

Female Empowerment and Femininity in Barbie's "You Can Be Anything" YouTube Channel Campaign

1st Alyssa Melita Rahmat

*English Studies Program, Faculty of
Humanities, Universitas Indonesia,*

Depok, Indonesia
alyssa.melita@ui.ac.id

2nd Shuri Mariasih Gietty Tambunan*

*Literature Department, Faculty of
Humanities, Universitas Indonesia,*

Depok, Indonesia
shuri.mariasih@ui.ac.id

Abstract—The famous Barbie doll is stereotypically perceived with negativity because of its unrealistic representation of the female appearance and standards of beauty. Thus, Mattel created a new campaign titled *You Can Be Anything* (YCBA) to encourage young girls to be ambitious and aim toward their aspirational selves. Among other means of dissemination, this campaign also uploads videos on the company's YouTube channel. This article explores how the color pink is utilized in this campaign both as a signifier of femininity and as a message of empowerment. Its use eventually delivers an abstruse interpretation of the campaign's mission. Applying Roland Barthes' conception of the levels of connotation and denotation to the analysis of the campaign's message of female empowerment through its depictions of the female mentorship program, this study finds that the YCBA campaign is indeterminate in its portrayal of empowerment for young girls, who form the target market for Barbie. The results of the study emphasize that girls still generally lack workplace and career equality and that the campaign contains moments of disempowerment that affirm dominant patriarchal values.

Keywords—Barbie, empowerment, femininity, girls' mentorship

I. Introduction

"My whole philosophy of Barbie was that, through the doll the little girl could be anything she wanted to be. Barbie has always represented the fact that woman has choices" [1]. Since Barbie's debut at the American International Toy Fair in New York in 1959, the doll has always been the one toy young girls around the world have played with the most [2]. The Barbie doll was created by Ruth Handler based on her experience with her daughter and the realities of growing up as a girl in the 1950s. "The only dolls available on the market were baby dolls, where the child is limited to playing mommy... and there was no adult doll with which a child could truly dream her dreams in the early fifties" [3]. Identifying this gap in the market, Handler desired her doll to become an inspiration for young girls. However, over the years, Barbie has been perceived with negativity because of assumptions that the doll falsely represents an ideal female [4]. Girls come in all shapes, colors, and sizes and cannot thus be encouraged by the unrealistic body proportions and unreasonable beauty standards represented by this doll. In response to the growing criticism, Mattel began a new campaign titled *You Can Be Anything* (YCBA) in 2015. The message on their website read, "when a girl plays with Barbie, she imagines everything she can become." Unlike previous campaigns, this version used the YouTube platform

to deliver the message of empowerment and encouragement to young girls. As of December 2018, Barbie's YouTube channel had uploaded 24 videos in its YCBA campaign series.

This article focuses on five videos from the YCBA series that are selected as case studies. The videos are named: "#YouCanBeAnything – TV Host Tracy Moore Mentorship | Barbie," "Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Soccer Player Ashley Lawrence | Barbie," "Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Chef – Connie DeSousa | Barbie," "Tradeswoman & Builder: Blue Collar CEO – Mandy Rennehan | You Can be Anything Mentorship | Barbie," and "You Can Be a Gymnast with Laurie Hernandez | Barbie." These five videos were chosen because each involves a mentor and a mentee whose relationship can be examined to assess the ambiguousness of the meaning of female empowerment and femininity delivered through the female-to-female mentorship program. According to Mosedale [5], empowerment is "an ongoing process rather than a product" in which the process of empowering is more important than the result. The ongoing process of empowering young girls to achieve their aspirations can be explicitly observed in the five selected videos. However, apart from female empowerment, this paper also seeks to analyze how Barbie continues to utilize conventional ways to depict an idealized image of a woman and to convey the message that a woman should look pretty [2]. According to Dee, "You must be meticulous in your clothing, make-up, skin– to be clean, fresh, and nice all the time" [6]. As times have changed since the 1950s, the social construct of femininity has also transformed. Women no longer seek a single image of femininity or beauty. In fact, most women place now accord greater importance to interpersonal behavior and the skills they bring to their worlds [6].

Being a famous doll, Barbie can certainly encourage girls to strive to achieve their aspirations. However, the hidden agenda of the brand that commodifies the stereotypical notions of femininity and empowerment must be scrutinized. For example, the color pink is widely used in the YouTube YCBA series to increase Mattel's profit. The current study also observes an ambiguity between the message of female empowerment and the construction of femininity that is delivered through the campaign videos. Roland Barthes' concepts of connotation and denotation were utilized as the theoretical grounding from which to analyze the abstruse signification of empowerment and femininity that are conveyed through the YCBA campaign propagated on the Barbie YouTube channel. This article is divided into four

sections: contextualizing Barbie and female (dis)empowerment, the “new” Barbie as a role model of female empowerment through hard work and the building of careers, how female-to-female mentoring facilitates emotional intimacy and helps girls cope with adulthood, and how Barbie’s pink color embraces empowerment through femininity.

