



Ca' Foscari  
University  
of Venice

Master's Degree programme  
In  
Scienze del Linguaggio

Final Thesis

# **Advertising Barbie Throughout the Years:**

a Multimodal Analysis on the World-famous Toy, Barbie,  
and her Role in Children's Overall Development

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**Academic Year**

2023 / 2024



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Here we go again, two more years have passed and here I am writing to whom has been a fundamental presence in my life.

To begin with, I'll start with someone pretty obvious: my parents. I'll be eternally grateful with them two for always supporting me either emotionally and economically throughout my student career, for cheering me up when I needed the most and for being a constant presence in my life. To my mum, I adore how passionate you become when you speak about something really matters to you, your stubbornness makes you never step back from your beliefs. Keep pushing with your English lessons you made huge improvements and please keep making us laugh. To my dad, thank you for being such a great example of ideals, integrity and consistency, thank you for being so patient with me when I'm being annoying. Many thanks goes also to my two little brothers, not so little anymore, who are able to make me laugh even when the situation seems to be unbearable. I know we do not say "I love you" to each other very often, because we know that gestures matter more than words, but this time I want to say it with all my heart: I love you so much!

Secondly, keeping up with the family track I would love to give many thanks to my two grandmothers for always supporting me. My sweetheart Gilda, for the press "nonna Gildy", always ready to gossip with me, no matter what time of the day it is, always very kind and keen to listen, maybe she is my personal therapist. My cutie Luciana, as known as "nonna Luci", thank you for being so kind and fair with all of us grandchildren, always ready to help if needed and in the same time being the most curious person in the world. I love you both to the moon and back.

In these two years I had the great pleasure to get to know many new people who have become great friends to me. I love them all for being who they are and I won't change anything at all. To my darling Sofia, the most brutally honest person in the entire world but also the most caring with who she thinks deserves her cares, thank you so much for asking me out on that summer evening and for giving me the chance to know these beautiful people, thank you for being constantly present when needed for a chat if something is good or bad. To my Aury Cuore, the sweetest person on the earth but also the most strict and stiff whenever needed, thank you for your patience and your understanding, always remember you have a beautiful soul and never let

anyone take it from you. To Ale, the man who sees good in everything and everyone and also for this reason lives his life peacefully, thank you for being always very kind and nice with me, your gentle presence always makes me feel at peace. To Simo, the uncertainty in human form, thank you for being always very sincere with me, please never belittle yourself because you have a huge heart and you are very smart, you can do anything in life only if you really believe it. To Riccardo, every little girl's favourite prince so kind and charming, thank you for your good manners and for all the deep and personal chats we have together, you let me open up and speak about everything bothers me or makes me feel extremely happy. Clearly I'm a better massage therapist than you, but don't you be discouraged I'll teach you some of my tricks. To Elia, at first impression very serious and tough but with an unlimited sweetness when it comes to his loved ones, thank you for your attention as watcher and analyser of every situation and to what was happening in general, always being very honest with me.

Besides the new encounters, a host of people I have known for a very long time have been very supportive throughout this adventure, therefore I want to give many thanks to all of them, namely: Anna, Claudia, Elena, Giada, Meci, Momo, Sofi, Hami, Thomas. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart for giving me the chance to distract when I was feeling overwhelm or when I needed a talk.

A place in which I always felt at ease and peace is my second family Giro di Danza. My fellow women have always been able to hype me up letting all problems and worries out of the door, giving space to fun and love. Thank you Moderno 6!

Talking again about who was a constant presence since high school and throughout university, I have to give many thanks to Chiara always very determined and committed, thank you for the laughs, the endless hours spent in the library listening to lectures, the inappropriate jokes, the thesis in pair and the 30 and praise like rain. I wish you success in achieving what you deserve in life.

Last but not least I want to give many thanks to my supervisor Prof.ssa Cesiri who inspired this entire work during one of her language courses, giving me room for imagination, making me think outside the box showing me that anything could be analysed and studied with the right methodological framework. Thank you for the passion you put in teaching students and your patience.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE - IMPORTANCE OF TOYS IN CHILDREN DEVELOPMENT .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>1.1 The psychosocial and emotional impact of toys on children .....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>1.2 The importance of choosing suitable games and toys for children .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>1.3 The risks of playing with virtual toys on children .....</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>1.4 The importance of playing in the learning process .....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>1.5 The role of dolls' playing on children .....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>1.6 General remarks .....</i>	<i>21</i>
<b>CHAPTER TWO - DATA AND METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>2.1 DATA ANALYSED .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<i>2.1.1 Data analysed in Barbie: Visual Analysis .....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>2.1.2 Data analysed in Skipper: Cluster Analysis .....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>2.1.3 Data analysed in Bratz vs Barbie: Visual Analysis .....</i>	<i>27</i>
<b>2.2 METHODS OF ANALYSIS .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>2.2.1 Visual Analysis .....</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>2.2.2 Cluster Analysis .....</i>	<i>30</i>
<b>CHAPTER THREE - BARBIE, SKIPPER AND BRATZ DOLLS: AN OVERVIEW OF THEIR HISTORY AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>3.1 HISTORY OF BARBIE .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<i>3.1.1 Barbie Origins .....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>3.1.2 Initial Scepticism .....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>3.1.3 Barbie Relevance Throughout Times .....</i>	<i>34</i>
<b>3.2 HISTORY OF SKIPPER .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<i>3.2.1 Skipper Origins .....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>3.2.2 Controversies .....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>3.2.3 Skipper Changes Throughout Time .....</i>	<i>36</i>

<b>3.3 HISTORY OF BRATZ</b> .....	<b>36</b>
3.3.1 <i>Bratz Origins</i> .....	36
3.3.2 <i>Bratz Compared to Barbie</i> .....	37
3.3.3 <i>The Bratz Pack</i> .....	38
3.3.4 <i>Bratz and Barbie in Courtyard</i> .....	39
<b>CHAPTER FOUR - BARBIE: VISUAL ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>4.1 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>4.2 GENERAL REMARKS</b> .....	<b>62</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE - SKIPPER: CLUSTER ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>64</b>
<b>5.1 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>64</b>
5.1.1 <i>Skipper First Commercial</i> .....	64
5.1.2 <i>Growing Up Skipper</i> .....	68
5.1.3 <i>Hot Stuff Skipper</i> .....	70
5.1.4 <i>Teen Fun Skipper</i> .....	72
5.1.5 <i>Skipper Babysitter</i> .....	75
5.1.6 <i>Pet Pals Skipper</i> .....	77
5.1.7 <i>Teen Skipper</i> .....	81
5.1.8 <i>Fashion Party Teen Skipper</i> .....	83
5.1.9 <i>Barbie &amp; Her Sisters Dolls</i> .....	86
5.1.10 <i>Barbie Skipper Babysitters - Stroller and Potty Training Playsets</i> .....	88
<b>5.2 GENERAL REMARKS</b> .....	<b>92</b>
<b>CHAPTER SIX - BRATZ VS BARBIE: VISUAL ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>94</b>
<b>6.1 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS</b> .....	<b>94</b>
6.1.1 <i>Bratz Advertisement Qualitative Analysis</i> .....	96
6.1.2 <i>Barbie Advertisement Qualitative Analysis</i> .....	98
<b>6.2 GENERAL REMARKS</b> .....	<b>100</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>102</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>107</b>
REFERENCES .....	107
WEBSITES CONSULTED. LAST ACCESSED: JUNE 2024 .....	111

## **ABSTRACT**

Toys and games are known to have a significant impact on children's cognitive, emotional, physical, linguistic and social development (Önder, 2018; Healey et al., 2019; Dag, Turkkan, Kacar & Dag, 2021; Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023). Indeed, the activity of playing with toys helps youngsters to develop useful skills, abilities and competences by, for instance, allowing them to specialise and master fine and gross physical movements. By means of game, especially when it involves a caregiver-child interaction, children are also given the chance to reproduce the social environment that they are going to deal with in their adulthood (Healey et al., 2019), hence understanding and acquiring the social rules of community living. The present dissertation analyses by means of a multimodal analysis the world-famous Barbie doll produced by Mattel Toy Company, trying to understand how this fashion doll succeeded into maintaining her relevance throughout time, notwithstanding the constant evolution and changing of society. By employing the methodological reference framework for Visual Analysis theorised by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), twelve newspaper advertisements examine the main features and characteristics this doll presented and the feminine role she promoted since her first debut in 1959 at the International Toy Fair in New York until the present days. Subsequently, the research focuses on a specific case study, analysing through a Cluster Analysis (Baldry Thibault, 2006) ten different television commercials of a specific Barbie doll, Skipper, Barbie's sister. Finally, Barbie is compared with another fashion icon who, however, presents different physical characteristics to those of Barbie and uplifts different ideals in respect of those conveyed by Barbie, namely the Bratz doll, produced in the early 2000s by the toy manufacturer Micro-Games America Entertainment (M.G.A. Entertainment). The rivalry between the two fashion icons began in 2001, when Bratz debuted in the world of children entertainment causing a significant decline in Barbie sales for the very first time in Barbie's history.





