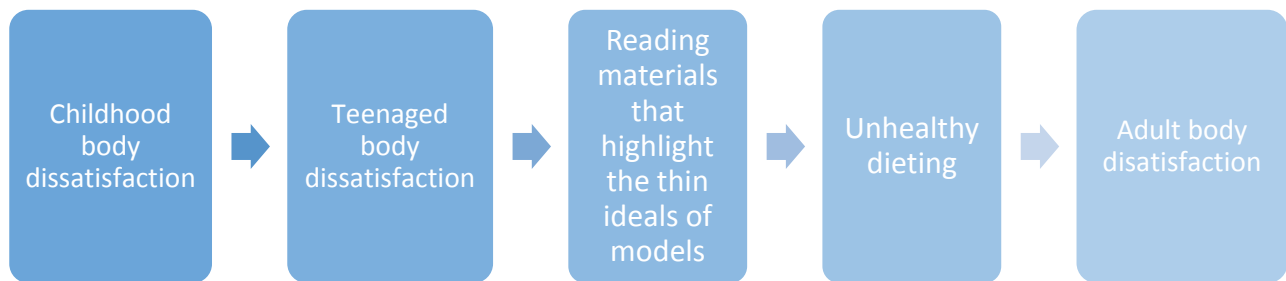


Figure 8: This is a timeline of the effects of the Barbie doll as hypothesized in this thesis.

### The Survey

My body image survey analyzes the effects of Barbie's unrealistic body image over the duration of various women's life. The unrealistic body image refers to Barbie's extremely disproportioned body. This body image is not humanly possible to obtain, and I see if this unrealistic body image can create a negative body image ideal as women become adults. This would mean that women aspire to have a "Barbie body".

My body image study is the result of surveys conducted with women aged twenty-one and over. This survey was created in order to establish the relationship between Barbie and

perceived body image in adult women. There are seventeen questions in total that are designed to give a basic outline of the cross-sections in the lives of the various women being surveyed. This base line shows the overall perceived body image of women during these cross-sections which are the child, teenage, and adult years. It also asks other questions to see if there might be any other reason for the results. For example, I included a question on whether or not a tragic event could be the cause.

The first few questions of the survey are designed to see if the women played with a Barbie Doll as a child and what other toys they were interested in. The survey also asks what the women's favorite toys were. This allows me to establish how often a woman played with Barbie and how much she actually cared for the doll. This will help to see if the effects of the doll differ depending on how much the doll was actually played with.

Next, the survey asks how they viewed their bodies as a child. This allows me to understand whether or not Barbie truly had an effect on how they saw their bodies. While there is indications that Barbie creates dissatisfaction of body image among young children, it is important to analyze the role Barbie plays on each individual women. This will allow me to better analyze the information given within the surveys.

The survey then looks at the person's teenage years. It first establishes whether or not the women became interested in books or magazines. The transition, as hypothesized, from Barbie into a person's teenage years is that they will become interested in magazines that have an emphasis on fashion and feature petite models. This is because of Barbie's thin ideals. It engrains a glorified version of what a woman should look like. This might translate into a specific magazine that features thin models or popular artists and actors.

The women are then asked about their dream jobs as teenagers and what activities they enjoyed the most. This is to see if activities can sway a person's perception of themselves. For example, an athletic person who enjoys playing sports would most likely have a thinner appearance and it could possibly make them happier with their body image. On the other hand, if someone enjoys watching movies or TV, then it might be possible that they could have a "chubbier" appearance and it could persuade them into a dissatisfied body image.

The next question the survey asks is how they viewed their body image as a teenager. The progression that I hypothesized would implicate that as the women grow older, they will have a heightened dissatisfaction of the bodies. To see if this is true, I need to understand how they feel about their teenage body. This allows me to see the progression of their body image.