II. Method

The YCBA campaign was analyzed using a qualitative methodology. First, five videos were selected from Barbie’s YouTube channel based on the criterion that each chosen video should portray a mentor-mentee relationship that could be examined. The content, dialogues, clothing, and environment presented in the videos were all scrutinized through the lens of Roland Barthes’ conceptual constructs of connotation and denotation. In particular, the usage of pink throughout the campaign was examined in terms of its associations with both femininity and female empowerment.

The study hypothesized the existence of an ambiguity in the meaning conveyed by the use of pink. However, in the contemporary context, pink has accrued multiple layers of meaning that span from symbolizing femininity or being “girly” to representing female empowerment. This paper also delves into Mattel’s hidden agenda and queries why this campaign was undertaken: Is it simply a marketing strategy? Is the company commodifying its own doll to regain its former success?

III. Results and Discussion

A. *The “New” Barbie: Being a Role Model and Empowering Females in their Careers through Hard Work*

Barbie has always been perceived as a symbol of female disempowerment. It has been postulated that young girls who play with Barbie may be negatively affected by the unreasonable beauty standards and unrealistic body proportions set by the doll. In addition, playing with the doll may also negatively influence the self-esteem of young girls because of the unhealthy body ideals that are propagated by the figure of the doll. Girls may feel that to be successful, they must be as thin, curvaceous, or beautiful in their facial features as Barbie.

This case study conducts a textual analysis of selected videos retrieved from Mattel’s YCBA series that consistently take the theme of empowering young girls. The selected audio-visual messages depict females as career women with specific professional skills. Throughout the videos, however, Barbie’s body image tends to be overpowering: the campaign constantly represents the image of a successful and professional version of the doll. The YCBA campaign shows a variety of careers being offered to girls to promote imagination of a different sort in little girls and to encourage them to think like future career women rather than as homemakers [7]. The careers that are presented in the videos are varied: businesswoman, gymnast, chef, astronaut, vet, paleontologist. The videos also portray women in professions that are dominated by men: construction worker, coach, soccer player, president, and professor. The careers showcased by Barbie thus

transcend the image of traditional feminine domestic careers such as homemakers, nurses, teachers, and so on.

Empowerment may be defined as “an interactive process through which less powerful people experience personal and social change, enabling them to achieve influence over the organizations and institutions which affect their lives, and the communities in which they live” [8]. The process of empowerment accords power or ability to do what they want to those who cannot [8]. The YCBA campaign attempts to share this message of empowerment through means such as depicting Barbie giving young girls the opportunity or ability to meet with experts. Figures 1 and 2 are screenshots from the first video of the series, “Tradeswoman & Builder: Blue Collar CEO – Mandy Rennehan | You Can Be Anything Mentorship | Barbie.” Around the beginning of the video (00:00:02 – 00:00:07), the narrator says, “Xoe Nickerson, of Yarmouth Nova Scotia, dreamed of being a builder. Therefore, Barbie gave her the chance to find out what it takes with the help of Blue Collar tradesperson and mentor, Mandy ‘Bear’ Rennehan.” The line “so Barbie gave her the chance to find out what it takes,” confirms that the campaign intends to posit Barbie as the reason why the girl in the video (and those watching the video) can meet this expert and experience what it feels like to work in their dream profession. Barbie wants all the girls in the campaign to achieve their ambitions by also understanding the process, and not merely by playing with her in the form of dolls. As has been stated in the definition of the term empowerment, the process is more important than the result. Therefore, Barbie gives little girls like Xoe in the first video the opportunity to grasp the process and the hard work required to become a construction worker or tradesperson.

Another evidence of Barbie’s ideal of emphasizing female empowerment through this YCBA campaign may be noted in the second video, “Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Chef – Connie DeSousa | Barbie.” This video contains a phrase similar to the one mentioned with respect to the first video. This phrase also occurs in the introductory section of the video (00:00:01 – 00:00:11): “Zoe from Calgary, Alberta, dreamed of being a chef. So, Barbie gave her the chance to find out what it takes with the help of Canadian celebrity chef and mentor, Connie DeSousa.” The words “dreamed of becoming a chef” reflect that what was initially just a dream for Zoe could ultimately become a reality because she was fortunate Barbie was there to help her understand and experience what it was like to actually be a chef. This second video also emphasizes that girls must learn about hard work to achieve their ambitions. Zoe learns that to be a restaurant chef she must wake up early in the morning and attend the morning briefing with the other teams (figure 1) before she begins preparations for the dishes she will serve to the restaurant’s customers (figure 2).