## **INTRODUCTION**

Plays, toys and games constitute the essential components that contribute to the overall development of a child (Önder, 2018: 146; Healey, Mendelsohn et al., 2019: 1; Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 922). Even if “plays and toys have an important place in all cultures” (Önder, 2018: 147), depending on the games played by children and the toys provided them, development might “differ from person to person, culture to culture or generation to generation” (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 922). This is extremely important in the modern multicultural inclusive world in which everyone needs and has the right to feel perfectly included and accepted in society despite different ethnicities, personal features or disabilities. Therefore, to best support the healthy development of children, besides satisfying their basic needs, it is necessary to consider and select very carefully the type of toys offered them when it comes to play (Healey, Mendelsohn et al., 2019: 4) in order to best support their correct physical and behavioural development.

“The history of plays is as old as the history of human civilization”, however it was just in today’s world that researchers began to better realize its importance (Önder, 2018: 147). Indeed, in the last 20 years a consistent number of studies was conducted over the importance of the activity of playing for children, which have led to a shift in the perception of toys in society (e.g. Önder, 2018; Healey et al., 2019; Dag, Turkkan, Kacar & Dag, 2021; Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023, to name but a few). Parents, teachers and caregivers started viewing toys as important for “children’s development, self-regulation, and executive functioning” (Healey et al., 2019: 1). According to Healey A. et al. (2019: 1) there are five main factors that have contributed to increase the importance given to toys, including:

- (1) increased recognition of early brain and child development as critical to educational success;
- (2) increased recognition of early experiences in the home and in child care settings as facilitating early brain and child development;
- (3) increased marketing of so-called “educational” toys as critical for enhancing early experiences;

- (4) the perception (perhaps misperception) of toy play rather than interaction with caregivers around toys as important for the child's development, inclusive of self-regulation; and
- (5) increasing sophistication of digital media-based virtual "toys" replacing physical toys and often incorrectly perceived by caregivers as having educational benefit.

For these reasons, many pieces of research developed over the idea that toys, defined as handmade, purchased or found in nature objects intended for children's play, are of fundamental importance during a child's early ages since they facilitate "cognitive development, language interactions, symbolic and pretend play, problem-solving, social interactions, and physical activity". Increasing their importance when children grow from infancy into toddlerhood (Healey et al., 2019: 2). Actually, children are known to "learn by seeing and doing rather than reading, listening and understanding" (Önder, 2018: 147), indeed in the first period of their lives, children use their body to explore the world around them. For instance, activities that include exploring and manipulating objects help in strengthening "those areas in the brain associated with spatial and mathematical learning" (Healey et al., 2019: 4). Hence, plays and toys assume the basic function to facilitate children's adaptation to the world, allowing them of understanding how it works (Önder, 2018: 147). This evolution of societal perceptions towards games and toys from being considered as simple children's playthings to becoming critical facilitators responsible for the healthy early brain development of a child, has presented parents, teachers and caregivers with a challenge in determining which toys are most appropriate for their children. Therefore, it is essential to ask whether the toys that our children use on a daily basis are capable of enabling their cognitive and social development, according to the constant changes and developments of society making numerous steps towards inclusiveness and equality in every field. Specifically, this dissertation analyses the figure of Barbie, a doll that brought an important revolution on girls' playing, analysing firstly "the queen of American dolls", as defined by Scott S. (2009: 34), through an historical visual overview. Then focusing on analysing the specific case study of Skipper, Barbie's little sister, who over time managed to detach herself from her bigger sister, creating her own identity with her unique features. Finally, comparing and contrasting Barbie, the iconic plastic doll made in the image of a conventionally attractive, slim, and shapely

young woman or girl, with blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin (<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/barbie>), produced by the Mattel Toy Company based in California (USA), with her younger rival the sassy Bratz doll, introduced in 2001 by the Californian M.G.A. Entertainment.

Before 1959, year in which Barbie was launched by Mattel, the toys young girls were able to play with were just baby dolls and games that reproduced household chores and domestic scenes, which only adult women were supposed to do at home (Talbot, 2006: 80; Karniol, Stuemler-Cohen, and Lahav-Gur, 2012: 897). Indeed, boys were provided with “toys that allowed them to imagine themselves as a firefighter, astronaut, doctor, and more” (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>), whereas girls were provided with toys that let them play the role of mothers or caregivers taking care of their baby dolls as if they were their children: feeding them, changing their diapers, ironing, doing the laundry and cleaning. Thereby, the figure of Barbie represents a very important product and concept in itself because this is the doll that revolutionised the toy market thanks to her uniqueness and versatility. “You can be anything” is the leading motto Mattel implemented for the doll, because her figure aims at inspiring young girls into believing in themselves and trying everything in their power in order to achieve their dreams. As the woman inventor of Barbie, Ruth Handler, stated in an interview for the New York Times dating back to the 1970s: “Every little girl needs a doll through which she can project herself into her future dreams. Barbie represents a woman who has choices” ([https://www.corriere.it/cronache/19\\_marzo\\_09/barbie-compie-60-anni-storia-bambola-piu-famosa-mondo-806a0790-425a-11e9-95b9-e83ec3332214.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cronache/19_marzo_09/barbie-compie-60-anni-storia-bambola-piu-famosa-mondo-806a0790-425a-11e9-95b9-e83ec3332214.shtml)). This is the reason behind the longstanding, international popularity of the doll, namely, the representation of a thousand female nuances and personalities; Barbie has always shown little girls that they can become whoever they wish (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>). However, since the year of her launch, Barbie has always been represented stereotyping all women as unattainable tall, slim and perfectly shaped physiques. This led to controversies that strongly arose around the 2000s and seemed to bring Barbie to the end of her time. The market changed and Mattel was harshly criticised for not representing the diversity of women around the world, in their physiques and colours. Barbie started to be

considered too skinny, too perfect and was accused of giving a negative image of women, which were perceived to only care about aesthetic beauty (Scott, 2009: 37). All of which forced Mattel to expand its horizons through a major rebranding operation which opened the door to inclusivity (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>). By doing so, Mattel welcomes diversity, making it a strength (<https://corporate.mattel.com/about-us>).