The next question asks about traumatic events that happened in the women's life. I did not leave any specific details related to defining a traumatic event. I believe that each person has a different way of looking at traumatic events, and this open format allows for the women to freely express what they believe is a traumatic event to them. This is to help gauge whether or not a traumatic event could be behind any effect that would be seen as caused by the Barbie Doll. It is likely that a terrible event could alter the mind of a woman and change her view point about her body, in either a negative or positive way. If there is a variance in the data it will be helpful in seeing if this could be a cause.

The women are then asked about their occupation and current dream job. Having a job that makes a person unhappy can cause a person to be unhappy with themselves. I use these questions to see whether or not the women are content with their jobs.

From there, the survey asks about how people perceive their current body image. This is important for the same reasons as asking about their teenage body. It will show whether or not they are still dissatisfied with their bodies. If they are not dissatisfied then Barbie most likely does not have a long term effect, however, if they do show an increased dissatisfaction, then the hypothesis would be proven correct.

To end the survey, people are asked whether or not they have ever dieted and if it was done in a healthy or unhealthy fashion. This is to see if the Barbie Doll can contribute to any bad dieting or disordered eating. As hypothesized, my thesis will explore the possibility that Barbie has an effect on the dieting habits of children as they grow into adulthood.

These surveys were conducted in an open ended format. The survey is as followed:

This survey is to be used in a thesis paper to see if playing with specific toys can effect a person over the duration of their life. These surveys will be kept anonymous so please do not give your name. Please fill out all questions in a detailed manor. Thank you very much for your time.

1. How old are you?
2. What toys did you play with as a child?
3. What was your favorite toy?
4. Did you play with Barbie dolls or other body image sensitive toys as a child?
5. How did you view your body image as a young child?
6. Did you like to read books or magazines as a teenager?
7. If yes, what books or magazines did you prefer to read? What content was within the reading material?
8. What job did you want when you grew up? Why?
9. How did you view your body image as a teenager?



10. What types of activities did you enjoy while growing up?
11. Did any traumatic events happen in your life?
12. What is your current occupation?
13. What is your dream job?
14. How do you currently view your body image?
15. Have you ever tried dieting?
16. If yes, did you do so in a healthy or unhealthy way? Please Explain.
17. Is there any additional information that you feel is important?

### The Process

In order to receive a wide variety of surveys from different women, I distributed several surveys in different environments. Some were distributed among professional women in office positions while others were distributed among women in college. The surveys were conducted in three different states to receive a variety of responses. The first state was New Jersey where surveys were conducted among professional women working office jobs. The surveys were also conducted on college campuses in Rhode Island and Georgia.

For this survey, I considered an adult women to be of the age twenty-one or older. This age range includes many college students and I found that distributing surveys at college campuses assisted in giving a perspective from a younger generation. This was helpful in obtaining variety in the women I surveyed.

The surveys were supplied to people who were able to fill out the information and return them to me in a timely manner. With professional women and women on college campuses, I found that not many people were available for a face to face interview.

Anonymous surveys allowed more people to fill them out and gave some people the confidence to write about themselves.

In total, twenty-three women were able to fill out and return surveys to me. After receiving these surveys, I analyzed the information. I looked for common denominators between the Barbie Doll and the body image as perceived by the women. I also looked to see if there was any information within the surveys that could cause a variation in the results.

### The Results

This survey was used to analyze the relationship between the Barbie Doll and the perception of body image among adult women. The hypothesis was that women who play with Barbie Dolls will grow up with a thin ideal of body image and will be dissatisfied with their own bodies. I have broken the survey results into several sections. These sections included how often the women played with the Barbie Doll, how the women viewed their bodies as they grew up, traumatic events that occurred in their lives, dieting habits, and reading material as a teenager.

The first section I analyzed was whether or not the women played with Barbie and how important it was to them. First of all, four of the twenty-three women admitted to never having played with Barbie. Of the remaining nineteen women, six stated that some form of a Barbie product was their favorite toy. These toys ranged from different Barbie Dolls to Barbie houses. The other thirteen women played with Barbie but had other toys that they preferred to play with. Also, two of these women made it a point to say that even though they played with Barbie, it was not in the typical way. One woman explained that she enjoyed setting up the house for Barbie but was too bored afterward to play with the actual doll. The other

women explained that she would rather have played with a GI Joe doll because she thought that he was much cooler than Barbie.

