

DIVERSITY AND WHITE SUPREMACY CONCEPT IN THE ADAPTATION OF BARBIE: FROM A DOLL INTO A VIDEO BLOG

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Abstract

Barbie doll for some people is only childhood plaything that holds memories, but for some others, it is a representation of one race that neglects the others. However, this problem was addressed in 2016 which when Mattel produced diverse dolls that represent people of other races, body types, skin colors, and many more. Yet there is still one platform that they have not change, that is when they adapted into YouTube, the video blog or vlog concept of Barbie. These two mediums both are created by one giant company that should value the same ideology. This study is conducted using comparative study to analyze both medium and applied diversity theory by Parekh to find out the diversity concept valued by Mattel. The findings show how Mattel still uphold some white supremacies ideology in its lack of diversity in the video blog production.

Keywords: *Diversity, White supremacy, Adaptation*

INTRODUCTION

The concept of diversity still becomes a hard notion to grasp by some particular group of people in America, especially those who until today uphold the dangerous belief of white supremacy. This is proven by several movements that are still being held in that country such as the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) for the Black people who are the residents in the USA and *Stop Asian Hate* for the Asian people who also live there. There are several complexities that are surrounding this discussion; however, we can root them back into one problem; racial supremacy and or racism. Barndt (1992) stated that “Racism is a white problem, [in] that it is exclusively a disorder of white people....It is true that many white people face [the same] issues of powerlessness on grounds other than race. However, white skin is a benefit, a source of power and privilege, and nonwhite skin is a liability.”

The color of people’s skin in many parts of the world can be a liability, not just in America, however this prejudice towards many colored people also can be

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perpetuated by any other aspects particularly representation. White people for several years back before the rapid development in technology and society's awareness are represented in many forms of media, which is newspaper, radio, television, etc. Another medium of representation of white people is Barbie, a doll that becomes a world phenomenon that is not only affecting the young mind of girls in America, but other countries as well. As a doll with typical Caucasian features, Barbie is not only a representation of women, but also race.

Creator of the Barbie doll, Ruth Handler (1959) stated that "My whole philosophy about Barbie is that through the doll, the little girl can be whatever she wants to be. Barbie has always represented the fact that a woman has choices." Her intention was, through the doll that is inspired by her daughter, children specifically girls know that they can be anything and find confidence in themselves. This sense of self-confidence leads to proving that women can do various jobs in the world. This is shown from the various Barbie clothes and accessories that represent jobs such as doctors, firefighters, nurses, teachers, and so on. This boost of self-confidence is also shown by Barbie's slogan which reads: "You can be everything" which is written both on the website, commercial advertisements and the films they launch.

These jobs trace back to the patriarchal notion which states that women cannot be as responsible as men at the time of the creation of these dolls, namely in the 1950s. Therefore Barbie, who still looks fashionable but managed to achieve her dream and get permanent job, was a breakthrough to change the perception of women at that time. This is also the hope for young women today to dare to dream, and believe that nothing is impossible.

However, the goal of building a young woman's self-confidence was questioned by the world because Barbie's body proportions were considered unreasonable. Starting from the waist, chest and also the shape of the legs that show too perfect of a proportion. Barbie and Ken's white skin color, blue eyes and blonde hair are also considered favoring the concept of white supremacy. Numerous people consider the message conveyed by the doll is an unhealthy

British, Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris

message to the younger generations. This opinion is strengthened by the expression of Koste (1995) which states that children's toys have an effect on the formation of their self-concept.

Noting these complaints and also because of the awareness against the issue of racism that is spreading in America, in 2016 Mattel finally produced Barbie dolls that represent various ethnicities, body shapes, hair colors and skin colors with specifications of seven skin tones, 22 eye colors, and 24 new hairstyles. These dolls vary from dolls of Asian, Mexican, African nationality and many more. This diversity is certainly welcomed by various parties who are concerned about the toys needed by their children. Even this production was celebrated by Ellen DeGeneres who announced this new production in her popular show in many countries.

