

FUNDAÇÃO GETULIO VARGAS

ESCOLA DE ADMINISTRAÇÃO DE EMPRESAS DE SÃO PAULO

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**STEREOTYPED AND NON-STEREOTYPED ADVERTISING: REVITALIZATION  
OF MATTEL'S ICONIC BARBIE BRAND IN THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF  
FEMININE EMPOWERMENT**

SÃO PAULO

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Thesis presented to Escola de Administração  
de Empresas de São Paulo of Fundação  
Getulio Vargas, as a requirement to obtain the  
title of Master in International Management  
(MPGI).

Knowledge field: Management and competi-  
tiveness in global companies

Advisor: Prof. Dr. Benjamin Rosenthal

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To my parents, with love.



## ABSTRACT

Plus size models, homosexual couples with children, women in leadership positions, a variety of ethnicities and religions starring in advertising campaigns from some of the world's most renowned brands. Even though stereotypes have been an integral part of the advertising world for ages, recent years have seen a substantial increase in non-stereotyped campaigns. This study aims to understand the context of non-stereotyped advertising in order to provide insights on its implications to both society and businesses.

The methodology adopted consists in exploratory, qualitative research based on the case study of Mattel's toy brand, Barbie. Netnography on the brand's social media platforms and online communities, in addition to in-depth interviews with mothers of young girls aged 3-13, were employed to better understand consumers' perception of the brand's newly launched non-stereotyped campaign, while an in-depth interview with Mattel's EMEA Marketing Director for Barbie was employed to understand the managerial implications of such a significant change in the brand's marketing and communication strategies.

The main findings suggest a strong positive reaction from consumers to Barbie's adoption of non-stereotyped portrayals in the campaign "You can be anything", and the advertising for the new products lines "Barbie Fashionistas" and "Barbie Inspiring Women Series", especially regarding diversity of body types, diversity of ethnicities, and Barbie's different careers endorsing feminine empowerment as a core message through femvertising. Key learnings from the case for companies when adopting non-stereotyped advertising campaigns reside in (1) the importance of alignment between advertising portrayals and brand purpose, (2) credibility generated by initiatives that go beyond advertising, such as corporate social responsibility investments, (3) consistency of message across all channels and touchpoints, and (4) benefits brought by open innovation and consumer's feedbacks. The learnings originated from this study, whilst more focused on gender-related advertising, provide valuable insights applicable to multiple formats of non-stereotyped advertising.

**Key-words:** stereotyped advertising, non-stereotyped advertising, gender, feminine empowerment, femvertising.



## RESUMO

Modelos *plus size*, casais homossexuais com filhos, mulheres em posições de liderança, uma variedade de etnias e religiões representadas em propagandas de algumas das marcas mais renomadas do mundo. Apesar de estereótipos serem parte integral do mundo da propaganda há anos, recentemente tem havido um aumento substancial em campanhas não-estereotipadas. Este estudo visa compreender o contexto do não-estereótipo na propaganda a fim de oferecer *insights* a respeito de suas implicações para a sociedade e negócios.

A metodologia adotada consiste em pesquisa exploratória qualitativa baseada no estudo de caso da marca de brinquedos da empresa Mattel, Barbie. Foram conduzidos netnografia nas redes sociais da marca e comunidades online, além de entrevistas em profundidade com mães de meninas de 3 a 13 anos de idade, a fim de melhor compreender as percepções dos consumidores a respeito das novas campanhas não-estereotipadas da marca. Uma entrevista em profundidade com a diretora de marketing EMEA da Mattel para a marca Barbie foi conduzida para melhor compreender as implicações gerenciais de uma mudança tão significativa nas estratégias de marketing e comunicação da marca.

Os principais achados incluem significativa percepção positiva dos consumidores a respeito da adoção de retratos não-estereotipados na campanha “*You can be anything*”, e nas propagandas das novas linhas de produto “*Barbie Fashionistas*” e “*Barbie Inspiring Women Series*”, especialmente no que diz respeito à variedade de corpos, diversidade de etnias, e as diferentes carreiras da Barbie, transmitindo como mensagem principal o empoderamento feminino via *femvertising*. Aprendizados para empresas que queiram adotar retratos não-estereotipados na propaganda incluem (1) a importância do alinhamento entre campanhas e propósito de marca, (2) credibilidade gerada por iniciativas que vão além da propaganda, por exemplo, investimentos em responsabilidade social corporativa, (3) consistência na mensagem em diversos canais e pontos de contato, (4) benefícios trazidos pela inovação aberta e constante *feedback* de consumidores. Os aprendizados deste estudo, ainda que focados em propagandas relacionadas à gênero, oferecem *insights* importantes e aplicáveis a múltiplos formatos e temas de propaganda não-estereotipada.

**Palavras-chave:** propaganda estereotipada, propaganda não-estereotipada, gênero, empoderamento feminino, *femvertising*.



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## 1. Introduction

Women portrayed as housewives, white men in leadership positions, Asians as hard workers, heterosexual couples with children portrayed as the perfect families. Stereotypes have been part of the advertising world for ages (Menon, Pankambekar, and Bhatia; 2015) and, whether in gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or religion, the majority of advertising has historically portrayed people in a stereotyped manner (Eisend, 2010).

In the current scenario, however, society is believed to be undergoing a shifting movement in terms of advertising representations: while a decreasing trend on stereotyped portrayals in advertising has been documented along the past years (Eisend, 2010), a gradual increase in the number of non-stereotyped portrayals has been observed (Mahdawi, 2015; Chu et al., 2015; Bukszpan, 2016; Åkestam et al., 2017a; Åkestam et al., 2017b).

In today's Western culture, examples of non-stereotyped advertising include plus size models, girls interested in science or other domains usually perceived as masculine, homosexual families, or any other portrayal of people in a way that does not adhere to a dominant stereotype in a certain culture (Taylor & Stern, 1997; Mastro & Stern, 2003), and/or people who are not usually featured in advertising for a certain product category (Åkestam, 2017).

The emergency of non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising raises several questions concerning its effectiveness for brands in comparison to stereotyped advertising (Zawisza, Luyt, Zawadzka, and Buczny, 2016), as well as its social impacts (Åkestam, 2017), and the several possible reasons behind its growing trend.

While the literature on stereotyped portrayals in advertising is vast (Eisend, 2010; Mastro, 2009; Milner, 2007), few studies have focused their scopes on non-stereotyped portrayals (Åkestam, 2017), therefore, overall literature on non-stereotyped advertising is still scarce and offers great opportunities for future studies.

### 1.1. Research objectives and relevance

This study aims to provide valuable insights on consumers' perceptions and social expressions around non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising, ultimately understanding if there is indeed a stated preference for such, as well as the main risks and benefits for



companies adopting non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising, and the main challenges when planning and implementing the campaigns.

Research suggests that non-stereotyped formats of advertising can actually outperform stereotyped campaigns (SheKnows Media, 2014). However, while several brands have succeeded in launching advertising campaigns with non-stereotyped portrayals, not all have managed to do so. As non-stereotyped advertising addresses, for example, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, thus relating to several social movements fighting for equal rights, the polarized public opinions may incur high risks for companies taking public stands in these matters. This study holds, therefore, strong relevance to both business theory and practice, having far-reaching implications for branding, corporate social responsibility initiatives, internal and external communications, and more.

In addition, stereotyped and non-stereotyped portrayals are believed to have several social implications (Åkestam, 2017). As it might influence the way individuals interact with each other and perceive themselves, stereotyping requires caution (Macklin & Kolbe, 1984). For instance, studies show that stereotyping physical characteristics such as body size and aesthetical features can lead to reduced self-esteem and increased dissatisfactions, having negative impacts on physical and mental health (Eisend, 2010). Non-stereotyped portrayals, on the other hand, may increase well-being, at least in some cases (Åkestam, 2017). Thus, this research not only holds high relevance to businesses, but also to society in terms of consumer welfare and public policies.

## **1.2. Research question**

This study aims to better understand the context of non-stereotyped advertising, under both consumers and businesses' perspectives. Therefore, the general research question of this study can be divided into two complementary drivers:

- i. How do consumers perceive and express themselves regarding non-stereotyped advertising?
- ii. What are the managerial implications for brands adopting non-stereotyped advertising?



From all types of non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising, gender has been attracting great levels of both popular and academic attention, with a particular interest from scholars in portrayals of women in advertising (Grau & Zotos, 2016). With feminine empowerment gaining traction as a social movement, and with the role of women in society changing through the decades, it is possible to observe a clear change in female representation in the media, going from highly stereotyped to rather non-stereotyped portrayals (Eisend, 2010). Brands such as Dove, with the “Real Beauty” campaign, or Always, with “Like a Girl”, are just a couple examples among several brands that have been adopting “Femvertising”, a type of non-stereotyped advertising that employs non-stereotyped female imagery to empower women (SheKnows Media, 2015).

Therefore, as for the research focus, even though non-stereotyped advertising comprises a variety of social topics (e.g. gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, religion), in order to conduct an in-depth investigation and to answer the proposed research questions, gender was selected as the core subject of study. The main learnings from this exploratory qualitative research on non-stereotyped gender portrayals may support the understanding of some other social stereotype categories.

### **1.3. Structure**

This report is structured as follows: this introduction presented the research topic, research question, relevance, as well as objectives and expected results. The next session presents a comprehensive review of the literature on stereotyped advertising and non-stereotyped advertising, its social implications, effectiveness for brands, as well as the possible reasons behind the growing trend of non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising. Subsequently, focus is given to gender portrayals, going through the historical evolution of female representations in advertising. After the literature review, the research method is detailed, the qualitative research data collected is further analyzed, and the obtained results are presented under the format of a case study, followed by a discussion on the implications to society, as well as business theory and practice. The conclusion and final considerations review the main insights and learnings of this study, followed by research limitations, and suggestions for future research.



## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Stereotyped portrayals in advertising

Stereotypes are beliefs about a social category (Vinacke, 1957), a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing (Fung & Ma, 2000). Stereotypes are specific to cultural contexts and can thus change over time (Eisend, 2010).

Within a certain cultural context, a stereotype would be a generalized and widely accepted belief about the personal attributes of members of a social category, such as gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation (Taylor & Stern, 1997; Grier & Deshpandé, 2001; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Åkestam, 2017). For example, the role of the man as the provider of the household opposed to the caregiver and nurturer role of the woman as the housewife would one kind of gender stereotype (Menon, Punkambekar, and Bhatia, 2015). Latinos being portrayed in a sexualized manner or Asians as hard workers would fall under the category of ethnical stereotypes (Mastro & Stern, 2003).

Stereotyping is not necessarily something negative (Eisend, 2010; Menon, Punkambekar, and Bhatia, 2015). Stereotypes may serve several purposes, as it can facilitate informational processing, help simplify cognitive demands (Bodenhausen, Kramer, and Süsner, 1994), and provide a useful orientation in everyday life (Menon, Punkambekar, and Bhatia, 2015). However, it can also lead to incorrect evaluations of subjects of a certain social category through oversimplified conceptions and misapplied knowledge evaluations (Menon, Punkambekar, and Bhatia, 2015). Even stereotypes containing positive information can be harmful, as they can be incorrectly applied and/or also prevent the perception of individual differences in people (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996; Eisend, 2010). Therefore, while stereotypes *per se* are not harmful and can help simplify communications, they can also shape people's expectations and limit possibilities for self-realization of individuals in a certain stereotyped social category (Knoll et al., 2011; Taylor & Stern, 1997; Åkestam, 2017).

As it might influence the way individuals interact with each other and perceive themselves, stereotyping requires caution (Macklin & Kolbe, 1984). For such reasons, public policy in several countries, especially in the European Union, is highly concerned about marketing activities that promote stereotypes (Eisend, 2010).



Stereotyped portrayals in advertising have been receiving a great level of academic attention on the past few years (Hatzithomas et al., 2016; Åkestam, 2017). However, stereotypes have been part of advertisement for ages (Menon, Pankambekar, and Bhatia; 2015), and the majority of advertising has historically portrayed people in a stereotyped manner (Eisend, 2010). There is a vast literature documenting the use of stereotyped portrayals in advertising (e.g., Eisend et al., 2014; Furnham & Paltzer, 2010; Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008) in different types of medias and geographical markets (Åkestam, 2017).

A stereotype is created when a specific image is conveyed repeatedly. By itself, the image would not generate any particular effects, but when repeated, it becomes a generally accepted belief (Taylor & Stern, 1997; Åkestam, 2017). In the context of marketing, an advertising portrayal is considered stereotyped when it portrays people in a way that is consistent with a general stereotype, an advertising stereotype, or both (Åkestam, 2017).

According to Åkestam (2017), the literature shows different conceptualizations of stereotyped advertising, including “idealized” advertising (Richins, 1991), “unfriendly” advertising (Van Hellemonst & Van den Bulck, 2012), and “objectifying” advertising (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Advertising stereotypes often present people with specific characteristics, for instance ethnicity, body type, and physical traits, as being the norm in the world (Richins, 1991; Bissell & Rask, 2010), or attribute specific intellectual and occupational characteristics to certain members of a social category.

In mainstream advertising, people with features such as white skin, skinny body type, heterosexual, successful (Elliott & Elliott, 2005; Gulas & McKeage, 2000; Martin & Kennedy, 1993; Eisend, 2010) have been historically over-represented, while other groups, usually minorities, have been underrepresented (Oakenfull et al., 2008; Mastro, 2009; Bissell & Rask, 2010; Åkestam, 2017).

Regarding sexual orientation, the literature suggests that even though 10% of the population in Western countries live openly as non-heterosexual, such couples and families were rarely featured in mainstream advertising, while heterosexual couples are over-represented (Oakenfull et al., 2008). Heterosexuality as a stereotype has been historically recurrent in mainstream advertising portrayals (Åkestam, 2017).

Regarding ethnicities, several content analyses show that the majority of ads through time have been ethnically stereotyped (e.g., Bailey, 2006; Mastro & Stern, 2003; Milner, 2007;



Taylor & Stern, 1997). For example, Bang and Reece's (2003) content analysis of advertising portraying children indicates that Caucasian children have higher frequency and exposition, while Black children are usually background characters. According to Taylor and Stern (1997), racial minorities are commonly portrayed in inferior roles in comparison to Caucasians in advertising. Furthermore, as ethnical stereotypes refer not only to skin color, but also to groups based on nationality and culture, it is possible to find several other ethnical types of stereotypes in advertising. For instance, portrayals of Asians tend to focus more on work ethics and work environment than in other aspects, with Asian models being overrepresented in business settings and underrepresented in home settings and family or social relationships (Taylor & Stern, 1997).

Regarding gender stereotypes, a meta-analysis of studies from 1974 to 2007 found that women were more likely than men to have non-speaking roles in advertising, to be presented in a domestic environment, and to be presented in a role dependent on others (Eisend, 2010; Windels & Mallia, 2015). Regarding physical characteristics, several scholars (e.g., Gulas & McKeage 2000; Gentry & Harrison, 2010; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Richins, 1991) argue that the vast majority of advertising portrayals women of slim body type and men of athletic body type.

In conclusion, a strong presence of stereotyped advertising in several different contexts is clearly noticeable, especially in mainstream advertising, being the most common stereotypes related to the three categories of gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. However, as stereotypes concern any type of social category, other examples of stereotypes in advertising can also be found in religion, age groups, or political orientation.

## **2.2. Non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising**

While stereotyped advertising portrayals people consistently with a general social stereotype, an advertising stereotype, or both (Åkestam, 2017), non-stereotyped advertising portrayals people in a way that does not adhere to the dominant stereotype for the social category to which they belong in a certain culture (Taylor & Stern, 1997; Mastro & Stern, 2003), and/or portrayals people who are not usually featured in advertising for a certain product category, therefore not adhering to an advertising stereotype (Åkestam, 2017).



Examples of non-stereotyped advertising portrayals would be girls interested in science or American football, women in leadership positions, black people in leadership positions, men as responsible for the household, elderly people practicing radical sports, or plus size models starring in a commercial for fashion or underwear brands.

It is important to notice that non-stereotyped advertising could consist of both counter-stereotyped portrayals, which actually challenge and question common social stereotypes (a commercial with plus size models starring a fashion brand would be a counter-stereotype portrayal), or neutral-portrayals, which are advertisings simply devoid of stereotyping altogether (Åkestam, 2017).

While the literature on stereotyped portrayals in advertising is vast (Eisend, 2010; Mastro, 2009; Milner, 2007), few studies have focused their scopes on non-stereotyped portrayals (Åkestam, 2017). Overall, research on non-stereotyped advertising is still scarce, with one exception being the investigation of stereotypes in terms of female body size and beauty (Bian & Wang, 2015; Bissell and Rask, 2010).

Such a disparity in literature of stereotyped versus non-stereotyped advertising can be attributed to the fact that non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising are rather a young phenomenon, only recently emerging in the media with higher frequency.

Thus, given that non-stereotyped advertising campaigns are a relatively new phenomenon, the limited empirical evidence of its impacts and effects in comparison to stereotyped advertising (Åkestam, 2017) represents a great opportunity for research investigation.

### **2.3. Implications of stereotyped and non-stereotyped advertising**

The debate between sociologists and advertisers regarding the social nature of advertising when it comes to stereotypes is long-lasting and polarized (Grau & Zotos, 2016) between scholars who defend the “mirror” versus the “mold” argument (Eisend, 2010).

The “mirror” argument suggests that advertising only reflects the dominant values that exist in society, representing a picture of a social phenomenon (Pollay 1986), but does not impact society itself. Therefore, under this logic, the portrayals of women and men in advertising, for example, would merely be a reflection of the dominant concepts of gender roles held by



society (Zotos & Tsihla, 2014), but would not help shape these concepts. Based on the assumption that there are several factors interrelated in the modern socioeconomic and political environments, the “mirror” theory assumes that the actual impact of advertising cannot be valued as relevant.

On the hand, the “mold” theory suggests that people incorporate stereotypes presented by the media into their system of values, ideas, and beliefs (Zotos & Tsihla, 2014). Thus, as advertising campaigns portray certain social stereotypes, they would reinforce these stereotypes in society, based on the assumption that people’s perceptions are influenced by what they see or hear in the media (Gerbner, 1998).

Until today, there is still no definite empirical evidence to proof whether advertising simply reflects what already exists in society or if it also shapes it (Eisend, 2010), leaving the polarization between the “mirror” and “mold” theories unsolved.

Recently, a middle ground, however, has been proposed, suggesting that the “mirror” and the “mold” arguments are actually a continuum (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Considering that advertising is created by people and represent an integral part of society’s culture, it could be suggested that both advertising and culture are powerful forces that feed and influence each other. This would mean that the cultural production of a certain country would reflect values of its society, while society would also be influenced by the cultural products generated and consumed by individuals. This argument is based on the principle that advertising is a system of visual representation which creates meaning within the framework of culture and, therefore, it both reflects and contributes to culture (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Zotos & Tsihla, 2014; Grau & Zotos, 2016).

### **2.3.1. Social impacts**

Given that advertising may indeed have implications on people’s perceptions, values, and beliefs, it is important to understand the social impacts of stereotyped and non-stereotyped portrayals for matters of consumer welfare and public policies.

Several studies have been conducted aiming to assess the social effects of stereotyping in advertising (Åkestam, 2017). According to the social comparison theory of Festinger (1954), stereotyped advertising portrayals can lead to a comparison process in which consumers



experience feelings of inadequacy (Richins, 1991). Especially when stereotypes refer to aesthetic aspects of attractiveness and body size, most studies report negative effects on body satisfaction (Richins, 1991), self-satisfaction (Wan et al., 2013), self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), and body-related anxiety (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004).

Beauty stereotypes are communicated through the mass media as one of the most effective channels to determine what is and what is not considered attractive (Levine & Smolak, 1996). Research suggests that individuals feel a stronger pressure for maintaining their bodies in shape and aligned with beauty standards coming from the media, rather than from their friends and family (Irving, 1990). For instance, women exposed to images of thin models report extremely negative self-evaluation (Stice & Shaw, 1994). Beauty stereotypes and the stigma imposed to over-weight in society has contributed to a culture highly focused on achieving a thin body as the ideal appearance (Crandall, 1994), which can lead to eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia (Harrison, 1997; Levine, Smolak, and Hayden, 1994).

Not only in terms of beauty, but other sorts of portrayals, such as age-related stereotypes for example, are also believed to impact self-perceptions, which, in turn, can influence health and functioning (Levy, 2009; Westerhof et al., 2014). Researchers and social psychologists suggest that stereotyped age portrayals in advertising, commonly depicting the elderly as “feeble, foolish or inept” (Goldman, 1993), damage their self-concepts, disrupt interpersonal relations and limit the socialization between young people and the elderly (Palmore, 1990; Smith, Moschis, and Moore, 1984), ultimately aggravating ageism in society (Palmore, 1990; Pollay, 1986). Ageism, being defined as prejudice and discrimination against one’s age, may limit opportunities for the elderly in several areas, from dating to finding a new job (Miller, Leyell, and Mazachek, 2004).

Stereotyped portrayals in advertising may generate a risk increase of real people being judged based on the pre-conceptions of a certain social group, rather than on their own individual capabilities (Åkestam, 2017). For example, if a stereotype suggests that Hispanic individuals are not hard workers, a candidate in a job interview could be under evaluated based on a general belief about his/her nationality, rather than on his/her personal abilities.

Stereotyping may influence the perception of others in relation to an individual, and also of an individual in relation to him/herself. The so called “stereotype threat” theory suggests that stereotypes undermine intellectual performance by triggering a disruptive mental load,



meaning that stereotyping could lead to a situational experience in which an individual feels vulnerable and pressured by the possibility of being judged by a stereotype, resulting in decrements in performance, even among highly skilled individuals (Smith, 2004; Croizet, Despres, Gauzins, Huguet, Leyens, and Meot, 2004; Cadinu, Maass, Frigerio, Impagliazzo, and Latinotti, 2003).

Similar findings have been reported by several studies, for example, analyzing the relation between stereotyping and academic underperformance of minorities (Aronson, Quinn, and Spencer, 1998), gender differences in mathematics achievement (Fan, Chen, and Matsumoto, 1997; Brown & Josephs, 1999), and more specifically, television advertising that elicit gender stereotype leading to restrained academic and professional performance of women (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, and Gerhardstein, 2002).

Even for stereotyping commonly seen as positive, stereotypes could limit self-realization. For example, if the stereotype suggests that Asians are more hard-working, or better at subjects such as mathematics or sciences, even though this is generally seen as a positive attribute, Asian students could be expected to outperform others academically, increasing psychological pressure and distress, or the professors of Asian students could discourage their personal preferences in other fields of study that do not conform to the stereotype, such as arts, music, and sports (Åkestam, 2017).

Therefore, exposure to stereotyped portrayals in advertising may not only limit individuals' well-being in terms of physical and psychological health (Richins, 1991; Wan et al., 2013), but also harm their possibilities for self-realization, for example, in terms of academic performance (Davies et al., 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1995), professional achievements, life objectives, and etc.

Based on all possible negative social impacts of stereotyping, public policy in several countries is concerned about marketing activities that promote stereotypes (Eisend, 2010). For instance, in 2008, a motion for an EU resolution was voted in order to incentive gender equality in the media sector (European Parliament, 2008).

Given that it has been suggested that stereotyped advertising can generate social effects that harm well-being, a natural assumption would be for non-stereotyped advertising to increase well-being instead, at least in some cases (Åkestam, 2017). Despite the significantly limited investigation on social impacts of non-stereotyped advertising, some studies were able find



support for such hypothesis. For instance, exposition to average body sized models vs. thin models may reduce body-focused anxiety on women (Dittmar & Howard, 2004, 2005; Halliwell et al., 2005) and improve self-esteem (Peck & Loken, 2005; Martin et al., 2007; Mills et al., 2002; Åkestam, 2017).

Most findings, however, are restricted to beauty stereotypes, more specifically related to female body sizes. Regarding social effects of non-stereotyped advertising on other stereotype categories, such as sexual orientation or ethnicity, there is limited empirical evidence of its social impacts, opening significant opportunities for further investigation.

### **2.3.2. Effectiveness for brands**

The latest emergency of non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising raises several questions concerning its effectiveness for brands in comparison to stereotyped advertising (Zawisza, Luyt, Zawadzka, and Buczny, 2016).

Given that advertising's ultimate goal is to trigger a specific effect that is supposed to benefit the brand (Eisend, 2016), for example, generate positive ad attitudes, positive brand attitudes, or increased purchase intention (Kim & Han, 2014), researchers' main goals is to assess whether stereotyped or non-stereotyped portrayals have higher or lower capabilities of influencing such variables.

Studies on the effectiveness of using non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising indicate positive results (Zawisza & Cinnirella, 2010). Pounders & Flynn's (2016) study, for example, indicates consumers' support for brands featuring diverse sexual orientations in their advertising. Non-stereotyped portrayals related to female beauty, especially in terms of body size, also generate strong positive reactions from consumers (Bian & Wang, 2015; Bissell & Rask, 2010).

When taking gender portrayals as an example, a survey conducted by SheKnows Media (2014) regarding perceptions on non-stereotyped portrayals shows that 51% of women support such ads for believing it breaks gender-equality barriers, 91% believe that the way women are portrayed in advertising has a direct impact on girls' self-esteem, 71% think brands should be responsible for using advertising to promote positive messages to women and 81% believe that pro-female messages in advertising are important for younger



generations. In addition, more than 50% of respondents said they had bought products because they liked how the brand's advertising portrayed women, and nearly half has followed brands on social media accounts for agreeing with its values, and shared non-stereotyped gender advertising with their social networks.

From a market perspective, one example would be Dove's campaign "Real Beauty", featuring non-stereotyped portrayals of women of several heights, weights, skin colors, and ages, as illustrated in Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3 (Appendix A). According to the company, the campaign has proved to be successful both in positive reactions from women and men and ultimately in sales. Since the year of launch in 2004, reported global sales for the brand increased from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion. Even though not a totality of sales increase can be attributed to the campaign, the brand has publicly stressed the importance of the new communication strategy to these successful results. In addition, in terms of consumers' perceptions, strong public support could be observed in terms of PR and word of mouth (Castillo, 2014).

As for stereotyped advertising, several studies suggests that stereotyped portrayals usually generate lower ad, brand, and product attitudes, and overall lower purchase intention, when compared to advertising without stereotyped portrayals (Eisend et al., 2014; Feiereisen et al., 2009; Huhmann & Limbu, 2016; Martin et al., 2007, Åkestam, 2017).

However, this is not always the case. Stereotypes are not necessarily something negative (Eisend, 2010; Menon, Pankambekar, and Bhatia, 2015), and can be helpful for brands' communication as it facilitates informational processing, helping consumer simplify cognitive demands (Bodenhausen, Kramer, and Süsner, 1994). Thus, for some consumers and in some circumstances, stereotyped portrayals may generate positive effects for brands (Åkestam, 2017). For example, consumers with strong gender-related prejudice seem to respond more positively to gender stereotyped portrayals in advertising than to non-stereotyped portrayals (Orth & Holancova, 2003). Arguably, the same logic could be valid to consumers with strong prejudice towards other social categories (e.g. sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion).

Therefore, regarding consumers' perceptions of stereotyped portrayals, there are strong differences and opposing findings in the literature.

Considering that several variables can potentially influence consumers' perceptions of advertising, it is difficult to isolate specific components when assessing their responses to



stereotyping. For example, according to Åkestam (2017), effectiveness of stereotyped or non-stereotyped advertising for brands depends on consumer's attitudes towards both the sender and the persuasive purpose of the ad (Dahlen & Rosengren, 2016; Eisend, 2016). Product type may also be a factor of influence (Pounders & Flynn, 2016), as well as other variables.

In conclusion, while the literature suggests more concrete findings regarding the social impacts of stereotyped and non-stereotyped advertising portrayals, in terms of effectiveness for brands, the literature is both more limited and far more conflicting.

#### **2.4. Inversion in advertising portrayals**

Having clarified the concepts of stereotyped and non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising, as well as its potential impacts on society and effectiveness for brands, it is important to understand the current dynamics of both types of portrayals in the media.

Currently, the advertising space is undergoing a shifting movement in terms of stereotypical representations: while a decrease on stereotyped portrayals in advertising has been documented along the past years (Eisend, 2010), evidence suggests a gradual increase in the number of non-stereotyped portrayals (Mahdawi, 2015; Chu et al., 2015; Bukszpan, 2016; Åkestam et al., 2017a; Åkestam et al., 2017b).