From there, I placed each women into one of three categories – those who played with Barbie, those whose favorite toy was Barbie, and those who never played with Barbie. I did this so that I could compare the role Barbie played in how they perceived their bodies. This allowed me to compare the three categories and see the differences.

I then looked into how each category viewed their bodies as a child, teenager, and adult. I categorized each response into one of four categories – no opinion, negative, average, and positive. No opinion responses were the ones that stated that they did not really have an opinion or even thought about their bodies. Negative comments were the ones that stated comments such as “fat”, “heavy”, or “chubby”. Average comments were ones like “fine”, “okay”, or “average”. Positive comments were the ones that stated a love or acceptance of their bodies. Some of these comments were “love it” or “I am generally much more happy and confident”.

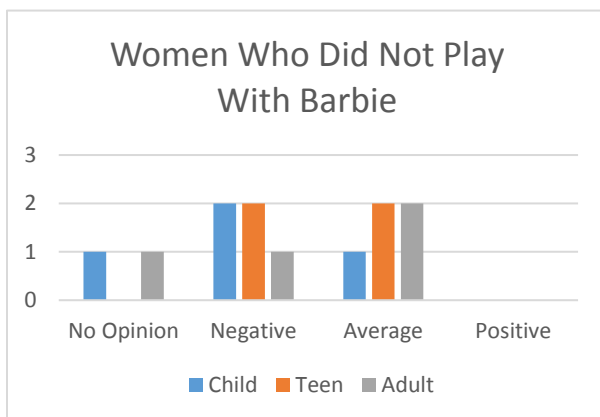


Figure 9: This graph shows how women who never played with Barbie see their bodies

I started by looking at the people who never played with Barbie. In reference to Figure 9, 50% of the women saw their childhood bodies in a negative way. 25% of the women saw themselves as average and the other 25% had no opinion about their bodies. In their teenaged years, there was a half and

half split between negative and average comments. As adults, 50% of women viewed their

bodies as average, 25% of the women felt negatively, and 25% of the women had no opinion. One person stated that due to her age, she no longer thinks of her body image as something important. As seen in Figure 9, never once did any of the women view their bodies in a positive way. I found this to be compelling because I hypothesized that women who played with Barbie would have body dissatisfaction, however, these women have never played with Barbie and they do not have a positive outlook of their body image.

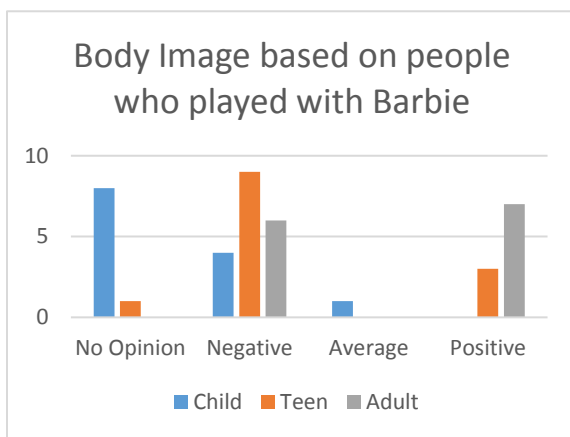


Figure 10: This graph shows how women who played with Barbie see their body

Next, I looked at the people who played with Barbie as children but did not recognize her as one of their favorite toys. Figure 10 shows the results of this section. As children, 61.5% of the women had no opinion on their body. 30.8% saw their body in a negative way, and 7.7% of the women saw their body as average. As these

women became teenagers, only one of them continued to have no opinion on how their body looked. Most of the women, 69.2%, had a negative view of their bodies. 23.1% now saw their bodies in a positive way. After becoming adults, the percentage of women who viewed their bodies in a negative way decreased to 46.2%. The percentage of women who viewed their bodies in a positive way increased to 53.8%. It seems that this category typically had no opinion of their bodies as children and started to see their bodies in a negative way as they entered their teenage years. As adults, their body satisfaction shifted towards viewing their bodies in a positive way.