Conversely in the same year, Mattel launched the Barbie YouTube channels which commemorate the life of the doll. This channel was initially only used as a medium to advertise the latest production of the popular doll and was created in 2005, but they changed their direction to a video blog channel that brought Barbie to life in 2017. The audience who visited this channel according to the demographic number as of September of 2021 has reached 3,264,600,081 viewers.

The concept of this video blog is following Barbie's daily life which tells about her feelings, the activities she is doing, makeup tutorials, room tour and also playing games with her friends. Naturally, the audience has varying opinions regarding this development, some gave a positive response, but some others express their disagreement because the concept of a live Barbie is considered a little unnatural.

Alongside the emergence of this channel, it deviates from Mattel's desire to celebrate diversity because in this channel, Barbie is only surrounded by her white friends. She also shows off a slightly extravagant lifestyle and she does not have a real job. This failure is also added to the fact that the younger generation is more

interested in toys and spectacles that indulge their audio-visuals, thus the dolls seem to fail in conveying the message of diversity they want to deliver.

RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this study is comparative study which comparing both Barbie in two different mediums, a doll as a concept, and the video blogs. The theory used for this research is the concept of diversity introduced by Bhikhu Parekh (2000) in his book *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*. This concept describes the multiculturalism faced by the previous generation and how they dealt with it and shows how the new generations should deal with differences. This theory is used to explain Mattel's ideology and understanding of diversity that he conveys through his doll productions and videos. If Mattel has accepted the concept of diversity, it will certainly consistently produce a variety of physical and non-physical products for consumers around the world.

RESEARCH FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Research related to Barbie and its effect on children's self-concepts, especially girls, is a study conducted by Tara L. Kuther and Erin McDonald (2004) which discusses the effect of Barbie dolls in forming self-concept and body image. The research, which was conducted using two focus groups, focused on the psychological aspects that children experience when they see a Barbie doll.

The second study was conducted by Milla Hanifah (2012) which discusses how the female body, which is depicted by a Barbie doll, becomes a capitalist's profit to gain revenue. The marketing of the female body as an object that was widely broadcast through Barbie's first commercial was analyzed by Hanifah using the theory of capitalism.

Both studies have similarities related to the development of women's self-esteem based on the presence of Barbie dolls, the concept of beauty, and the exploitation of women's bodies as the benefits of capitalism. Meanwhile, the researchers found the loss of the concept of diversity in Mattel's transfer of rides from the production of dolls or inanimate objects to a video blog that brought

Barbie to life. It then revived the previous standard of beauty, namely white supremacy.

Barbie Sales Drops

After more than 50 years of dominating the global market with the theme of children's toys favored by many people, in 2014 Barbie sales decreased drastically from previous years' income (Wallstreet Journal, 2016). According to Ziobro (2016), that year was the year Mattel began to realize their mistakes in production and sales so they decided to change their production strategy. One of Mattel's efforts is to add three body shapes to the production of dolls. If Barbie usually always comes with the same body shape, in 2016 they gave birth to three new body shapes: tall, curvy and petite. Not only with body shape, Mattel also presents Barbie with various races and nationalities, hair color, eye color, and skin color.



Figure 1. Ellen introduces new Barbie products on *The Ellen Show* (2016)

This change then attracted public attention to Barbie, as shown by Mattel's skyrocketing revenue at the end of 2016 when the company's stock figure increased to 6%. The increase in international sales of this phenomenal doll has even reached 15.8% at the end of September 2016 (Reuters, 2016).

This proves the positive public response to Mattel's openness towards the criticism that was attacking the company's ideology. Previously, Mattel seemed to define an ideal female body shape and create beauty standards that uphold the white nation, Mattel is now trying to establish a corporate image that is open to

diversity. It also proves once again that Barbie has had an impact on the world of children's toys since her debut in 1959. This doll is able to build children's perceptions of the female body which in turn affects their mindset and their self-confidence.

Barbie Video Blog Debut

Right after the skyrocketing sales figures and the return of Barbie's popularity, Mattel tried to boost Barbie's popularity in the internet through YouTube. YouTube creators are no stranger to internet lovers who adore short and interesting audio-visual entertainment, such as Nigahiga with her comedy content, IISuperwomanII with a video blog containing her life story, and Michelle Pan with her makeup tutorial content. However, the difference between Barbie and these creators is that she is a doll that is brought to live on screen, while other creators are actually human being.