Past literature suggested that even though non-stereotyped representations had been featured in niche advertising (e.g. advertising targeting minorities, such as the LGBT community), such portrayals had been largely absent, or heavily stereotyped, in advertising targeted to the mainstream audience (Oakenfull et al., 2008; Mastro, 2009; Bissell & Rask, 2010). Nowadays, however, non-stereotyped portrayals are not only present in niche advertising anymore, but have also been increasing its presence in mainstream advertising (Mahdawi, 2015), raising questions regarding the possible reasons behind the increase in non-stereotyped advertising.

Based on the assumption that advertising is capable of reflecting social phenomenon (Pollay 1987), several changes in society could potentially explain the trend, being it structural changes (e.g. demographics, labor force), changes in mentality and attitudes (e.g. consumers' mindsets, beliefs, values, behaviors), both, and/or others.



According to Scott Goodson (2012), author of “Uprising: How to build a brand and change the world by sparking cultural movements”, society is currently living a time of uprisings, with causes such as gender equality, LGBT, religious diversity, political freedom, and several others gaining traction, and as consumers have become more involved in promoting changes in those matters, they also expect companies to position accordingly. Such expectations come not only from individuals who identify themselves as part of specific groups (e.g. LGBT), but by many others who share their support.

Nowadays, modern consumers judge companies by their public stands more than ever, supporting businesses with values that resonate with theirs. According to Nielsen (2015) 55% of consumers are willing to pay more for products of cause-supporting brands. Edelman Trust Barometer (2016) shows that 80% of consumers expect businesses to play a role in addressing social issues. Amongst Millennials, brand activism is a far more important factor for purchasing decisions when compared to Generation X and Baby Boomers (Weber Shandwick and KRC Research, 2017). In addition, Millennials frequently use social media to share content and promote causes that they care about (Conne Communications, 2013).

As modern consumers have become more cause-oriented along time, brands nowadays have higher incentives to take public stands and actively support social causes, which may include several topics, from environmental protection, to political freedom, but also LBGT, racial and gender equality. Consequently, at least in some of those causes, the result of brands’ support is the increased adoption of non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising campaigns.

In the current market environment, managers are increasingly more interested in fostering cultural and social movements, looking for topics and causes around which their target audiences are gathered (Manzo, 2012). According to Scott Goodson (2012), brands should try to identify an idea or movement on the rise in culture, around which people are uniting, and become an authentic part of the movement building on that particular idea.

One example of a social change ultimately reflected in advertising portrayals is the evolution of women’s social roles. The rise of the feminist movement in the United States in the 1960s initiated a gradual change in occupational opportunities and domestic life (Zotos & Lysonski 1994; Plakoyiannaki et al. 2008; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos 2009; Zotos & Tsihla 2014) that brought significant changes in labor force and family structures. These changes have impacted both male and female roles in society and, consequently, how they were reflected in



advertising (Zotos & Lysonski, 1994; Zotos & Tsihla, 2014). Indeed, research indicates a slow but clear shift from stereotyped to non-stereotyped portrayals of women along the past decades (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

Many other social changes could also be mentioned. For example, in terms of demographics, in the United States alone, 1.4 million people identified themselves as transgender in 2016 (Flores, Herman, Gates, and Brown, 2016). This data represents a clear opportunity, if not an inevitable need, for marketers to include transgender representations in advertising, given that not only transgender individuals, but all consumers who share their support for equal rights for the LGBT community, might demonstrate low acceptance to stereotyped advertising.

Examples of brands that have already been including gender diversity in their campaigns are Bud Light, through its pro-transgender ad featuring Seth Rogen and Amy Schumer with the tagline "Beer should have labels, not people", as shown in Figure 4 (Appendix A), as well as Nike's commercial featuring a transgender athlete for the first time in the brand's history, as shown in Figure 5 (Appendix A).

In terms of sexual orientation, after the Supreme Court legalized homosexual marriage in 2015 in the United States, several brands used their digital channels to show support, including the multinationals General Mills, owner of the Cheerios brand, and American Airlines, as shown in Figure 6 and Figure 7 (Appendix A). American Airlines has been including diversity in its commercials, for example through the "Fly Forward" campaign, shown in Figure 8. Another example is Ray Ban with the "Nerve Hide" commercial, illustrated in Figure 9 (Appendix A). In the beauty industry, in June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the LGBT proud day, the Brazilian makeup brand Avon launched the "Sinta na pele" campaign, claiming that makeup should be for all, and featuring several artists and models of the LGBT community, as shown in Figure 10.





Figure 10 – Avon's "Sinta na pele" campaign  
Source: Avon, 2016

In 2017, the makeup artist Manny Gutierrez was hired by the makeup brand Maybelline to star the "That Boss Life" campaign, advertising a new mascara, as shown in Figure 11.



Figure 11 – Maybelline's "That Boss Life" campaign  
Source: Maybelline, 2017

Supporting the increasing movements of racial equality and ethnical diversity, in the beverages industry, the Brazilian brand Skol, owned by AB Imbev, has launched a limited edition of cans in different colors to represent different skin color tones and celebrate diverse ethnicities, in a campaign named "Skolors", as shown in Figure 12 (Appendix A). Another example is Procter & Gamble's a campaign "The Talk", launched in 2017 for My Black is Beautiful, a group created in 2006 by black women at P&G to spark the dialogue about black beauty. The ad features African American parents having conversations with their children



regarding racial bias, along with the hashtag “#TalkAboutBias” inviting consumers to join the conversation on social media, as shown in Figure 13.



Figure 13 – Procter & Gamble’s “The Talk” campaign  
Source: Handley, 2018

In addition, it is important to notice that, to some extent, social changes can raise the need for businesses to adapt not only communications, but also product design and development.

In the fashion industry, for example, brands such as Diesel and Guess have recently launched campaigns featuring new gender-neutral clothing collections, targeting the young generations, as shown below in Figure 14, and Figure 15 and Figure 16 (Appendix A). A study by the J. Walter Thompson Intelligence (2016) shows that, among Generation Z (those born between 1995 and 2012), only 48% of respondents identify themselves as heterosexual, 56% knows someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns, and over a third believe gender does not define a person as much as it did in the past. Guided by those beliefs, Generation Z individuals naturally reject gender binary clothing as well (e.g. only 44% shops for clothes designed for their own birth gender).





Figure 14 – Diesel’s gender-neutral advertising  
Source: Monllos, 2016

Therefore, all initiatives discussed reinforce the perception that brands are adapting its marketing and communication strategies in parallel with changes in social structures and consumers’ mentality and attitudes.

#### **2.4.1. Evolution of women’s portrayals in advertising**

In order to better understand the shifting trend in advertising portrayals, gender representations will be analyzed in further detail.

Gender stereotypes in advertising have been attracting great level of both popular and academic attention. Only between 2005 and 2015, a review of major journals in marketing and advertising has found 37 articles published on the topic (Huhmanna & Limbub, 2016). Amongst studies on gender stereotypes, there seems to be a particular interest from scholars in the topic of women in advertising (Grau & Zotos, 2016), resulting in an extensive literature within disciplines of marketing, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies (Sandikci, 1998).

According to Sandikci (1998), it is possible to categorize three major streams of research on women’s portrayals in advertising. The first consists of content analysis examining how women are usually depicted, coding certain elements in the ads (e.g. Courtney & Whipple,



1983; Gilly, 1988; Fox, 1990; Craig, 1992). The second stream consists of experimental studies attempting to measure the impact of different role portrayals on consumers' responses such as attitudes towards the ad and brand, brand image, and purchase intention (e.g. Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Leigh et al., 1987; Ford & LaTour, 1993; Jaffe & Berger, 1994). Finally, the third stream consists of critical studies focused on the ideological content and consequences of portrayals of women in advertising (e.g. Williamson, 1978; Winship, 1980; Yanni, 1990; Rakow, 1992).

Through the research stream of content analyses, researchers have been able to map the differences in how men and women are represented in advertising along time. By drawing a historical timeline, starting in the 1900s, advertising usually portrayed women as housewives, with white skin and more voluptuous bodies. In developing countries such as Brazil, for example, until 1888 black women were only shown as slaves and servants (Ribeiro et al., 2017).

During the 1910s and 1920s, advertising targeted to women were still associated mainly with food, hygiene, and cleaning products, reinforcing the female stereotype dedicated to the family and the household, submissive to men, and obedient to social norms, while some ads even mocked women's fight for equal rights (Ribeiro et al., 2017). Figure 17 and Figure 18 illustrate this concept.

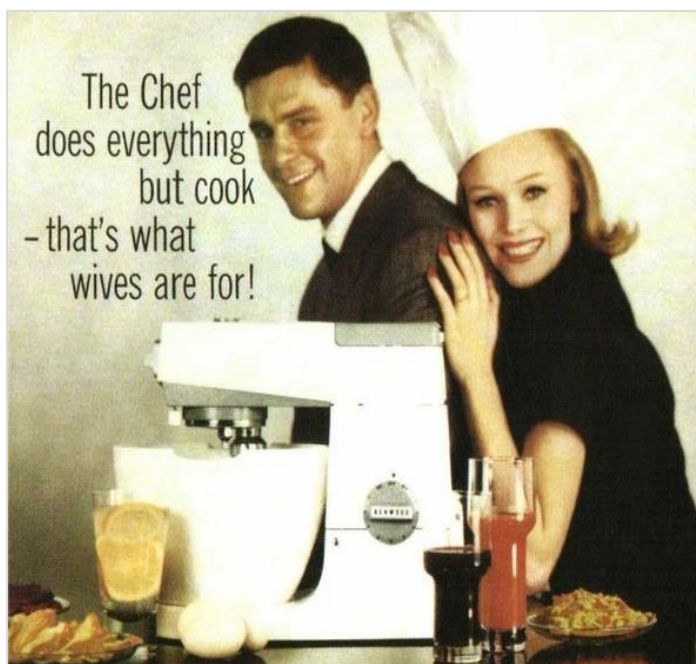


Figure 17 – Kenwood Chef, “That’s what wives are for”, 1960s  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012





Figure 18 – Dacron, “It’s nice to have a girl around the house”, 1960s  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012

At that time, portrayals of women usually followed the ideal of north-American beauty with more voluptuous silhouettes being considered ideal. From the 1930s and 1940s onwards, however, as the Hollywood divas gained popularity, beauty stereotypes changed to a thinner, more delicate, and fragile body type perceived as ideal (Eisend, 2010).

With the Second World Wars, women started to participate more actively in the professional job market, gaining responsibility for sustaining the household and autonomy in domestic decisions. However, a strong sexist mentality was still dominant in society. Thus, few commercials portrayed women in professional roles, with few exceptions showing only job positions considered “feminine”, such as secretaries, teachers, and stewardesses (Ribeiro et al., 2017).

In the 1960s, the creation of the birth control pill started a sexual revolution and became a symbol of freedom to women. In addition, Betty Friedan published “The feminine mystique”, book considered as the base of the modern feminism, which propelled the feminist movement in the USA and other countries afterwards. Donyale Luna became the first black women to star in a magazine cover in the USA, for Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue, representing a significant break in stereotypes at the time. In the 80s, the “I Dream” campaign by



Maidenform was one the first non-stereotyped gender portrayals in advertising. However, those commercials were still rare exceptions.

During the following years, advertising changed the focus from domestic and family oriented portrayals to elements of beauty and sensuality, using the objectification of women as a commercial tool and adopting strongly sexualized portrayals. Several ads also commonly carried elements of women's physical abuse. The hiper-sexualization in advertising from the 80s and 90s was perpetuated until very recently, in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ribeiro et al., 2017), as illustrated by Figure 19.

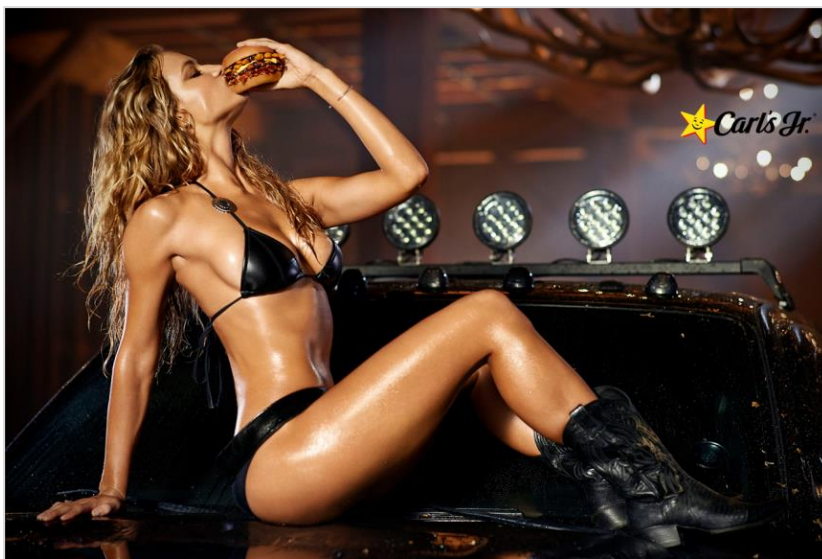


Figure 19 – Carl's Junior sexualized feminine portrayal, 2000s  
Source: Dodge, 2014

In Figures 20 to 31 (Appendix A) it is possible to see several stereotyped representations of women in advertising throughout time, from 1930s until the 2000s. The examples are consistent with several research findings. For example, a meta-analysis of studies from 1974 to 2007 found that women were more likely than men to have non-speaking roles, and to be presented in a domestic environment, as dependent on others (Eisend, 2010; Windels & Mallia, 2015), in submissive roles (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Craig, 1992; Elliot, Jones, Benfield, and Barlow, 1995), family-oriented roles, and in a highly sexualized manner (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008). The same research shows that men, on the other hand, are usually portrayed in authority, independency, and dominance roles (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004).



Table 1 summarizes the most common stereotyped portrayals of women.

Portrayals	Source
Women as younger	Eisend, 2010
Women as sexual objects	Plakoyiannaki and Zotos, 2008; Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Ferguson et al., 1990; Sullivan and O'Connor, 1988
Women of a slim body type	Halliwell and Dittmar, 2004
Women as passive or in subordination to male models	Eisend, 2010; Goffman, 1976; Ruggiero and Weston, 1985
Women as dependent	Eisend, 2010; Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976
Women in a domestic environment	Eisend, 2010; Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Mitchell and Taylor, 1990; Wiles et al. 1995
Women concerned with physical appearance	Eisend, 2009; Lysonski, 1985; Mitchell and Taylor, 1990
Women making unimportant decisions	Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976
Women in decorative roles	Wiles et al., 1995; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994; Sullivan and O'Connor, 1988

Table 1 – Frequent portrayals of women in advertising

Source: Adapted from Åkestam, 2017

When taking gender as subject of study, the comparison between historical periods and the portrayals of women in advertising exposes a clear delay (Grau & Zotos, 2016), with advertising developing in a slower pace than social changes on gender equality. Such a gap can be attributed to the sexist mentality that still perpetuated in society for several decades (Ribeiro et al., 2017), and possibly to the fact that men still represented the main labor force in the advertising industry. For example, according to data from the institute “The 3% Movement” (2008), until the year 2008 only 3% of creative directors in advertising in the United States were women, and even less were people of color.

In the current scenario, however, it has become difficult for brands to ignore feminine importance in the marketplace. Nowadays, women represent over \$20 trillion of global annual



consumer spending, are currently responsible for over 85% of household purchasing decisions and control more than one-third of global private wealth (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009).

As women gain representability, they increasingly demand companies to build more respectful and empowering messages and images into their ads. As a result, companies perceive the positive outcomes of connecting with this target audience on a more meaningful level and, at the same time, realize the risks incurred in resisting to change the strongly gender stereotyped advertising portrayals broadly used in the past. For example, a survey conducted by SheKnows Media (2014) indicates that 94% of women believe portraying women as sex symbols in advertisements is harmful and outdated.

According to a research from Think Eva (2017), the advancement of social media networks has also played an important role in the feminine empowerment and gender equality movement, allowing women to easily report cases of gender violence, abuse, or discrimination. This could be one more factor contributing to a decrease in stereotyped gender portrayals in advertising, as nowadays content generated by brands can be easily shared and criticized online by consumers.

Despite the fact that advertising has generally developed in a slower pace than women's fights for equal rights, non-stereotyped gender advertising has been gaining space in several media channels. The so called Femvertising, defined as advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls (SheKnows Media, 2014) is being adopted by several brands around the world, as a type of non-stereotyped advertising.

Following the steps from Dove, the brand Always, from Procter & Gamble, with the campaign "Like a Girl", has also become worldly renowned for its non-stereotyped gender campaign portraying young girls interested in sciences, sports, and several other activities commonly stereotyped as masculine, as shown in Figure 32 (Appendix A).

Another example in the feminine hygiene industry is the brand Hello Flo with the commercials "Camp Gyno" and "First Moon Party", which go on the complete opposite direction of most feminine tampon ads and show the real struggles of young girls dealing with menstrual cramps and the pressures of having their first period. Bodyform with the campaign "Live Fearless" featuring the taglines "Don't let your period stop you" and "No blood should hold us back" also adopted non-stereotyped portrayals, featuring women as athletes,



performing different kinds of sports and physical activities, and building a strong empowered image, as shown in Figure 33.

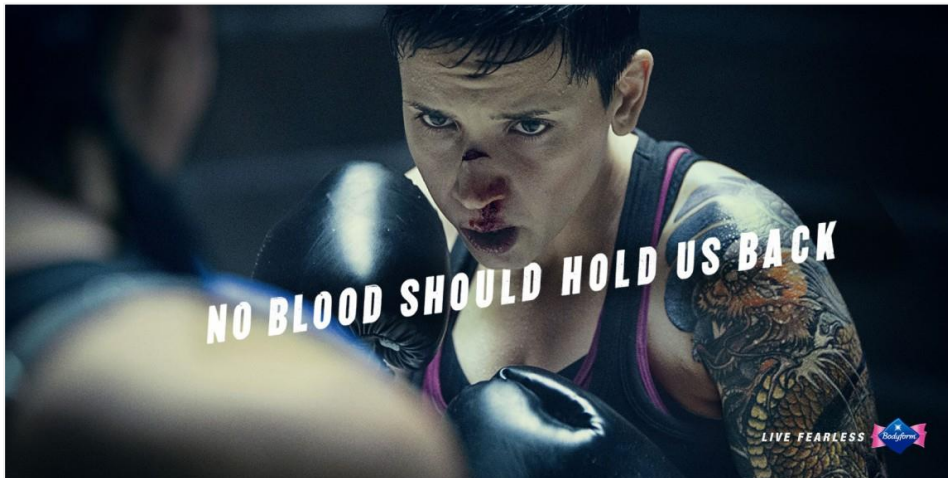


Figure 33 – Bodyform’s “Live fearless” campaign  
Source: Bodyform UK, 2018

In sports clothing and apparel, Nike announced its “Pro Hijab” line in 2018, enabling veiled Muslim women to practice sports with better performance, as shown in Figure 34 (Appendix A). Another brand in athletic apparel products, Under Armour, had its campaign “Rule Yourself: Women’s Gymnastics” awarded by SheKnows Media in 2016, as one of the best ads with the purpose of reshaping how society thinks about gender stereotypes.

In the technology and IT industry, usually stereotyped as masculine, Microsoft’s campaign “Girls do science” received good critics for breaking gender stereotypes by showing girls pursuing careers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics).

Despite several cases of success, several brands still find difficulties in approaching the female audience, and some had its advertising campaigns heavily criticized by the public. Pantene’s 2014 campaign “Sorry Not Sorry” tried to show that women should not over apologize for their actions, as shown in Figure 36 (Appendix A). The campaign was received by the public with polarized views. Despite positive reactions, some criticized the brand for approaching an important topic such as salary gap in a superficial way and for not choosing diverse models, in terms of body size and ethnicity for example, to feature the campaign.

The main negative criticism towards “Femvertising” is the idea that brands would be using feminism simply to increase profits, without real concerns for its impacts on women and next generations. On the other hand, the opposing argument states that despite profits generated by



Femvertising, the approach can indeed bring positive impacts on society and help empower women through breaking gender stereotypes.

According to SheKnows Media (2014), 62% of women believe any brand can enter the pro-female advertising space. However, companies which have always portrayed women in heavily stereotyped ways in advertising before might encounter more difficulties in shifting the negative associations related to the brand. One example is the beer brand Skol, from AB Imbev, which went public in 2017 apologizing for the way it has portrayed women in advertising in the past, and stating that “such images and stereotypes do not represent the brand and its beliefs anymore”. The company hired female artists to recreate sexist posters from its past, in a campaign called “Reposter”, as shown in Figure 37 and Figure 38.

There is, therefore, a great amount of controversy surrounding “Femvertising”, and despite its great prospects on positive return in terms of brand image, awareness, and financial outcomes, the incurred risks might also be significant for brands entering this new space in communications, reinforcing the relevance of the present study to both business theory and practice.



### 3. Methodology

This study aims to understand non-stereotyped advertising in terms of consumers' perceptions and its implications for businesses. Thus, the research questions are:

- i. How do consumers perceive and express themselves regarding non-stereotyped advertising?
- ii. What are the managerial implications for brands adopting non-stereotyped advertising?

The method applied to answer the research questions consists of qualitative exploratory research based on netnography and in-depth interviews.

Exploratory research is characterized as non-structured, based on simple non-representative sample, resulting in non-definitive assays that later usually require additional conclusive studies (Malhotra, 2006). It allows researchers to gain insights on specific phenomenon of uncertain nature (Saunders, Thornhill, and Lewis, 2009), when there is none or little information available, having as the main goal to develop initial insights and provide directions for future studies (Malhotra, 2006; Churchill, 1999). Considering that non-stereotyped advertising is a relatively recent phenomenon with little empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness or implications, exploratory research is a suitable choice.

As for the research focus, even though non-stereotyped advertising comprises a variety of social topics (e.g. sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, religion), in order to conduct proper in-depth investigation, gender was selected as the research subject, with learnings from the exploratory research aiming to support the understanding of other stereotypes categories.

Focusing on gender, among the several brands currently employing Femvertising, Barbie, from Mattel Inc., was selected as a case study. Case studies enable the investigation of contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 1984), being considered a robust research method particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed (Zainal, 2007).

The main reasons supporting the choice for Barbie as a case study are, first, the fact that Barbie is an iconic brand, with high levels of awareness and recognition in an international setting. Second, along its 60 years of history, Barbie has been heavily criticized by the public and the media for perpetuating stereotypes; however, in 2015, a new strategy for brand revitalization has changed its communication strategy and even the product portfolio to



include non-stereotyped representations, therefore showing a strong fit with the research topic and high relevance to the research questions.

The research scope within the Barbie case includes the most relevant initiatives of Barbie's revitalization strategy: the new "You can be anything" campaign, which includes the commercial "Imagine the possibilities", the new product line "Barbie Fashionistas" and its advertisings, and the new product line "Barbie Inspiring Women Series" and its advertisings.

### 3.1. Data collection

Having defined the scope of investigation, data was collected through the methods of netnography and in-depth interviews.

1. Netnography	2. In-depth interviews
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Facebook communities</li> <li>■ Barbie Facebook page</li> <li>■ Barbie Instagram account</li> <li>■ Barbie YouTube channel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Marketing Director of Barbie</li> <li>■ Mothers of girls between 3 and 13 years old</li> <li>■ Pedagogue</li> </ul>

Table 2 – Research methodologies  
Source: Developed by the author

There are several ways in which social media data can be collected and formatted, depending on the types of behavior being researched and the platforms which are used as source material (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). In this study, netnography applied as a qualitative method to enable a more grounded understanding of consumers' online discourses and interactions. Netnography is defined as a branch of ethnography that investigates consumer behavior of online cultures and communities (Kozinets, 2010).

In the netnographic study, data was collected from June 15<sup>th</sup> to September 10<sup>th</sup> 2018. As suggested by Kozinets (2010), data collection continued for as long as new insights and findings on relevant topics were still being generated.

Three social media platforms were selected for data collection: Barbie's official Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube accounts. Tables, 3, 4, and 5 shows the different metrics of each platform, with numbers being up-to-date until the end of the study, September 10<sup>th</sup> 2018.



Facebook	Numbers
Followers	14.4 million
Page likes	14.5 million
Pictures	5.991
Videos	93

Table 3 – Facebook metrics

Source: Developed by the author

Instagram	Numbers
Followers	1.2 million
Posts	1.553

Table 4 – Instagram metrics

Source: Developed by the author

YouTube	Numbers
Subscribers	5.2 million
Videos	2.186

Table 5 – YouTube metrics

Source: Developed by the author

In addition, within Facebook, not only Barbie's official page was monitored, but online communities around Barbie were mapped and selected for further investigation. Following the recommendations of Kozinets (2010), the criteria used to select the online communities were: high frequency of posting traffic, rich quality data, large number of active participants, and multiple interactions of the type required to answer the specific research questions. As a result, four online communities were selected, as shown in Table 6.

Name	Platform	Description	Members
Barbie Collectors	Facebook	"Welcome to Barbie Collectors! Here is a place to talk about everything Barbie-related."	19,241
Barbie through the years	Facebook	"This is a group to discuss and share pictures of your Barbie collection. This group is for all eras of Barbie, from Vintage to today! Feel free to share your Barbie knowledge with one another."	2,104
Curvy Barbie Collectors Club	Facebook	"For the love of curvy Barbie, where a few extra pounds is beautiful!"	675
Barbie fashionista dolls	Facebook	"A fun pictures, news and discussion group for Barbie fashionistas."	2,193

Table 6 – Online communities selected for netnographic analysis

Source: Developed by the author



Within the online communities, three types of data were collected for further analysis: first, data directly copied from the community members' posts and interactions; second, data that the researcher herself inscribed regarding her observations of the community, its members, interactions, and meanings, also called fieldnotes (Kozinets, 2010); third, data originated from individual conversations between researcher and users, conducted in separate.

Regarding individual interviews conducted with community members, users were categorized according to level of involvement, defined by frequency of posting and activity, criteria adapted from the method suggested by Kozinets (2010). Members with low activity levels were categorized as "Tourists", members with average observed activity were categorized as "Minglers", and members with strong social ties to the group and strong activity were categorized as "Devotees". Representing valuable community members, a total of six "Devotees" were invited for interviews (three from "Barbie Collectors", two from "Barbie through the years", and one from "Barbie fashionista dolls"), to obtain deeper insights on their perceptions of Barbie's revitalization strategy. Separate interviews were conducted from August 15<sup>th</sup> to September 10<sup>th</sup> via Skype call, lasting approximately 25 minutes.

Finally, regarding the netnographic study overall, a total of 183 Facebook posts, 147 Instagram posts, and 38 YouTube videos summing approximately 1 hour and 27 minutes, were used for detailed data collection and further analysis.

Regarding in-depth interviews, three different audiences participated in the study. The first audience consists of 14 mothers of young girls between the ages of 3 and 13 years old, representing Barbie's target audience. Regarding the mother's profiles and demographics, further detailed on Table 7, most interviewees were married and worked out of the household, the average age was 36 years old, and in total 8 different nationalities were represented in the interviews. The second audience consists of a pedagogue specialized in child care and gender-related play. The third audience consists of an executive from Mattel, currently the EMEA (Europe, Middle East, and Africa) Marketing Director for Barbie.



Interviews	Age	Marital status	Profession	Nationality	Children
MOT 1	34	Married	Entrepreneur	Brazilian	Daughter, 4 years old
MOT 2	38	Married	Entrepreneur	Brazilian	Daughter, 5 years old Daughter, 7 years old
MOT 3	42	Married	Brand manager	Portuguese	Daughter, 11 years old
MOT 4	45	Divorced	Stay at home mother	Brazilian	Daughter, 12 years old
MOT 5	33	Married	Pediatrician	Brazilian	Daughter, 6 years old
MOT 6	37	Married	HR coordinator	Spanish	Daughter, 6 years old Daughter, 13 years old
MOT 7	46	Divorced	Chemical engineer	German	Daughter, 10 years old
MOT 8	29	Married	Stay at home mother	Polish	Daughter, 6 years old
MOT 9	31	Married	Executive assistant	Spanish	Daughter, 5 years old
MOT 10	28	Single	Therapist	Spanish	Daughter, 5 years old
MOT 11	44	Married	Stay at home mother	Brazilian	Daughter, 11 years old Daughter, 13 years old
MOT 12	33	Married	Investment banker	Swiss	Daughter, 3 years old
MOT 13	37	Married	Stay at home mother	English	Daughter, 8 years old
MOT 14	35	Married	Designer	Italian	Twin daughters, 4 years old

Table 7 – Profiles of mothers who participated in in-depth interviews

Source: Developed by the author

Regarding methodological procedure for the in-depth interviews, semi-structured questionnaires were used to guide conversations, which are further detailed in Appendix B. Sampling was based on a convenience sample, a non-probability sampling method in which the sample is chosen according to easiness to contact and reach (Malhotra, 2006). The interviews were conducted either personally or via Skype call, between August 5<sup>th</sup> and October 14<sup>th</sup>, lasting on average 60 minutes.