Previous studies on Barbie's evolution such as, Weissman K. N. (1999) and Driessen R. (2016) made a comparison of the features of just two kinds of Barbie dolls. Both studies focused on a cultural analysis of the values and stereotypes present in Barbie doll at her first debut, in comparison, respectively, to "the current practices of representations in 1999" (Weissman, 1999) and "the curvy 2016 Barbie doll" (Driessen, 2016), looking at them through the interpretation of women's perception of Barbie (Weissman, 1999) and commercials (Driessen, 2016). Moreover, Barbie's ability to become the most popular toy in the world has always fascinated researchers, because "while most toys were popular for only two or three years, Barbie has remained in style for decades" (Roberts, 2020). Therefore, another study conducted from Roberts D. L. (2019) focused on the marketing and advertising strategies employed by Mattel that have determined Barbie's long-term success. Roberts analysed the evolution of Barbie's marketing successful and unsuccessful campaigns "throughout decades that marked real changes in the experience of childhood". For what concerns Skipper's case study, previous literature focused mainly on her most controversial model, namely Growing Up Skipper (Paris, 1999; Lord, 2004), who in 1975 was able to arise strong criticism between parents for her ability to transact from being a little girl to a curvy teenager. Indeed, as reported by Paris L. (1999: 67), in *Forever Barbie* by Lord M.G., this specific doll was claimed to have "required from its owner a taste for the macabre" since the doll debuted in a moment in which men managed the Barbie line, therefore she "reflected a male rendition of a female coming-of-age: breasts, not blood". However, Paris affirms she enjoyed playing with Skipper even if she could not be claimed to be "a useful preparatory tool for adolescence or that it nurtured [her] sense of the possibilities of womanhood". Instead, regarding the figure of Bratz, many studies compared it to the one of Barbie. In fact, the essay written by an assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Ethnic Studies at

Washington State University, Guerrero L. (2009), Barbie and Bratz's dichotomy is analysed by examining the shift witnessed in children's market popularity right after 2001, year in which the Bratz line was launched and Barbie purchasing rates began to fall, in order to explore the evolution of the concept of style among American girls, with a particular focus on the ways in which notions of race, class and "the Other" have influenced their understanding of what it means to be stylish, powerful, and womanly. Therefore, she focused on four main topics: "the problematic use of race in the line; the constructions of gender and sexuality embraced by the line; the culture of commodity reflected in the collection; and the layered exoticization within the line" (Guerrero, 2009: 188). Moreover, Karniol R., Stuemler-Cohen T. and Lahav-Gur Y., researchers at Tel Aviv University, in 2012 have studied Bratz's appeal to young girls on sixty Israeli girls, 6–11 years old attending elementary school. More precisely, the study analysed young girls' fashion doll preferences for Barbie or Bratz according to the four gender role orientations derived by crossing the dimensions of masculinity and femininity as theorized by Bem (1975; 1981), namely masculine, feminine, undifferentiated, and androgynous. Firstly, researchers administered to children the Hebrew translation of Boldizar's (1991) Children's Sex Role Inventory, (CSRI), a questionnaire which is a version of Bem's (1974) Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI), in order to establish at which gender role orientations they belonged to. Then the girls were individually interviewed, and they were asked what kind of dolls they had at home, what they thought about them and why they thought girls liked them. In conclusion, gender role orientation was found to be relevant for girls in terms of liking and possessing a certain type of the two dolls, Barbie or Bratz.

As can be seen, previous studies have not considered Barbie's overall development, observing and analysing the evolution of her characteristics and features towards inclusion and equality over the years. In addition, the developmental analysis of a specific doll different from Barbie such as Barbie's little sister, Skipper, was never considered worth of attention. Neither previous pieces of research have thought of analysing the figures of Barbie, Skipper or Bratz through a proper multimodal analysis.

For all these reasons, this topic is worth investigating, because there are several developmental benefits that the simple act of playing with dolls entails. However, Barbie has to keep on track with the changes in today's society, overcoming any kind

of bias and stereotypes. In order to verify so, the present study analyses twelve pictures, which are to be divided into advertisement pictures and product presentation pictures, describing the evolution of Barbie dolls' characteristics and features over the years, from her first debut at the 1959 International Toy Fair in New York City to the latest inclusive doll line of recent years, produced more specifically in 2018. Moreover, the present dissertation examines the leading figures of the historic toys diatribe between the American fashion dolls, Barbie and Bratz, analysing their main features and the public at whom they refer to. The aim is to investigate these multimodal products and to analyse the choices made in the realization of different kinds of Barbie models, which had the enormous power to attract and influence the majority of the girls' public, at the beginning, into buying these specific products. Also comparing Barbie to Bratz since the new fashion doll was able to affect Barbie's sale rates with her entrance in the scene in 2001. Thus, the two parts of the present study, dealing with Barbie and Bratz image employ the visual analysis method of investigation using the layout of meaning making in images proposed from Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). Instead, the case study analysing the evolution of the image of Skipper since her first launch as Barbie's eight-year-old sister in 1964, until her contemporary representation of an adult girl with a steady job as a babysitter; makes use of another method for visual analysis, namely the cluster analysis theorised by Baldry and Thibault (2006).

The present dissertation is subdivided into six different Chapters. Firstly, Chapter One provides a general background over the importance of toys in children overall development, covering positive and negative psychological, emotional and physical effects of plays, toys and games on children lives and education. Secondly, Chapter Two states in greater detail what kind of material is considered in the present research, which criteria are employed to select these data and the reasons behind the usage of a specific methodological approach. Then, Chapter Three proceeds with providing some background information about the history of the iconic Barbie doll, as well as the histories of Skipper and Bratz. Subsequently, Chapters Four, Five and Six present the multimodal analyses conducted on the material selected by presenting, contextualising and examining the samples one by one and then providing some general remarks at the end of each Chapter. Finally, the last Chapter provides some partial Conclusions.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Importance of toys in children development**

#### **1. General introduction**

The activity of playing with toys has a very important role in children's lives and education (Önder, 2018: 146), because it contributes to their cognitive, motor, physical, emotional and linguistic development (Dag, Turkkan, Kacar & Dag, 2021: 414). To begin with, it is proper to define what the terms playing, toys and game mean for the Merriam Webster Dictionary as mentioned in a double-blind peer-reviewed, open-access international journal, the Northern Clinics of Istanbul (NCI), published by the Health Directorate of Istanbul (HDI): playing indicates "an action involving fun and learning in which a child willingly participates". Toys indicate the tools children use while performing the action of playing (Dag et al., 2021: 414). Instead, game defines "a physical or mental competition conducted according to rules with the participants in direct opposition to each other" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/game>). The article published by NCI, written by Dag N. C., Turkkan E., Kacar A. and Dag H. (2021), clearly identifies playing as a profession that children perform, their only "job" (as in Önder, 2018: 146), because this is the main activity they undertake, indeed the best experience children do during their childhood is playing with toys (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 922). For this reason, games and toys play a fundamental role in children's overall development, in fact, while playing, children acquire specific skills that will have a very important function throughout their lives.

The article written by Dag et al. (2021), additionally describes the effects of games and toys on children, analysing the physical effects and the cognitive influences they have on the little ones. For what concerns the physical effects of playing on children, as stated by the article, "physical activity has a very important effect on children's health and development" (Dag et al., 2021: 414). Therefore, it is fundamental to encourage children into playing outdoors in activities such as: "walking, running, swinging, rolling, jumping, and crawling on the ground" (Dag et al., 2021: 415) in order to favour muscles strengthening, improve gross motor

coordination, reduce the obesity rates and meet the need for Vitamin D absorption due to sunlight exposure. In addition to all these physical benefits, it is worth mentioning many mental advantages that can arise from such activities, such as a decrease in the levels of anxiety and depression and a better sleep quality. Moreover, activities as: “carrying, grasping, writing, drawing geometric pictures with a pencil, cutting paper with scissors, playing with dough and sand, stringing beads, eating suitable foods with a fork” (Dag et al., 2021: 415), “colouring, cutting, dressing up their dolls and playing with colour coordinated games” (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 923) are all very helpful activities to develop fine motor movements and cognition. Thereby, activities consisting of “colouring, matching cut outs, art and craft related toys, placing cut outs on the board”, require fine motor skills that help developing hand-eye coordination and small muscle coordination (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 923).