The interesting side of this development is that Barbie always discusses events that are actually experienced by teenage girls. It was as if she really had the experience of a teenage girl. She recounted her sadness and told how she had overcome it; she recounted her origins and even her family traditions when a national holiday arrived. This closeness to reality was later explained by a Mattel representative for Barbie's debut in an article on a list daily:

"Giving Barbie a voice on YouTube seemed the most authentic thing we had ever done," said Hackmann.

"How do we really deliver the first animated character in this form?" asked Pistor.

"It scared us."

Hackmann noted that she runs everything by her 16-year-old daughter to help make sure the Barbie voice is talking about things a teenager would talk about" (Peterson, 2015).

The Barbie YouTube channel has been around since 2015, but the popularity of videos and the consistent presence of this doll's video blog occurred right at the beginning of 2017, after their new production received a positive response and their sales figures increased. The consistency of Barbie's video

presence is defined by the consistency of uploading the latest videos on their YouTube channel; Barbie uploads her latest videos once a week or twice a month.

Mattel's Attitude towards Diversity

According to Parekh (2000, p. 165), cultural differences can complement each other because no culture is truly perfect. Cultural differences can also help expand thinking and develop human ways of dealing with life. Therefore, there should be no concept of a superior nation or superior culture in this multicultural world. The attitude that can be chosen by the current generation is to accept differences and try to eliminate prejudice against differences, both in terms of culture, physicality, nation, and differences that can refer to other negative attitudes.

The praise and positive comments that Mattel has received for its innovation in the production of new Barbie dolls give the impression that the company supports diversity and diversity, and does not agree with the company's concept of white supremacy. He also gave the impression that he wanted to remove the standard of beauty that had long dominated women's thinking that beauty was those with fair skin, blue eyes and blonde hair. However, the author finds that Mattel is inconsistent with this discourse.



Figure 2. Latest Video Blog, May 5, 2017
Q&A: 23 Questions with Barbie | Barbie Vlog | Episode 36

In the latest video blog that Mattel uploaded on May 5, 2017, Barbie held a question-and-answer session with Stacie, her younger sister. Her sister, of course, has the same physical proportions and nationality as the teenage girl, therefore viewers cannot find the element of diversity in this one video blog.



Figure 3. The Whisper Challenge with Ken! _ Barbie Vlog _ Episode 25

The video blog which was starred by other characters besides Barbie and her family was a video with Ken, a Caucasian male character produced by Handler as Barbie's companion. They in this video play a word guessing challenge that is popular among YouTube Creators. It can be seen from this video that again Mattel does not present a character that introduces diversity to its audience. Ken can be called the male version of Barbie with blonde hair, blue eyes and fair skin.



Figure 4. J. Lo Joins the Barbie World _ Barbie

Before the challenge video with Ken was shared, Barbie uploaded a video with Jennifer Lopez whose main goal was to bring diversity in their videos. However, as can be seen in the image above, the format used is not a video blog format, but an interview format, so the message conveyed is of course different because this video can be categorized as an advertisement. This video doesn't bring the Lopez doll character into Barbie's 'life'.



Figure 5. Barbie's New Look

Another video on Barbie's YouTube channel that shows multiculturalism and ethnic differences is a video entitled Barbie's New Look. However, similar to the ad format shown by Lopez, this video is also just an advertisement for the presence of Barbie's new friends in the form of dolls, not actually including these various race dolls in Barbie's 'life', so that again Mattel doesn't bring its concept of diversity into their video blog production.



Figure 6. Friend Tag with Harper! _ Barbie Vlog _ Episode 26

On December 9, 2016, Mattel finally presented a character who had differences with Barbie into a video blog. The doll or character is named Harper who has all the characteristics that are not considered in a previous Barbie doll, with a body that is plus-sized and dark skin. They are said to have met in a music class and quickly became close friends. This video comes after Mattel's new production was confirmed to have received a positive response and high profits in the previous month (Reuters, 2016).