### 3.2. Data analysis

As data analysis started concomitant with data collection. Contextualization of online data often proves to be challenging (Kozinets, 2010), and softwares such as QSR NVivo or Atlas.ti



may be used to expedite coding, content analysis, sentiment analysis, data linking, data display, and theory-building functions (Richards and Richards, 1994). The software QSR NVivo was used simply as a facilitator for data storage and documentation.

When analyzing of data collected on social media platforms, proper data documentation is an important concern (Kozinets, 2010). As NVivo allows storing and sorting all data under one single platform, importing content from several source and under various formats (e.g. text, audio, video, emails, images, spreadsheets, social and web content), it facilitates the documentation of data, as the initial step for qualitative analysis.

Data was organized according to the platform (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), and the brand initiative to which it referred, considering the defined scope of investigation for Barbie's revitalization strategy. For example, collected data regarding consumers' perceptions of the "Imagine the possibilities" commercial were classified under one category, while perceptions of the "Barbie Fashionistas" were classified under another.

After data organization, NVivo was experimentally used in an attempt to sort sentiment, as shown in Figure 39 (Appendix B), as it allows the researcher to run automated analysis for identification of expressions and sentiment in content using a tool called "Auto Code Wizard", coding sentiment under four streams: very positive, moderately positive, moderately negative or negative. However, confirming initial concerns, it was possible to identify several misallocations and misinterpretations, as for example posts and comments contains elements of sarcasm or irony where not correctly interpreted by NVivo. Therefore, a qualitative approach to data analysis was adopted, focusing on meanings rather than quantifiable phenomena. Analysis of semantics and visual elements in each social media post was conducted, maintaining sensitivity to context rather than seeking generalizations. According to Kozinets (2010), the most valuable interpretations of netnographic data it based on contextual richness, metaphoric and symbolic interpretation (Sherry 1991, Thompson, 1997), rather than meticulous classification and automated evaluations.

Finally, especially in netnographic studies, the ethical concern regarding social media data interpretation is a sensitive issue, based on a broad discussion on what information may be disclosed and the boundaries of public and private online spaces. Netnographers must be cautious, as publishing information collected on online communities may lead to embarrassment or ostracism if an associated person's identity is discerned (Kozinets, 2010).



Due to the high volume of posts and number of participants posting in the online communities, asking for consent for using data inputs would not be realistic. However, in this study, two main ethical procedures were assured: first, full disclosure of the presence and intentions of the researcher in the online communities during the research, and second, confidentiality and anonymity guaranteed to all members of the online communities and of Barbie's social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

As for in-depth interviews, consent was given by 6 of the total interviewees to record audio files, later transcript for analysis. The remaining interviews were analyzed based on the researcher's observation and notes. Given that content generated by in-depth interviews can become overwhelming, as a one hour interview can generate dozens of transcript text pages (Kvale, 2006), in order to make analysis less daunting, notes and reflections were registered by the researcher both during and immediately after each interaction.

Each interviewee was then categorized under a coding system, used to label each quote, as shown in Table 8.

<b>Audience</b>	<b>Identification code</b>
Pedagogue	PED1
Executive	EXE1
Mothers	MOT 1, MOT 2, MOT 3, MOT 4, MOT 5, MOT 6, MOT 7, MOT 8, MOT 9, MOT 10, MOT 11, MOT 12, MOT 13, MOT 14

Table 8 – Coding of in-depth interviews  
Source: Developed by the author



## **4. Barbie case**

Mattel Inc.'s Barbie doll is one of the world's most iconic toys. However, from 2014 to 2015, close to its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the brand saw itself struggling as both sales and consumer engagement decreased. With the industry landscape becoming more competitive, consumers' preferences changing, and Barbie entering the spotlights for several controversies, being criticized for perpetuating sexist gender stereotypes, the brand started losing its appeal and relevance in the market. In this scenario, in 2015, Mattel initiated Barbie's brand revitalization, launching the "You can be anything" campaign and expanding the product portfolio in an attempt to, once again, make Barbie one of the most beloved toys in the world.

### **4.1. Mattel Inc.**

Mattel is amongst the world's largest toys and games manufacturers, seen as a reference in design, manufacturing and marketing of toys and family products. The American company, founded in 1945 in California, holds major brands such as Fisher-Price, American Girl, Hot Wheels and Barbie. Mattel employs approximately 30,000 people in 40 different countries, and commercializes its products in more than 150 nations.<sup>1</sup>

Mattel, Inc. became the world's largest toy manufacturer in the 1990s, mainly due to the successful Barbie's sales, acquisitions of toy companies, and alliances in the entertainment industry. In 2014, however, Mattel lost the post of world's largest toy manufacturer to LEGO. At that time, the company was suffering from growing competition (mainly, but not limited to digital games), and changing demographics, such as late marriages and declining birth rates in most developed countries in the world (Thadamalla, 2015).

By that time, Mattel also lost Disney's "Frozen" franchise license, saw its iconic Barbie brand decline in popularity amongst young girls, and other brands in its portfolio decrease in market performance, which altogether contributed to the overall decline in global financial results.

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1. Mattel, Inc. "Mattel History". Retrieved from [http://www.mattel.com/About\\_Us/History/mattel\\_history.pdf](http://www.mattel.com/About_Us/History/mattel_history.pdf)



## 4.2. Barbie's history

The iconic Barbie doll's story started in the 1950s, when Ruth Handler one day watched her daughter, Barbara, playing make-believe with paper dolls as if the cut-outs were teenagers with roles of college students, cheerleaders, or adults with various careers. At that moment, Ruth realized how this kind of imagination was as an important in early childhood. While the boys' toys market was already advanced at the time, toys for girls were still very limited. Noticing a clear market gap, Ruth decided to create a doll capable of inspiring her daughter to dream about future possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

After several designs, resistance from Mattel's engineers (who told Ruth the doll would be too expensive to produce) and from Mattel's advertising agency (which worried about the adult-looks of the toy), Mattel finally introduced Barbie into the market in 1959, at the annual Toy Fair in New York City (Paul, 2005). The fashion model doll wearing a black-and-white striped bathing suit was completely different from any other doll available in the market at that time. Initially sold for \$3, and with additional fashion items based on Paris' runway trends sold from \$1 to \$5, Barbie was the world's first mass-marketed doll to have an adult-look. Being heavily marketed through television advertising, 300,000 units were sold only within the first year of its launch.<sup>2</sup> During the following three years, Mattel added factory capacity and warehouse space, but still couldn't keep up with the demand for the dolls.

Over time, the Barbie doll underwent several make-overs to reflect social trends. In the 50s, Barbie's looks mirrored Hollywood stars, with a tall figure, pale skin, long and slim legs, narrow waist and hips. At the time, even though the doll was already sold in both blonde and brunette versions, Barbie became broadly known for her blonde hair. In the 1960s, Barbie gained slightly softer eye makeup, less arched eyebrows, and blue irises for the first time, in addition to a third hair color, called "Titan", a popular expression for red hair. In the 1970s, Malibu Barbie, with suntanned skin and long-straight hair, represented the ultimate surfer girl, reflecting American society's popular culture at the time. Later in the same decade, Superstar Barbie held a glittering disco glam look, aligned with the disco dance floor culture that spread across the United States. In the 1980s, Barbie & The Rockers dolls had shoulder pads, scrun-

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1. Mattel, Inc. "Barbie History". Retrieved from [www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/history.html](http://www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/history.html)

2. Mattel Inc. "Barbie Media: Facts by the number". Retrieved from <http://barbiemedia.com/aboutbarbie/fast-facts.html>



chies, big belts, and leggings in the "Day and Night" theme. In the 1990s, the Generation Girl Barbie took on an "edgy", street-fashion look, reflecting the pace of the decade's race to the new millennium. Finally, in the 2000s, Barbie assumed a more athletic physique, with a bendable and flexible waist.<sup>1</sup>

In alignment with racial equality issues during the 60s, Mattel released a black version of doll in 1967, named "Colored Francie". However, the version did not succeed in the market, perhaps due to the still elevated racial inequality and the fact that many parents were still reluctant to reinforce diversity to their children at a time when racism was still commonly accepted. Mattel also launched Theresa in 1988, with a Hispanic background, and Barbie's Asian friend Lia, in 1990 (Paul, 2005). However, none of the models became as significant as the original Barbie doll.

During her lifetime, Barbie had different career dolls launched in the market, such as astronaut Barbie in 1986, Dr. Barbie in 1988, as well as veterinarian Barbie, chef Barbie, and several other professional versions.

By the 1980s, Barbie had become a \$1 billion brand.<sup>2</sup> By the 1990s, it was estimated that two Barbie dolls were sold every second.<sup>2</sup> By the 2000s, annual sales were higher than \$3.6 billion.<sup>3</sup> By 2009, the Barbie brand was ranked 97<sup>th</sup> in the Best Global Brands report, with a brand value estimated at \$1.87 billion (Gayatri, 2005). In 2009, Barbie merchandise represented 25% of the U.S. market share in dolls and accessories.<sup>3</sup> Barbie became worldly famous, turned into one of the preferred girls' toy in the world, an icon of the American culture amongst baby boomers, and a model of aesthetic perfection and femininity.

### **4.3. Product portfolio and channels**

Mattel initially commercialized only physical products under the Barbie brand, including the doll itself, accessories (e.g. clothes, hair accessories), and playsets (e.g. Dream House furnitu-

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1. Mattel, Inc. "Barbie History". Retrieved from [www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/history.html](http://www.barbiemedia.com/about-barbie/history.html)

2. Mattel Inc. "Barbie Media: Facts by the number". Retrieved from <http://barbiemedia.com/aboutbarbie/fast-facts.html>

3. Mattel Inc. "Annual Report 2004". Retrieved from <https://investor.shareholder.com/mattel/annuals.cfm>



re, Barbie's car). Later offerings included books, CDs, clothing, costumes, and assorted merchandising products carrying the Barbie logo targeted at young girls.

Along the years, the portfolio was updated to reflect the new technologies in an attempt to fight new competitors. Barbie expanded into the digital world with TV series and movies, music, apps, and online games, even though the dolls continued to be the main revenue driver.

For several decades, Barbie was commercialized through the American retailer Toys "R" Us, which recently went bankrupt. Nowadays, Barbie's products are commercialized both on online and offline channels, through major retailers such as Target, Walmart, Carrefour, Amazon, in addition to its own online store. Furthermore, Barbie has one separate segment in its online store for collectors, named "Official Barbie Collectors Club", offering exclusive vintage models.

#### **4.4. Brand communications**

Based on a throughout analysis of Barbie's advertising pieces from the decade of 1950 to 2014, the main messages of the communication strategy were mapped in order to provide a better understanding of how the doll's image was built over time.

In 1959, in the United States, Mattel broadcasted Barbie's first TV commercial<sup>1</sup>, as shown in Figure 40 (Appendix C). The main focus in terms of content was to show the many joys of having a Barbie doll. The ad listed the main reasons that made Barbie the best doll: Barbie is "slim, petit, neat, and beautiful", Barbie is the perfect hostess, Barbie has several outfits and accessories for girls to experiment with, and girls can be like Barbie when they grow up. The theme song of the commercial carried the sentences "one day I will be exactly like you" and "I will make-believe that I am you". Commercials in the 60s, 70s and 80s continued to emphasize Barbie's beauty, personality, and fashion elements, showing Barbie modeling in different outfits and describing the various ways in which girls could dress the doll.

Another main topic commonly approached by early communication campaigns during the 60s

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1. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hhjjhYGQtY&index=6&list=PLRjBgF9z8gwNB5aUAAbV6c2v8UtyviKdcl>



was Barbie's dream house<sup>1</sup>, which was sold completely furnished, containing Barbie's dressing table, den, studio couch, TV, and a dedicated closet with hangers where girls could store the outfits purchased for their Barbie dolls. Girls could also assemble the furniture themselves and arrange it within the dream house, as shown in Figure 41 (Appendix C).

Still in the 1960's, the first ever commercial introducing Ken was launched<sup>2</sup>, showing how Barbie met her boyfriend in a romantic ball and went on dates. During the next decades, Ken continued to be a key subject in advertisings.

Common to society during that time, women primarily held the roles of housewives, being frequently portrayed in family environments, as caregivers, and submissive to their husbands. Therefore, it is also possible to observe some of Barbie's old advertising pieces naturally reflecting the social mindset of that time, for example, by portraying Barbie serving drinks to her boyfriend, Ken, in a platter, as shown in Figure 42.



Figure 42 – Barbie serving her boyfriend, Ken  
Source: Barbie Collectors, 2018

Barbie's friends were also an important topic in the brand communication pieces. Commercials would show how Barbie had fun with her friends in group activities such as shopping, partying, dancing, practicing sports, and sunbathing at the beach.

1. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lL4rxKWemI&list=PLRjBgF9z8gwNB5aUAbV6c2v8UtyviKdcI&index=5>

2. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5pcyHT838g>

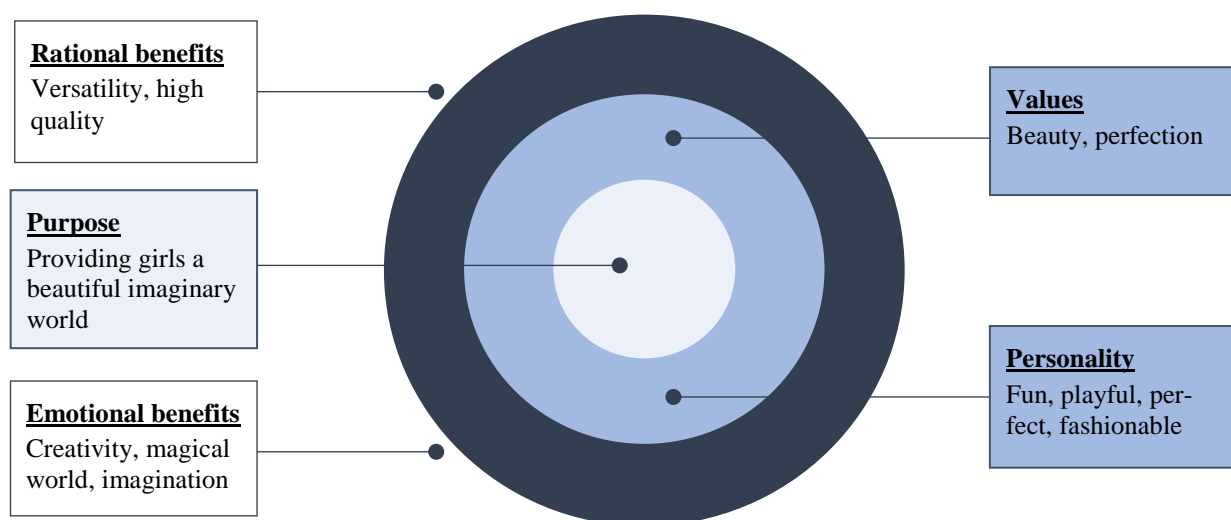


Another main communication topic was the doll's beauty features, especially body, face, and hair. During the 90s, commercials highlighted how girls could perform life-like movements with Barbie's articulated body, or how her life-like blonde hair allowed girls to create different hair styles, as shown in Figure 43 and Figure 44 (Appendix C).

Even though some commercials from past decades would eventually portray Barbie as a professional, for example Barbie Astronaut commercial in the 80s, shown in Figure 45 (Appendix C), this message was not as frequent in ads as the previously discussed topics.

In conclusion, it is possible to group the brand's core communication messages until 2014 in four main themes: (1) fashion, (2) beauty, (3) leisure, and (4) relationships.

An analysis of the brand wheel, based on communications prior to the brand revitalization, shows that the main rational benefit communicated by the brand was the dolls' multi-functionality, allowing girls to play make-believe in different scenarios and accessorize several outfits, in addition to product quality and real-life likeness of the dolls. The main values would be perfectionism and beauty, upon which the brand was positioned in the market for many years. In terms of personality, the Barbie was closely related to fun, playful, fashionable, beautiful and charming. The emotional benefits consisted mainly on the creativity and the magical imaginative world that the doll provided to young girls, and how Barbie served as a role model in terms of beauty and personality. Finally, the brands' purpose could be summarized in "providing girls with a beautiful imaginary world while growing up".



Graph 1 – Barbie's brand wheel prior to new strategy  
Source: Adapted from Iglesias, 2017



#### 4.5. Brand controversies and public criticism

Barbie's looks was a subject of controversy for many decades, as the brand was accused of reinforcing unhealthy beauty stereotypes in society. The original Barbie doll is blonde, tall, and skinny. Given the doll's body proportions, if Barbie were human, she would have a 41cm waist and weight 50 kilograms, which is a low-level probability for a real body shape amongst most women worldwide (Robson & Beninger, 2016). In response, Mattel claimed that Barbie was never scaled to human measurements.<sup>1</sup>

As most advertising campaigns along time repeatedly portrayed Barbie in the same light as when she was first introduced in 1950, the public perception of the brand remained limited to aspects of fashion, beauty, and lifestyle. Until 2014, Barbie was still seen as the blonde, ponytailed, pink dressed girl, with a wardrobe full of high-hells, and fan of shopping and hosting parties, thus, as a synonym of superficiality and materialism (Reuters, 2014).

Several products and commercials along the doll's history have also contributed to public perceptions of Barbie being a controversial toy that reinforced gender and beauty stereotypes. For example, in 1936 Mattel introduced Slumber Party Barbie into the market, consisting of a Barbie doll in pink pajamas and robe. The doll came with a pink bathroom scale set to 110 pounds and a one-page diet book presenting the sentence "How to lose weight?" stamped in the cover, and the instruction "Don't eat!" in the back, as show in Figure 46.



Figure 46 – Slumber Party Barbie  
Source: Lacey, 2012

1. Mattel, Inc. "Consumer Relations Answer Center". Retrieved from [http://service.mattel.com/us/faq\\_results.asp?SearchString=&category=7&product\\_number=H0998&faqPage=1&faq\\_id=52093](http://service.mattel.com/us/faq_results.asp?SearchString=&category=7&product_number=H0998&faqPage=1&faq_id=52093)



Another example is “Growing up Skipper Barbie”, launched in 1965 and later discontinued after being target of strong criticism. The product attempted to demonstrate the changes in girls’ bodies when becoming woman, thus, by rotating the doll’s arms, the torso would lengthen and the breasts would grow, as shown in Figure 47 (Appendix C).

In 2014, Barbie made to the cover of Sports Illustrated Swimsuit edition, wearing a modern version of the iconic black and white swimsuit in which the first doll was launched back in 1959, as shown in Figure 48 (Appendix C). The two brands, which for decades had been target of complaints about its sexist portrayals of women, joined forces in a campaign centered on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the magazine.

The campaign’s theme was “Unapologetic”, and both brands claimed that they were proudly “unapologetic” about whom they were. Shortly after the launching, Mattel issued an additional statement saying *“As a legend herself, and under constant criticism about her body and how she looks, posing in the issue gives Barbie and her fellow legends an opportunity to own who they are, what they have done, and be unapologetic”* (Elliot, 2014, p. 3). The campaign included a cover and a four-page advertising feature in the magazine, a limited-edition Sports Illustrated Barbie, video clips, social media content with the hashtag “#Unapologetic”, a billboard in Times Square and a beach-themed party in Manhattan.

The partnership ignited an online debate and several negative critics over the images of both brands, as the public claimed that the doll, with her stereotyped thin and blonde figure and strong focus on fashion, was not a positive role model for girls, and that Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue often objectified women through sexual feminine portrayals.

In addition to negative reviews of the campaign being published by Advertising Age, Adweek, and several other newspapers and magazines, a popular blog at the time, named Mommyish, carried the headline *“The Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue Will Feature Barbie, So Your Daughter Can Feel Bad Too”*, receiving strong public attention (Elliot, 2014, p. 6). Consumers’ posted several critics on social media, highlighting the irony of being “unapologetic” and self-confident when your body was considered the ideal beauty-standard in society, and that an “#Unapologetic” campaign issued in the cover of an adult swimsuit magazine was highly unappropriated for a children’s toy brand.

In addition to the doll’s body, Barbie also suffered negative criticism for having its image often associated to “superficial” topics and projecting a retrograde image of women’s social



role and capacity, instead of an empowered feminine image. In the early 1990s, for example, Teen Talk Barbie was released as a programmed doll with pre-recorded statements that included “I love shopping!” and “Math class is though”, which reinforced the ideas that Barbie wasn’t intelligent enough and only enjoyed superficial activities. Even though the product was later modified and the sentences were removed, the event reinforced the public perception that the doll was not a good educational toy.

More recently, in 2014, “Barbie: I can be a computer engineer” e-book was launched containing a controversial plot that showed Barbie failing in several tasks at work (e.g. damaging her computer with viruses, losing files) and needing help from her male colleagues to amend her mistakes. Facing a strong negative response from the public, Mattel discontinued the product and apologized, saying that “*The portrayal of Barbie in this story does not reflect the brand’s vision for what Barbie stands for*” (The Guardian, 2014, p.7).

All of the controversies involving the brand have served as fuel to the long-standing debate on whether the doll would be an appropriate role model for young girls or not. Such discussion got educators and researchers involved trying to assess the influence of Barbie dolls on children’s development of self-confidence, body image, understanding of gender roles and even racism (Bell, 2004).

Psychologists have long recognized the importance of play to children’s development (Huizinga, 1950; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Kuther, 2004), as it enables children to converse with the world around them and internalize social elements such as norms, values, and adult roles (Huizinga, 1950; Kline, 1995; Koste, 1995; Singer, 1995; Fein, 1995; Kuther, 2004). Several authors defend that toys are indeed influential to children’s development of self-concept, and particular toys chosen as favorites by children can become central to their identity (Koste, 1995; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Kuther, 2004).

As for Barbie in specific, it has been argued that the doll represents the paradigm of adult female beauty to which young girls learn to aspire (Turkel, 1998). Given that Barbie is believed to reflect a sexualized and stereotyped image (Kuther, 2004), the main concern is that by dramatizing stereotypical feminine roles during play, girls may internalize and later embody such roles themselves (Freedman, 1986).

Studies exploring children’s experiences with Barbie show that while Barbie dolls indeed seem to impact girls’ ideals, it remains unknown whether the influence is beneficial or



detrimental to girls' development (Rogers, 1999), while others show both positive and negative responses from children towards the doll (Kuther, 2004).

The in-depth interview conducted with a pedagogue in this study raised awareness to the fact that several parents are currently concerned with how certain activities and types of play can harm or improve child's development. According to the pedagogue, a common demand from millennial parents is to avoid labeling toy according to gender, to incentivize children to play with colleagues from both genders, preferably with toys meant to stimulate children's development and that offer educational elements. The quote below, extracted from the interview, exemplifies this concern.

Coding	Statement
PED 1	Parents nowadays are very worried about how toys impact their children. This didn't happen in the past. Parents trusted schools with their children and didn't monitor which activities were proposed. Toys were clearly defined as for girls or for boys. For example, dolls were meant exclusively for girls, and cars and trucks for boys. Parents didn't question that. Honestly, most educators also didn't. It is about the mentality of a certain time. Nowadays toys carry hidden meanings. We are aware of how they impact children, so we have to adapt what we offer as a pedagogic plan.

It is important to notice, however, that public criticism towards the brand is not only limited to potential harms caused in children, but also on the fact that Barbie's stereotypical portrayals help reinforce sexist stereotypes in society overall and, thus, could also impact women's' fight for equal rights.

As a result of such negative perceptions, several companies and consumers have started different initiatives to protest against the brand.

For instance, The Body Shop, British retailer of cosmetics, perfumes, and skin care products, launched a comprehensive self-esteem campaign in 1998, introducing Ruby, the doll that became known as the "anti-Barbie". The ads portrayed a curvy doll along with the message "There are 3 billion women who don't look like supermodels and only 8 who do", as shown in Figure 49 below, and Figure 50 (Appendix C). The campaign questioned the ideal of a thin body fitting all women, and its main goal was to challenge beauty stereotypes in society and start a debate about women's body image and self-esteem in the cosmetics industry.



At that time, the Ruby campaign received strong public attention and an overall positive reaction from consumers. In 1998, Mattel handed in a cease-and-desist order to The Body Shop demanding all images of Ruby to be removed from its shops.

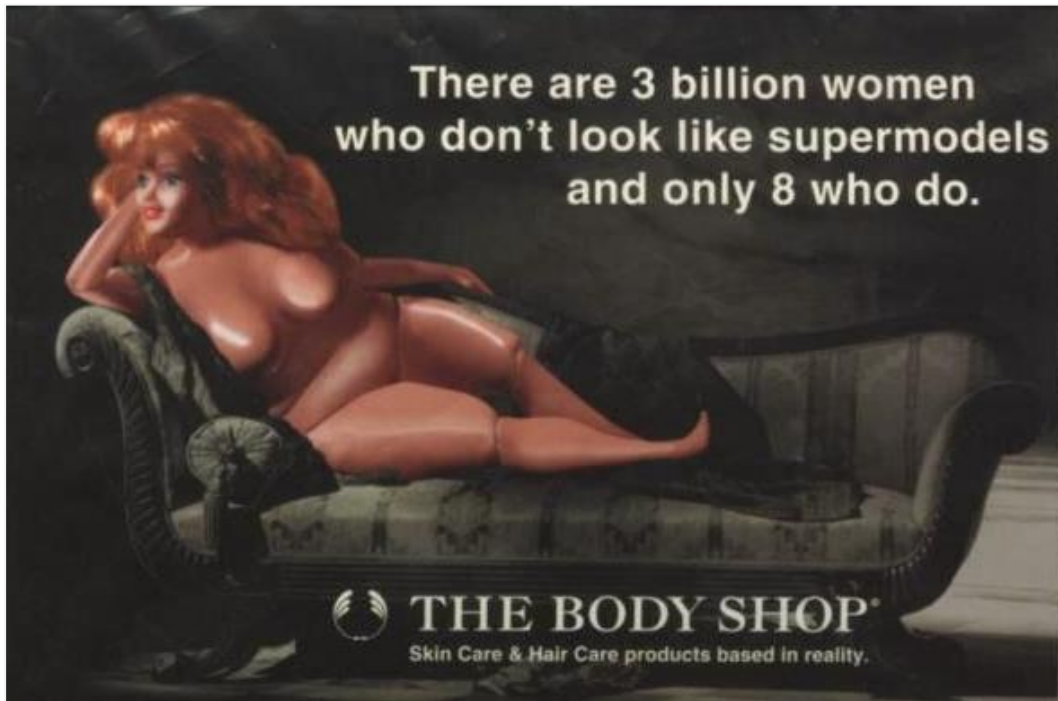


Figure 49 – The Body Shop  
Source: The Body Shop's "Know Your Body" Blog, 2005

In the same period, in 1997, the Danish-Norwegian pop music group Aqua released the "Barbie Girl" song as part of their new album. The lyrics were about Barbie and Ken, and included phrases such as "I'm a Barbie girl in a Barbie world. Life in plastic, it's fantastic. You can brush my hair, undress me everywhere" and "I'm a blond, bimbo girl, in a fantasy world. Dress me up, make me talk, I'm your dollie". In the plastic case in which the CD was commercialized, the group noted that the song was only a social comment and not created or approved by the doll's manufacturer (Mattel).

The song became worldwide famous, particularly in European countries. In the UK, it was a number-one hit for three weeks, as well as in Australia, and it reached the 7<sup>th</sup> position in the US "Billboard Hot 100" list of 1997. The song also featured magazines such as the Rolling Stone, both in 2007 and 2011, voted amongst "the most annoying songs", as well as the VH1's "The most awesomely bad songs ever" countdown.



Mattel filed a law suit against MCA Records, responsible for the album, for trademark infringement and defamation, claiming that the song was harming Barbie's reputation. Ultimately the lawsuit was dismissed by the court and the song was considered a parody, however, in the process, a great level of attention was raised to both the song and the band.

In a more recent example, when Unilever's Dove brand launched the "Real Beauty" campaign in 2005 and established the Dove Self-Esteem Fund, the discussion upon the deconstruction of beauty stereotypes in advertising gained significant strength. The campaign became well known worldwide, and is considered to be one of the pioneers in Femvertising. Amongst the several activities promoted by Dove's Self-Esteem Fund, one in particular had significant impact on Barbie's image. A variety of workshops were organized under an initiative called "BodyTalk", aimed to boost the self-esteem and positive body image of young girls and boys aged 8 to 16. Among the materials developed for the workshop, one entire activity sheet was devoted to the theme "Playing with beauty: Barbie and Ken – are they fun-inspiring dolls?" (Rhovland, 2015). The material was meant to help parents and mentors as to talk about the topic of self-esteem, and beauty stereotypes.

