

Bratz Dolls: Fun-Loving Children's Dolls or Detriments to the Mind and Body?

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Most people, especially women, recall playing with various types of dolls throughout their childhood, ranging from Barbie dolls, to Bratz dolls, to Polly Pockets. To a young girl, the dolls have a tasteful appearance, one they imagine themselves having when they grow up. As appealing as these dolls may look, they provide young girls with false notions of the ideal image of beauty. Children's dolls, particularly Bratz dolls, display physical features that are unattainable and harmful to the minds of the young girls for which they are intended, thus causing artists like Sonia Singh to transform Bratz dolls into Tree Change Dolls with realistic features.

The images produced by the media on a daily basis reach young, impressionable children worldwide through advertisements and television commercials. Toy advertisements, specifically for young girls, lure their targeted audience by displaying images of "beautiful" dolls with features that are pleasing to the eye. At a young age, girls are easily swayed by such imagery. They do not yet have the critical view of the media that older people tend to have. They simply buy into the portrayal of women they are bombarded with each day and end up suffering as a result. According to *Psychology Today*, children are most likely to be impacted by an outside source during their years as adolescents (Lohmann 1). Thus, the toys they play with have a major impact on their thought processes and beliefs about body image. Lohmann also emphasizes, "These years mark insurmountable growth both physically and psychologically" (1). Adolescents experience a significant portion of their growth and development at this age; therefore, it is so important for them to be surrounded by healthy inspiration via images that provide positivity, satisfaction, and optimism. Though dolls seem innocent and harmless, their overall effects on girls may be negative. According to the *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, "body image is a psychological concept that refers to an individual's mental representation of his or her own body" (Kazdin 436). As girls age, they begin to put more emphasis on body image and often compare themselves to other people. Their first representations of body image come from the dolls they play with, which are highly inaccurate and unhealthy examples of the female physique. After being exposed to Bratz dolls and playing with them for several years, young girls begin to believe that they, too, should look as thin and promiscuous as the dolls they have grown to love and idolize. Consequently, their perception of body image is tainted by this inaccurate and sexualized appearance. Kazdin, the author of the *Encyclopedia of Psychology* entry about body image, also states the following view: "Body image has less to do with feelings about the body itself than about unconscious events and feelings about the self" (436). According to this claim, most girls may not even realize the influence that dolls may have on their idea of body image. They are constantly flooded with unrealistic portrayals of women and are led to believe that they should mimic the images provided to them, which is frightening since it seems as if they have little to no control of their perceptions. They are given no choice but to accept the images presented by the media and often suffer physically and mentally as a result. Because these perceptions form unconsciously, it is vital for girls to be exposed to images that will provoke feelings of positivity regarding their bodies and self-concepts.

Aside from the detrimental effects Bratz dolls have on girls, a more alarming realization is that

they are affected at such a young age. Helga Dittmar, a professor from the Department of Psychology at the University of Sussex, highlights the procedure and results of a study conducted to measure the extent to which Barbie dolls, similar to Bratz dolls in terms of their exaggerated features, influence girls' views on body image. The participants, ages five and eight, were studied after viewing both a Barbie doll and an Emme doll, which is an example of a more realistic doll. The study concludes that girls experience more dissatisfaction with their own bodies after viewing a Barbie doll, as opposed to viewing an Emme doll (17). These results serve as proof of the harmful effects that are unleashed on naïve and vulnerable girls who instinctively compare themselves to Barbie and Bratz dolls and immediately feel badly about their own appearances. Dittmar reveals, "Body dissatisfaction, the experience of negative thoughts and esteem about one's body, is important to study because it results in a number of significant consequences, including negative self-perception, depressed mood, and disordered eating" (5). She mentions several of the dangerous effects girls experience because of the dissatisfaction they feel when they see dolls with impossible features. It is disturbing to know that a doll, something meant purely for entertainment and enjoyment, is powerful enough to lead to such drastic consequences. It is even more unsettling to believe that companies continue to produce and sell Bratz dolls to consumers after being informed of this.

The effects Bratz dolls have on their biggest fans have been studied by various associations and organizations, including the American Psychological Association (APA), thus emphasizing the urgency of the issue. Louisa Barnett claims, "sexualised images in the media are psychologically damaging young girls and corrupting childhood" (1). She is referring to the representation of women through the production of Bratz dolls, who exude sexuality by their tight, short attire and heavy makeup, all highly inappropriate for the targeted age group of six to ten years old. Barnett directly quotes the chair of the APA: "We have ample evidence to conclude that sexualisation has negative effects in a variety of domains, including cognitive functioning, physical and mental health, and healthy sexual development" (2). The multiple consequences are serious and are not easily reversed. In addition to heightening body dissatisfaction among girls, the dolls have also led to concerns regarding the progression of both physical and mental capacities. These harmful effects are not to be taken lightly, so it is highly necessary to slow the production of these dolls and prevent further health issues.