Then, talking about what concerns the cognitive influences of the action of playing on children, it is important to mention how playing encourages the development of the abilities of learning and thinking, thus supporting cognitive development (Dag et al., 2021: 415). One of the best scholars who investigated “the effects of games on cognitive development” is the Swiss philosopher Piaget, a pioneer of the cognitive development studies. The theory he elaborated in his works, is based on the concept of a balanced impulse. According to his research, “humans have a biological tendency to organize and adapt to achieve balance”, from their earliest years children are capable of making some mental adjustments by interacting with their surroundings through the medium of game. These mental arrangements of organisation and adaptation (Önder, 2018: 147) are built on previous experiences, thus due to the game, children acquire cognitive development by experimenting imbalance and creating a new balance, including the gains of the previous period in order to progress through each of the four universal stages Piaget hypothesized. Foremost among them, the (i) sensory period, from birth to 2 years of age, at this young age, the baby has a strong sense of curiosity which brings him/her to explore and discover many things (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 923), hence in this period the body of the baby is also his/her first toy. The (ii) pre-produce period, between 2 and 7 years old, in which the child perceives himself/herself in the centre of life, and the people surrounding are due to his/her presence, ready to comply with every request for play or otherwise. The



(iii) concrete trading period, between 7 and 12 years old, in which the child gets rid of the previous egocentric view of life and begins to realize that the others can have different thoughts and perspectives in perceiving things and actions. Lastly, the (iv) abstract processing period, which starts at 12 years old and enshrines the beginning of the development of personal ideals, ideas, values and beliefs (Dag et al., 2021: 416). According to Piaget, as cited by Önder M. (2018: 147) in his paper, the children's unconscious desire to attribute a meaning to life experiences triggers in them the need to play with toys and games. Moreover, Önder (2018: 147) mentions the psychologist Vygotsky, who affirms that children use playing to experience, understand and learn the things they cannot do in real life, thus plays can be identified as "the most suitable environment for the functioning of cognitive mechanism".

### **1.1 The psychosocial and emotional impact of toys on children**

Furthermore, in their article Dag et al. (2021: 417) talk about the psychosocial and emotional impacts of playing in children, stating that there are particular types of games which help and encourage children to develop better social skills because they engage the participants in complex forms of sociodramatic plots. These kind of playing activities are tasks in which children will understand how to deal with their playmates, overcoming the difficulties that might arise, showing mutual respect and learning the ability of sharing (Dag et al., 2021: 417). In fact, through these games, children acquire more empathy, imagination and a finer capacity to understand things, becoming also less aggressive, showing more self-control and higher levels of thinking. Games and toys that involve interaction between the participants provide benefit for children's social development, since they help building communication skills. For instance, as mentioned in the article written by the psychologist Elkind D. (2008), a 1990 study, conducted by the Israeli psychologist Smilansky S., on sociodramatic play comparing American and Israeli children, revealed that playing in this caregiver-child interaction "activates resources that stimulate social and intellectual growth in the child", all of which could in turn also affect a "child's success in school". According to this view of playing as a social activity, children are able to step out of their inner world and start communicating with the environment surrounding them (Mahoney et al., 2002: 444). Hence, role playing with toys, emulating what adults do: drive, cook, grocery,

shopping; helps children to build creative imagination, acquire good communication skills and develop some sort of sense of responsibility which would be required in school and more in general in their future life (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 923). In fact, due to these games, children learn “to greet, introduce oneself, participate in the game, respect the people around”, wait for their turn to speak, share, obey the rules, as well as defend their rights against others and gain the ability to solve problems (Dag et al., 2021: 417). As reported by Healey et al. (2019: 2) in the largest professional association of paediatricians in the United States, the American Academy of Pediatrics, playing with dolls, for example, pretending through those toys and their associated toy objects such as: food, utensils, cars, planes, and buildings; favours the promotion in children of words and narratives to describe, imitate, and cope with actual circumstances and feelings. Moreover, Weisleder A., Cates C. B., Dreyer B.P., et al. (2016) as mentioned by Healey et al. (2019: 3), affirm that such imaginative play enables language development, self-regulation, symbolic thinking, and social-emotional development. During roleplay and imaginative play, children become capable of understanding their own feelings, realizing what makes them happy, learning how to deal with their fears, to control their jealousy and their emotions in general, especially the negative ones to which they cannot tackle with. Moreover, such play-based interactions are said to lead to the engagement of caregivers in children’s play, thus facilitating child “cognitive development, language interactions, symbolic and pretend play, problem-solving, social interactions, and physical activity” (Healey et al., 2019: 2).

Speaking of emotion development, it is proper to define what emotions are and when they usually develop in children, since they are a fundamental component that children must develop in order to live properly and successfully in the society in the future (Önder, 2018; Healey et al., 2019; Dag et al., 2021). Studies on the emotional component developed mainly in the 1990s, thanks to scholars such as Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Goleman (1995), both cited in Cottini L. (2018: 263). Nevertheless, the first scientifically founded study on emotions dates back to 1884, when the Danish psychologist William J. published an article over emotions in the journal *'Mind'* (Cottini, 2018: 263). In his work, the psychologist supports the idea that individuals evaluate every event with which they come into contact; from this evaluation they are

able to activate a response in the autonomic nervous system that implies a change in the body state, and because of this change emotions are triggered (Cottini, 2018: 263). During childhood, most of the events children come into contact with are plays and toys and thus it is only through the activity of playing that children are able to develop emotionally (Elkind, 2008; Önder, 2018; Healey et al., 2019; Dag et al., 2021; Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023). This is extremely important, as the emotional mind is much faster than the thinking one because the mechanism that evaluates perceptions of reality is faster. Indeed, in this emotional mechanism, plays a fundamental role the amygdala, a small nucleus located in the anterior position of the temporal lobe; it represents the brain region fundamental for emotions, as it is capable of integrating signals coming from the hypothalamus and the cerebral cortex, based on their emotional value. The visual information reaches the amygdala, which enacts for a rapid scanning, and allows the information to be processed and transmitted to the centres of the brainstem that mediate rapid responses. In parallel, the visual cortex implements a slower and more precise scanning of the visual stimulus, the resulting information, in this case, is used in the rational decision-making process (Cottini, 2018: 263). Therefore, emotional development is fundamental for young children, and the activity of playing games and playing with toys is the only one able to help children establish and develop emotional relationships, hence supporting children's mental health in general (Önder, 2018: 146). In fact, through playing, children develop their conscience and emotions, giving rise to "a loving personality that can self-regulate and perform internal control" (Önder, 2018: 147). Genre literature (Cottini, 2018: 267) generally agrees in distinguishing emotions into two groups: primary emotions, which are basic emotions present from birth, and secondary emotions, which intervene later in development and are the result of the involvement of thought and the processing of more complex situations regarding a social dimension. The primary emotions are: fear, anger, joy, sadness and disgust and allow the infant's survival, protecting him/her from negative stimulation by progressively adapting to the demands of the environment. Secondary emotions, on the other hand, arise from children's experiences, cultural conditioning and educational processes and are: shame, guilt, pride, embarrassment and many others (Cottini, 2018: 267). All these abilities are easily acquired through playing with toys, hence ensuring social development in children, usually a very

crucial element in children overall development which helps little ones to realize their potential in the society by learning to manage their emotions to the best of their ability, enabling them to interpret the environment that surrounds them in order to learn how to properly live in the society (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 923). For all these reasons mentioned above, the activity of playing is worth defending since it is essential to enable children to lead a happy and healthy life when they will become adults, full of love and social connections, helping them establishing and developing emotional relationships (Elkind, 2008; Önder, 2018).