#### **4.6. Competitors**

In 2014, the toys and games global industry was valued in \$151.2 billion, with traditional toys and board games accounting for 56% and video games accounting for the remainder, but growing at a fast rate.<sup>1</sup> Within this industry, Barbie faced major competition from brands such as My Little Pony and Bratz dolls. Bratz in specific had released in 2001 a brand of fashion dolls that became a common object of comparison with Barbie, since the product line was more diverse in terms of hair, eye, and skin colors, thus portraying a less stereotyped image and broader ethnical representativeness.

The rise of new players such as GoldieBlox, American brand of interactive toys for girls launched in 2012, also increased pressure on Barbie. The brand, instead of selling dolls, sells board games, puzzles, and media entertainment, describing itself as a company that challenges gender stereotypes by offering toys designed to inspire creativity and develop girls' skills under the "do it yourself" philosophy, leading more girls to follow a STEM career

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1. Mattel, Inc. "Annual Report 2015". Retrieved from <https://investor.shareholder.com/mattel/annuals.cfm>



(Science, Technology, Engineering, Math). Thus, GoldieBlox challenges the very basic principle of playing with dolls and questions the benefits of gender stereotyped toys.

One of the current trends in the toys and games industry is actually gender neutrality, as it is believed that gender-neutral toys may help to take preconceived notions out of playtime and promote a more child-driven learning process (Stagnitti, Rodger, and Clarke, 2010). Even some retailers have been following the same path, for example Target, American retail brand that ignited a debate in the US after adopting gender-neutral toy labeling in its stores.

#### 4.7. Research results

This session presents the results of the research conducted with consumers and Mattel's executive in order to better understand how the brand revitalization strategy was planned and implemented, and how consumers perceived it. Table 9 summarizes the results.

Brand revitalization initiatives	Implementation and impacts for the brand
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “You can be anything” campaign               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Imagine the possibilities” commercial</li> <li>- Additional communication and initiatives (e.g. “You can be a beekeeper” commercial, contests, partnerships)</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ “Barbie Fashionistas” dolls</li> <li>▪ “Barbie Inspiring Women Series” dolls</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="244 1442 732 1836"> </div>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Financial performance and results from consumer research indicated need for change</li> <li>▪ Conflicting opinions between executives</li> <li>▪ Advertising changes led to further adaptations (product design, manufacturing)</li> <li>▪ Initial resistance to change internally from sales representatives, and externally from retailers</li> <li>▪ Modest sales increase post campaign launch</li> <li>▪ Additional benefits (e.g. PR, word-of-mouth)</li> </ul> <div data-bbox="809 1503 1455 1861"> <h4>Consumers' perceptions</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Differences in opinions between audiences (mothers vs. collectors)</li> <li>▪ Consumers' demand for investments beyond advertising, in corporate social responsibility</li> <li>▪ Overall positive reactions to non-stereotyped advertising, especially to messages of feminine empowerment and diversity</li> </ul> </div>

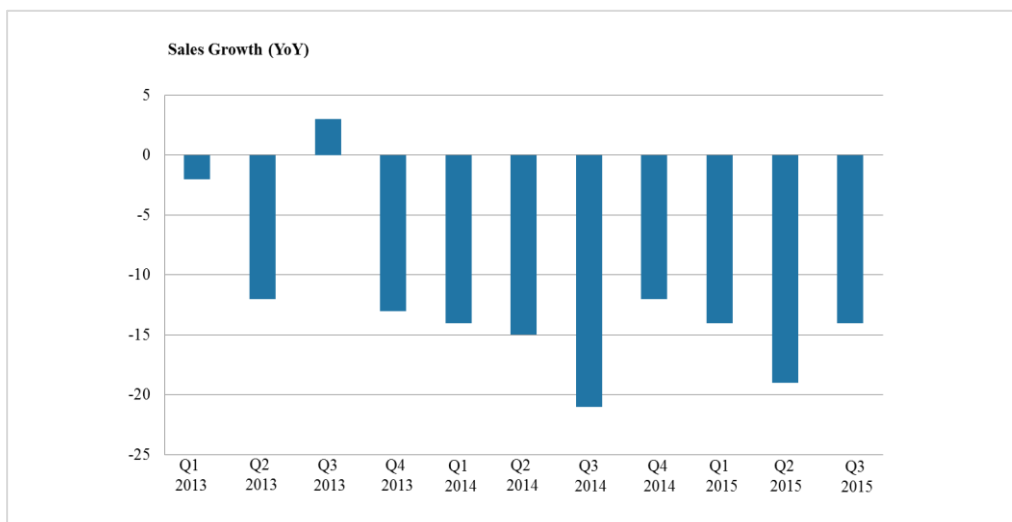
Table 9 – Research results summary  
Source: Developed by the author



#### 4.7.1. Brand revitalization process

The in-depth interview with Mattel's EMEA Marketing Director for Barbie was divided into four phases. First, given the industry landscape, changing consumer preferences, and several controversies surrounding the brand, the interview started with a discussion on the environment that led Mattel's executives to decide for revitalizing the brand. Second, the discussion focused on how the strategy was developed and implemented, and what were the managerial implications and challenges faced by the company. Third, the interview assessed how the revitalization process impacted different stakeholders, for example, in terms of retailers and investors' relations, and consumers' perceptions and engagement. Finally, the next steps foreseen for the Barbie brand were mapped from the company's point of view.

According to Mattel's executive, the most pressing symptom that indicated Barbie was facing problems was an expressive decline in sales in consecutive quarters, starting in 2013.



Graph 2 – Barbie's sales growth (YoY) Q1 2013 to Q3 2015

Source: Townsend, 2018

Such a decline led Mattel to slightly shift the corporate focus and investments from Barbie to brands that were presenting better performances, such as Monster High, which was a worrying signal for Barbie's executives.

In addition, negative media attention started to rise along with sales declines of Barbie, which was clearly perceived internally by the public relations department. Even though Barbie had always been involved in controversial debates, the frequency and depth of criticism became stronger with time, demanding higher efforts from the PR team to try and maintain a positive brand image.



Given the situation, Barbie's executives decided to invest in consumer research to identify the root of the problem and gain further insights on consumers' perceptions.

Consumer research conducted with parents showed a strong disconnection and lack of engagement between this target audience and the brand, especially regarding millennial parents. Feedback from millennial parents indicated that they could not identify value in the brand's proposition. They perceived too high of a focus on fashion content, which was considered of low relevance to children's education, and demonstrated a clear discontentment with the dolls' body and physical appearance reinforcing beauty stereotypes. Many millennial mothers had actually played with Barbies during their own childhoods, but felt that the company failed in modernizing its speech and actions to reflect the modern times.

In 2014 and 2015, a documentary called "Tiny Shoulders: Rethinking Barbie" started to be recorded inside of Mattel's headquarters in El Segundo, Los Angeles, California, showing some of the first strategic meetings of the brand revitalization process. By that time, Richard Dickson, President and Chief Operating Officer of the toy manufacturer, stated in front of the cameras: *"The foundation of our business is cracked... People say Barbie is vapid and materialistic"* (Baiz, 2018, p.9).

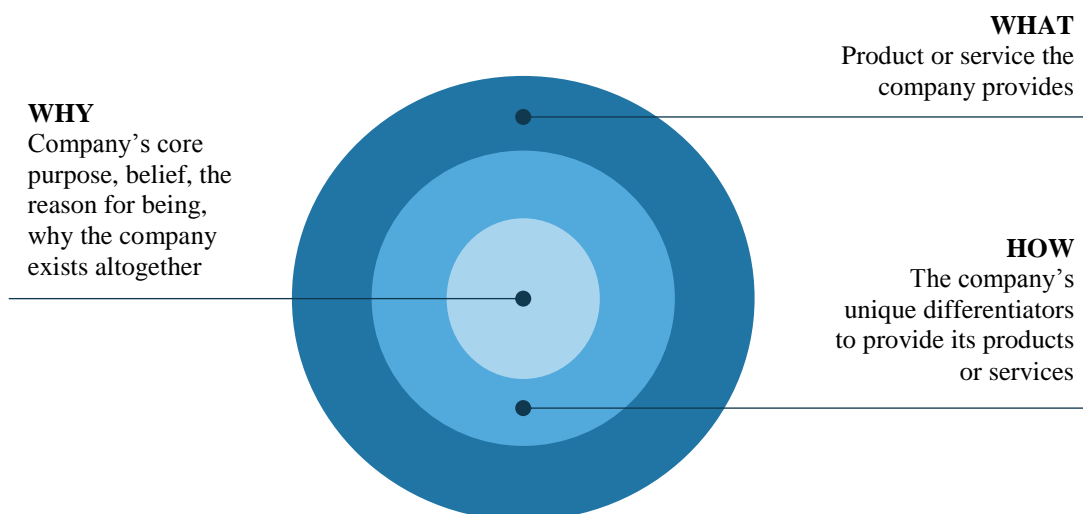
Pressured by declining financial performance and aware of consumers' discontentment, Barbie's executives acknowledged that a significant change was necessary in order to regain market relevance and strengthen the relationships with millennial parents. Thus, the brand revitalization process started with the approval of Mattel's Executive Board, being conducted in a global level, and later cascaded to a regional level and ultimately local level (countries) for implementation.

The initial step in the brand revitalization process was an intensive internal reevaluation of vision, mission, and values, aiming to gain clarity on the reason why Barbie existed altogether beyond financial gains, thus, Barbie's purpose.

Based on the Golden Circle theory of Simon Sinek, author of "Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action" who inspired Mattel's executives, corporations need to gain clarity on their purposes in order to generate engagement from both employees and consumers. The Golden Circle proposes that inspirational companies communicate from inside out, starting with why they do what they do.



Graph 3 illustrates the theory.



Graph 3 – The Golden Circle  
Source: Adapted from Sinek, 2009

According to the EMEA Marketing Director, defining Barbie's purpose was a priority inside of the organization, and executives were aligned on it being the first step for the brand revitalization. The process of search for purpose required Barbie's executives to investigate the brand's past and understand its origins. When looking into the reasons that led Ruth Handler to create Barbie back in 1950, it became clear that Barbie was always meant to be a source of inspiration for girls to dream about future possibilities. One particular quote by Ruth Handler inspired Barbie's executives in their search for purpose, as shown in Figure 51.



Figure 51– Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator  
Source: Internal report 2017, made available Mattel







In the new communication strategy, the messages shifted from the utilitarian approach of highlighting the doll's functional attributes, to a more hedonic approach of highlighting the several benefits and empowerment brought to girls by the activity of playing make-believe with the dolls.

Figure 53 illustrates the clear differences between Barbie's communication strategy in 2014 and in 2015, when the new "You can be anything" campaign launched. The changes from 2015 to 2017 and onwards, however, are more subtle. The tagline "You can be anything" remained unchanged, as did the content focused on professional careers for girls' empowerment. However, it is possible to observe a shift from focusing on the doll itself to girls who play with Barbie, especially in terms of visuals and imagery used in the campaign.



Figure 53 – Changes in communication strategy  
Source: Developed by the author

The new "You can be anything" campaign featured the commercial "Imagine the possibilities"<sup>1</sup>, launched in October 2015 and developed by the agency BBDO San Francisco in conjunction with BBDO New York. The new campaign aimed to rescue the topic of professional careers that had always underlined the brand's history, using it as the basis for the new communication strategy, showing how Barbie was capable of inspiring young girls to pursue their dreams.

1. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11vnsqbnAkk>



The commercial became a viral sensation. According to data made available by Mattel, in 2017 it had more than 50 million views around the globe and 718 million impressions. It also received international recognition, winning the “YouTube ad of the year” in 2015, the “Cannes Lion” prize in 2016, and the “Clio Award” also in 2016.

Overall, the new campaign started with strong support and positive response from the public, which served as a confirmation internally to the company that the proposed changes were indeed on the right path of recovery for Barbie.

Along with the new campaign, Barbie expanded its portfolio, launching more dolls with several careers under the product line named “Career dolls”, as illustrated in Figure 54. The company also established a culture of open communication with consumers, collecting suggestions for products from a proprietary website named “My Mattel Ideas”, in which consumers could agree with terms and submit their ideas for new products.



Figure 54 – Career dolls  
Source: Barbie Shop, 2018

In addition, several initiatives aimed at increasing consumer engagement were developed, for example, the “You Can Be Anything” contest, in which children all over the world could submit a photo or video on social media channels describing what they wanted to be when they grew up, for the chance to win a \$10,000 experience. The winner of the contest, a seven-year-old girl who dreamed of becoming an author, was taken to attend writing and illustrating workshops, visit publishing houses, and also received guidance to write her own book in a mentorship program with the Australian author Louise Park and the illustrator Judith Rossell.

However, despite the initial success of the “You can be anything” campaign, Barbie continued to suffer negative criticism regarding the physical appearance.



Barbie's team was already aware that the lack of diversity in the product line, especially regarding body shapes and sizes, was a main issue to millennial parents, as it was repeatedly confirmed by consumer researches.

Even though there had been previous discussion at Mattel on how to address the issue of diversity, the debate never gained momentum to actually generate practical changes. However, with the "You can be anything" campaign in place, a general questioning started to circulate inside of the company on whether the timing was finally right to include more diversity in the product portfolio.

While changes in the communication strategy reflected by the new "You can be anything" campaign received unanimous support across the organization, without any internal opposition to the campaign's core concept, the topic of diversity was still highly controversial inside of Mattel, dividing executives pro and contrary to the idea.

Internal meetings conducted in Barbie's headquarters in Los Angeles involved not only the high level management of Mattel, but also Barbie's executives of key departments that would be affected by a potential change, such as PR, marketing, and product design. Ahead of the team defending the need for a product remodeling was Kimberly Culmone, Vice President - Global Head of Barbie Design, a firm believer of purpose-driven and human-centric design. Culmone started her career at Mattel in 1998 in the textile department, and assumed several positions since then, including Vice President of Consumer Product Design in 2010, reaching her current position in 2013.

On one hand, the company wanted to make the doll more relatable to children and millennial parents, but on the other, incurred risks of product redesign were extremely high, as changing the doll's body and looks would require significant additional investments and also impact both operational and social areas.

Operationally, giving Barbie a new body would implicate in new clothing sizes, new measurements for her convertible car, new measurements for the Dream House and its furniture. In terms of manufacturing, adding diversity to the line required new product molds, new packaging, adjustments in factory layout and machinery, changes in manufacturing times, new control guidelines for product quality and errors. In terms of supply chain, the redesign could potentially impact retailers' fulfillment and, in some cases, even reverse



logistics. Socially, the redesign would mean to open the discussion on the extremely delicate topic of Barbie's potential influence on girls' development of self-esteem and body image.

The quote below, extracted from interview, exemplifies this complexity.

Coding	Statement
EXE 1	Changing the doll was a very complex move. Would curvy Barbie fit in her car? Would tall Barbie pass through the doors inside of the Dream House? There are several manufacturing adaptations that have to be done. And beyond that, this was a decision that would change Barbie in a way that she was never changed before.

After intensive internal debate, Mattel finally decided to approve Barbie's redesign despite the high risks, based on the understanding that the doll's original looks, as it was, had become too dangerous of a threat for the business' future sustainability, and not consistent with the brand purpose that was supposed to guide the brand's future steps.

As a result, Barbie announced<sup>1</sup> the launch of the new "Barbie Fashionistas" line in February 2016, including 7 skin tones, 22 eye colors, 24 hairstyles (new textures and colors), and four body types: curvy, tall, petite, and original. The new line was promoted in social media with the hashtag "#TheDollEvolves". Figure 55 illustrates some of the new "Fashionistas" models, while Figure 56 illustrates specifically the four different body types.



Figure 55 – Barbie Fashionistas  
Source: Barbie Shop, 2018

1. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y\\_z1gbBBIhI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_z1gbBBIhI)





Figure 56 – Barbie’s new body types  
Source: Barbie Shop, 2018

The initiative generated 5 billion media impressions worldwide, with nearly 100% positive sentiment. The launch of the “Fashionistas” line led Barbie to gain the cover of TIME magazine, being named one of the “Top 25 Inventions of 2016”. Figure 57 illustrates the magazine cover featuring curvy Barbie.



Figure 57 – TIME magazine cover featuring curvy Barbie  
Source: Aoki, 2016



With a strong support from the public, the new line was also ultimately well accepted internally across the organization. According to the EMEA Marketing Director, even though the decision was made by the global team in the American headquarters, other regions have embraced the change with great appreciation.

Coding	Statement
EXE 1	Yes, there was a lot of internal debate in El Segundo. But once the decision was made, in an international level I think everybody took the change in a good way. For example, in Europe we had maybe even more issues with European moms regarding the image of Barbie than in the US. Because in the US the brand has a stronger root, has a story of heritage, more people have played with Barbie when growing up. In Europe, it's not always the case. So for EMEA this was a very important change.

In terms of the most impacted departments and the main challenges brought by the new “Fashionistas” line, in addition to all the operational changes required in manufacturing and product design, the sales team was one more to face significant challenges.

At first, retailers were reluctant to accept the new diversified dolls without knowing how the toys would perform in terms of sales. Sales representatives were also already used to selling more of the original, thin, and blonde Barbie doll. Thus, the addition of diversity in the product line caused initial resistance from both retailers and some of the sales reps.

As a result of the new launch, the representatives had to adapt their sales pitch with retailers in order to incentivize the commercialization of dolls in the most assorted combination possible. A corporate decision was made to offer only certain assortment of products named “diversity combos” that included the dolls of the “Fashionistas” line. Therefore, selling only the original Barbie dolls was not an option anymore. By doing so, Mattel was able to guide both sales representatives and retailers towards the goal of increasing commercialization of the “Fashionistas” line, avoiding individual preferences for the original Barbie.

According to the EMEA Marketing Director, even though some resistance from the sales representatives was noticed at first, the situation rapidly changed once the “Fashionistas” line started performing well in online and offline channels, proofing its value across the organization. After the initial success, retailers started to naturally order more diverse dolls.

Barbie’s next step for Barbie was to launch “Barbie Inspiring Women Series”, a line of personalized dolls celebrating inspiring women who had significative contributions to society.



According to Mattel’s executive, the dolls from “Barbie Inspiring Women Series” were designed for “young girls to explore their own potential and learn about women who helped pave the way for them.

In addition to the commercial<sup>1</sup>, as part of the launch, girls were invited to join the online conversation and share on social media pictures or stories of people who inspire them, using the hashtag #MoreRoleModels. The initiative generated more than 1.4 billion global media impressions by the end of 2017, with nearly 100% positive sentiment.

In order to develop “Barbie Inspiring Women Series”, the brand partnered with real women in the fields of sports, STEM, arts, gastronomy, journalism, and many others, gathering a group of female brand ambassadors under a program named “Sheros” (unification of the words “she” and “hero”). The list includes personalities such as the filmmaker and director Patty Jenkins, gymnastics champion Gabby Douglas, boxing champion Nicola Adams Obe, environmentalist Bindi Irwin, world-renowned chef Hélène Darroze, model and body activist Ashley Graham, amongst others. In addition, “Barbie Inspiring Women Series” also pays a tribute to women who have already passed, such as the artist Frida Kahlo, aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart, and NASA mathematician and physicist Katherine Johnson.

Figure 58 illustrates some of the dolls available in the “Barbie Inspiring Women Series”, and Figure 59 shows one of the commercials featuring the brand ambassador Gabi Douglas.



Figure 58 – Barbie Inspiring Women Series  
Source: Barbie Role Models, 2018

1. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNjNY46Vw1M>





Figure 59 – Gabi Douglas for Barbie Inspiring Women Series  
Source: Barbie Role Models, 2018

The EMEA Marketing Director reinforced the importance of internal alignment across the organization to guarantee consistency of the new brand strategy in all channels and touchpoints with consumers. The quote below, extracted from the interview, explains the importance of consistency.

Coding	Statement
EXE 1	We wanted the Barbie brand to really live the purpose in all touchpoints. From marketing team in a local level, to the PR team, to trade marketing and sales, to content creation team, all the lines of business were involved to make sure we were delivering the message and living the purpose in a consistent way. You may think that for some lines this is not so crucial, but all are. For instance, we have lines of t-shirts and merchandising material, they had to be adapted to carry messages of girl empowerment. If we organize an event, we need to have the purpose in mind. If we sign a new partnership, if we develop content together with another brand, it has to be in line with our values. Every single PR launch, everything Barbie has already launched and will launch in the future must be aligned with the brand's purpose.

Figure 60, made available by the Mattel, illustrates how the different departments must work in full alignment.





Figure 60 – Barbie brand’s holist approach for living its purpose  
Source: Internal report 2017, made available Mattel

For example, the merchandising team must make sure that retail stores have updated materials in accordance to the guidelines of the new communication strategy. Consumer products, which include the assorted products such as t-shirts, bicycles, clothing and accessories for girls, all must carry a messages and imageries aligned that reflect girl empowerment. According to the EMEA Marketing Director, some of the old movies and online content are still available due to the impossibility of breaking contracts with distributors, such as Netflix and other platforms. However, all new content developed for the entertainment products, which include movies, TV and online series, must in accordance with the new communication guidelines.

Finally, regarding next steps, the brand aims to engage more fathers with the brand and the activity of playing make-belief, as currently the main focus is on mothers, seen as the key deciders on the purchasing process of Barbie dolls. The commercial “Dads who play with Barbie”, produced by BBDO and launched in 2017, was the first explicit step in this direction, but higher efforts should be placed on the years to come.

In addition, Barbie is prompt to continue launching initiatives that empower young girls. For example, in October 2018 the brand launched the new “Closing the dream gap” project, with the main objective of *“promoting and fostering gender equality by nurturing girls’ universal*



*right to dream*". The project raises awareness for the fact that at an average age of six years old girls stop seeing themselves as capable of being and doing anything, a phenomenon named by the brand as "Dream Gap". From being unable to identify them as intelligent enough and being less likely to picture themselves in gender-stereotyped careers, such as scientists, engineers, a gap is created between girls and boys. The company proposes interventions at early ages to reinforce girls self-esteem through initiatives such open-ended, unstructured play that fosters divergent thinking and innovation, engaging play that teaches and supports key skills, such as coding.

Awareness campaigns will likely become more frequent in the future, as well as investments on and sponsorships of pro-female initiatives, as an effort to expand Barbie's corporate social responsibility program.

#### **4.7.2. Consumers' perceptions**

The netnographic study gathered consumers' perceptions of the Barbie brand from 2014 to 2018, thus, understanding the scenarios prior and post brand revitalization.

Similarly, the in-depth interviews with mothers of girls aged 3-13 started with an assessment of their familiarity with Barbie, brand associations, brand image, frequency and ways in which their children play with Barbie. Subsequently, TV commercials prior to the new strategy were displayed and perceptions were collected. The three ads were chosen for display, from the decades of 1980, 1990, and 2000, the first being "Great Shape Barbie"<sup>1</sup>, portraying Barbie doing gymnastic exercises to keep her body in a thin shape, the second being "Hawaiian Fun Barbie"<sup>2</sup>, portraying Barbie and her friends at the beach, and the third being "Barbie Fashion Avenue Collection"<sup>3</sup>, portraying Barbie in fashion outfits. The ads were purposefully chosen due to its potential controversies in terms of stereotypes. Figure 41, Figure 42, and Figure 43 illustrate each commercial (Appendix B). Lastly, the interviews focused on the revitalized brand, its new campaign and product launches.

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1. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buwwEYewQtU>

2. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QS-wIgumKz8>

3. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mX6d-ba39ms>



The first insight of the research is the fact that the Barbie brand has two main audiences: collectors and parents. Collectors are adults who purchase Barbie dolls for their own private collections, being highly loyal to the brand. Collectors usually attend conferences, events, and promote unofficial gatherings to exchange knowledge and vintage dolls. Parents, on the other hand, are customers who purchase dolls for their children to play with. Among parents, mothers have a higher involvement with the brand, both in terms of playing make-believe with their daughters and making the final decision in the purchasing process.

The netnographic study showed that most members of online Facebook communities are rather collectors than parents. In the online communities, several collectors expressed they had been purchasing Barbie dolls for decades, gathering hundreds of dolls (one of the collectors claimed to have approximately 230 Barbie dolls in his private collection). It is also a common practice to exchange, sell, or buy dolls in the Facebook communities. Some collectors also customize their own dolls, changing body parts to assemble unique models, and also designing and producing customized outfits for the dolls. Some members even offer customization of dolls and outfits as a paid service to other collectors.

As for the brand's official social media accounts (Facebook page, Instagram account, YouTube channel), even though there is less evidence available to enable a proper differentiation among users being parents or collectors, in comparison to the online communities, there seems to be a more diverse presence of different audiences, with a mixed participation of collectors, parents, and even some girls and boys of different ages.

Regarding the perceptions and behaviors of the two main audiences, some differences could be observed. For parents, Barbie is “just a toy”, and the conversations during in-depth interviews made even clearer that the main purpose of the product for this audience is to provide recreational and educational experiences for their children. For collectors, on the other hand, Barbie is seen as “more than a doll”, rather as a valuable good, which's main purpose is to be appreciated and displayed to other fans, rather than played with.

Even though some mothers describe themselves as fans of the brand and show a certain nostalgia of when they were children and also played with Barbie, the great majority seems to have a more utilitarian relationship with the brand, rather than emotional. Mother's main concerns are their child's well-being and development, and the way the Barbie brand influences those two factors, either positively or negatively, dictates their perceptions and



evaluations of the brand, its communication campaigns and marketing efforts. Regarding purchasing process, the criteria used for decision making are child's age and gender, the toys' potential of contributing to child's development, education aspects of the toy, as well as perceived safety, quality, durability, and price.

Collectors, on the other hand, seem to be more emotionally attached to the brand, highly loyal, acting as brand advocates and defending the brand from public criticism in online debates on the Facebook communities. Their purchasing process, on the other hand, is rationally-driven, the most important factor being product quality in terms of manufacturing materials (e.g. high quality vinyl versus cheaper compositions of plastic), durability, doll's outfit, original date of launch, uniqueness and rarity of a specific doll model, price, value added for their individual private collection, and when purchased from a previous owner rather than directly from retailers, the preservation state and conditions of the doll.

Regarding the importance of parents versus collectors, it is clear for the company that the first is the most important audience. According to the EMEA Marketing Director for Barbie, the doll always was and continues to be a toy meant for children, and even though collectors are also important, they are not as representative and not as strategically important to the company. Therefore, the new brand strategy was fully planned and implemented having in mind parents, and more specifically mothers, as the main audience, taking into consideration their needs, preferences, and concerns regarding their children. The results of the qualitative research regarding consumers' perception of the new strategy, as presented in this session, reflects this corporate decision, since it was possible to observe a much broader acceptance and positive perception of the new strategy coming from mothers rather than from collectors.

The in-depth interviews with mothers started with an assessment of their previous knowledge of the Barbie doll, familiarity with the product and with the company, understanding of frequency and dynamics to which their children play with Barbie, as well as their most common brand associations. Later, an assessment of advertising campaigns was conducted, going through old commercials in order to gather insights on topics considered controversial, later entering the topics related to the brand revitalization.

From the 14 mothers interviewed, all were familiar with Mattel, with the Barbie brand, and were able to clearly describe the product. All confirmed that their daughters play with Barbies



almost daily, including in some cases their sons as well. Their children's ages varied from 3 to 13 years old, with no specific variations in frequency of play according to age.

Four out of 14 mothers described themselves as fans of the brand, saying they also used to play with Barbie when they were young, while the rest was familiar with Barbie, but showed no attachment to the brand and claimed they did not play with Barbie while growing up.

When asked to list the first three words that come to mind when thinking of Barbie, the results showed the following words as the main brand associations, the larger words being the most frequently suggested, as illustrated in Figure 61.



Figure 61– Word cloud of mother's brand associations  
Source: Developed by the author

It is possible to cluster the words in two groups, the first group carrying associations related to the image of Barbie prior to the brand revitalization, such as “fashion”, “model”, “blonde”, “skinny”, “thin”, “pink”, “style”, “party”, and “beautiful”, and the second more aligned with the revitalized brand, reflecting associations related to feminine empowerment, such as “strong”, “example”, “independent”, “astronaut”, “creative”, “play”, and “imagine”. Since some mothers were already familiar with the new campaign “You can be anything”, “Fashionistas” and “Inspiring women” lines, it is not possible to make a clear distinction of their perceptions prior to the brand revitalization.