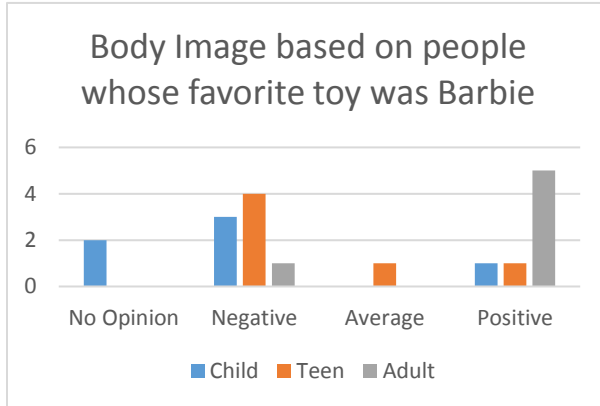


Figure 11: This graph shows how women who favored Barbie see their bodies

The last group that I looked at was the people whose favorite toys were Barbie products. Figure 11 graphs the responses in this section. As children, 50% of the women saw their bodies in a negative way. 33.3% had no opinion of their bodies and 16.7% viewed their bodies in a positive way. As the women

entered into their teenage years, the negative responses grew to 66.8%. The rest were split with 16.6% in both average and positive responses. As adults, the positive responses skyrocketed to 83.3% with only 16.7% having a negative response. This section shows that as children and into teen years, these women disliked their bodies, but after becoming adults, they saw their bodies in a positive way and accepted who they were.

Because the results were polar opposite from my hypothesis, I looked to see if there was some kind of reason, other than the Barbie, that could have caused this. The one thing I found was that there was a lack of traumatic events occurring in the lives of the women who never played with Barbie. On the other hand, 84.2% of people who played with Barbie had traumatic events happen in their lives. I thought that this could have affected the results of the survey so I looked at the women who did not have traumatic events happen to them and the women who did. I looked to see how they viewed their own bodies to see if this could affect body satisfaction.

The data provided in Figure 12 shows the results from the people without traumatic events occurring in their lives. As children, 57.1% of the women had no opinion of their bodies

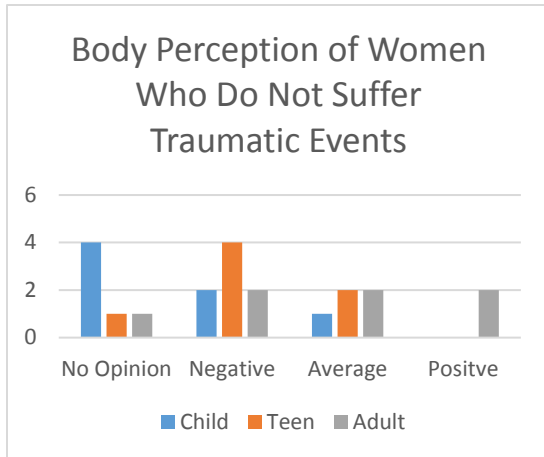


Figure 12: This graph shows how women who do not suffer from Traumatic Events see their bodies

and 28.6% of the women saw their bodies in a negative way. In their teenaged years, the percentage of negative responses grew to 57.1% and 28.6% giving average responses. However, as Adults, the responses seemed to level out. 14.3% of the women did not have an opinion while each of the other three categories had 28.6% of the

responses.