The only way to decrease the amount of negative effects on girls and young women is by changing the appearance of Bratz dolls and transforming them to promote body satisfaction. In September 2014, a Tasmanian artist named Sonia Singh took the initiative and decided to give Bratz dolls "a more down to earth style" (Singh 2). She recognized the harmful effects originating from the appearance of Bratz dolls and decided to take action for women's health. Senior writer of *The Age* newspaper in Australia, Amanda Dunn referenced Singh's new and improved Tree Change Dolls: "...Sonia Singh has drawn much applause for her upcycled dolls, from which she removes the nightclub makeup and clothes from Bratz dolls...and remodels them into fresh-faced plastic girls in tree-climbing gear" (2). Dunn explains that Sonia Singh combats the issues raised by Bratz dolls, drawing attention to the efforts made by one woman, who hopes to diminish the disorders and developmental problems that Bratz dolls contributed to in some cases. When one views the Tree Change dolls, the drastic alterations are extremely noticeable: the heavy eye shadow, eyeliner, and mascara of the Bratz dolls have been replaced by fresh, clean eyes with less artificial eyebrows and, the Bratz doll's thickly lined and colored lips appear

as normally sized and are replaced with a nude hue (“Tree Change Dolls – Inspiring Max”). The “before” and “after” pictures are astounding, as one Singh’s ability to add a realistic element to these highly sexualized dolls. The new doll is almost unrecognizable in the best way possible, showing that Singh’s idea was a success. By creating Tree Change Dolls, Singh provides young girls with a more natural and accurate portrayal of a woman and allows them to veer away from the artificiality of Bratz dolls. Consumers should consider making every effort to replace Bratz doll purchases with Tree Change Doll purchases. We must promote and support her cause to make a difference in the effects we are seeing in young girls. In addition to giving Bratz dolls “makeunders” (Singh 2), Sonia Singh also promotes overall improved health for all women. Laura Stamper quotes Singh when she says, “Singh tells *TIME* she is asking supporters to donate to the International Women’s Developmental Agency” (Stamper 3). Singh’s line of children’s dolls is only one step towards the improvement of women’s physical and mental health; she also advocates participation in an agency that specifically targets the development of women, directly relating to the effects of the Bratz dolls on girls. She is passionate about the welfare of other women and hopes to raise awareness about the media’s inaccurate portrayals of women. Her dolls create and promote a healthier mindset for young girls as they grow into mature women. The dolls, if continuously and successfully produced, will have a more positive impact on women than the superficial and exaggerated Bratz dolls. Countless companies create false advertisements, causing their audience to experience feelings of shame and insecurity in relation to their bodies. Consumers become deeply dissatisfied with their appearances as they are constantly flooded with images of body types they cannot physically acquire.

While many people critique the sexualized female body of every Bratz doll, one cannot help but notice the continuous success of the company. Despite the feelings of disgust and anger towards Bratz dolls, they are still being produced and sold to waiting consumers. The human eye is attracted to their physically unattainable features, though they may lead to health disorders and unhappiness in girls. According to Margaret Talbot, “M.G.A. has sold a hundred and twenty-five million Bratz worldwide, and it has become the top fashion doll in the United Kingdom and Australia” (3). Even after revealing these harmful aspects through numerous studies, consumers all over the world are still willing to purchase them for their children. Thus, one of the underlying issues is that humans cannot help but give into these false notions of body image forced upon them by the media. Although there exists people like Sonia Singh who hope to prevent the issues girls face as they grow up, many still give into their desires and allow themselves to believe that they should look as flawless as the women they see in the advertising, modeling, and toy industries.

At first glance, people may not realize how damaging the effects of Bratz dolls truly are to the young girls who play with them. Now that there is more evidence and information available to the public, critics are finally taking action against this growing issue, as many girls are suffering from serious health effects that directly correlate with these dolls. Sonia Singh understands the severity of the situation, as do her supporters. However, it is extremely unsettling when one realizes how far the situation was extended before anyone took initiative to resolve it. Companies and corporations should not be creating such problematic products in the first place. Surely, they know how inaccurate and unnecessarily sexualized their dolls are; therefore, their production of them is disturbing on many levels. Perhaps Sonia Singh’s unique and clever creation of Tree Change Dolls will spread far enough to inspire these powerful companies to halt their production

of such dolls. They know their audience, yet they continue to sell Bratz dolls to girls with thoughts of money and successful business encompassing their minds. The establishment of Tree Change Dolls stems from the ongoing concerns surrounding Bratz dolls, but it is refreshing to know that there are people who care for the women around them and are willing to use their creativity to support young women who have been negatively affected by these dolls. Sonia Singh and her groundbreaking creation serve as one example of the hope one must have that the problems caused by Bratz dolls will soon be diminished. With regard to women worldwide, we must all work together to spread positive messages to women about their bodies in general. In my opinion, women should be reminded of their natural and wholesome beauty on a daily basis, whether or not they look similar to any of the women found in the media. We do not, under any circumstances, need to accept the harmful body ideals presented to us. Instead, we must stress the importance of learning to be happy with appearance, and that appearance is not the sole provider of self-worth. The task of ending false representations is not simple or easy, but by boycotting companies that take part in such a damaging campaign, we can certainly begin to make a difference.

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