### **1.2 The importance of choosing suitable games and toys for children**

Research on the field has confirmed the immense value of play and its crucial role “for physical, cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development” as Önder (2018: 147) states in his paper citing Poyraz (2017). Its importance is mainly due to what is known as “the purest form of play”, that is to say, “the unstructured, self-motivated, imaginative, independent kind, where children initiate their own games and even invent their own rules” (Elkind, 2008). Hence, especially for children attending elementary school, play is used “to learn mutual respect, friendship, cooperation, and competition”. However, playing games and playing with toys is not an activity only children can perform, in fact during adolescence, play is used as a way to explore possible identities, as well as a way to vent and keep fit. Even in adulthood, playing has different benefits, since it promotes unity, love and work (Elkind, 2008). Notwithstanding the social, physical, and cognitive positive effects of playing on children, the rate of active playing is decreasing with modern life compared to previous years, due to the widespread of technology (Elkind, 2008; Önder, 2018: 148), also for this reason great care should be taken when selecting games and toys for a child. The evolution of society brought a replacement of traditional toys with digital media-based virtual toys, which could have harmful effects on children (Healey et al., 2019: 4). Actually, according to the article written by Elkind (2008), “the decline of children’s free, self-initiated play is the result of a perfect storm of technological innovation, rapid social change, and economic globalization”, children are getting increasingly addicted to electronics and digital devices. The disappearing of play in children’s lives of today’s society is supported by some data cited in the article, from a study conducted

by Hofferth S. (2009) for the University of Maryland, which states that “from 1997 to 2003, children’s time spent outdoors fell 50 percent”. Moreover, in a study conducted by Tandon et al. (2015), it was shown that 98 preschool children from 10 childcare centres did not perform the recommended level of physical activity. This is an indicator of the fact that more active play opportunities are necessary for children in order to meet recommendations (Tandon et al., 2015).

As already mentioned, previous research (Elkind, 2008; Önder 2018; Healey et al., 2019; Dag et al., 2021; Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023) demonstrated that toys play an essential part in a child overall learning process, however, an aspect has to be kept in mind, since the individual development of a child depends also on the kind of toy chosen to play (Önder, 2018; Healey et al., 2019; Dag et al., 2021; Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023). It is crucial to highlight the extreme importance over the correct selection of the toys provided to play with, and the games played by children, even if sometimes “the selection of toys depends on child behaviour” and interests (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 922). This is because toys are educational devices (Önder, 2018:147) and “must comply with the age of the child and the minimum safety requirements” (Dag et al., 2021: 414). In order “to create the most suitable developmental environment for children” (Dag et al., 2021: 417), it is fundamental to offer children safe toys that favour different opportunities to play safely and correctly (Healey et al., 2019: 3). By growing and developing, children’s need for specific toys “will change as their age their interest level and their abilities” (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 922), therefore, parents, teachers and caregivers should pay attention when it comes to select the correct toy for a child, considering the age or any difficult situation or special abilities that characterise each child (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 924). As far as toys and games are concerned, parents and caregivers should be cautious and properly advised whenever it comes to purchase a toy. They should analyse the characteristics of the different toys in order to find the most appropriate ones for their children, according to a child’s age, the toys’ safety considerations, namely the special risks they might carry (Dag et al., 2021: 417) and to the amount and the kind of technology involved in concrete and virtual toys (Healey et al., 2019: 2). Both the Northern Clinics of Istanbul and the American Academy of Pediatrics stated their concernment over the choice of suitable toys for

the age of a child since accidents due to them are not uncommon, indeed between 2015 and 2018 over 1 million toy-related accidents were detected in America (Dag et al., 2021: 417). Therefore, families and toy sellers are reported to not have sufficient knowledge about toys that mediate play for children (Dag et al., 2021: 417). For this reason, caregivers should be warned and well informed whenever purchasing toys. The statement Conformité Européenne (CE), generally applied on those products, indicates that they meet the minimum safety conditions following the regulations (Dag et al., 2021: 417). Actually, recently government regulations improved safety standards for the manufacture and use of toys and product testing guaranteed toys' safety, however, it is not certain that because a toy is on the market it is safe. In fact, in determining a toy as safe, it is fundamental to consider the characteristics of the toy itself, if it is used appropriately for recommended ages and stages of developments, as well as how the toy is used and the amount of supervision or support provided by the caregiver for a safe play (Healey et al., 2019: 5). Great care must be taken especially in cases of children presenting developmental delays and disabilities, since the action of playing could result much more difficult and with many obstacles because of intellectual limitations or physical restrictions (Healey et al., 2019: 3). The way in which a child plays, the atypical behaviours he/she enacts, disrupt social interactions and limit his/her ability to learn and develop at most from parent-child and peer play opportunities. In cases of children with special needs, the choice of suitable toys may be more complex giving that safety recommendations on toys packaging are usually based on age and not developmental capacities (Healey et al., 2019: 4).

### **1.3 The risks of playing with virtual toys on children**

With regards to toys that make use of a discrete or great amount of technology, they do not consent the process of decision making, depriving children of the opportunity to search, explore and try by the process of trial and error, because such toys do the entire job themselves (Önder, 2018: 148). Besides representing a potentially harmful context due to the exposure to electronic media, environmental toxins and security hazards; displacing, in this way, the caregiver-child interactions during play; causing also reductions in cognitive, language and gross motor activities. All of which could

lead to implications for child development and even harmful health outcomes (Healey et al., 2019: 4).

In recent years, electronic media exposure has increased dramatically, and the article published by Healey et al. in the American Academy of Pediatrics (2019: 4) resumed the results of some studies conducted on US children. Compared to the data collected in 2011, in 2013 the number of toddlers younger than 2 years and toddlers between 2 and 4 year-old who have used a mobile electronic media device has more than doubled. More recent investigations conducted in 2015, stated that 96.9% of children have used mobile devices in early ages, and most of them started using them before 1 year of age (Healey et al., 2019: 4). Namely, the time young children spend in front of a screen has increased over the past decade, resulting in a decrease in both active play and play with toys. Indeed, screen time interferes significantly with play activities and parent-child interactions, since even in educational media, the child plays without any kind of caregiver input (Healey et al., 2019: 4). Knowledge according to recent studies revealed that while playing with electronic toys, children have fewer chances to deal with adults, leading to the exposure of fewer children's vocalizations, "fewer conversational turns, fewer parental responses, and fewer productions of content-specific words than during play with traditional toys or books" (Healey et al., 2019: 4-5). Many caregivers are convinced that expensive electronic toys, such as sensory-stimulating noise toys, light toys for infants and toddlers and tablet-based toys, guarantee a better development for a child (Healey et al., 2019: 2). However, sometimes these toys are advertised through misleading conceptions which are not based on scientific evidence, since not all of them permit a proper play-based caregiver-child interaction, nor induce to a realistic development in the child. In fact, Klin A., Jones W. et al. (2003) as mentioned by Healey et al. (2019: 2), affirm that the key elements of such toys, involving the excessive use of technology, detract the social component from the role of toys as a mean to interact with the other, denying the possibility to learn how to reproduce facial expressions, gestures and vocalizations that are important for social development (Healey et al., 2019: 2). In summary, virtual toys such as screen games and applications are often designed to emulate and even replace physical toys; this aspect presents certain drawbacks since it further increases the already known risks of electronic media exposure, promoting aggressive behaviour,

mainly the use of desensitized violence portrayed as humorous or justified and poor health conditions such as obesity (Healey et al., 2019: 4). Nevertheless, some learning benefits could be associated with interactive media, although no evidence suggests that those possible benefits match those of active, creative, hands-on, and pretend play with more traditional toys (Healey et al., 2019: 4).

Many studies of early childhood documented that the action of playing with toys enriches its power when it is performed with the support of a caregiver, in those cases in which there is “context of serve-and-return conversations that build on the child’s focus”, learning takes place optimally (Healey et al., 2019: 3). Plays and toys should provide children with the opportunity to do whatever they want, in order to try different schemes, explore and be creative (Önder, 2018: 148).