I then looked at the women who suffered from traumatic events. As seen in figure 13, 50% of the women did not have an opinion on their body image as a child and 43.7% had a negative view of their bodies. There was an extreme dip in body satisfaction in their teenage

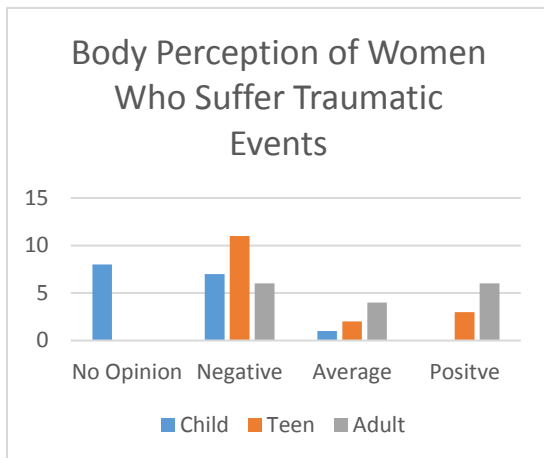


Figure 13: This graph shows how women who have suffered from Traumatic Events see their bodies

years with 68.7% of women having a negative perception of their bodies. 18.7% of the women viewed their bodies in a positive way and 12.6% had an average point of view. However, the data was more dispersed in their adult years. The negative and positive results were both 37.5% and 25% of the women had an average view of their bodies.

These two sets of data displayed similar results. As children, women tend to have no opinion of their bodies or a negative outlook with a select few having an average body perception. In the teenage years, body image satisfaction takes a large dip and produces high negative numbers. Then, as they become adults, the statistics level out and the number of

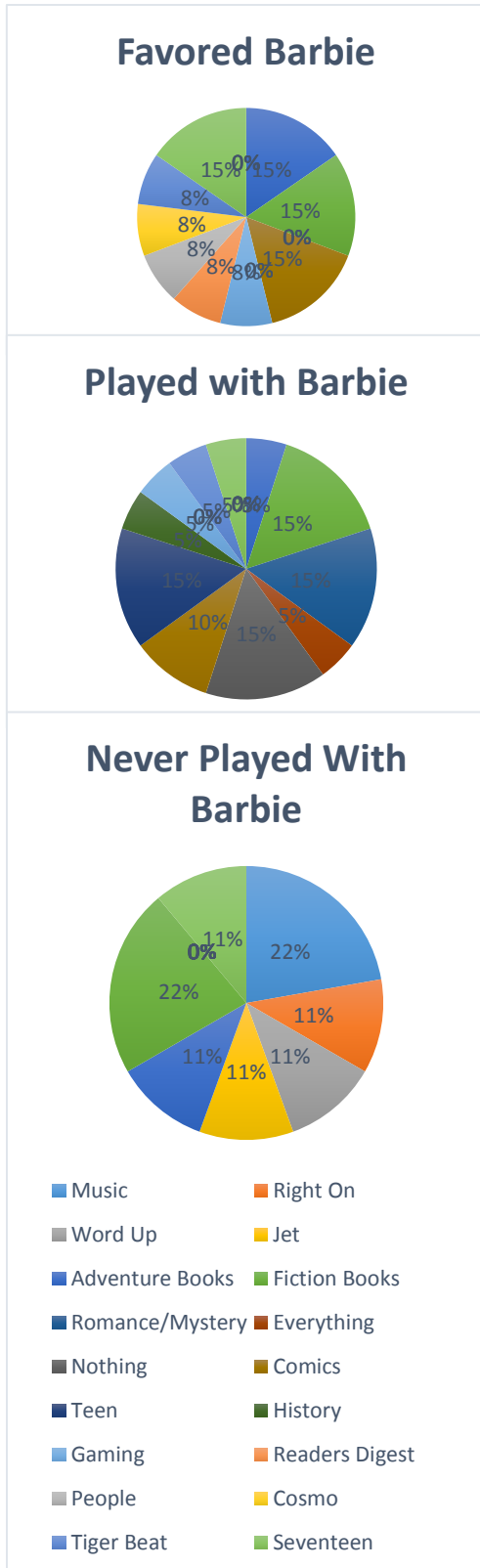


Figure 14: These charts shows the different reading materials, how many people read them, and what category they fall into

positive and negative response become equal. Because of this, I conclude that traumatic events do not have an effect on the way people perceive their body images.

After seeing how women looked at their bodies, I analyzed the reading materials during their teenage years. According to my hypothesis, playing with Barbie leads to reading magazines that feature thin models and popular icons. To analyze this, I looked at the reading material between the three different categories of women – those who played with Barbie, those who did not play with Barbie, and those who favored Barbie products.