Before exposing the interviewees to any visual stimuli, all mothers were asked to describe how a typical advertisement of the Barbie brand would look like. Once again, it was possible to observe some contrasting ideas. A majority of mothers described ads more focused on topics of fashion, beauty, leisure, while a few described ads which portrayed Barbie as a more empowered woman, even mentioning different careers. Those were later found to be already familiar with the brand revitalization initiatives, and also described themselves as the more emotionally attached consumers who also played with Barbie in their childhoods.

The quotes below exemplify some of the typical commercials imagined by mothers.

Coding	Statement
MOT 1	I think a typical Barbie ad would be completely pink, pink everywhere, super girly. It would show blonde Barbie, with her hair flying in the wind and her stylish clothes. She would be driving to the beach with friends in her convertible car in California, with some kind of perky music playing in the background, and all of them dancing and celebrating in the car.
MOT 2	A traditional ad for me would be Barbie as a fashion model. Showing different clothes, different outfits for the girls to play with. Barbie would be like a superstar in the fashion week, going through the catwalk with cameras shooting pictures of her.
MOT 3	A typical ad would be like the ones I loved to watch in my childhood. One that I have very strongly marked in my memory is Barbie as an astronaut. It shows the space and the galaxy and Barbie there, being the first woman in outer space, but still with her pink astronaut clothes! It could also be Barbie as a teacher or a mermaid or a business woman, nowadays I see many of those too.
MOT 4	Barbie taking care of animals, like a veterinarian or rescuing puppies. I have this image in my head because it was my favorite story to play make-believe when I was a little girl, and my daughter also like this one doll a lot.
MOT 5	I guess a typical ad would have to be something with Barbie being beautiful and how girls can dress her up, cut her hair, do her make-up, etc. I remember many ads showing Barbie's different hair styles and how girls can play with it.

It is possible to observe, therefore, a clear mix in perceptions, with some mothers associating Barbie to more positive role models.

In order to enter the discussion of controversies surrounding the brand, some specific ads were presented, such as “Great Shape Barbie”, “Hawaiian Fun Barbie”, and “Barbie Fashion Avenue Collection”. The quotes below show some of the reactions to such ads.



Regarding “Great Shape Barbie”:

<b>Coding</b>	<b>Statement</b>
MOT 1	I don’t see the point in making an ad like that for young girls. I mean, I know it was made decades ago and at that time it was ok, but I don’t imagine it having a good acceptance nowadays. I wouldn’t want my daughter focusing on her shape and working out. And I wouldn’t even want to define to her what a great shape is or not.
MOT 6	Those old ads are the worst. But it is funny to think how this image held up for so many years, actually until very recently. Because I could still imagine a more modern version of this ad coming from Barbie in the last years. Because it was so frequent in the past, I think it unfortunately got stuck with the brand. Now they have to make an extra effort to run away of this image and make people see other sides of Barbie too.

Regarding “Hawaiian Fun Barbie”:

<b>Coding</b>	<b>Statement</b>
MOT 2	I don’t know what is worst, the boring ad or showing girls dancing in tiny bikinis. Maybe it was not their intention, but I find the ad of bad taste.
MOT 7	This is for me a very typical Barbie ad. I remember so many ads in the 70s with Malibu Barbie. The beach theme was a bit hit for Barbie. Since we were talking about typical ads before, this would be one for sure: Barbie having fun and partying at the beach, this sort of thing. I think it is very poor in terms of content. It doesn’t add value to my daughter. I know that not every single piece of advertising has to be highly educative, and parents’ can relax once in a while knowing their kids can also play with more “superficial” toys, but at least sometimes there has to be a more meaningful message, rather than only Barbie dancing at the beach.
MOT 9	Showing these girls dancing in bikinis, the super skinny Barbie, I don’t like it. It is so superficial. When they remove the doll skirt you can also see how extremely tiny her waist is. When it shows Barbie in the water in her boyfriend’s lap, I mean, no one here is trying to play the pure and religious mother, but I think there is a right moment for everything in life, showing this to my five-year-old daughter seems wrong. It is not the right idea for such a young child. Maybe if she were older it would be ok.

Regarding “Barbie Fashion Avenue Collection”:

<b>Coding</b>	<b>Statement</b>
MOT 4	It’s a fun ad, I see my daughter liking it even nowadays. What I found curious is how the ad shows a black girl playing with the super stereotyped blonde doll. Wouldn’t it be nicer to show different girls with different Barbies? Would be much nicer to see other hair colors and so



	on. But of course, this is an old ad. Nowadays this is already much better.
MOT 9	This is the main image I have of Barbie in my head, Barbie being a model in a fashion show.
MOT 10	Very typical of Barbie, showing all of her different dresses, many were pink and even with animal prints, very girly. I don't think there is anything wrong with such an ad. The only problem is that it is superficial, so I would expect to see more interesting things in addition to this. It teaches girls to play with fashion, which is ok, and of course all girls like it. But it would be better to see more things, not only a fashion model.

In conclusion, the inde-depth interviews with mothers suggest disapproval to stereotyped portrayals in the brand's past advertising.

Moving to consumers' perceptions post brand revitalization, the netnographic study and the in-depth interviews with mothers made clear that the public perceives changes in two main topics brought by the revitalization initiatives: (1) professional careers and (2) physical appearance.

The new campaign "You can be anything" started emphasizing the broad range of careers for Barbie, holding as core message that girls who play with Barbie can be inspired to pursue any profession they wish. Within this initiative, the commercial "Imagine the possibilities" was released by the end of 2015, and despite the positive public perception overall, some points of difference in opinion were observed for parents and collectors.

Most collectors were already aware that Barbie had multiple professions since the 1950s, and that the new campaign was not proposing a new concept, but rather rescuing an element of the brand's origins that got lost with time. Regarding collectors' perceptions of the advertising "Imagine the possibilities" in specific, most collectors showed appreciation, perceiving it as a way of showing the world that they were wrong in criticizing Barbie for being "only a fashion model" when in reality the doll has always inspired girls to be anything.

In addition, some collectors also mentioned they do not see an issue in Barbie being associated to topics of fashion and beauty, claiming that this was indeed the essence of the brand from its creation, and thus not something to be ashamed of, nothing negative or superficial.



The quotes below, extracted from in-depth conversation with individual collectors conducted during the netnographic study clearly shows such perceptions.

Coding	Statement
COL 1	Those who are real fans of Barbie know that this topic of professions is nothing really new. Barbie already had many different careers since the beginning of its creation. The new campaign now is just rescuing this element, because it got a little lost with time. People criticize Barbie saying she is only a fashion model, which is not true. But I think it is nice that the company really reinforces the message of the careers, because it shows people that they are wrong, Barbie is not only one thing.
COL 2	I really like this “imagine the possibilities”. But I don’t like that people think this is a revolution. This is based on Barbie’s history; her truth was used as basis for the ad.
COL 4	I don’t understand haters. They want girls to be anything, then go there and criticize who works in fashion. What is wrong with being a model? I wish the brand were not ashamed of it. I like the new campaign, but hope they don’t deny what Barbie always was. Yes she had many different careers, I remember when growing up in the 70s, way before starting my collection, I already had different professional Barbies. But the very first thing she was, was a fashion model. People have to accept that.
COL 6	I love that Barbie brought back the careers topic with more emphasis now. This will put an end to the criticism that Barbie is a superficial toy for girls and finally shows how it can be empowering.

Figure 62 and Figure 63 show such perceptions extracted from the Facebook communities.



Figure 62 – Post from collector about vintage Barbie’s careers on Facebook communities  
Source: Developed by the author





Figure 63 – Collectors’ perceptions of “Imagine the possibilities” commercial on Facebook communities  
Source: Developed by the author

The in-depth interviews with mothers, on the other hand, showed that the level of awareness of the fact that Barbie had multiple careers in the past varied according to each interviewee’s familiarity with the brand. Nonetheless, the perception of the new “You can be anything” campaign was unanimously positive. The quotes below, extracted from the interviews, demonstrate the reactions to the commercial “Imagine the possibilities” in specific.

Coding	Statement
MOT 1	I absolutely love this commercial. First it’s just adorable how they put those girls playing adults; it’s cute to see inside of their minds and the imagination process. I love it! Second, I guess it surprises me to see a brand like Barbie talking about feminine power.
MOT 2	I always hated the brand to be very honest, always thought it was too girly and superficial. I was never a fashionable girl, never felt connected with Barbie. I have no sisters, only bigger brothers, and I never played with Barbie myself. I was always more a fan of sports and boy’s play. Look how funny... that we categorize “boy” and “girl” play. But it’s true. In my time doll was only a girls’ thing and Barbie was the ultimate girly doll. I think it is nice to see more careers, not only Barbie super model.



	My girls for example also empathize more with soccer-player Barbie than with enchanted castle Barbie or magical fairy or any of these things. Finally something I like from Barbie!
MOT 3	I was a fan of Barbie myself and I had all of the professionals when I was a kid. I remember playing with Barbie doctor, Barbie police, Barbie astronaut. I even had some of the old ones that I saved thinking that one day my daughter could play with. But it's great to see that with more emphasis. Because most of the commercials are not like that.
MOT 11	I think there is nothing wrong in saying Barbie is a magic princess, Barbie is a fashion model, etc. The problem is saying only that. Saying this all the time, making it the most important message. Because then it gives the wrong idea to girls. Or at least it doesn't make them see all the potential. My husband and I are more than happy to see the girls playing scientist with the dolls, both of them love it.
MOT 12	My sister showed me this video a while ago on Facebook and I thought it was amazing! I could see it over and over again. Congratulations to the company for keeping this kind of message and values. I don't want to buy dolls for my daughter to play only princess, I want Ana to be whatever she want. I think they could even stop the old story of Barbie princess, Barbie mermaid, and focus only on the real professions.
MOT 13	It is great to see brands going that way. We need more companies doing this type of action. Sofia always liked dolls and plushy animals. But I always tried to show that there is much more than making the hair and makeup of the doll. The problem is that before I had to push this story myself, because on TV you only saw Barbie model, Barbie fashion, Barbie pretty... not Barbie veterinary, professor... at least I haven't seen it before this campaign was launched. Now I trust that the brand is in the right way and my daughter will get the right idea more naturally.
MOT 14	I remember my days with Barbie and she was always so many things. But I think lately the company was too focused on the wrong things, now it is getting back to being more authentic. [...]By wrong things I mean that the doll was born as a fashion model, right? But she had different professions. In the 70s she was already many different things. Then for a while all you could see on TV was boring commercials, like shopping Barbie, party Barbie, drinking Barbie. I even saw a picture on Facebook once with Barbie and her friends holding glasses celebrating something, that shouldn't even be a message to kids. But anyway, now you see the brand going back to track and saying "Hey, this is me, I'm different things, you can also choose what you want to be". I think Mattel got it right. This is what moms want their kids to see.

Netnographic analysis of Barbie's social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) showed similar positive results, with many users reacting positively to the commercial "Imagine the possibilities". Figure 64 and Figure 65 demonstrate such perceptions extracted from Barbie's official social media pages.





Figure 64 – Barbie’s post of “Imagine the possibilities” commercial on YouTube  
Source: Developed by the author





Figure 65 – Consumers’ reactions to “Imagine the possibilities” commercial on YouTube  
Source: Developed by the author

Going beyond the commercial “Imagine the possibilities”, the analysis of other social media posts under the “You can be anything” campaign, consistently with previous findings, showed a positive reaction from the public, with several users complimenting the company’s efforts to empower young girls to pursue diverse careers, as illustrated in Figure 66 and Figure 67.

In addition, in various posts from the brand on the official social media accounts it was possible to observe users making requests and suggestions to Mattel of a broad variety of careers for Barbie that could be incorporated to the portfolio, as illustrated in Figure 68.





Figure 66 – Consumers' reactions to "You can be anything" campaign on Facebook  
Source: Developed by the author





Figure 67 – Consumers’ reactions to “You can be anything” campaign on Instagram  
Source: Developed by the author



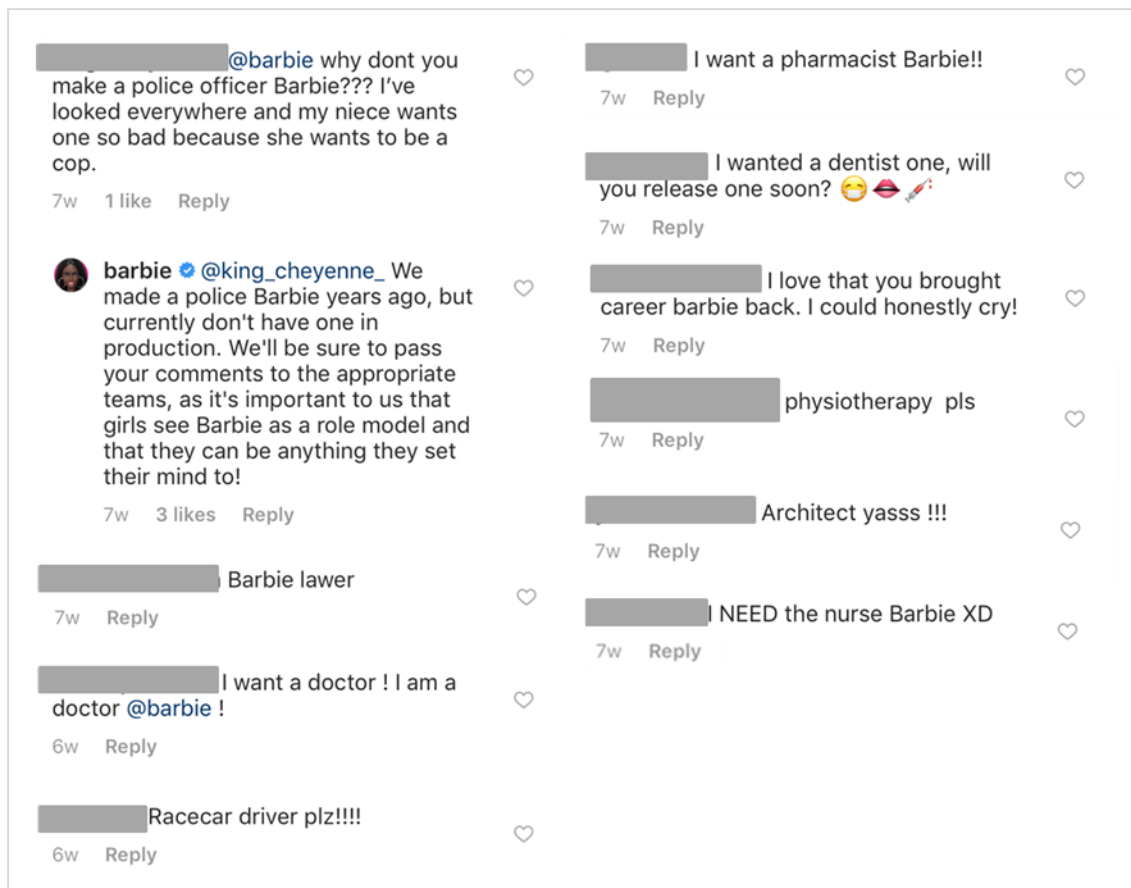


Figure 68 – Consumers suggesting new careers for Barbie on Instagram  
Source: Developed by the author

The brand has replied to some of the comments, incentivizing consumers to share their ideas via the official Mattel website developed to promote open innovation, named “My Mattel Ideas”, as illustrated in Figure 69.

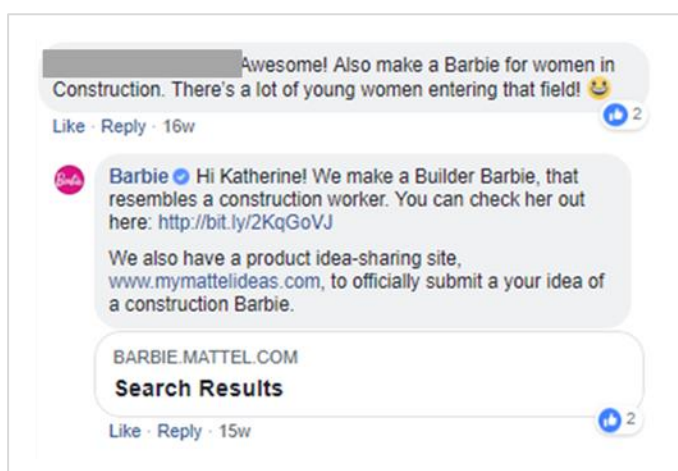


Figure 69 – Brand’s response to consumers’ suggestions on Facebook  
Source: Developed by the author



Other commercials under the “You can be anything” campaign, such as the “You can be a beekeeper” commercial, also gained strong popularity and media coverage, being overall well perceived by the public. There were, however, some critics being made to the brand reinforcing gender stereotypes, such as the pink color for girls, and the fact that Barbie does not show boys in advertising campaigns even though in reality boys might also want to play with Barbie dolls. In addition, the fact that some careers portrayed in the commercial are usually perceived as gender-stereotyped professions was also criticized by some people, and many suggested that the brand should go one step further and incentivize careers in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), which is an area traditionally seen as masculine. Figure 70 and Figure 71 demonstrates such critics and suggestions extracted from Barbie’s official social media pages.

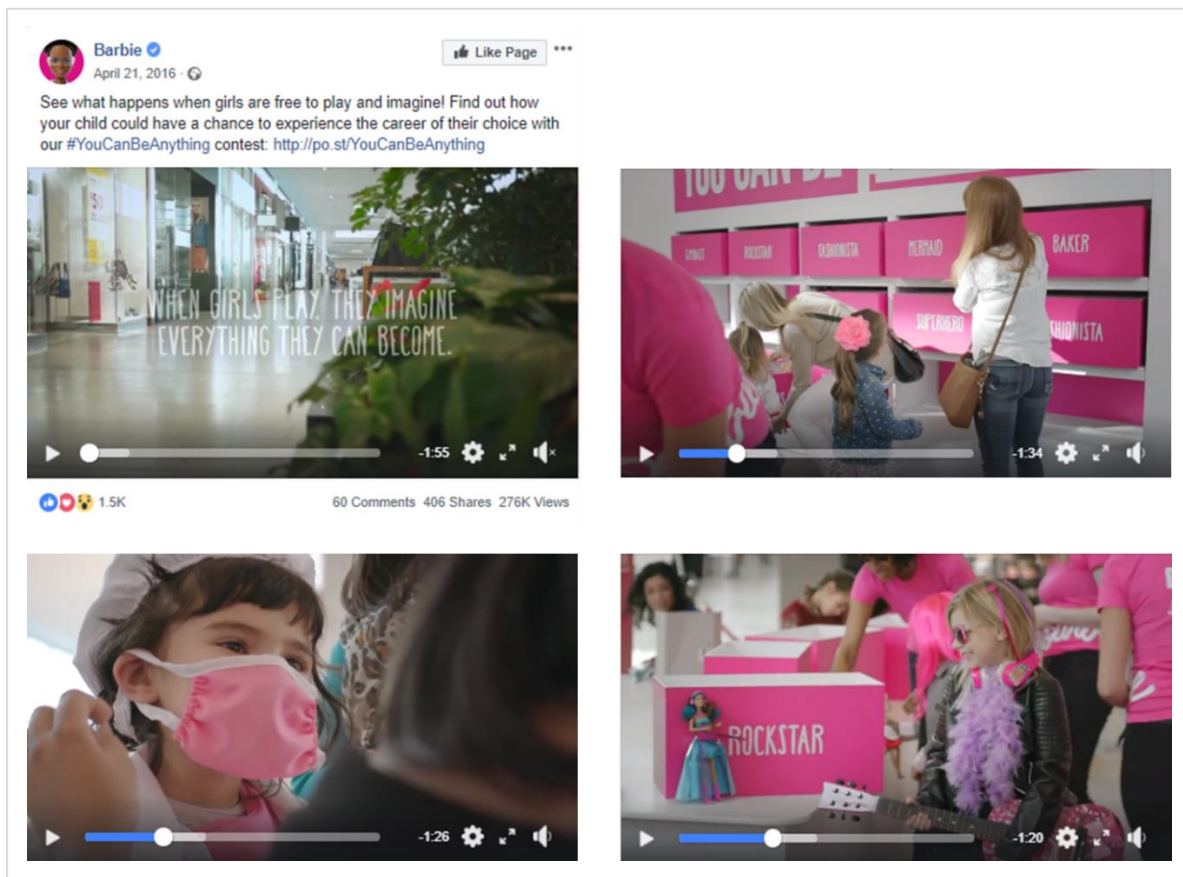


Figure 70 – Barbie’s post of “You can be a beekeeper” commercial on Facebook  
Source: Developed by the author





Figure 71 – Consumers criticizing stereotypes in “You can be a beekeeper” commercial on Facebook  
Source: Developed by the author

The in-depth interviews with mothers showed a similar perception, with positive overall feedback, but some criticism regarding career-stereotypes and suggestions on how the brand could do even better. The quotes below exemplify such reactions.

Coding	Statement
MOT 2	No doubt that this is a great initiative. We have to admit how much they have already changed and it is important what they are trying to communicate. They can now keep this same energy and I hope that the next steps will be to show fewer stereotypes in the commercials.
MOT 5	I don't see boys in the commercial, and they could have used less pink color and a less girly environment. I know that in theory Barbie is meant for girls. But Amelie really hates pink for example, she is always



	choosing dolls with less pink outfits. I'm sure she is not the only one out there. Also, Amelie's brothers play with her from time to time. I don't know if targeting boys is what the brand wants, maybe they don't do it on purpose, but it seems to be a very big market that they are missing.
MOT 6	Like the other one, the "Imagine the possibilities" one, I also love this ad, especially how the girls are excited about the carriers! It is adorable. Would be even nicer to have more scientists, engineers, other options that girls don't think about much because society teaches them not to. I always try to show my daughter that there is no such thing as a career for women or for men, both can do whatever they like.
MOT 8	How great would it be to have a programmer, a girl in computer sciences? My husband works in a technology company and all my kids love to say they will be "computer genius" like their dad. I want my girls to really follow that if it's what they want. It's important to have this kind of support coming from brands too.

Barbie eventually followed this path and created initiatives to incentivize girls to follow careers in STEM, for instance, launching "Barbie Robotics Engineer" dolls. Consumer's perceptions were strongly positive, as illustrated in Figure 72 and Figure 73.

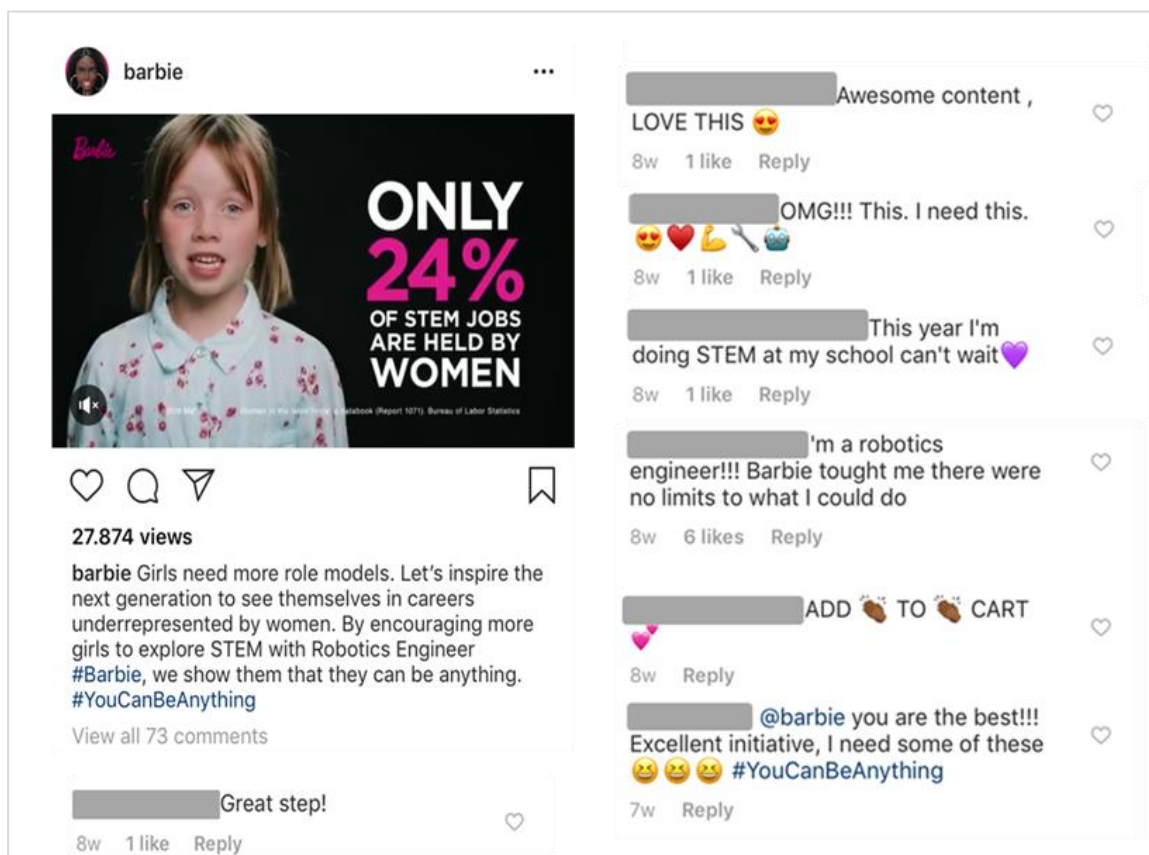


Figure 72 – Consumers' reactions to STEM career dolls on Instagram  
Source: Developed by the author



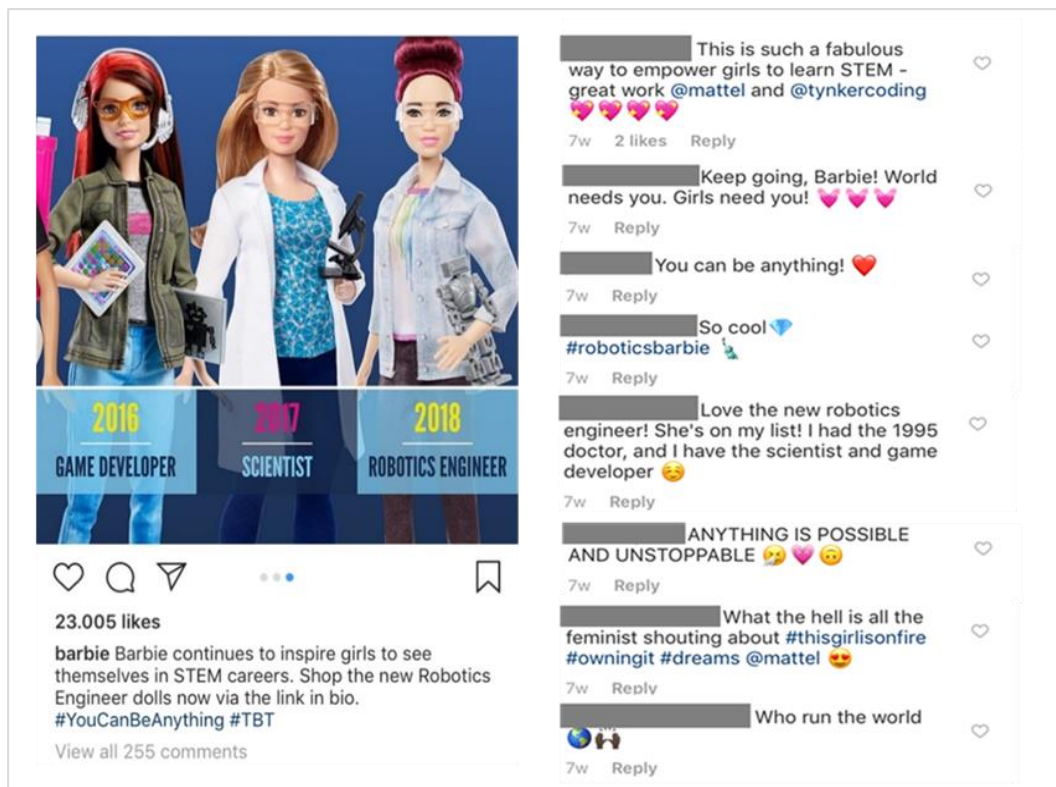


Figure 73 – Consumers' reactions to STEM career dolls on Instagram  
Source: Source: Developed by the author

Nonetheless, some consumers also reinforced the importance for the brand to further invest in initiatives beyond the toys, suggesting contests and partnerships, as illustrated in Figure 74.

