

Barbie in India: A Study of Effects of Barbie in Psychological and Social Health

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Abstract : Barbie is a fashion doll manufactured by the American toy company Mattel Inc and it made debut at the American International Toy Fair in New York in 9 March 1959. From being a fashion doll to a symbol of fetishistic commodification, Barbie has come a long way. A Barbie doll is sold every three seconds across the world, which makes the billion dollar brand the world's most popular doll for the girls. The 11.5 inch moulded plastic doll has a height of 5 feet 9 inches at 1/6 scale. Her vital statistics have been estimated at 36 inches (chest), 18 inches (waist) and 33 inches (hips). Her weight is permanently set at 110 pounds which would be 35 pounds underweight. Ruth Handler, the creator of Barbie wanted a doll that represented adulthood and allowed children to imagine themselves as teenagers or adults. While Barbie might have been intended to be independent, imaginative and innovative, the physical uniqueness does not confine the doll to the status of a play thing. It is a cultural icon but with far reaching critical implications. The doll is a commodity bearing more social value than practical use value. The way Barbie is produced represents industrialization and commodification of the process of symbolic production. And this symbolic production and consumption is a standardized planned one that produce stereotypical 'pseudo-individuality' and suppresses cultural alternatives. Children are being subject to and also arise as subjects in this consumer context. A very gendered, physiologically dissected sexually charged symbolism is imposed upon children (both male and female), childhood, their social worlds, identity, and relationship formation. Barbie is also very popular among Indian children. While the doll is essentially an imaginative representation of the West, it is internalized by the Indian sensibilities. Through observation and questionnaire-based interview within a sample population of adolescent children (primarily female, a few male) and parents (primarily mothers) in Kolkata, an Indian metropolis, the paper puts forth findings of sociological relevance. 1. Barbie creates, recreates, and accentuates already existing divides between the binaries like male- female, fat- thin, sexy- nonsexy, beauty-brain and more. 2. The Indian girl child in her associative process with Barbie wants to be like her and commodifies her own self. The male child also readily accepts this standardized commodification. Definition of beauty is thus based on prejudice and stereotype. 3. Not being able to become Barbie creates health issues both psychological and physiological varying from anorexia to obesity as well as personality disorder. 4. From being a plaything Barbie becomes the game maker. Barbie along with many other forms of simulation further creates a consumer culture and market for all kind of fitness related hyper enchantment and subsequent disillusionment. The construct becomes the reality and the real gets lost in the play world. The paper would thus argue that Barbie from being an innocuous doll transports itself into becoming social construct with long term and irreversible adverse impact.

Keywords : barbie, commodification, personality disorder, sterotype

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