Figure 14 represents the different reading materials and the percentages of the women who read them. It can be seen that there is a wide variety of material. However, it does seem that the people who played with Barbie favored popular teenage magazine such as Seventeen and Teen Magazine. These magazines tend to promote the thin ideals that Barbie represents.

The women also seemed to enjoy reading a wide variety of fiction, adventure, and romance novels. The

women who did not play with Barbie seemed to enjoy reading materials that contained some form of musical influences and some fiction books. This contrast may be due to the fact that the women who did not play with Barbie are on the older side ranging from forty-four to sixty-two years old. It does seem that playing with Barbie creates a fascination with magazines featuring thin models.

However, people who played with Barbie also seemed to have a larger range of reading materials. They read everything from Teen Magazine to comics. This may be influenced by

Barbie’s multitude of professions. Barbie was originally meant to inspire women to reach for the dreams and goals. This may be the related effect of that.

The last section of the survey that I analyzed was the women’s dieting habits. Out of the twenty-three women, only two of them stated that they have never dieted.

Figure 15 breaks down the different diets and the number of people who have tried them. It seems that there is a wide variety of diets and that most of the women tried more than one. Part of the question in the survey was whether or not the diets were healthy or unhealthy.

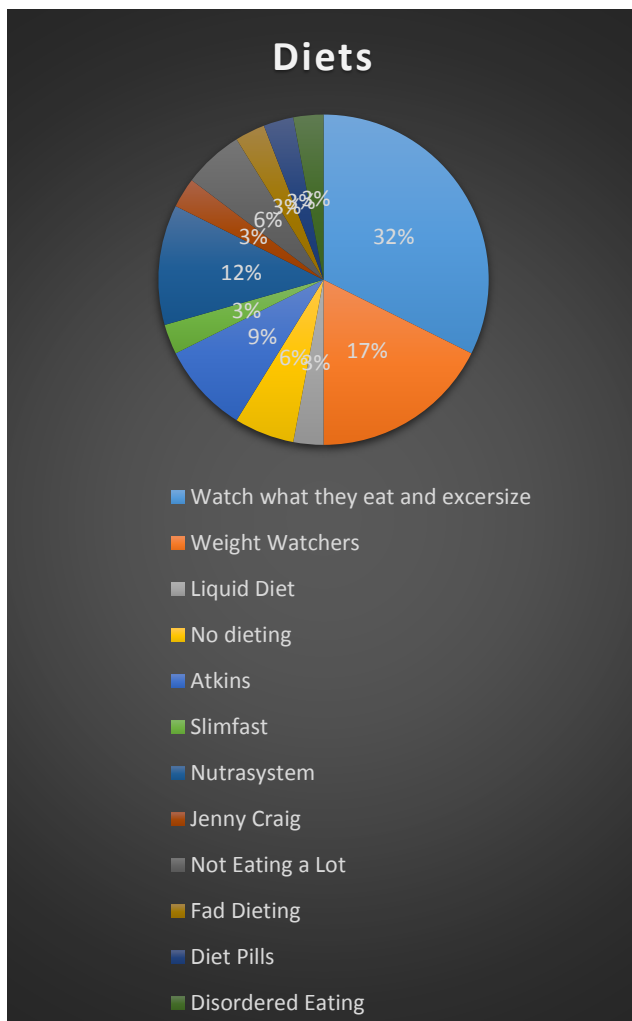


Figure 15: This chart shows the different diets and the percentage of women who tried them



This was where the answer varied the most. Several of the diets were conducted by more than one women. However, while they were doing the same diet, the classification of healthy or unhealthy varied between women. For example, four people tried the Nutrasystem diet. Two women thought that the diet was healthy, one women thought that it was unhealthy, and one person had no idea if the diet was good for her or not. Another variation was with the Atkins diet. Three women partook in this diet and while two of them considered the diet to be healthy, one of them thought that it was unhealthy.