#### **1.4 The importance of playing in the learning process**

The importance of playing has also been detected by a well-known Italian linguist, university lecturer and scholar of glottodidactics, Balboni P., in his work ‘*Le sfide di Babele. Insegnare le lingue nelle società complesse*’ (2019), which deals with the working mechanisms of foreign language acquisition, presenting some practical instructive examples and teaching methods to activate these mechanisms and exploit their full potential (Balboni, 2019: 194-195). Indeed, in his work, Balboni presents various different playful techniques that can be used to improve and support the acquisition of grammar in a second language. More specifically, he tries to dispel the myth that grammar practice must necessarily be exhausting and boring. Precisely because learning a foreign language can be gruelling, playful activity and motivation based on the pleasure derived from it can be supportive and useful for language acquisition, in fact, as stated by Chomsky and Krashen’s theories (Balboni, 2019: 47), acquisition, or by using the term coined by Chomsky *cognising*, is an unconscious process that produces stable acquisition of determined contents. It is indeed very important to find the right methodologies and to use innovative playful techniques to keep the students’ attention threshold high, in order to motivate them to follow the lesson actively. Pleasure-based motivation is very productive in terms of supporting the effort of learning a foreign language. This element is also important because if there is no motivation, there can be no acquisition, and whatever is acquired becomes



a stable part of the person's competence and enters in one's long-term memory (Balboni, 2019: 47). Despite the fact that the act of playing is one of the basic forms of pleasure, it is rarely used in the classroom due to some misconceptions shared by teachers and pupils (Balboni, 2019: 194), which lead teachers to consider games as childish, distracting and a waste of time. On the contrary, in this Section the activity of playing is considered as time invested, as it creates an ideal situation for spontaneous acquisition that focuses on the game rather than on the language, enabling in this way the pupil to maintain the mind free to activate its language acquisition mechanism. Furthermore, play allows the exploitation of emotional intelligence that leads to the production of neurotransmitters, such as adrenalin and noradrenalin, which facilitate the internalisation of the contents explained (Balboni, 2019: 195).

### **1.5 The role of dolls' playing on children**

As already mentioned, toys have a fundamental psychological and emotional impact on children as they support their healthy overall development (Elkind, 2008; Önder 2018; Healey et al., 2019; Dag et al., 2021; Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023). A healthy development notably occurs when children pretend by playing emulating what adults do, identifying with them through roleplay in a positive play-based caregiver-child interaction, mostly by playing with dolls (Healey et al., 2019: 2). For this reason, the role of dolls' playing on children is worth investigating, in fact, according to a recent neuroscience study conducted by Cardiff University and published in October 2020, "playing with dolls, like Barbie, allows children to develop empathy and social processing skills, which are key determinants in kids' future emotional, academic, and social success" (<https://corporate.mattel.com/news/barbie-launches-new-brand-campaign-focused-on-the-benefits-of-doll-play>). The research team found that the posterior superior temporal sulcus (pSTS), a region of the brain associated with social information processing, "was activated even when the child was playing on their own" (<https://corporate.mattel.com/news/barbie-launches-new-brand-campaign-focused-on-the-benefits-of-doll-play>). The leader researcher of the team, neuroscientist Dr. Gerson S., also affirms that this specific area of the brain is used by humans whenever they think about other people, which means thinking about another person's thoughts or feelings, and that playing with dolls encourages the development of imagination,

problem-solving and building games skills. Therefore, doll play is an activity that builds children's endless imagination as well as empathy, which represents a resourceful capacity "to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/empathy>). Moreover, in 2023, Cardiff University's School of Psychology's Centre for Human Developmental Science released the latest findings from a multi-year study always conducted by Dr. Gerson and the research team she led, who investigated the developmental impacts of doll play in short and long-term. In their results of the third year of investigation, researchers affirm that the activity of playing with dolls is capable of benefitting "children with varying social communication styles, including those who display neurodivergent traits commonly associated with autism" (<https://corporate.mattel.com/news/multi-year-scientific-study-reveals-playing-with-dolls-allows-children-to-develop-and-practice-social-skills>). Thus, demonstrating that playing with dolls can support and facilitate social processing among all children, because it might be used as a useful tool for developing and practicing social skills such as empathy, through the creation of social scenarios regardless of a child's neurodevelopmental profile.

Moreover, since "children are not miniature adults capable of fending entirely for themselves" (Durham, 2009: 596), and in order to grow and develop as healthy and competent members of society, they need the care, protection and guidance of supportive adults, thus the interaction between adults and children during play is extremely important. This is especially needed in the present day, in which contemporary childhood witnesses a significant sexualisation of contents, in fact, as mentioned in Durham's book review (2009), in their work *So Sexy So Soon*, Levin D. and Kilbourne J., affirm that there are plenty of real-world examples in which childhood shows to be saturated with adult sexuality:

the book starts off with alarming descriptions of 8-year-olds inquiring about blow jobs and 7-year-olds worrying about being "sexy" enough and it goes on to detail the barrage of marketing that pushes sexy products at kids, from lingerie Barbie dolls to "pimp squad" T-shirts in toddler boys' sizes.

Here are the reasons why toy marketers talk about a phenomenon called K.G.O.Y., namely Kids Getting Older Younger, which is intended as result of modern life evolution rather than a fact toy marketers have created themselves, because they affirm that children are exposed to much more things at earlier ages, hence their scope of reference is wider (Talbot, 2006: 76). Therefore, to comply with what is happening in contemporary society in which children grow up being bombarded since very early ages with “graphic messages about sex and sexiness in the media” (Durham, 2009: 596) parents and caregivers need to adopt specific strategies to help kids to successfully negotiate the media-saturated environment they live in (Durham, 2009: 597). Besides being open to dialogue productively with their children about difficult sexual topics, in order to promote healthy sexuality and to challenge the harmful effects of commercial sexualisation (Durham, 2009: 597).

As reported by Lord in her excellent *Forever Barbie* (2004), in the case of Barbie, for example, in 1958 Mattel commissioned a study of toys to Ernest Dichter, a Jewish psychoanalyst emigrated in the United States, who discovered a remarkable and exploitable wedge between mothers and daughters when it came to the doll; indeed, many girls loved her; many mothers did not (Talbot, 2006: 80-81) because of her exaggeratedly sexualised appearance (Scott, 2009: 37). Even scholars and psychologists manifested a concernment over the doll, because “Barbie’s unrealistic dimensions may be creating body image problems in young Americans girls that lead to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia” (Scott, 2009: 37). Moreover, Barbie dolls were considered dull and unimaginative; parents would rather prefer more “educational” toys. (Paris, 1999: 69). For this reason, in 2009, Barbie’s compulsive obsession with just appearance and fashion brought Jeff Eldrige, West Virginia legislator, to introduce a bill to ban the doll from his state because she spread the misconception that if you are beautiful, you do not need to be smart (Associated Press, 2009, cit. in Scott, 2009: 37). The same controversies have arisen also later on, when Bratz dolls were launched by M.G.A. in 2001, hence either these complaints over children “becoming too knowing too early are to some extent perennial, or companies keep pushing the bounds of what parents find acceptable, and parents are limited in what they can do to push back” (Talbot, 2006: 81). Regardless of everything, it is undeniable that marketers counsel companies do not care about advertising products

that parents dislike, indeed thanks to the “nag factor” which “is the tendency of children, who are bombarded with marketers' messages, to unrelentingly request advertised items” (Henry and Borzekowski, 2011: 298), there are “plenty of examples of successful products that moms really don’t like for themselves, but they buy anyway” (Talbot, 2006: 77).

However, with regards to dolls, their presence has not always had a negative impact along the history, in fact, in a book review of Forman-Brunell M. and Dawn Whitney J.’s (2015) collection of essays written by Parnett-Dwyer M. and published by the *American Journal of Play*, the general public is provided with a critical overview of the ways in which playing with dolls and the construction of dolls have had an impact on imaginations, ideologies and identities (Parnett-Dwyer, 2018: 364). The essays contained in this study, illustrate the growing importance of taking an international and interdisciplinary approach to studying these universal toys, according to “the poststructuralist theoretical perspectives with feminist epistemologies” which developed over time (Parnett-Dwyer, 2018: 365). This approach draws attention to the significant contribution that women and girls have made to establishing female identities through playing with dolls. Indeed, *A Study on Dolls* by Hall and Elliss (1897), claimed that dolls fostered a girl’s feminine identity (Parnett-Dwyer, 2018: 366). Notwithstanding, these positive aspect of dolls as establishers of girls’ feminine identities, not all girls liked Barbie dolls. At the beginning Barbie was intended for nine- to twelve-year-olds, then as time went by girls began perceiving the doll as something “babyish”, representative of “their younger childhood out of which they felt they had now grown” (Talbot, 2006: 76-77), hence in the present, girls perceive the doll as a toy for three- to six-year-olds. This perception of Barbie for just preschool girls sometimes led older girls “to repudiate the doll with sadistic élan”. Indeed Dr. Nair A., researcher at the University of Bath, in one of her studies found that some “girls feel violence and hatred towards their Barbie”. Moreover, Nair and her colleagues discovered that “it is common for seven- to eleven-year-old girls to mutilate Barbies with scissors, fire, and even microwave ovens” (Frean, 2005, cit. in Scott, 2009: 37), namely something never seen in the world of American toys, the destructive relationship between girls and their Barbie dolls (Scott, 2009: 37). Though mutilation and violence towards Barbie was not always in the name of hate, in fact, in order to

identify with their dolls, before the appearance on the scene of Barbie's black friend Christie, in 1968, sometimes black girl could not feel properly represented by blonde-hair blue-eyes Barbie and therefore acted violent towards those clichéd dolls. Sometimes they even tried to make the dolls resemble their features by cutting their hair, painting them and dressing them in African-print fabric, as stated in Ducille A.'s work published by *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* (1994: 46).