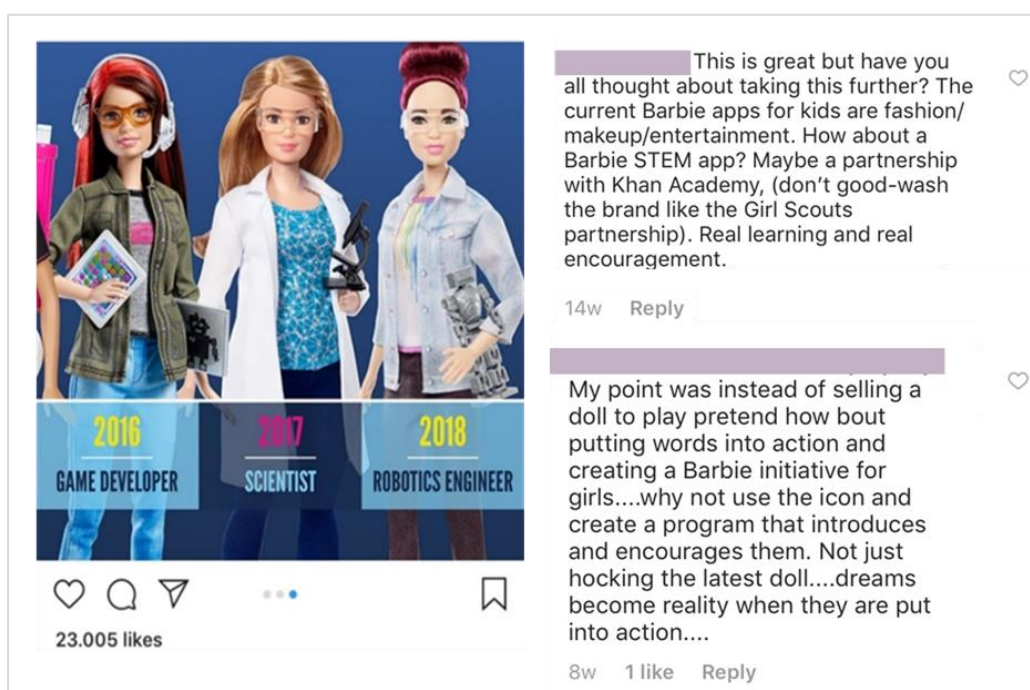


Figure 74 – Consumers' suggestions on further initiatives for Barbie  
Source: Developed by the author



Thus, when Barbie announced the partnership with Tynker, a coding company that offers easy-to-learn visual programming courses for children, building a new platform called “Barbie Programming Experience”, consumer’s reactions were strongly positive, as illustrated in Figure 75.

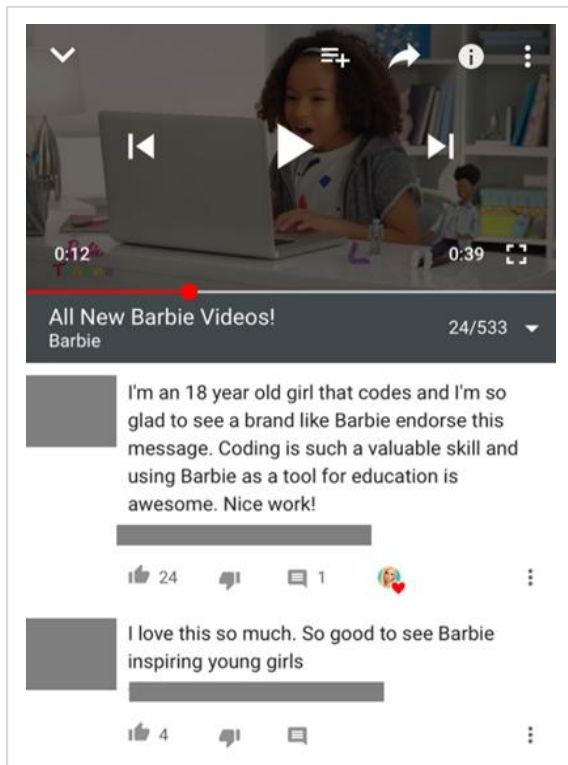


Figure 75 – Consumers’ reactions to video announcing partnership with Tynker on YouTube  
Source: Developed by the author

In summary, the previous findings indicate ample market acceptance and success of the “You can be anything” campaign regarding feminine empowerment as a core message related to professional careers and women’s roles in society. Nonetheless, despite the overall success, the brand was still suffering criticism regarding the dolls’ physical appearance, more specifically in terms of body type and ethnicities.

Many consumers claimed there was a strong inconsistency in launching a campaign empowering girls to become anything they wanted, while limiting the message by showing stereotyped beauty ideals. As illustrated on Figure 76, Figure 77, and Figure 78 the requests on social media pages for the company to modernize the dolls’ physical appearance were recurrent.



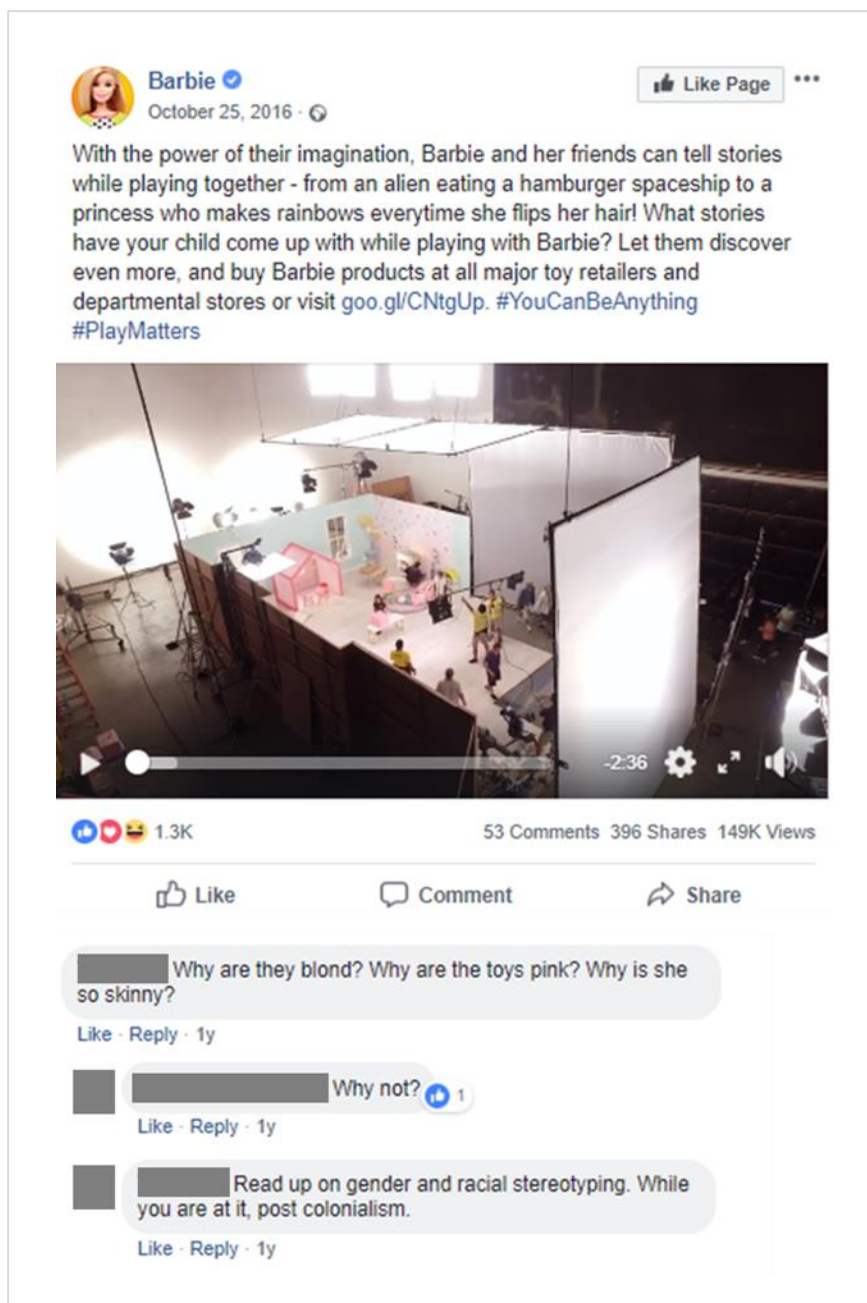


Figure 76 – Consumers criticizing stereotypes in Barbie’s commercial on Facebook  
Source: Source: Developed by the author





Figure 77 – Consumers criticizing Barbie’s lack of ethnical diversity on Facebook  
Source: Developed by the author





Figure 78 – Consumers criticizing Barbie’s female beauty stereotypes on Instagram  
Source: Developed by the author



Therefore, the public response to the brand's launch of the new line "Barbie Fashionistas", including a variety of body shapes, heights, skin tones and hair colors, was strongly positive. By the time, the brand announced the change in a video showing the different body types and the hashtag "#TheDollEvolves". Figure 79 demonstrates the strong support from most consumers on Barbie's official social media pages.

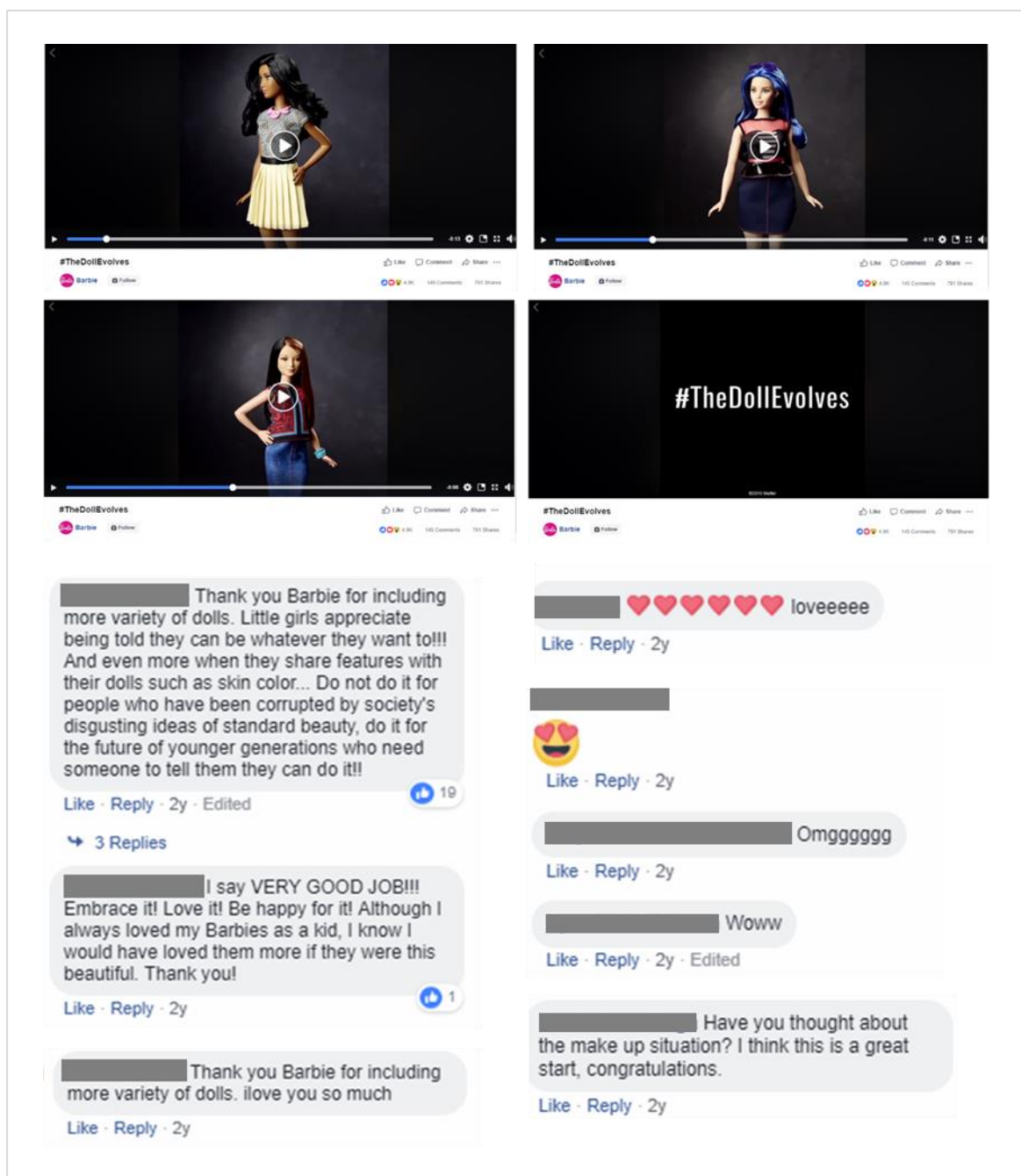


Figure 79 – Consumers' reactions to the launch "Barbie Fashionistas" on Facebook  
Source: Developed by the author



As per Figures 80, 81, 82, and 83, it is possible to observe several consumers congratulating Mattel for including more diversity and modernizing the dolls' image. It is even possible to see one user satirizing the doll through an image that implies that Barbie was not eating enough before, and now with the new body types being added to the line she is finally allowed to eat more.



Figure 80 – Consumers' perceptions of "Barbie Fashionistas" on Facebook  
Source: Developed by the author





Figure 81 – Consumers' perceptions of "Barbie Fashionistas" on Facebook  
Source: Developed by the author



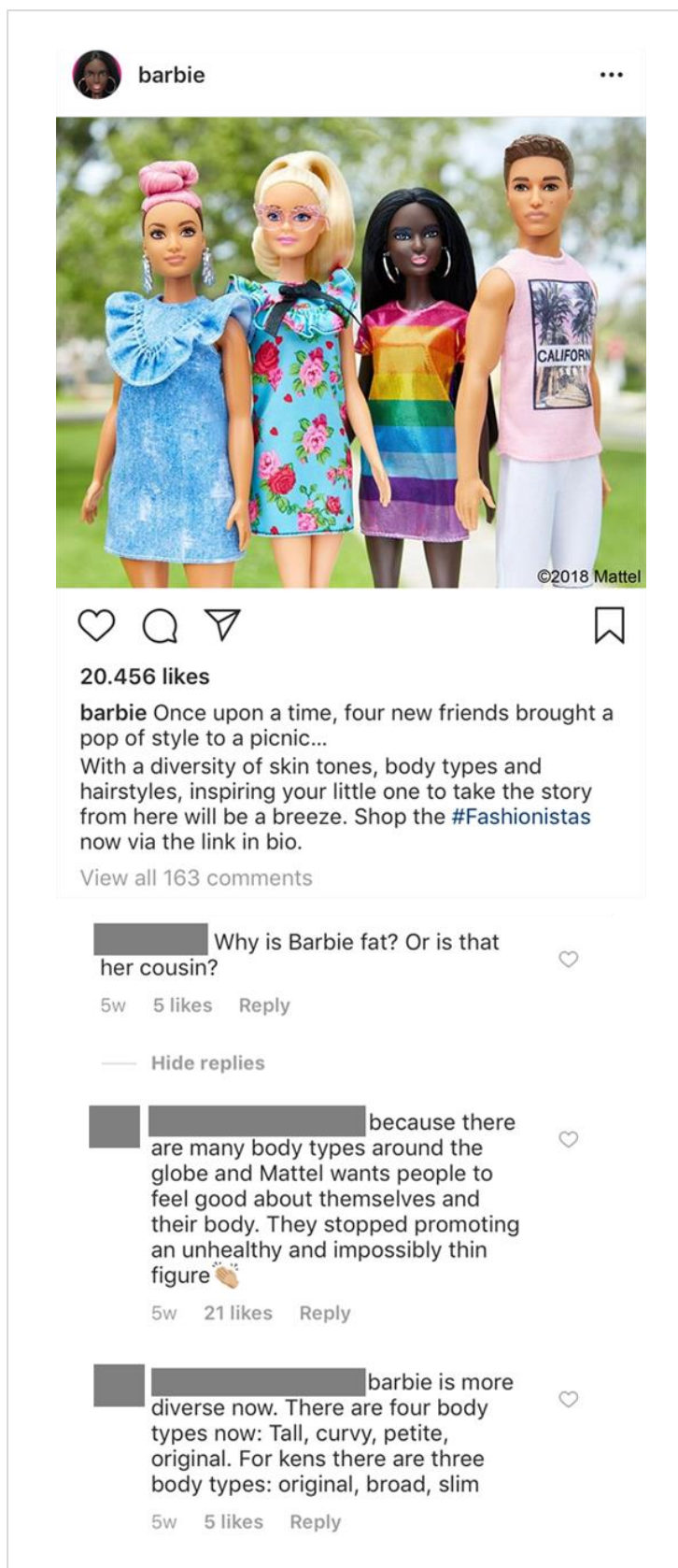


Figure 82 – Consumers’ perceptions of “Barbie Fashionistas” on Instagram  
Source: Developed by the author



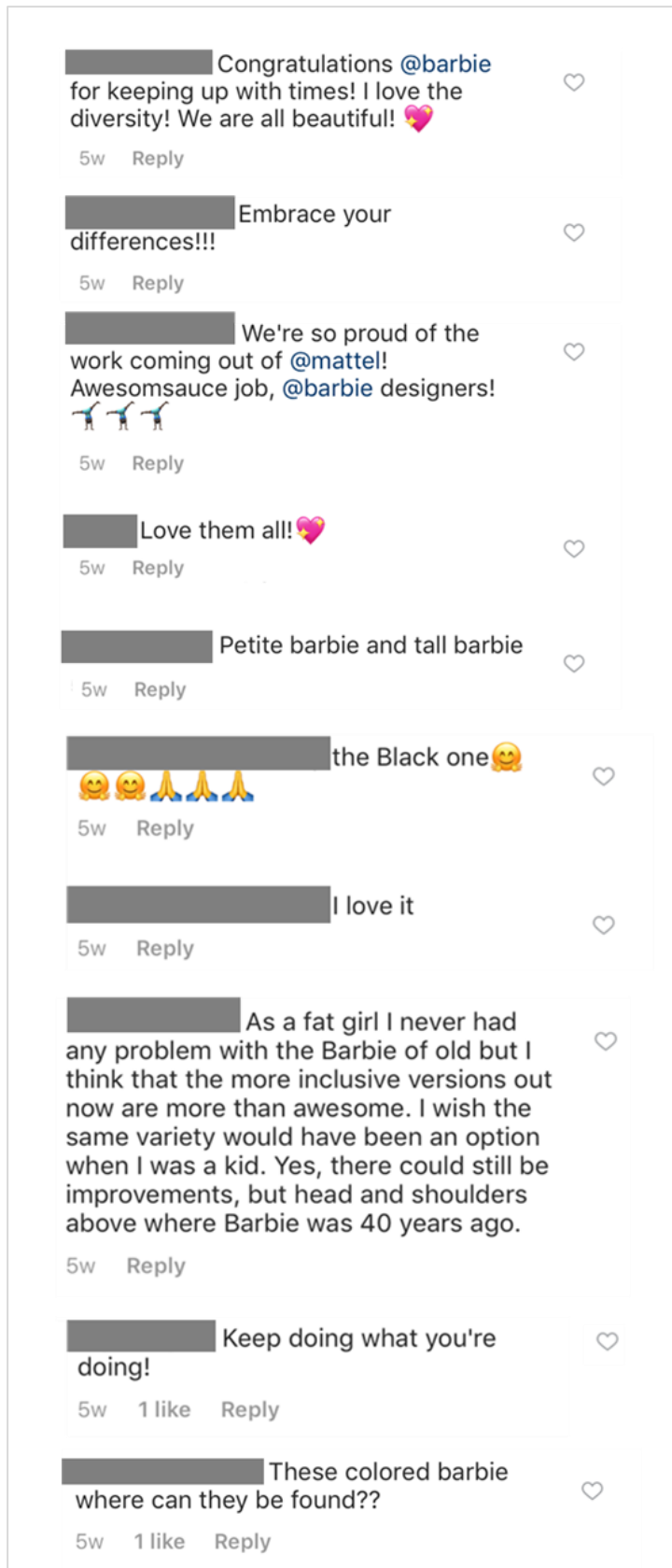


Figure 83 – Consumers' perceptions of "Barbie Fashionistas" on Instagram  
Source: Developed by the author



During the in-depth interviews, mothers have also strongly emphasized the importance of the brand revitalization to include new body types and ethnicities, claiming that it made them more comfortable to let their children play with Barbie.

The consensus was that the new line aggregates value in multiple ways: first, it helps girls to build their self-esteem while growing up by to be more acceptant of their own bodies and looks; second, it breaks the myth of the one single beauty stereotype that, being unachievable to the great majority, can lead girls to suffer from potential physical and psychological harms such as depression, anxiety, or eating disorders; finally, diversity in terms of ethnicity for the dolls can be a helpful tool for parents to teach their children about issues with racism, being an important reference for girls to understand and respect differences in ethnicity from a very young age, and also to see themselves and their own ethnicities represented in their dolls.

Despite the fact that both body shapes and ethnicities were highlighted by mothers as important benefits of the portfolio expansion, their comments were mainly focused on the new body shapes, since this was the main innovation brought by the “Barbie Fashionistas” line, given that Barbie already had different skin and hair colors in the past (even though in a smaller proportion).

The quotes below describe the main perceptions.

Coding	Statement
MOT 5	I think it was a super smart idea from Mattel. It’s great to show girls that diversity exists and is here to be celebrated. Their speech was getting too old. It was about time for Barbie to modernize this.
MOT 6	No matter if short, tall, skinny, a bit chubby, black, or white, all women should feel pretty, but most pre-adolescent girls don’t see this message so often. I like to see one brand as big as Barbie embracing this idea.
MOT 8	I love this line, I only saw it recently but I want to take my daughters hopping for it. I would even tell Mattel to make more versions, Asian Barbie, maybe older Barbies, why not? The more to choose from, the better for the girls.
MOT 10	The lack of diversity was one of the reasons I didn’t like my daughter to play with Barbies. It was hard, because she saw all her friends playing, but I refused to buy a doll that I saw as a danger to her. I bought Bratz dolls instead because they were more diverse. I myself struggled with anorexia when growing up, I was always overweight, and I know how painful this is. Barbie was impossibly thin before, tiny waist, skinny legs. How can this be a good example to my child? Now she already has many of the new curvy models. I hope the brand keeps innovating in this path.



MOT 11	I bought the “Doll 90” version on the website [...] the black Barbie. My daughters asked specifically for this one, they saw it on Facebook. To be honest, I had already seen a couple of black Barbies before, but it was hard to find it in stores. Also there were no dolls with afro hair. Now there are more options. I’m happier to spend my money on Barbies now! Being black, it is hard to teach your daughters that they are beautiful and can do anything if they are the only black kids in their class in school for example. Now they can see themselves in the dolls. Its’ all about identification, that may seem silly, but it means a lot.
MOT 12	I think it helps parents educate their children; teach that diversity is important, that they can be happy about who they are, that there is not only one perfect body. These new dolls are extremely important to fight health problems that are becoming so common now, anorexia, bulimia, and so on. Look at the US, how many girls dying because of beauty stereotypes. Not only US, everywhere actually.
MOT 13	I remember the first time I ever wanted to change my hair color, I was 13, I asked my mother and she said no. And it was because of my Barbie dolls, because I wanted to be blonde like them. Nowadays I imagine that if this happened with me, why wouldn’t it happen to my daughter? When you become a parent you realize how powerful toys are, and you are afraid of what they do to your kid. Not only toys but everything we see on TV, internet, etc., stereotypes are everywhere, and it is hard to protect children from seeing it. It is good to see a brand setting the right example. It is one less concern for me.
MOT 14	If I could congratulate the person responsible for this at Mattel I would, right now. If all brands adopted the same speech we wouldn’t have girls dying to fit in their clothes. Talking about careers is important, yes, but is not enough. For me, this next step for Barbie goes on a deeper level, this is really empowerment.

As for collectors, the netnographic study showed polarized opinions, with some negative criticism to the new “Barbie Fashionistas” line, but overall with the majority of collectors still supporting the initiative. It is important to notice that most of the complaints were directed to the new body shapes, rather than ethnicities.

Collectors that were against the new line claimed they preferred the original Barbie doll, being thin and blonde. In some cases, the changes were seen as an “offense” to fans of the original doll, who collected original pieces for many years and would rather keep the tradition ongoing. Some also claimed not to understand why people believe the dolls can be dangerous to girls’ self-esteem, as in their opinion, this sort of issue is unrelated to the activity of playing with dolls, but rather influenced by other factors such as friends, education given by parents, and messages seen on TV and magazines. Some even claimed that parents are overreacting by associating eating disorders and psychological problems to Barbie, and should not unfairly



blame the doll. Even though there is a clear contraction in claiming that commercials on TV and magazines can lead to physical and psychological disorders, but Barbie in specific cannot, collectors were still reluctant to associate the brand to any possible harm caused in children. In this sense, the strong attachment of some collectors to the Barbie brand seems to be a clear factor of influence in terms of opinions, leading them to take the role of brand advocates and to defend the brand from any sort of criticism. Figure 84 and Figure 85 describe such perceptions extracted from the Facebook communities.

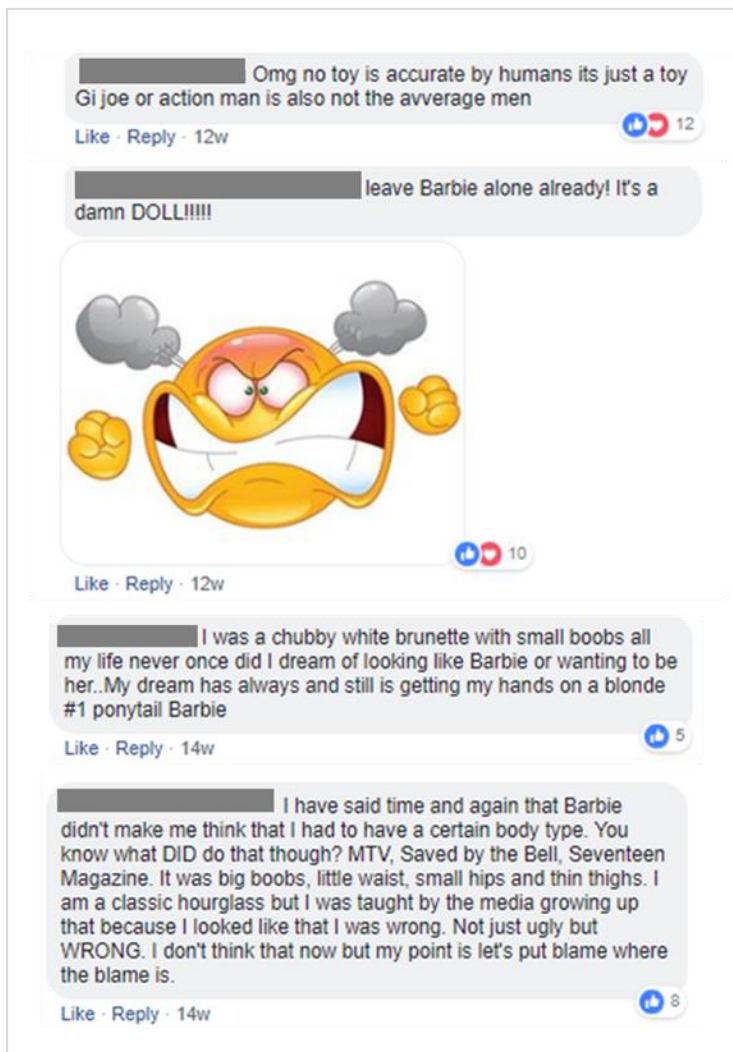


Figure 84 – Collectors defending Barbie on Facebook communities  
Source: Developed by the author





Figure 85 – Collectors defending Barbie on Facebook communities  
 Source: Developed by the author



The quotes below, extracted from in-depth conversation with individual collectors conducted during the netnographic study, also shows some of the arguments contrary to the new line. As some collectors seem to consider themselves to be the “true consumers”, they do not agree with changes being made to please children and parents. It is possible to observe different needs for the two target audiences, parents being focused on educational aspects and their children’s well-being, while some collectors contrary to the changes are concerned with value depreciation, loss of quality in manufacturing materials and outfits.