While some of the women mentioned their bad dieting, all of the women who tried an unhealthy diet were women who had played with Barbie. While all the women who never played with Barbie dieted, they did it in a healthy way. They exercised and watched what they ate. This means that the only women who attempted unhealthy dieting were those who played with Barbie.

### **My Analysis of the Information**

As a result of my research and analysis of my findings, my hypothesis was not supported. While I had hypothesized that Barbie would create a negative body image view within women, my research suggests that there is no correlation between childhood play with Barbie and negative effects as an adult. As women go into their teenage years, they seem to see themselves in a negative way, however, as an adult who played with Barbie there is a higher rate of women seeing themselves in a positive light.

As a child, it seems as though women tend to not think about their bodies. I found this to be extremely interesting as the previous study proved the exact opposite. In those studies,

exposure to these dolls created a dissatisfaction of their body image. To see that not many of the women even thought about their body image as a child was an interesting fact to learn.

It does seem that Barbie can cause negative influences within the teenage years. However, come adulthood, the women who played with Barbie seem to think more positively about their body images. Not only that, women whose favorite toy was a Barbie product found acceptance of their bodies now that they are adults. One woman stated, "I feel and I am generally much more happy and confident." Another one said, "I fight with it [my body] sometimes but have learned to love certain aspects of it."

Going into this research I was convinced that Barbie was a bad influence on people. I had seen research on how negatively it effected children, and I believed that it would continue throughout their lives. However, I am happy to see that I was wrong. According to the hypothesized timeline, early childhood play with Barbie dolls would lead to a life of negative effects related to the Barbie doll.

The original timeline started with a negative body image perception in childhood, growing into body dissatisfaction as a teenager. This was accompanied by reading materials that featured thin ideals and disordered eating created by Barbie's image. The end result would end in dissatisfaction with their adult bodies. While there was an increase in body dissatisfaction within a women's teenage years and they read more magazines featuring models who represented the thin ideals of Barbie, there was not enough evidence to prove that Barbie effected their dieting habits. Also, there was a lack of body dissatisfaction as children and adults of the women who played with Barbie. Figure 16 displays a new timeline using this newly acquired information.

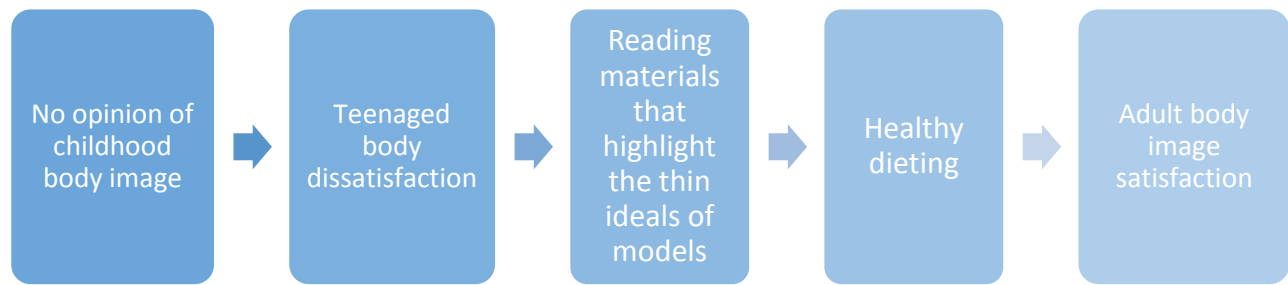


Figure 16: This timeline displays the events that unfold throughout a woman's life who plays with the Barbie doll

I am not saying that the stereotypical progression that I hypothesized does not exist. In fact, there were a few surveys that followed fairly close to this stereotypical Barbie lifestyle. However, these instances were very seldom found.

