Living in a Barbie World: Body Image Development

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Abstract

There is a common belief that Barbie is detrimental to women's body image and subsequent eating habits due to Barbie's unrealistic body shape, yet there is little scientific evidence that supports this. In a pilot study, 30 primarily white women (M = 20.35) completed questionnaires regarding their disordered eating attitudes and the toys they played with as children/adolescents. Hierarchical regressions showed that how often women played with Barbie in the past did not predict current eating disorder symptomology. This indicates that there may not actually be an association between playing with Barbie as a child and the development of poor eating habits.

Introduction

There is a pervasive belief among Western societies that the popular child's toy "Barbie" has a negative effect on girls' body image development, and subsequently their eating habits. This belief stems from her unrealistic body proportions, which would be unattainable by natural means in human females. Despite these claims, there has been limited experimental evidence that shows such a link. One study found that young girls who were exposed to Barbie reported decreased body satisfaction compared to a control group that looked at a doll with a more normative body (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006). However, this study failed to control for existing body dissatisfaction before the exposure to the dolls. Conversely, another study by Worobey (2009) found that owning Barbies as a child did not have a significant effect on women's body dissatisfaction as an adult.

Method

Participants
- 30 primarily white women (M = 20.35)
- Participants were recruited from a Midwestern college via flyers, listerv emails, and the HDFS website

Procedure
- Self-report surveys on disordered eating behaviors were shared with participants via an online survey
- 5-10 days after participants completed the online surveys, they visited the Eating Disorders and Body Image Lab in order to view photos of different dolls (e.g. Barbie, Bratz) and complete surveys on their attitudes towards the dolls

Compensation was $10

Measures of Disordered eating behaviors
- Eating Disorder Diagnostic Scale (Stice et al., 2000)
- Example: "How many days per week on average over the past 6 months have you eaten an unusually large amount of food and experienced a loss of control?"
- Measures of Attitudes towards Barbie
- Open-ended responses on attitudes towards Barbie
- Example: "How do you think or feel about Barbie now?"

Results

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine if symptoms of eating disorders in adulthood can be predicted by how often women played with Barbie as a child/adolescent. The relationship between women's scores on the EDDS and how often they played with Barbie as a child was not significant (p = .23), even when BMI was controlled for. Our results suggest that how often women played with Barbies as children/adolescents does not affect levels of eating disorder symptomology as an adult.

When participants were asked about their feelings towards Barbie as an adult through open-ended responses, there was a consensus that Barbie does not have a realistic body shape, but that they do not feel as though they compared themselves to her when they were children. One participant responded:

"Barbies definitely have an unrealistic sizing ratio to them, but it is a doll and I don't know if I have ever really compared myself to a doll that is less than a foot tall. I feel as though I would feel comfortable allowing my child to play with them."

Their feelings on Barbie were mostly positive compared to other controversial dolls (e.g. Bratz dolls), as they mentioned things such as how much they enjoyed playing with her and the nostalgia that she brings. For example, one participant stated:

"I enjoyed playing with them [Barbie] as a little kid, and I don't think they harmed me in any way...overall I think they are pretty harmless."

Another participant mentioned that she loved playing with them as a child and would want their children to have the same experience that she did.

Discussion

The current study provided evidence that there may not be a link between the development of poor eating habits and childhood exposure to Barbie. The open-ended responses about women's feelings about Barbie suggest that even though Barbie has an impossible-to-achieve body, her body shape may not influence girls to strive for a similar body type. It may be that children simply enjoy playing with Barbie, and the belief that Barbie directly affects the development of a negative body image and poor eating habits may be overly exaggerated in the public sphere. Indeed, our findings suggest that there is not a significant relationship between exposure to Barbie as a child and the future development of disordered eating habits and body dissatisfaction.

These results show that the stigma against Barbie throughout the years due to her supposed ill effect on body image and disordered eating development has been too harsh. In addition, the potential positive aspects of Barbie have remained unrecognized. Our results indicate that participants fondly recall good memories of playing with Barbie, and hope their potential children will as well. It is still important for children to learn that while Barbie is a fun toy to use, her body type is not realistic. Instead of conveying the message that Barbie is harmful, parents can instead potentially use Barbie as a tool for discussing body image with their children. One way of doing this could be to explain to children that there are several different body types, and there is no "right" type.

References


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