Coding	Statement
COL 1	The real fans are us, collectors. We are the ones who spend a lot, invest. The brand should be focused on real fans, because I understand why they changed the body shapes for children, but for a collector this makes no sense. I only collect vintage dolls, all of them are slim, this is the image I have from Barbie.
COL 4	The new line is just an excuse to produce lower quality dolls. Nowadays all materials are cheap, you can’t find vinyl dolls like in the old days. But people are so focused on the body discussion that Mattel gets away with it. For collectors it is a pity. For example, because now there are more body types, the company started producing clothes and outfits that are not measured for each body, but rather more unshaped to fit all bodies, because they want to cut costs. This means all the new clothes won’t fit well any of my older dolls, it will be all big and saggy clothes.
COL 5	I don’t understand haters. They want girls to be anything, then go there and criticize who works in fashion. What is wrong with being a model? I wish the brand were not ashamed of it. I like the new campaign, but hope they don’t deny what Barbie always was. Yes she had many different careers, I remember when growing up in the 70s, way before starting my collection, I already had different professional Barbies. But the very first thing she was, was a fashion model. People have to accept that.
COL 6	I hate seeing the brand changing who Barbie is. The new chubby doll, the new skin colors, the short doll, all of that is fine to have but it is not Barbie, could be friends of Barbie. Barbie should be what she always was, the icon, tall, thin, blonde, a fashion model.

However, despite the discontent from some collectors, others seemed to appreciate the new line with different body types. One of the online communities included in the netnographic study was actually completely dedicated to the curvy version of Barbie (Curvy Barbie Collectors Club). When sharing their own experiences playing with Barbie while growing up, some collectors admitted to have experienced themselves the desire to look like their dolls, and, therefore, acknowledged the importance of adding variety to the portfolio in order to



incentive diversity and girls' self-confidence. In addition, many collectors also saw the new "Barbie Fashionistas" line as an interesting opportunity to diversify their private collections.

Figure 86, Figure 87, and Figure 88 illustrate several positive responses to the new line, extracted from Facebook communities, with compliments especially to the curvy Barbie doll.



Figure 86 – Collectors perceptions of "Barbie Fashionistas" on Facebook communities  
Source: Developed by the author



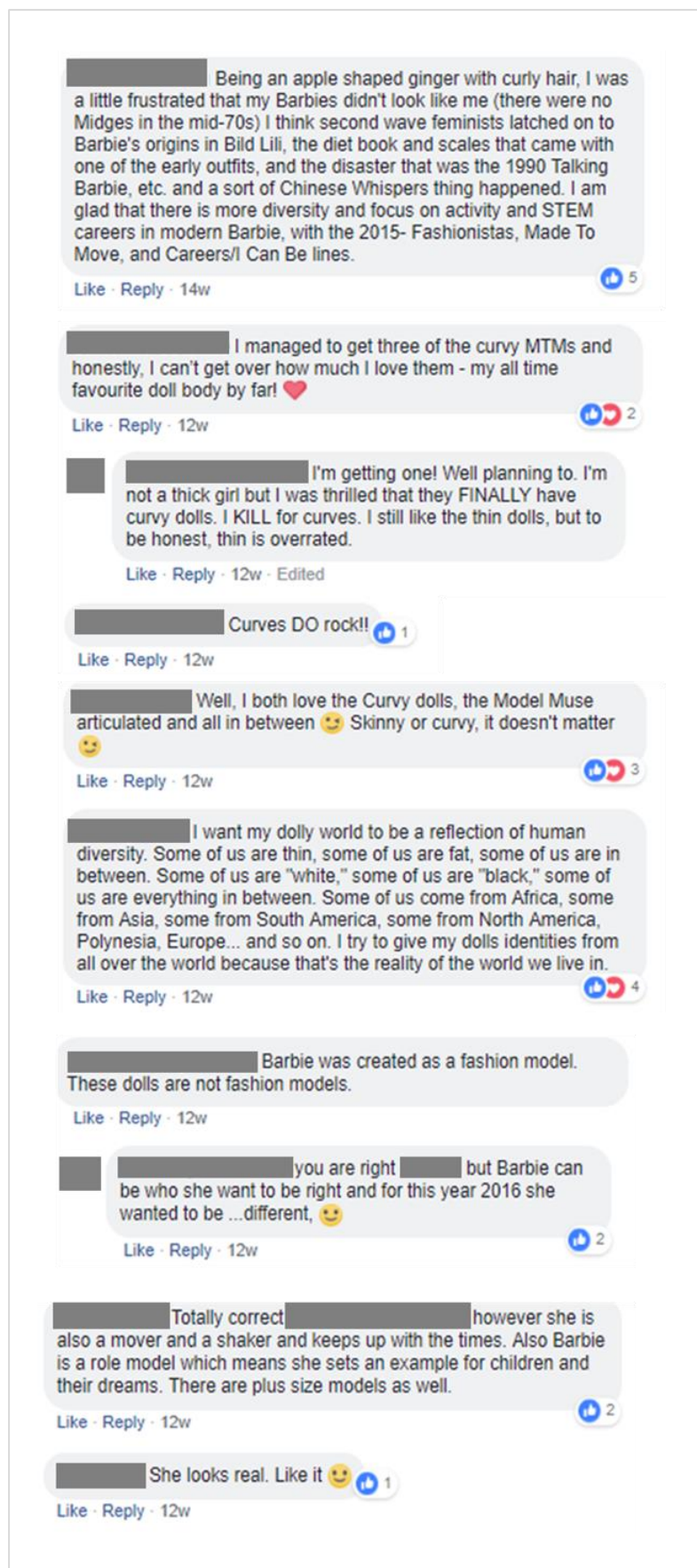


Figure 87 – Collectors perceptions of “Barbie Fashionistas” on Facebook communities  
Source: Developed by the author



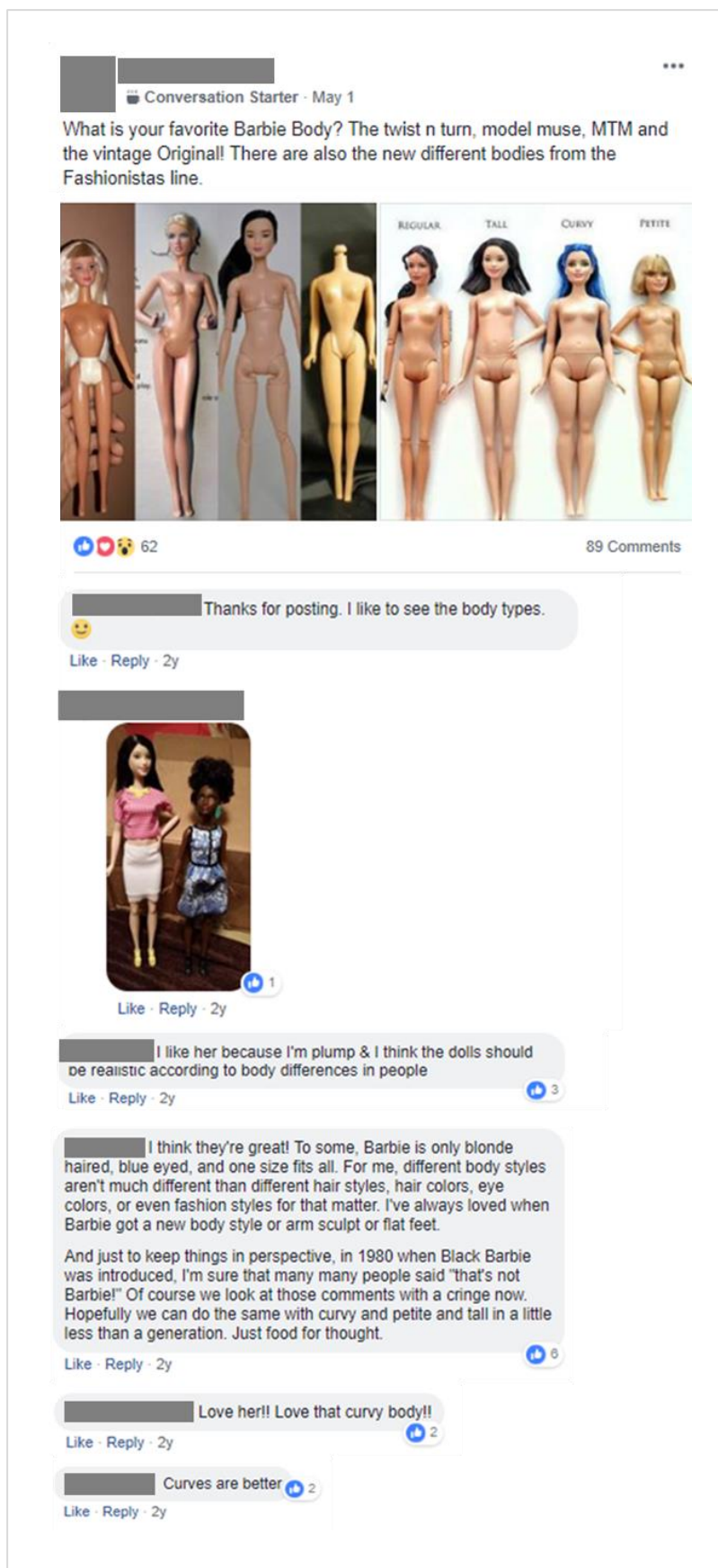


Figure 88 – Collectors perceptions of “Barbie Fashionistas” on Facebook communities  
Source: Developed by the author



Finally, regarding the most recent development under the “You can be anything” campaign, the launch of Barbie Inspiring Women Series”, also caused strongly positive reactions from the public. The initiative unified both topics of professional careers and physical appearance previously discussed, as the role model dolls celebrate women in different fields of work and of different physical appearances.

The discussions during the in-depth interview with mothers highlighted the importance of unifying the imaginary world with the real world, showing girls that they can dream of pursuing different careers not only by playing make-believe with their dolls, but also looking up at real women and their great achievements.

Coding	Statement
MOT 5	This is the cherry on top of the cake. It is the perfect match to everything they have been doing. I love how they chose different areas, like sports and sciences, and how they kept a good representation of all colors, all sizes. In real life women are all different, so if you inspire your toy line in real women, rather than if you have only one plastic mold in the factory, you will get it right! This is why people said Barbie was too stereotyped before. For me this is not the case anymore.
MOT 7	To give girls toys that enable them to dream of what they want to be is admirable. But to show them that real women are actually doing it, that is something else. Since the late 70s when Barbie was a part of my life, the brand has grown to represent a much more powerful message.
MOT 8	It even made me emotional to watch. I keep imagining for my daughters, because they are both in the gymnastics girls’ team at school and they love it so much. If they would see a doll inspired in a real athlete like Laurie Hernandez they would go crazy. I have to buy this one for them. Mattel is getting better and better at what they are doing.
MOT 12	Of course it is a very good idea commercially, because these women have fans and I can imagine that people go crazy to buy the dolls, not only for children, but to keep it for themselves. But it is also important for children of course, to get them inspired by real life examples is to show them that they can be the next ones there, the next NASA scientist, the next world-known artist, the next world cup soccer player.
MOT 13	This is such a smart move. I feel like the company is really reading what parents want for their children. All of these moves give more and more reasons for me as a mother to buy Barbie dolls for my daughter.

Figure 89 and Figure 90 show the public support to the “Role Models” dolls on Barbie’s official social media pages.





Figure 89 – Barbie’s post announcing launch of “Barbie Inspiring Women Series” on Instagram  
Source: Developed by the author





Figure 90 – Consumers’ reactions to “Barbie Inspiring Women Series” on Instagram  
 Source: Developed by the author

As for collectors, once again opinions were divided amongst those who see the new dolls as an opportunity to add value to their collections and those who disagree with Barbie’s new dolls. The quotes below, extracted from the conversations with individual collectors, exemplify both cases.



Coding	Statement
COL 3	I loved this idea the moment I saw it. I liked how Mattel launched it in the international women's day too, it fits well. I think this is important to everyone, not only children, but all women, because it breaks the old idea that women are limited to certain things while men are not. I already have several of the role models in my collection. I also love how they made some models so exclusive that most people can't find it. They made the dolls available online at the official Barbie Collector Club, in addition to some normal retailers like Target or Walmart. But I heard some dolls are hard to find in normal retail.
COL 6	What kind of project is this? I don't get it. Us, collectors, want more vintage dolls, more dolls celebrating Barbie's past, traditions. Give me more high quality vintage dolls and I'll be much happier.

In conclusion, it is possible to observe a positive overall reaction from consumers to the new brand strategy. Most people consider the new “You can be anything” campaign a step forwards towards feminine empowerment and celebration of diversity.

Despite some criticisms to certain elements of the campaign, most users on Barbie's official social media accounts have complimented the new campaign and its various commercials and different initiatives. It is important to notice that changes regarding more diversity in bodies and ethnicities were essential to the overall positive impressions.

Specifically regarding in-depth interviews with mothers, great appreciation was demonstrated for the changes along with a generalized belief that Barbie became a more educative and safe toy for children.

Collectors, who represent a niche audience for the brand, overall also demonstrated positive reactions to the “You can be anything” campaign and its commercials, however, seemed to be more polarized regarding “Barbie Fashionistas” and “Barbie Inspiring Women Series”.

#### 4.8. Financial analysis

Having a better understanding of consumer's perceptions and reactions to the non-stereotyped portrayals adopted by Barbie, a financial analysis was conducted aiming to assess the performance both in terms of sales and stocks prior and post brand revitalization.



Table 10 provides a summary of Barbie's consolidated gross sales from 2011 to 2017.

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>For the year end (In USD millions)</b>	<b>Change as reported (%)</b>
<b>2011</b>	\$ 1,316.7	-
<b>2012</b>	\$ 1,275.3	-3%
<b>2013</b>	\$ 1,202.8	-6%
<b>2014</b>	\$ 1,009.5	-16%
<b>2015</b>	\$ 905.9	-10%
<b>2016</b>	\$ 971.8	7%
<b>2017</b>	\$ 954.9	-2%

Table 10 – Barbie's consolidated gross sales from 2011 to 2017  
Source: Mattel Annual Reports, 2011 to 2017

Table 11 provides a summary of Barbie's gross sales in the International segment from 2011 to 2017.

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>For the year end (In USD millions)</b>	<b>Change as reported (%)</b>
<b>2011</b>	\$ 773.6	-
<b>2012</b>	\$ 751.7	-3%
<b>2013</b>	\$ 744.2	-1%
<b>2014</b>	\$ 585.9	-21%
<b>2015</b>	\$ 472.0	-19%
<b>2016</b>	\$ 482.7	2%
<b>2017</b>	\$ 504.0	4%

Table 11 – Barbie's international gross sales from 2011 to 2017  
Source: Mattel Annual Reports, 2011 to 2017

Table 12 provides a summary of Barbie's gross sales for the North America segment from 2011 to 2017:

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>For the year end (In USD millions)</b>	<b>Change as reported (%)</b>
<b>2011</b>	\$ 543.1	-



<b>2012</b>	\$	522.6	-4%
<b>2013</b>	\$	458.6	-12%
<b>2014</b>	\$	423.6	-8%
<b>2015</b>	\$	433.9	2%
<b>2016</b>	\$	489.1	13%
<b>2017</b>	\$	450.9	-8%

Table 12 – Barbie’s North American gross sales from 2011 to 2017

Source: Mattel Annual Reports, 2011 to 2017

It is possible to notice a negative trend in gross sales for Barbie from 2011 to 2015. Even though it is important to notice that results were also impacted by a stronger U.S. dollar, in Mattel’s financial reports the explanations for the poor performance rely mainly in the stronger competition within the doll category, both in the U.S. and in certain international markets, along with lower effectiveness of in-store, commercial, and promotional activities contributing to a continued inventory overhang in European markets, in addition to product innovation not being strong enough to drive growth, and finally, as described by the company itself, due to “brand propositions that were not compelling enough to consumers”.

In 2015, as Barbie was successfully revitalized, the fourth quarter results already reflected double digits growth in North America and positive numbers in International markets. In 2016, Barbie continued to evolve to offer more choices for girls and to reinforce the core message to parents that the brand stands for the idea that through playing with Barbie, a girl can imagine the possibilities of what she really can be. By that time, the global “You Can Be Anything” campaign was planned to be supported by innovative products, events, and strategic partnerships, and Barbie announced the expansion of its Fashionistas® line with new body types, skin tones and hair styles. The new strategy’s success clearly impacted financial results on the following years.

In North America, the significant increase in Barbie’s gross sales from 2015 to 2016 was primarily attributed to the success of the Fashionistas® and I Can Be® lines. The same positive results can be seen in an international scenario, as Barbie also presented a strong performance in non-us markets 2016, leading the brand to a total increase of 7% in its consolidated gross sales from 2015 to 2016.

The decrease of 2% in Barbie’s consolidated gross sales from 2016 to 2017 was mainly driven by the poorer performance in the North American market in comparison to the



previous year (-8% from 2016 to 2017), and yet slightly offset by the continuous positive performance in Barbie's other markets around the globe in the same period (4% increase from 2016 to 2017). However, the decrease in sales performance was not exclusive to the Barbie brand, but also to several other important brands in Mattel's portfolio, including products in Other Girls, Construction and Arts & Crafts, American Girl, and Fisher-Price Friends. Poor performance in consolidated gross sales was mainly a result of the reversal of approximately \$47 million of gross sales related to Toys "R" Us filing for bankruptcy in the United States, which also explains why the performance of Barbie and other major Mattel brands was lower in the North America market. In addition, Mattel began to reduce shipping to Toys "R" Us already in the beginning of September 2017, which resulted in the loss of revenue reported in the second half of 2017. Toys "R" Us was an important retail partner for Mattel, as in 2016 the toys company announced a multi-year partnership with Toys "R" Us to have significant retail units of American Girl dolls and accessories in its stores.

Such negative performance from Mattel's major brands, partially due to the retailer bankruptcy, led the company to register total gross sales of \$5.51 billion in 2017, representing a decrease 9% as compared to \$6.07 billion in 2016. The Barbie brand, however, continued to show promising results in other markets, as indicated by the 4% growth in the International segment in 2017, indicating a continuous success of the new strategy. Thus, the Barbie brand was also expected to regain strength in the North America segment and resume its previous positive sales trajectory after being temporarily affected by the retail difficulties.

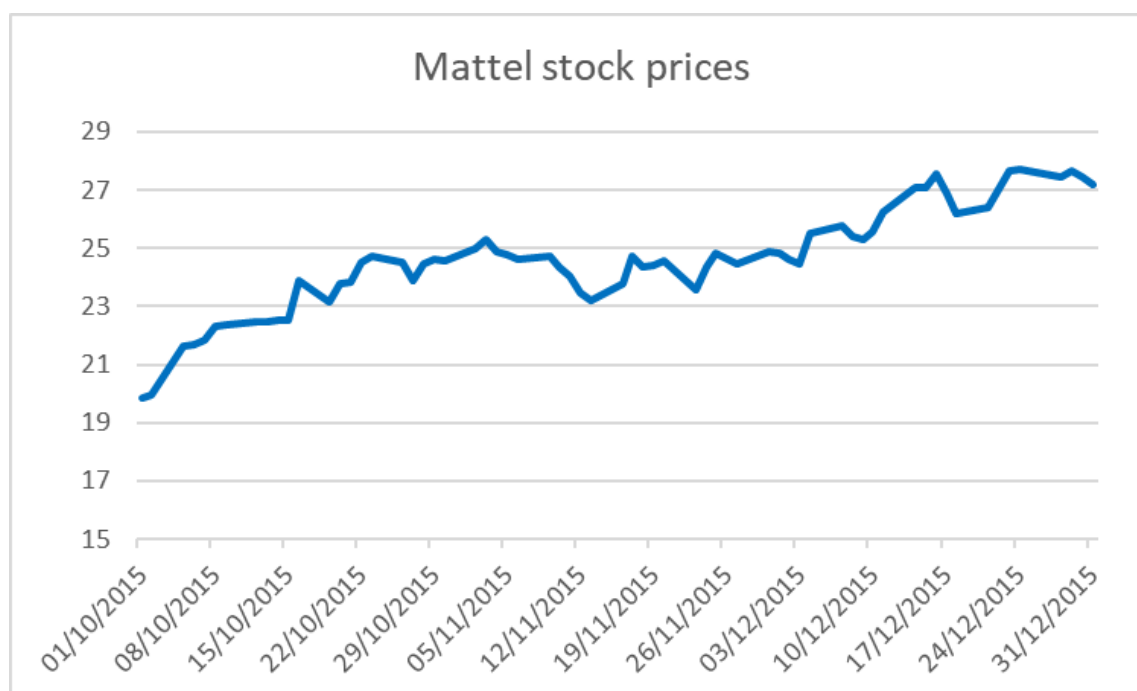
Financial results reported by Mattel in 2018 indeed already showed clear signs of recovery for Barbie in the first quarter, as worldwide gross sales for the doll brand were up 24% versus 2017's first quarter, primarily driven by the successful introduction of the new product lines. In the second quarter of 2018, Barbie continued its strong momentum and registered worldwide gross sales increase of 12% versus the previous year's quarter.

Even though the Barbie brand continues to perform well and to some extent offset the negative results from other major brands in the portfolio, Mattel as a company is still experiencing difficulties, as the liquidation of Toys "R" Us caused strong damage in terms of profitability and performance in the stock exchange.



Not only Barbie's gross sales were declining prior to 2015, but the company's performance on the stock exchange was also suffering. Listed MAT in NASDAQ, Mattel's stock prices in 2014 were down 40% after 10 straight quarters of sales declines (Adweek, 2016).

In 2015, year in which Barbie was revitalized and sales performance started to rise, stock prices took a steep increase after financial institutions recommended investors to buy in based on predictions of a strong selling season. By that time, Goldman Sachs' analyst, Taposh Bari, upgraded MAT stocks to Goldman's "Conviction" list, along with the statement "*Barbie is back, earnings have troughed, the dividend is safe*" (Kilgore, 2016, p.2).



Graph 4 – Stock Exchange MAT, October to December 2015  
Source: NASDAQ, 2015

After closing at a near six-year low on October 1st, 2015, stocks finally started to recover. After launching the "You can be anything" campaign in October 2015, and with the ad "Imagine the possibilities" reaching millions of views on YouTube, stock prices rose by 24% only within the first month, and by 37% in the end of 2015, ranging from \$19.83 in October 1st, 2015 to \$27.17 in December 31st, 2015.



## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The Barbie case has brought to attention several important aspects for the understanding of non-stereotyped advertising both through consumers and business point of view.

The literature review of this study showed that, regarding stereotyped gender portrayals in advertising, women are usually portrayed in submissive roles (Courtney & Whipple, 1983; Craig, 1992; Elliot, Jones, Benfield, and Barlow, 1995), family-oriented roles (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008), as passive or dependent on men (Eisend, 2010; Goffman, 1976; Ruggiero & Weston, 1985; Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971; Belkaoui & Belkaoui, 1976). Regarding physical appearances, women in advertising tend to be portrayed with slim body types (Gulas & McKeage 2000; Gentry & Harrison, 2010; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; Richins, 1991). In addition, regarding ethnical portrayals in advertising, Caucasian actors dominate ads in terms of frequency and exposition, while Black actors are usually background characters (Bang & Reece, 2003) and commonly portrayed in inferior roles (Taylor & Stern, 1997).

Therefore, Barbie's commercials post brand revitalization can be characterized as non-stereotyped due to the fact that they portrayal women in a way that does not adhere to dominant social stereotypes (Taylor & Stern, 1997; Mastro & Stern, 2003), for example, by showing Barbie dolls in diverse professional roles, empowered positions (e.g. president) and incentivizing girls to pursue careers usually perceived as masculine in modern western society, such as firefighter, engineer, etc. In addition, Barbie's advertising campaigns also adopted representations of people who are not frequently featured in advertising, therefore not adhering to advertising stereotypes (Åkestam, 2017), such as black women and plus size models in a fashion context.

Regarding the first research question proposed in this study, results from the netnography and in-depth interviews suggest overall positive perception from consumers to non-stereotyped advertising, with few exceptions, being preferred in comparison to stereotyped portrayals. Positive reactions were mainly based on the perception that the higher level of diversity included in the brand's advertising leads is more authentic, closer to reality, and provides a more fair representability to the several consumers of the brand.

Regarding the second research question proposed in this study, results indicate that adopting non-stereotyped advertising portrayals is a complex decision that entails organizational commitment from diverse departments. In the case of Barbie, complexities were increased by



the fact that not only advertising campaigns, but the product itself was also seen as stereotyped prior to the revitalization (e.g. the doll's thin body type, white skin, and blonde hair as indicators of beauty). Therefore, in order for advertising campaigns to be considered non-stereotyped, the product had to be redesigned altogether, which is likely not necessary to most companies. Due to its complexity, the Barbie case is, therefore, extremely rich for the understanding of non-stereotyped advertising and its impacts for businesses.

Valuable insights for businesses on what are the important elements to guarantee success when adopting non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising derived from the netnographic study and in-depth interviews with mothers and with Mattel's executive.

The first key learning provided by this study regards the importance of purpose. Purpose is a brand's reason to exist, the "why", it is about understanding the brand's role in addressing the needs and aspirations of customers (Yellowwood, 2013). The initial step in the brand revitalization process for Barbie was an intensive internal search for brand purpose, which provided clarity and guidance on all subsequent changes in terms of communication strategy and even product portfolio. In Barbie's case, purpose provided a meaningful and relevant reason to explain why the company was promoting changes and revitalizing the brand. Barbie's efforts to closely associate its advertising campaigns and marketing efforts focused on feminine empowerment with its defined purpose projected an image of authentic and truth to the public. As described in this study's review of the literature, according to Scott Goodson (2012) in the current market environment, managers are increasingly more interested in fostering cultural and social movements, looking for topics and causes around which their target audiences are gathered, and finding a way of becoming an authentic part of the movement.

Authenticity enabled by purpose brings the discussion to the second key learning provided by this research: credibility is an essential element for the success of non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising. Credibility is often achieved by actions that go beyond advertising, as means to provide support to communication campaigns, for example through initiatives in corporate social responsibility. As demonstrated by the Barbie case, consumers not only want brand's speech to resonate with their value and beliefs, but they expect brand's actions to reflect what is being dictated (e.g. consumers have asked Mattel to invest in girl's education for STEM careers, instead of only raising awareness on the importance of doing so).



Barbie has supported its brand revitalization strategy with several actions, for example, partnering with companies such as Tynker to design a coding platform for girls or launching contests to incentive girls to follow careers in STEM. Barbie has also launched several other contests to provide girls with real opportunities to learn more about their dream careers, for example, the “You Can Be Anything” contest, awarding a 7 year-old aspiring writer with a \$10,000 experience.

As noted in the review of the literature, brands negative critics on “Femvertising” are based on the perception that some brands might be using feminism simply to increase its profits, without real concerns for its impacts on women and generations of young girls. The same could be extended to all other types of non-stereotyped portrayals. Brands adopting non-stereotyped advertising must have a strong ownership to be able to generate genuine debates around diversity topics such as ethnicity or sexual orientation.

The third key learning from companies is the importance of consistency. As described in the Barbie case, brand managers and executives had to make sure that the core message of feminine empowerment was being delivered across all channels and touchpoints, from actual advertising campaigns, to content creation for entertainment products such as movies, games, and TV series, to events and partnerships, to merchandising materials. Consistency was essential to Barbie’s success along the revitalization process. For instance, even though the “You can be anything campaign” had an overall strong positive feedback from consumers, many critics were still perceived regarding Barbie’s body and physical appearance. The need for consistency demanded the company to actually change its portfolio line to reflect diversity and corroborate the core message of its advertising campaign.

Not only within the Barbie brand, but actually across Mattel as an organization, uniformity is being promoted in terms of non-stereotyped portrayals in several brands. For example, the brand of scale die-cast toy cars “Hot Wheels”, historically targeted to boys, has recently included girls in its communications, as shown in Figure 91.





Figure 91 – Visual elements in Hot Wheel’s communication

Source: Mattel, 2018

Such changes are important to provide uniformity across the organization and increase credibility, ultimately increasing consumer’s acceptance and positive perceptions.

Finally, the fourth and last key learning of this research is how customer-centricity is capable of helping brands in the process of adopting non-stereotyped portrayals. The Barbie case has demonstrated how the company benefited from incentivizing a culture of open communication and open innovation. Consumers have constantly posted suggestions and request on social media channels regarding new ideas and modifications from the dolls. Mattel has developed a website for open innovation, named “My Mattel Ideas”, which consumers were advised to use to send their suggestions for Barbie. By doing so, not only the company can benefit from innovative ideas in terms of product development, but also project an image of collaboration and strengthen relations with its target audience.

Another important aspect related to customer-centricity is the fact that companies must have clarity on who is their main target audience, and based on constant consumer research and insights of this audience’s specific needs and preferences, develop and continuously adjust its communications and marketing efforts. In the Barbie case, the brand was dealing with two very distinct audiences, collectors and parents. However, having clarity on the fact that parents were indeed the main priority, the brand was able to make decisions best aligned with their expectations, even though some collectors were unsatisfied with certain changes.