Fig. 1. Zoe comes to the restaurant early to join the staff briefing before the restaurant opens. Screenshot from: [Barbie]. (2017, December 7). Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Chef – Connie DeSousa | Barbie [Video file].



Fig. 2. Zoe and Connie prepare the food for the customers. Screenshot from: [Barbie]. (2017, December 7). Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Chef – Connie DeSousa | Barbie [Video file].

The above scenes relate to and prove Barbie’s empowerment point and underscore its emancipatory narrative: “everyone is free to succeed ... all it requires is a clear and focused commitment to the task at hand.” The message that is delivered is that girls must work harder to produce better knowledge in themselves and they must extend superior effort [9] rather than merely dreaming of becoming someone else.

B. Adult Female Mentors: Building Emotional Intimacy and Coping with Adulthood

The YCBA campaign reflects the notion of female-to-female mentorship as a means of helping and encourage young girls to be brave in seeking to achieve their aspirations of becoming career women. The act of mentorship is the primary idea that is promoted throughout the series to ensure that girls can both imagine their dream careers and pursue those dreams by meeting the professionals who actually embody them. All five of the selected videos from the YCBA campaign depict mentorship or meeting the experts as an important step in the right direction: girls can become more motivated to achieve their dreams if they are accorded the opportunity to meet an expert in their desired field of specialization. Allen-Sommerville defines mentoring as, “a one-to-one relationship between a caring adult and a student who needs support to achieve academic, career, social, or personal goals” [10]. The selected videos showcase the professional mentors assigning and supervising tasks to the girls who become their mentees. Thus, the campaign does not restrict itself to the mere “telling” of what girls must do to achieve their desired careers. The mentors also undertake actual activities with the girls. In so doing, the videos subscribe to the thought that “the long-term presence of one caring adult can contribute to the capacity of certain young people to overcome adverse circumstances in moving towards adulthood” [11]. It is thus elucidated that according to Barbie, little girls require the support and care of adults who can act as role models to bring out the best in them.

The same-sex mentoring displayed in this campaign seems to adhere to the belief that “given that female relationships are characterized by emotional intimacy, it has been suggested that girls may benefit from relationships with adult female mentors that emphasize self-disclosure and empathy, ...” [12]. The style of mentoring presented in the YCBA campaign is a mix of instrumental and psychosocial approaches: the first focuses on problem-solving and practical skill-building, and the second emphasizes in “the interpersonal relationship that forms between the mentor and the girls which is believed to influence the developing personal characteristic of the youth” [12]. Barbie’s YouTube channel asserts that it includes mentors in the program because: “...they want to support the girls’ self-discovery and help them to imagine the possibilities that they can be anything.”

C. Pink: Embracing Empowerment Through Femininity

Despite its mission of empowerment, the YCBA campaign also conveys femininity through the settings and outfits that are predominantly pink. This use of pink conveys the two connotations of femininity and empowerment but in an indistinct manner. Pink is the predominant color used in the campaign. Given that this color is stereotypically associated with femininity, its “first and basic function is to signify something as feminine” [13]. In the 1980s, pink was strongly associated with femininity, and it became the primary color choice for female infants and children. Pink represents the “female-stereotypes color” [14] and symbolizes traditional definitions of femininity or being feminine. This conventional description of femininity is explicit in Barbie dolls: their clothing is still majorly “pink,” “pretty,” “sweetheart,” “floral,” and “chic” [2].



Fig. 3. Zariah wears a pink striped dress along with chic floral scrunchy. Screenshot from: [Barbie]. (2017, September 13). Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Soccer Player Ashley Lawrence | Barbie [Video file].

All five videos of the YCBA campaign selected for this study liberally utilized pink in the clothing of the girls who met with the experts and also in the settings. Driessen quotes a survey conducted by Koller [13] to confirm that words such as “blossom” and “flowers” are also correlated with pink. Thus, the outfit worn by Zariah (figure 3) can also be considered pink.



Fig. 4. The use of the TV host shooting set is completely pink. Screenshot from: [Barbie]. (2017, September 13). #YouCanBeAnything – TV Host Tracy Moore Mentorship | Barbie [Video file].



Fig. 5. The soccer player’s locker room is decorated in bright pink. Screenshot from: [Barbie]. (2017, September 13). Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Soccer Plate Ashley Lawrence | Barbie [Video file].