However, there are two contradictions for this one video uploaded by Mattel. First, because of the approximately 200 videos on their YouTube channel, this one video cannot yet be called an improvement on Mattel's attitude in dealing with the development of diversity. Moreover, because this video was uploaded after their production received the spotlight from the public eye, it seems as if they made this video content with the intention of pleasing the community, not because of their acceptance of differences and diversity.

The second opinion is, after the upload of this video, Barbie will no longer produce videos containing characters with various physical differences, races and other background differences in their latest vlogs. If they had made diversity their production ideology, they would consistently create video content that prides itself on and celebrates differences. After this video was published, the video uploaded afterwards returned to be about the exclusive life of Barbie and her white friends.

Barbie's Concept of Diversity

Loden and Rosener (1991) describe diversity as something that distinguishes a group of people from other groups based on primary and secondary dimensions. They also explain these two dimensions as follows:

Primary dimensions of diversity, those exerting primary influences on our identities, are gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, age and mental or physical abilities and characteristics. The primary dimensions shape our basic self-image as well as our fundamental world views. Additionally, they have the most impact on groups in the workplace and society. Secondary

dimensions of diversity are less visible, exert a more variable influence on personal identity and add a more subtle richness to the primary dimensions of diversity. They include: educational background, geographic location, religion, first language, family status, work style, work experience, military experience, organizational role and level, income and communication style. The secondary dimensions impact our self-esteem and self-definition (Loden & Rosener, 1991).

Regarding the Loden & Rosener's opinion, Mattel produces Barbie based on primary dimensions, namely the characteristics of gender, race, and sexual orientation to the same age. Barbie's gender has always been dominated by women, even in her latest production, all makeovers are done on female dolls only. However, this is understandable because the target market is girls. Barbie's race is synonymous with Caucasians or whites. Barbie's sexual orientation is always described as straight and she is always paired with Ken.

In a video called Family Holiday Traditions or video blog Episode 7, Barbie talks about her family's holiday traditions and that of her friends. In this tradition, there are many traditions that come from different ethnicities and religions, for example the Ken family who takes the Christmas tradition from Japan who celebrates Christmas while eating fried chicken, Teresa who adopts Mexican traditions, Renee who celebrates Hanukkah and several other traditions.



Figure 7. Family Holiday Traditions _ Barbie Vlog _ Episode 7

Barbie's narrative about the celebration traditions that she and her friends do with the traditions of other nations that they have adopted, is not a form of diversity, but just tolerance. Since according to O'Reilly, Williams, & Barsade (1998), a group can be said to be diverse if the members of the group consist of individuals who have different characteristics whose characteristics are based on their group's social identity.

In Barbie's friendship group, the basic group characteristic that unites them is race, while Barbie, Ken, Teresa and Renee's race is Caucasian or white. They only adopted some traditions from other ethnicities for their big celebrations, but they didn't come from races that celebrate those traditions, subsequently Barbie's friendship group can't be expressed as a diverse group, but a similar group.



Figure 8. Barbie

Ken

Teresa

Renee

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

From the analysis above, Mattel's media adaptation from dolls to video blogs shows Mattel's ideology which majority upholds the white supremacy, or an ideology that favors the white race. Both in beauty standards, as well as in everyday life because the concept of the video blog they created is a concept that shows Barbie's daily life as a human-like. There has been an attempt from Mattel to show a diversity attitude, but this attitude has not been seen concretely. The concept of diversity has not been deeply rooted in the ideology of the giant company even though they have produced dolls with various physical shapes and various nationalities.

They made these changes because of pressure from the community. They considered the demands of the community, and it was also due to the declining

sales figures and company shares from year to year starting from 2014. After their sales soared again and the focus of the children's toy world returned to Barbie, they reoriented themselves to their belief in producing works that feature Caucasian Barbie or white Barbie. This is evidenced by the videos that Mattel has uploaded on their YouTube channel about Barbie's life. The writer suggests further analysis by next interested researcher since the YouTube channel is still growing and they have since brought new characters into the screen.

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