In conclusion, this study suggests that, depending on several aspects such as brand history, past communications, industry, target audience, and others, brands may perceive a higher or lower demand from consumers for non-stereotyped advertising portrayals. For Barbie in



specific, a shift from stereotyped to non-stereotyped representations proved to be not only a possibility that the brand chose to adopt, but an actual need in order to keep the brand relevant in the market and guarantee its future sustainability.

Different arguments may be proposed to whether brands could opt for neutral-portrayals, consisting of advertisings simply devoid of stereotyping altogether, or counter-stereotyped portrayals, defined as representations that actually challenge and question common social stereotypes (Åkestam, 2017), such as plus size models, when developing their non-stereotyped advertising campaigns. Either way, the main findings in this study suggest that actual stereotyped portrayals have not been well perceived as positive by most consumers.



## **6. Final considerations**

### **6.1. Research limitations**

Despite the fact that the learnings originated from this study represent an important contribution to the critical reflection and understanding of non-stereotyped portrayals in advertising, limitations must be considered.

First of all, it is important to understand that this study consists of qualitative exploratory research, based on simple non-representative sample, having as a main objective to gain initial insights on non-stereotyped advertising as a phenomenon of yet uncertain nature and characteristics. As such, the findings are subject to several limitations.

In terms of sampling, the convenience samples for in-depth interviews represent a non-probability sampling method (Malhotra, 2006), and, therefore, it does not allow generalizations of the research findings.

Limitations in terms of bias in the in-depth interviews are acknowledged, as the results of the study could have differed in a different sample set. Presumably, a different sample containing consumers of different genders, ages, cultural backgrounds, and even level of familiarity with the brand would probably have reacted in different ways to advertising featuring stereotyped and non-stereotyped gender portrayals.

In addition, even though the in-depth interviews have shown to be an appropriate method for this exploratory qualitative research, it is important to recognize limitations in terms of reliability of the statements given by the interviewees, considering that questions regarding personal opinions, values and beliefs might intimidate or make interviewees uncomfortable to report certain opinions and behaviors.

Another important limitation is the study's focus on gender stereotypes based on one brand, Barbie. The choice for different brands and different advertising campaigns would likely have provided different insights.

Regarding data collection on social media platforms through netnography, four online communities were investigated in further detail, following the recommendations of Kozinets (2002) regarding the selection criteria. Nonetheless, given the broad range of online



communities available, not only on Facebook but other platforms such as blogs and forums, limitations on the netnographic are also present.

In addition, a limitation of netnographic research is related to the need for the researcher's interpretive skill and the lack of informant identifiers present in the online context leading to difficulties in generalizing results to groups outside the online community sample.

## **6.2. Suggestions for future studies**

The literature on non-stereotyped advertising is still scarce, and there is limited empirical evidence of both its social impacts and effectiveness for brands (Åkestam, 2017), opening a great opportunity for further studies.

The research limitations described in this study offer opportunities for further investigation. In terms of methodological approach, different sampling processes could be used, capturing responses from consumers clustered in different groups with higher representation of gender, age, cultural background, in order to assess the impact of different characteristics on the perception of non-stereotyped advertising portrayals.

Several brands are available for further research investigation, Barbie being only one amongst many possibilities. Therefore, future studies could assess responses to different brands and advertising campaigns, isolating perceptions specific to a brand's context and characteristics, reaching valuable insights on perceptions common to several non-stereotyped portrayals.

Within the literature on non-stereotyped portrayals, gender is one of the areas that concentrate most efforts, especially regarding the investigation of female body size and beauty portrayals (Bian & Wang, 2015; Bissell and Rask, 2010). Therefore, an important recommendation is to expand the research focus into different areas, such as LGBT, age, religion, and other categories with even higher limitations of literature.

Finally, this study may serve as basis for further investigations attempting to assess consumers' processing of advertising featuring non-stereotyped portrayals. Quantitative studies may investigate consumer's responses and impacts for brands regarding variables considered as the most important in advertising effectiveness, such as ad attitudes, brand attitudes, and purchase intention (Kim et al., 2014), as well as other variables of interest, such as awareness, knowledge, evaluation of the product, conviction and desire (Naidu, 2015).



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## 8. Appendix A



Figure 1 – Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, "Grey or gorgeous?" advertising  
 Source: Dove UK, 2014

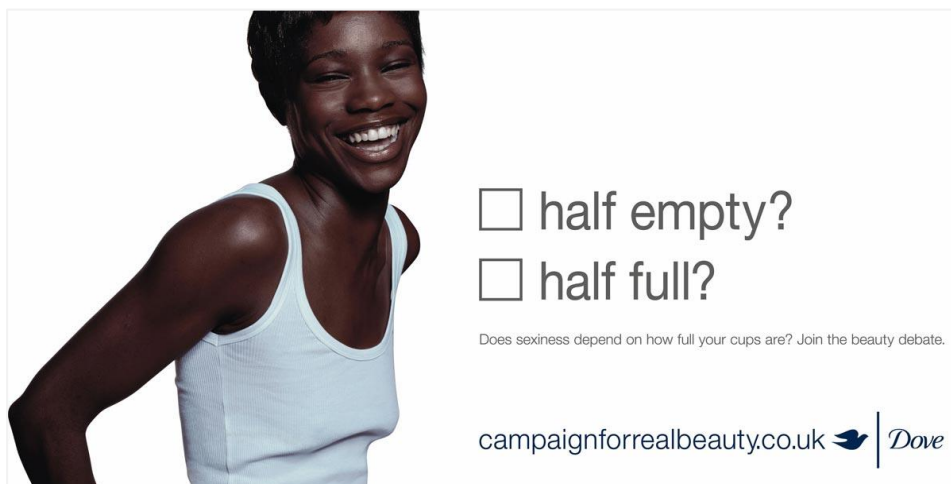


Figure 2 – Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign, "half empty or half full?" advertising  
 Source: Dove UK, 2014



Figure 3 – Dove's "Real Beauty" non-stereotyped advertising  
 Source: Bahadur, 2014





Figure 4 – Bud Light’s “Labels” campaign  
Source: Kell, 2016



Figure 5 – Nike’s advertising featuring transgender athlete Chris Mosier  
Source: Nike News, 2016





Figure 6 – Cheerios' support to LGBT community  
Source: Cheerios' Twitter, 2015



Figure 7 – American Airlines' support to LGBT community  
Source: Castillo, 2015





**FLY FORWARD.**



American Airlines is a trendsetter.  
We are the first and only airline  
to score 100% on the HRC's  
Corporate Equality Index for six years  
in a row. Because it's not just where  
you're going. It's also how you get there.

Book now at [AA.com/rainbow](http://AA.com/rainbow).™

We know why you fly®  
**American Airlines**  
[AA.com/rainbow](http://AA.com/rainbow)



American Airlines, We know why you fly and AA.com/rainbow are marks of American Airlines, Inc. one world is a mark of the oneworld Alliance, LLC.

Figure 8 – American Airlines' "Fly Forward" campaign  
Source: American Airlines, 2017



New York City, 1942

**NEVER HIDE** 

Figure 9 – Ray-Ban's "Never Hide" campaign  
Source: Huffington Post, 2012





Figure 12 – Skol's "Skolors" campaign  
Source: Meio e Mensagem, 2017



Figure 15 – Guess' gender neutral advertising  
Source: WGSN Insider, 2016





Figure 16 – Diesel's gender neutral advertising  
Source: Monllos, 2016



Figure 20 – Kellogg's PEP cereal, 1930s  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012



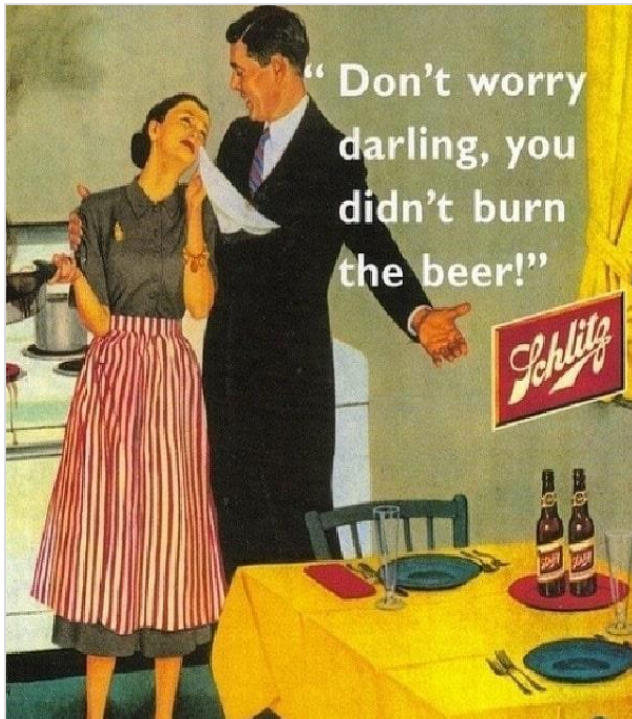


Figure 21 – Schlitz, “Don’t worry darling, you didn’t burn the beer!”, 1950s  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012

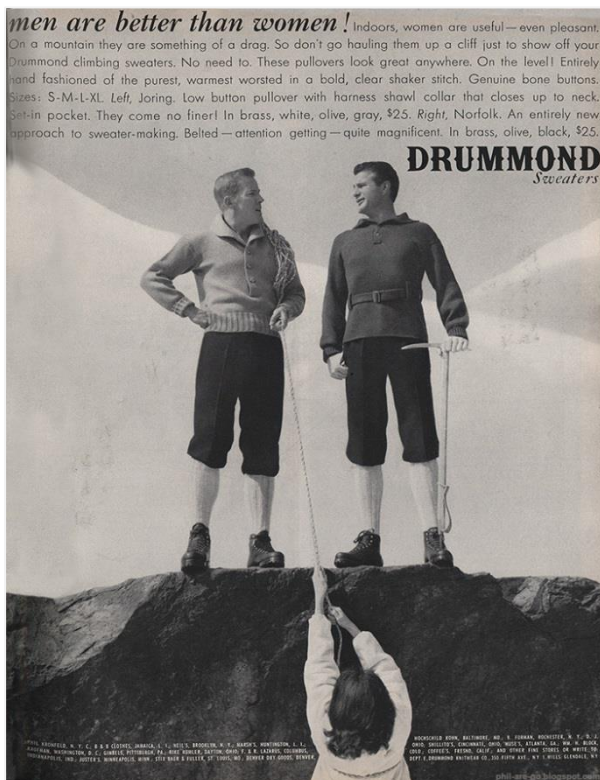


Figure 22 – Drummond Sweaters, “Men are better than women”, 1950s  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012



**If your husband ever finds out**  
*you're not "store-testing" for fresher coffee...*

...if he discovers you're still taking chances on getting flat, stale coffee... we'll be onto you!

For today there's a sure and certain way to test for freshness before you buy



Here's how easy it is to be sure of fresher coffee



**Just do this:**  
 Press your thumb against the dome top before you buy. If it bums, it's stale. Write regularly to pressure's gone—take another. It's the one way to get the freshest coffee ever packed.

**No other can lets you test!**  
 You can't see an ordinary flat top can. Name one "bumpy"? That sure has an air to seal freshness. But all flat top cans look alike. You can't tell which are good and which are stale.

**Here's the payoff!**  
 Sure as you put a cap, they'll seal most? Not Chase & Sanborn is a genuine brand of more pressure coffee... thought for you justice. No wonder Chase & Sanborn pays a bonus dividend you won't find on any other coffee!



**"PRESSURE PACKED"**  
**Chase & Sanborn**

Figure 23 – Chase & Sanborn coffee, "If your husband ever finds out", 1950s  
 Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012

**Keep her where she belongs...**



with **WEYENBERG MASSAGIC**

Shoe illustrated sells for about \$35.00—For name of your nearest dealer, write: Weyenberg Shoe Mfg. Co., Milwaukee, Wisc. 53201.

Figure 24 – Weyenberg Massagic Footwear, "Keep Her Where She Belongs", 1970s  
 Source: CNN, 2015





Figure 25 – Tipalet, “Blow in her face and she will follow you anywhere”, 1970s  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012



Figure 26 – American Apparel, “Now open”, 1970s  
Source: Huffington Post, 2012





Figure 27 – Duncan Quinn, 2000s  
Source: Green, 2013

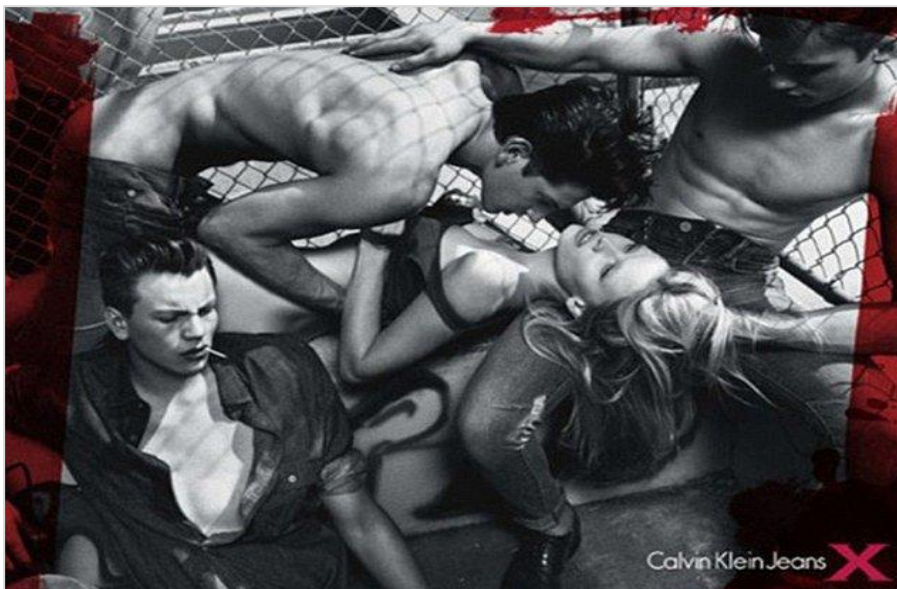


Figure 28 – Calvin Klein, 2000s  
Source: Green, 2013





Figure 29 – Tom Ford, 2000s  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012



Figure 30 – Burger King, “It’ll blow your mind away”, 2000s  
Source: Rahim, 2017



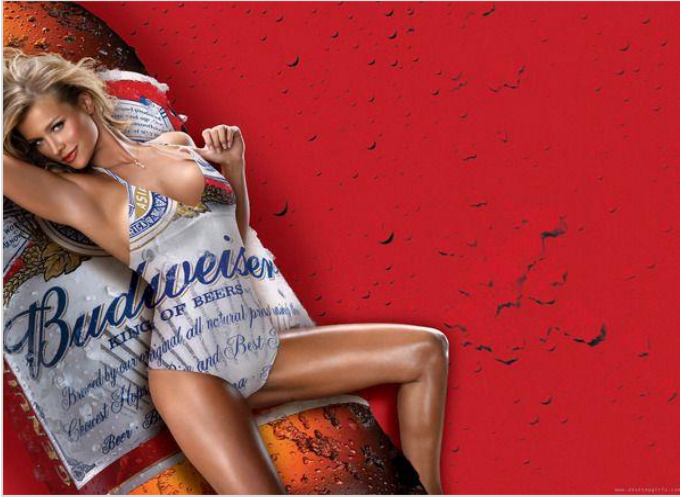


Figure 31 – Budweiser, 2000s  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012



Figure 32 – Always' "Like a girl" campaign  
Source: Procter & Gamble, 2014



Figure 34 – Nike's "Pro Hijab" advertising  
Source: Nike, 2017



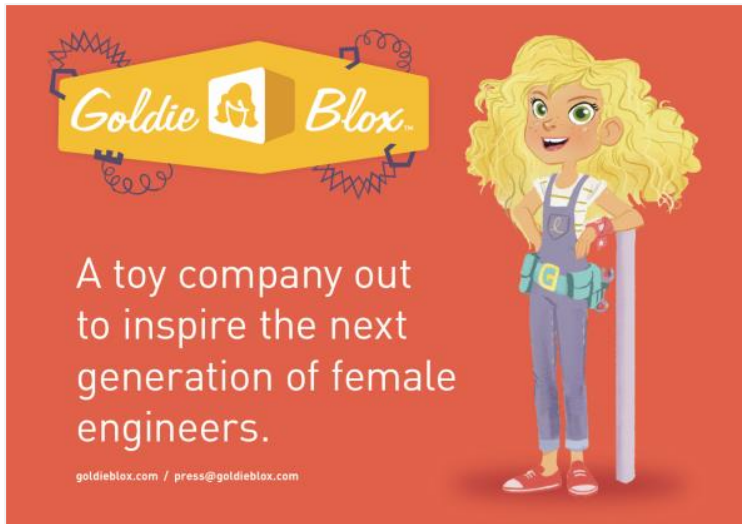


Figure 35 – GoldieBlox’s advertising  
Source: Stanley, 2015

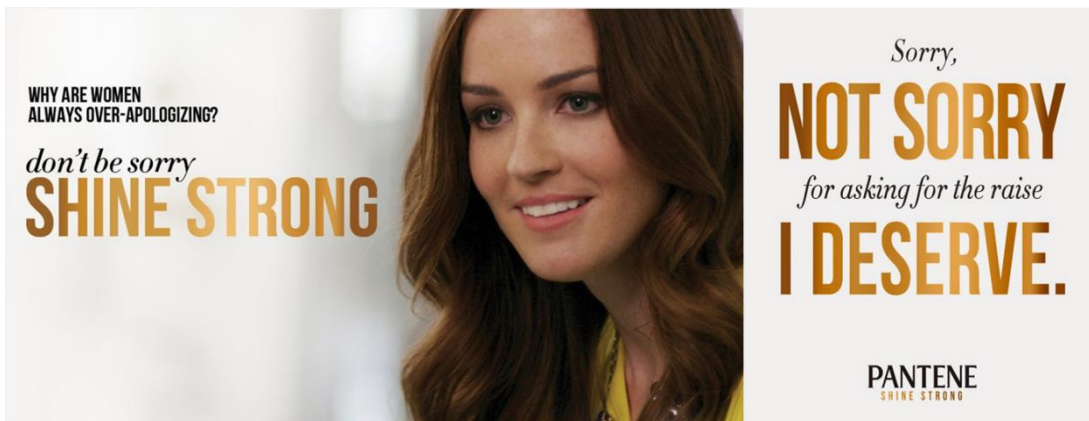


Figure 36 – Pantene’s “Sorry not sorry” campaign  
Source: Pantene’s official website



Figure 37 – Skol’s “Reposter campaign, old poster versus new version  
Source: Natividad, 2017





Figure 38 – Skol's "Reposter campaign, old poster versus new version  
Source: Natividad, 2017

## 9. Appendix B

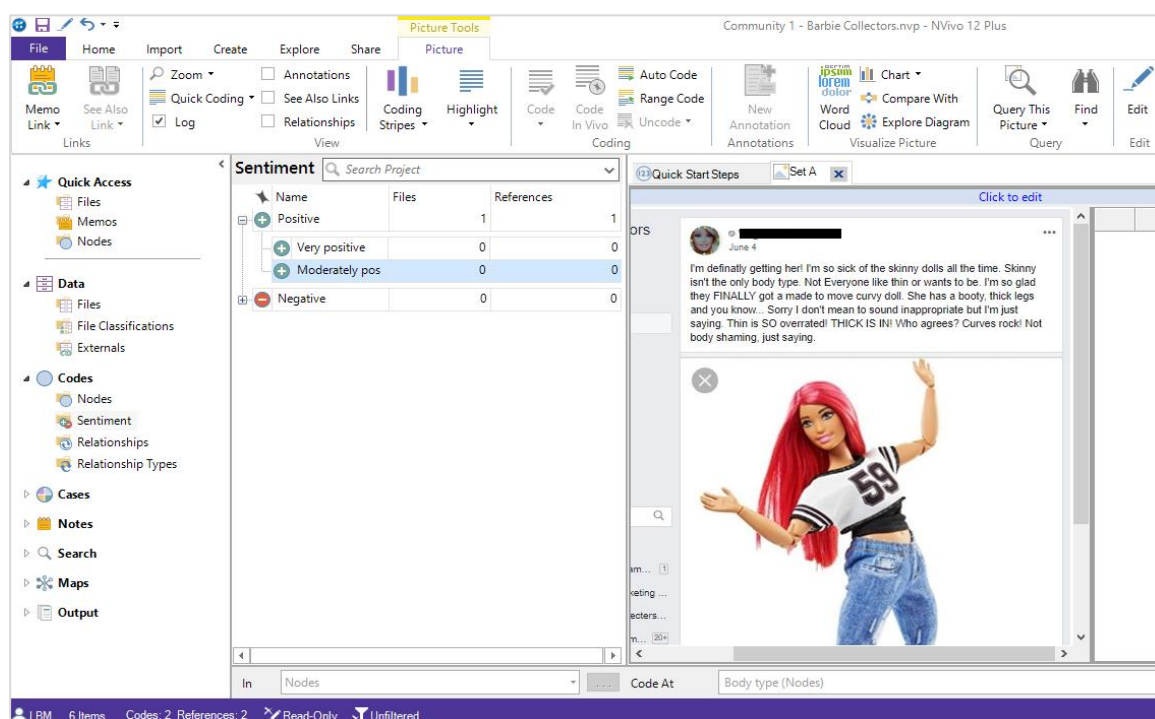


Figure 39 – NVivo Software for netnographic research



### **In-depth interview guideline - Mothers**

#### **1. Introduction (5 minutes)**

Profile detailing: name, age, nationality, civil status, profession, and children.

#### **2. Familiarity with the brand and dynamics of play (20 minutes)**

Do you know the doll brand named Barbie? If yes, what can you tell me about it?

What are the three first words that come to mind when you think of Barbie?

Did you use to play with Barbie when you were growing up? If yes, please describe it. If not, why?

Please describe a typical advertisement of the Barbie brand: what is the overall story, colors, background scenario, what is Barbie doing, how is she dressed, with whom is she with? Etc.

Do your children currently play with Barbie? If yes, please describe it. If not, why?

Please describe how your children usually play with Barbie:

- Which are the usual stories behind make-believe playing?
- How often do they play?
- Do they play alone or with friends, at home or at school?
- Which are their favorite Barbie dolls and why?
- Is there a specific Barbie doll you prefer them to play with? If yes, why?
- Is there a Barbie doll you wouldn't let them play with? If yes, why?

#### **3. Commercials and perceptions of Barbie prior to revitalization (10 minutes)**

What are your first impressions of the commercial "Great Shape Barbie"?

What are your first impressions of the commercial "Hawaiian Fun Barbie"?

What are your first impressions of the commercial "Barbie Fashion Avenue Collection"?

#### **4. Perceptions of Barbie post revitalization (25 minutes)**

Are you aware of the "You can be anything" campaign?

What are your first impressions of the commercial "Imagine the possibilities"? What is the core message taken from this ad? Do you consider it important? What would you change or how could this ad be improved?

Does your daughter have doll with different careers? Which ones?

What do you think about Barbie approaching the topic of feminine empowerment through professional careers?



In which main elements does the new campaign differ from the previous commercials of Barbie dolls?

Are you aware of the “Barbie Fashionistas” line?

Have you ever bought a doll from the “Fashionistas” line to your children? Which one(s)? Why?

Does your daughter have different “Fashionistas” dolls? Please describe it.

What do you think of Barbie changing the doll’s bodies? What is your opinion regarding the new body typed (curvy, tall, petit) compared to the original doll?

What do you think about Barbie approaching the topic of feminine empowerment through self-esteem and beauty related topics?

Are you aware of the “Barbie Inspiring Women Series”?

Have you ever bought a doll from the “Barbie Inspiring Women Series” to your children? Which one(s)? Why?

What do you think of the ambassadors? Do you know all of them? Is there any ambassador you would dislike? Why? Is there any ambassador you would suggest to be included in the “Barbie Inspiring Women Series”? Why?

## **5. Suggestions and future steps (5 to 10 minutes)**

How can Barbie continue to “empower and inspire creativity” in young girls?

In your opinion, what should be Barbie’s next step in terms of campaigns, products, sponsorships, etc?



**In-depth interview guideline – Pedagogue**

Do gender-related toys and playing could potentially impact children's development? How?

How do you perceive parents' positioning regarding gender-related toy and play?

More broadly, how do you perceive parents' positioning regarding gender equality and feminine empowerment matters?

What has changed from the older generation of parents to millennial parents?

How does the school position in those matters?

What had to change over the years in terms of pedagogical approach and planned activities to meet parents expectations and demands?



### **In-depth interview guideline - Executive**

#### **1. Introduction (5 to 10 minutes)**

Professional path at Mattel, current position and main responsibilities.

#### **2. Brand revitalization planning and implementation (25 minutes)**

Gathering of studies and materials made available by Mattel on consumer research prior to brand revitalization.

Discussion on several possible causes that led to the revitalization:

- Brand image (e.g. when consumers thought of Barbie, they thought about the pink convertible, Dream house, blond hair, thin body, fashion and a closet full of stilettos).
- Target audience (e.g. differently from Gen X parents, Millennials want to give their children toys that have purpose and meaning).
- Increasing market competition (e.g. Bratz dolls) and digitalization.
- PR controversies.
- Others.

How did all the topics discussed before impact Barbie's market share, profits, and even Mattel's stocks?

When and how exactly did Mattel decide to change the brand? Please describe it.

Was there internal alignment regarding need for revitalization? Was overall agreement present from the beginning? Which were the points of conflict?

Was the decision made on a global, regional, or local level?

How was the implementation process?

Was there a roll-out plan?

How did the implementation evolve or was adapted over time? How were results measured?

What were the main challenges of implementation?

#### **3. Impacts of brand revitalization (25 minutes)**

Gathering of studies and materials made available by Mattel on consumer research post to brand revitalization.

How were the new campaigns received by the public? (e.g. reach, sentiment, social media engagement, word or mouth, etc).

How did the relation between the brand and the target audience change?



What was the financial impact of the brand revitalization in terms of sales, profit, and share prices?

What are other important impacts of the revitalization, for example, in terms of relationship with retailers, partners, media, or other stakeholders?

How did the revitalization change the team's internal structure, tasks, responsibilities, or way of working?

Are there clear differences in impact per different geographic regions and markets?

#### **4. Future steps (5 to 10 minutes)**

How does the company perceive the debate over the influence of Barbie dolls on girls' developing self-concept and body image?

How does the company perceive the debate over the influence of Barbie dolls on social gender roles?

What else is the brand planning to do on these lines?

How can Barbie continue to “empower and inspire creativity” in young girls?



## 10. Appendix C



Figure 40 – Barbie's first TV commercial  
Source: Barbie Collectors, 2018



Figure 41 – Barbie's Dream House commercial  
Source: Barbie Collectors, 2018





Figure 43 – Barbie's hair as core message in advertising  
Source: Barbie Collectors, 2018



Figure 44 – Barbie's body features as core message in advertising  
Source: Barbie Collectors, 2018



Figure 45 – Barbie Astronaut commercial  
Source: Barbie Collectors, 2018



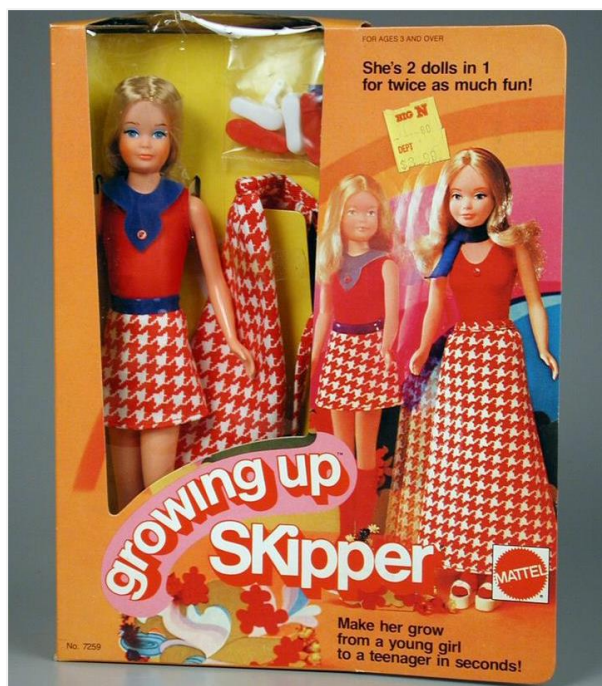


Figure 47 – Growing-up Skipper Barbie  
Source: Daily Mail UK, 2012



Figure 48 – Barbie's Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition  
Source: The New York Times, 2014





Figure 50 – The Body Shop's "Ruby" campaign  
Source: The Body Shop Blog, 2014