There was one woman who was fifty-three years old. When she was not outside playing, she was playing with Barbie - her favorite toy. As a child she saw herself as a "chunky" person. As she grew into her teenaged years, she read *Teen*, *Cosmo*, and *Tiger Beat*, and she continued to see herself as overweight. She still feels overweight and has admitted to trying liquid diets in her high school years. While this followed my hypothesized progression, it is only one of a few. In fact, this woman does not blame Barbie for what happened to her. She is a proud thyroid cancer survivor and she stated "my parents always compared me to her [sister] and of course I did as well." This comparison is most likely a factor in her body dissatisfaction.

Looking at these surveys, I found many comments about comparisons. Many women found that Barbie was not to blame, but it was the comparison of the women to others such as Barbie or a thinner person. A woman wrote, "My mom always pointed out that she was smaller than I and my Dad did tease me about my flat chest . . . I look at people I see in the movies, on TV, in advertisements and magazines and want to look better." It is this comparison that is making such an impact on people.

It is not only the comparison between women and people they see on TV though. There is also a comparison between ethnicity. One woman expressed:

Honestly it wasn't the body image of the dolls that affected me. As an African American child, it was the complexion and look of the dolls that affected me. Back in the 70's, the African American dolls weren't made to look beautiful. The Caucasian dolls were made to be the image of beauty.

It was this fact that made this woman feel so insecure and affected the way she saw herself.

Had there not been this comparison, then she would have most likely had a better body image satisfaction.

I also found out through the surveys that cultural aspects play a major role in eating styles and what is considered fat. One woman who was Asian wrote about her home life. She explained that her family is constantly forcing her to eat a lot of food. After making her eat all of that food, they will tell her that she is starting to look a bit chubby. While this is a cultural difference, it affects the way she sees herself. It also hurts her diet because she is forced to eat more food than she should.

How parents raise you to view yourself is also a factor. For ex. My Asian family members will encourage me to eat but then turn around and say I am fat out of love for me to be healthier but it makes you self-conscious.

Almost all of the women tried some form of a diet, and there were many different forms of diets that they tried. However, when asked about whether it was healthy or not, there was much conflict. While dieting, many women did not know the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy diet. I think that this is something that should be corrected. One woman mentioned that it would be helpful to include educational classes about maintaining and sustaining a healthy diet in the educational system. Due to the fact that several women did not know whether a diet was good for them or not, I would have to agree with this information.

It is important that women know the difference between good and bad dieting. When someone tries an unhealthy diet, they open themselves up to many health risks.

There was one woman who gave a response to how they currently view their body image that really interested me. Her response was “a constant struggle for an idea of perfection that I’m not even sure exists.” This interested me because this was what I hypothesized. I believed that Barbie would create these unattainable ideals in women. While it is not prevalent in all of the women, this unrealistic body image does exist. However, it may not be entirely Barbie’s fault.

With the appearance of a few people who followed the timeline hypothesized in this thesis and the introduction of culture and ethnicity as playing a factor, more research needs to be done to see the extent of these effects on children. I believe that we have taken the few examples of the negative influences of Barbie and we have created a false image of the Barbie doll. Sometimes, I believe that people are too quick in jumping to a conclusion. Even I fell into that category. However, I think that people now need to understand the lack of negative effects related to the Barbie doll and start looking for the real culprit behind these effects.

## **Conclusion**

While it is easy to place blame on the Barbie doll for creating a negative body image perception among women, my research suggested that Barbie might actually help create a positive perception of body image later in life. While there is much research proving that Barbie has negatively affected children, there are no negative long term effects created by the doll. I believe that the negative effects could be created from the comparisons between a person and another who may be thinner or overall better looking.

I believe that there are many more factors that should be consider when looking at the Barbie doll. While there is much research about Barbie and the negative effects on children, there is little research done to see if those effects are long lasting. From here, this research should be expanded to see how Barbie is related to this possible positive body satisfaction in adult years. This research should be expanded to include ethnicity, culture, and comparisons to see if those factors are influencing women to have a negative perception of body image.

It should also be expanded to see if there are reasons why there is a negative dip in body satisfaction during the teenage years in a women's life. This was a common fact for most of the women who partook in my survey. While the Barbie does not have negative effects during adulthood, new research should explore the possibility that Barbie can effect a women into her teenage years.

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