Pink settings are noted in the shooting set in “You Can Be Anything - TV Host Tracy Moore Mentorship | Barbie” (figure 4) and in the soccer player’s locker room in “Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Soccer Player Ashley Lawrence | Barbie” (figure 5). The series seems to employ pink as a metaphor for the feminine and to represent the

qualities of “sweetness, softness, and delicacy” [13]. Consequently, the first connotation of pink in this campaign is as a code for femininity, which contradicts Ruth Handler’s dream and the campaign’s mission to empower women. This liberal use of pink in the campaign connotes that Barbie’s ideals include young girls dressed in pink and thus represents the patriarchal construction of femininity. On the other hand, although the softness of pink connotes that women are submissive to men, recent feminist scholarship has tended to subvert the patriarchal construct to own pink and accord a new layer of connotation to the color, making it also the color of female empowerment. Valerie Steel, the director of The Museum at the Fashion Institute (cited in *Broadway*, 2013), claims that “pink was initially considered slightly masculine as diminutive of red, which was thought to be a ‘warlike’ color” (para. 5). Thus, pink can connote empowerment and even masculinity even though the color was undeniably associated with girls and femininity in the 1980s [15]. Recent trends seem to suggest that this color could become gender-free in the next decade.

Close scrutiny of the visualization of this color in the series of videos leads to the interpretation that rather than being used as a marker of femininity or the color scheme of female empowerment, this typical pink that is also known as the Barbie color serves as a marketing tool to achieve the primary objective of corporate branding. Mattel’s real goal is to amplify the sales of its prime product. The video series and the liberal use of pink are tethered to that principal objective of marketing. Throughout the YCBA series, “pink is used to feminize Barbie and interpersonally to attract the attention of the targeted market through visual markers of femininity” [13].

This paper thus contends that the ambiguous signification of pink in the YCBA campaign does seem to support the idea of female empowerment. However, it also idealizes markers of femininity that conform to the patriarchal ideology. The typical Barbie pink used in this campaign seeks to embrace the conventional notion of femininity as something soft, gentle, and flowery and to also convey the idea of empowerment and achievement of ambitions without bounds. In so doing, the campaign misses the mark. Barbie seems to articulate contradictory messages: girls can own their empowerment but they must still maintain their conventionally approved feminine features.

IV. Conclusion

This study finds that the YCBA campaign on Barbie’s YouTube channel depicts the idea that Barbie is not limited to the unrealistic body proportions and unreasonable beauty standards for which the doll and its marketers have been severely criticized. The analysis of the five selected clips evidenced that the campaign projects a multitude of careers that young girls can choose from and imagine to be. The campaign also empowers little girls by according them the opportunity to meet experts in careers they desire when they grow up. Barbie’s interventions ensure that girls get the message that they must be motivated to work harder to achieve their dreams and that they should not be afraid to espouse high ambitions. The female-to-female mentorship method showcased in the campaign is certainly influential because it takes into account both the instrumental and

psychosocial approaches toward the skill-development of the featured girls. By meeting specialists who support their dreams, little girls can get the role models and impetus they require to ensure the achievement of their aspirational careers. Thus, the YCBA campaign does reflect a different aspect of Barbie, which counters the previous interpretation of the toy as disempowering. However, this study finds persistent indeterminacy in the conveyance of the campaign’s stated mission, particularly because of the predominance of pink used by the campaign. While it is true that pink can connote both femininity and empowerment, the patriarchal construction of pink is perpetuated and seems to overshadow the empowerment. In addition, this study posits that the predominance of pink may also simply indicate Mattel’s profit-making marketing strategy to increase sales.

This paper contributes to the scholarly discourse about young girls who continue to lack workplace or career equality. This deficiency has been utilized by Mattel to launch an ambiguously empowering campaign. The analysis of the message of empowerment conveyed by the YCBA series yields the conclusion that Barbie’s YCBA campaign responds to contemporary problems and encourages young women to be unafraid of ambition and to be anything they want to be. It also encourages a new and more updated way of conceiving the Barbie doll by informing people that this toy does not merely embody stereotypical femininity; it can also open discussions on empowerment and project superior role models for young girls. Future research can analyze how women of color are treated in the campaign because the selected clips mostly still use white Barbie dolls. Thus, prospective researchers could scrutinize Barbie’s lack of inclusivity and its effects on the intersectionality of gender, sexual preferences, race, ethnicity, and even social classes.