The common belief was that girls rejected Barbie because "she represented a sexualized womanhood" to which girls felt ambivalent about entering. However, M.G.A. Entertainment's C.E.O., Isaac Larian, believes that Barbie now resembles more a "mommy figure" and many girls do not "want to play with a doll who reminds them of their mothers" (Talbot, 2006: 77). That is the reason for M.G.A.'s Bratz who look like "celebrity hotties", holding the six- to twelve-years-old market (Talbot, 2006: 77).

### **1.6 General remarks**

All things considered, the concept of playing with toys, is an aspect which is worth paying close attention to because of its essential role in children overall development. Indeed, toys and games support children throughout their early life experiences, giving them the possibility to become, in the future, part of society as healthy individuals (Dag et al., 2021: 419). Playing for children is a fundamental activity especially when children play with toys that involve a caregiver-child interaction. Indeed, toys and games that involve social interaction encourage children's social development, in which communication, and therefore listening and interacting with people, has a key role. Toys and games represent the only means to acquire these communication skills from an early age, because playing with other individuals whether they parents, caregivers or peers, encourages child interaction in safe environment, without any inhibition (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 924). However, it is crucial to select and purchase the best toys for a child, identifying those that match with children's age, developmental capacities and abilities and that encourage also the development of new skills (Healey et al., 2019: 3). Notwithstanding the amount of technology included in concrete and virtual toys, what indicates the appropriateness for a toy is especially the presence of the caregiver, when consistent it allows scaffolding children in their play,

for example by setting up a storyline for pretending together (Healey et al., 2019: 3). Therefore, connecting to the research question for the present dissertation, the important question, which has to be answered is whether the toys that our children use on a daily basis and that should enable their cognitive and social development are able to guarantee a proper developmental environment for them. Specifically, by analysing the figure of Barbie, the toy doll produced by the Mattel Toy Company, the leading global toy company and owner of one of the strongest portfolios of children's and family entertainment franchises in the world (<https://corporate.mattel.com/about-us>), founded in 1945, by Ruth Mosko, Elliot Handler and Harold Mattson (Talbot, 2006: 80), based in California (USA). Barbie was invented and then produced to provide little girls (initially) with a brand-new toy, able to inspire their imagination and give them the chance to believe they can be anything they want. Alongside, with analysing the figure of Bratz, the strongest Barbie's rival in history, which was launched in 2001 (Talbot, 2006: 74) by the M.G.A. (Micro Games of America) Entertainment, another manufacturer of children's toys and entertainment products founded in 1979 in Southern California (USA). Hence, these dolls are worth analysing and examining, because their study "provides a unique perspective for understanding how play constructs and disrupts girlhood" (Parnett-Dwyer, 2018: 366). And in particular, the analysis of these dolls through images, "demonstrates the importance of play and its material culture to social and cultural history" (Parnett-Dwyer, 2018: 366).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Data and Methodology

#### 2.1 Data analysed

##### 2.1.1 Data analysed in Barbie: Visual Analysis



Figure 1: Barbie representative picture, 2024 from <https://shopping.mattel.com/it-it/pages/barbie>

The first part of the analysis conducted in the present dissertation comprises twelve pictures, which are to be divided into newspaper advertisements published in different American newspapers and packaging pictures. All the images depict product presentation pictures of different kinds of Barbie dolls belonging to different Barbie lines from different eras.

As far as the criteria of collecting and selection of data are concerned, the material to be investigated was collected manually through a thorough internet search looking on Google for those Barbie models that have been more relevant throughout the brand's history. The Barbie dolls to be analysed were selected after examining the official Barbie YouTube Channel, Barbie Media (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/>), Mattel-managed, where fans can check out the newest content, products, movies and more other information regarding Barbie. More specifically, the search for material was based on the timeline provided by the webpage, which identifies and describes the most important Barbie models ever produced and sold in the 1950s, '60s, '70s, '80s

and 90s until the latest more inclusive lines after 2000s. In particular, the advertising pictures were found by examining the largest online newspaper archive established in 2012, the Newspapers.com viewer (<https://www.newspapers.com/>). An online tool which includes documents from over 600 million newspaper pages from the 17th to the 21st century from around the United States and beyond. Whilst the packaging pictures were found by scanning the Internet for finding the original packaging of the Barbie interested. The Barbie dolls and the advertisements to be analysed try to expose the evolution of Barbie over the years, analysing her most important changes, starting from the first Barbie ever produced, presented at the 1959 International Toy Fair in New York City, until the more inclusive doll lines released more recently in 2018. More precisely, the Barbie models to be analysed are the ones advertised in 1959, 1965, 1967, 1968, 1980, 1985, 1992, 2015 and 2018, in order to dissuade parents into buying the different dolls for their daughters at the beginning, and more recently for all children, both boys and girls, in general. The Internet was carefully consulted and each image was selected manually with extreme attention to its representativeness role to answer the specific research question as adequately as possible, individualizing how different version of different Barbie dolls have been advertised in different eras, and how the changes in society's mentality, becoming more and more inclusive towards anyone, influenced the dolls production and advertisement across time.

According to the size and representativeness of the material, it has to be said that twelve figures represent a very narrow sample, thinking about all the different Barbie lines Mattel produced since 1959. Nevertheless, considering the large quantity of dolls ever produced it would be extremely difficult to analyse each one of the Barbie models sold from 1959 to present days. Moreover, the analysis of a small-scale sample is sufficient to present the key moments of Barbie's history of evolution, becoming an increasingly inclusive and representative toy for both boys and girls due to the wide range of body types, ethnicities, skin tones and varying disabilities, as stated by the Mattel Toy Company itself.

The present research aims to analyse if the choices made in the realization of Barbie followed the social development of the female role in public's thoughts throughout the years, bringing therefore to an evolution of the feminine stereotype the doll promoted. The main changes in the doll herself are delineated through the



examination and description of the different characteristics and nuances, namely body shapes and sizes, advertised in different American newspapers and presented by the doll's packaging.

### 2.1.2 Data analysed in Skipper: Cluster Analysis



Figure 2: Growing Up Skipper representative picture, 1975 from <https://www.barbiemedia.com/search.html?search=skipper>



Figure 3: Skipper representative picture, 2019 from <https://www.barbiemedia.com/search.html?search=skipper>

The second part of the analysis in the present study focuses its attention on a specific Barbie doll: Skipper Roberts, Barbie's little sister presented in America for the first time in 1964. In this instance, the sample analysed comprises ten television commercials found through a thorough search on the web platform that allows the sharing of multimodal content, YouTube. The commercials have been chosen by carefully examining different YouTube channels, which have published the television commercials recorded by Mattel Toy Company and released to the public throughout the years. Even in this case, the material to be investigated was selected manually through extensive research on YouTube, identifying the main changes in the product realization and the principal advertisement policies adopted for promoting this specific Barbie model. Thus, highlighting the major differences between each version of Skipper produced, trying to explain the reasons for the strategies implied in the television commercials and in the doll's features production, which presented her to

the public in many different ways, attempting to follow the public's thoughts and the evolution of society's mentality increasingly welcoming and inclusive, from her first presentation in 1964 until present days. More precisely, the television commercial examined in Chapter Five refer to Skipper versions produced in 1964, 1975, 1984, 1987, 1990, 1992, 1997, 2000, 2010 and 2018.