Acknowledgment

I thank Ms. Gietty Tambunan for guiding me from the inception to the submission of this article. This work was supported by Universitas Indonesia’s Research Grant (PITMA B 2019) managed by DRPM UI/Indonesian Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education’s Research Grant (PDUPT 2019) managed by DRPM UI.

References

- [1] Handler, R. (1994). *Dream Doll: The Ruth Handler Story* (1st ed.). MA: Longmeadow Press.
- [2] Broadway, A. (2013). *Pink Wasn’t Always Girly*. The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/08/pink-wasnt-always-girly/278535/>
- [3] Driessen, R. (2016). “The evolution of an icon: a comparison of the values and stereotypes reflected in the original 1959 barbie doll and the curvy 2016 barbie doll.” Retrieved from https://theses.uhn.nl/bitstream/handle/123456789/4706/Driessen%20R_1.pdf?sequence=1
- [4] Stern, S. (1998). *Barbie Nation: An Unauthorized Tour*. San Francisco, CA: El Rio Productions LLC.
- [5] Weissman, K. (1999). *Barbie: The Icon, the Image, the Ideal: An Analytical Interpretation of the Barbie Doll in Popular Culture*. Irvine, California: Universal Publishers.
- [6] Mosedale, S. (2005). Assessing women’s empowerment: towards a conceptual framework. *Journal of International Development*, 17(2), 243-257. DOI: 10.1002/jid.1212
- [7] Peacock, L. (2013). *How would you define femininity?*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10190331/How-would-you-define-femininity.html>

- [8] Martincic, Jo C. & Bhatnagar, N. (2012) Will Computer Engineer Barbie® impact women's career choice?. *Information System Educational Journal (ISEDJ)*, 10(6), 1-14. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1136648.pdf>
- [9] Syed, J. (2010). Reconstructing gender empowerment. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 33(3), 283–294. DOI: 10.1016/j.wsif.2010.03.002
- [10] Helstein, M. T. (2003). That's Who I Want to be. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 27(3), 276–292. DOI: 10.1177/0193732503255479
- [11] Holmes et al. (2012). Girls Helping Girls: Assessing the Influenced of College Student Mentors in an Afterschool Engineer Program. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 20(1), 137-150. DOI: 10.1080/13611267.2012.645604
- [12] Philip, K., and Hendry, L. B. (2000). making sense of mentoring or mentoring making sense? reflections on the mentoring process by adult mentors with young people. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 10(3), 211-223 DOI: 10.1002/1099-1298(200005/06)10:3%3C211::AID-CASP569%3E3.0.CO;2-S
- [13] Spencer, R. & Liang, B. (2009). "She Gives Me a Break from the World": Formal Youth Mentoring Relationships Between Adolescent Girls and Adult Women. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 30(2), 109-130. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-009-0172-1>
- [14] Koller, V. (2008). 'Not just a colour': pink as a gender and sexuality marker in visual communication. *Visual Communication*, 7(4), 395-423. DOI: 10.1177/1470357208096209
- [15] Karniol, R. (2011). The Color of Children's Gender Stereotypes. *Sex Roles*, 65(1-2), 119-132. DOI: 10.1007/s11199-011-9989-1
- [16] Paoletti, J. (2012). When did pink become a feminine color?. Retrieved from <https://www.pinkisforboys.org/blog/when-did-pink-become-a-feminine-color>
- [17] [Barbie]. (2018, January 30). *Tradeswoman & Builder: Blue Collar CEO - Mandy Rennehan | You Can be Anything Mentorship | Barbie* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orHzMWqMIE8&list=PL5BsR19zFaeTTPR7JiTY389R31NV2-M6T&index=9&t=32s>
- [18] [Barbie]. (2018, August 14). *You Can be a Gymnast with Laurie Hernandez | Barbie* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSmTgW5swgs&list=PL5BsR19zFaeTTPR7JiTY389R31NV2-M6T&index=6&t=0s>
- [19] [Barbie]. (2017, September 13). *#YouCanBeAnything – TV Host Tracy Moore Mentorship | Barbie* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gmi002OZCmw&list=PL5BsR19zFaeTTPR7JiTY389R31NV2-M6T&index=13&t=0s>
- [20] [Barbie]. (2017, September 13). *Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Soccer Plate Ashley Lawrence | Barbie* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsWMMcIVIRA&t=2s&index=12&list=PL5BsR19zFaeTTPR7JiTY389R31NV2-M6T>
- [21] [Barbie]. (2017, December 7). *Barbie YCBA Mentorship Video Chef – Connie DeSousa | Barbie* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwnMEJ9EUos&list=PL5BsR19zFaeTTPR7JiTY389R31NV2-M6T&index=10&t=1s>