As far as the size and representativeness of the material is concerned, it has to be said that the choice for the commercials to analyse could be interpreted to be excessively personal and a too narrow sample to analyse. However, the video chosen try to depict the main changes in production features and in the advertising policies implied by Mattel across time. In order to properly answer to the research question, many different television commercials have been visualized and only the ones that showed to be promoting revolutionary characteristics and features which follow the evolving mentality of society in presenting the doll, are considered in the examination.

### **2.1.3 Data analysed in Bratz vs Barbie: Visual Analysis**



Figure 4: Bratz representative picture, 2024 from <https://www.mgae.com/brands/bratz>



Figure 5: Barbie representative picture, 2024 from <https://www.barbiemedia.com/images/detail/4206.html>

The last part of the analysis compares and contrasts the figures of Barbie and Bratz, in accordance with the rivalry between the two dolls that arose from 2001; year in which Bratz was presented for the first time at the Hong Kong International Toy Fair by another American manufacturer of children's toys, the M.G.A. Entertainment. Regarding the sample analysed for this section, it comprises one newspaper advertising image found in the online newspaper archive Newspapers.com viewer. This material aims at demonstrating how the two dolls have been advertised differently, highlighting different features and characteristics of the products, in accordance with the evolving of general public's thought of the female role in society and of the need to being representative of the racial mixing present in the States without emphasizing differences but welcoming and accepting them as ordinariness. Once again, the advertising strategies adopted for inducing parents into buying those products and children into asking for those products, are to be examined through the comparison of the images and the words implied into advertising both dolls, individualizing which aspects the two toy companies emphasised in order to make their dolls more appealing for children.

According to the size and representativeness of the material analysed, it has to be said that just one newspaper advertisement represents a very narrow sample to examine. However, the main point in Chapter Six is to consider the different ways in which these two dolls, presenting completely different physiques, nuances and

characteristics, are described and advertised to the public. Hence, trying to answer as adequately as possible to the research question by focusing on the distinct ideals Barbie and Bratz promoted to the audience through their totally different physical appearance and ideals conveyed.

## **2.2 Methods of analysis**

As a general outline of the methods used in order to describe the material selected in the present investigation, the study makes use of two distinct theoretical frameworks to qualitatively analyse the different materials, the newspaper advertisements and the television commercials. Only qualitative analyses are conducted because of the limited size and the kind of the sample collected.

### **2.2.1 Visual Analysis**

For both the Barbie Visual Analysis and the Bratz vs Barbie Visual Analysis, the analyses start with a very brief general description for each picture presented and then each of them is examined through the layout of meaning making in images theorized from Kress & Van Leeuwen (1996). More specifically, the analyses observe whether the images presented follow or not the diagram proposed from the two founders of multimodal studies, which is a methodological reference framework to investigate static pictures. Indeed, Kress & Van Leeuwen individualised that there is a schematic representation of how an image is composed in order to provide some meaning. This common model to approach static images involves representing something already known, something given, in the left margin of the image, whereas representing, in the right margin, something completely new, an unknown piece of information that is presented to the public for the first time. Moreover, the upper left and the upper right margins of the image should convey an ideal concept, whilst the lower margins both left and right should represent something real, something existing in real life. However, pictures do not always follow this prototypical representation, sometimes they deviate from the norm, thus only through a careful analysis of the participants represented in the communicative event, the processes, the language, the kinesics and the proxemics, it could be seen whether the message is anyway sent successfully.

Nevertheless, in Chapter Four this study focuses on how the specific features of Barbie changed following the evolution of the public's thoughts and mentality along times, adapting her characteristics to a society that requires increasing inclusion and equality for everyone. Presenting a multimodal analysis on how Barbie's image has changed throughout the years, identifying the development in Barbie's figure according to the constant cultural society's thoughts evolution towards a more inclusive and accessible world for women at first and then for everyone in general. Whilst the second visual analysis in Chapter Six, tries to outline the main differences in advertising Bratz and Barbie, two different kind of dolls which represent different ideals of femininity and uplift two extremely different representations of women in terms of appearance. Therefore, Kress & Van Leeuwen's method of investigation for elements in visual analysis is implemented as a useful tool to describe in detail the newspapers and packaging's static images presenting or advertising a specific type of Barbie (Chapter Four) also in comparison with a brand-new fashion doll, Bratz (Chapter Six), helping analysing the particular features of the different doll models produced. More specifically, in the first visual analysis, the multimodal analysis performed focuses on how Barbie's image has changed throughout the years, identifying the development in Barbie's figure according to the constant cultural society's thoughts evolution towards a more inclusive and accessible world. Whereas the second visual analysis tries to expose the main differences in marketing and advertising Barbie and Bratz to the general public, underlining the products' characteristics emphasized by the two toy companies.

### **2.2.2 Cluster Analysis**

Regarding the case study of Skipper, another multimodal analysis is conducted applying the theoretical framework for clusters theorized by Baldry & Thibault (2006). More concretely, the cluster analysis applied to videos seeks to understand if all the elements present in multimodal texts contribute to efficiently create some meaning and send some message to the public. This method of analysis examines clusters, which are the different sections of a video functionally related to each other in order to create specific clips. Therefore, clusters are not isolated images, they are reciprocally interconnected, creating a local grouping of sections which may be verbal and/or visual



in nature; in any case, the sections need to be close to each other in order to create meaning. There are specific criteria to understand whether a section is functional in creating meaning, examining clusters based on: the reading patterns (left, right, top, down), the following of the actual sequence of proximity, the lexical connectivity across all the video investigated and the successful sending of the message conveyed. All of these parameters are to be examined through the analysis of: the language, the colour, the layout and the six elements of Visual Analysis, namely the participants represented in the communicative event, the processes, the language, the sound, the kinesics and the proxemics.

In this instance, after giving a very brief general description for each commercial presented, this method of analysing videos is employed to identify the specific meaning for each visual and verbal choice in each commercial. Namely, this cluster analysis considers the composition of each one of the ten Skipper commercial video in itself, in addition to detect whether repetitive and predetermined reading patterns present in these television commercials, work or not in sending a specific message to the public. The analyses take into account whether the multimodal texts present in Skipper commercials follow or not Baldry & Thibault's methodological reference framework of parameters and criteria to investigate clusters, in order to understand whether a section is functional in creating meaning. Hence, this method of investigation for multimodal texts is implemented in this instance as a useful tool to attempt to display the evolution of this particular Barbie through commercials, carefully observing the doll's physical changes in representation and in the activities she performs. In fact, Skipper has witnessed many changes over time, from her height to the colour of her hair, following what were the demands of society but she always remained Barbie's little sister.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Barbie, Skipper and Bratz Dolls: An Overview of Their History and Social Significance**

#### **3.1 History of Barbie**

##### **3.1.1 Barbie Origins**

Barbara Millicent Roberts is the full name of the worldwide known Barbie doll, which, as reported by the *Wisconsin Historical Society* (<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS2720>), was invented by Mattel's co-founder Ruth Handler, called Ruth Mosko before her marriage with Elliot Handler (Talbot, 2006: 80), and was named after Ruth and Elliot's daughter, Barbara. However, it is not quite correct to affirm that Ruth Handler invented Barbie, because in reality she took inspiration in 1957 from a family holiday in which Ruth and her husband Elliot, the other proprietor of the Mattel Toy Company, were vacationing in Europe (Scott, 2009: 34). It was in this country where they came across the German plastic doll Bild-Lilli. This doll belonged to the German sex market and was based on Reinhard Beuthin's promiscuous cartoon character from the German tabloid Bild-Zeitung and as affirmed by Scott (2009: 34) she "was brought to three-dimensional life by German doll maker Max Weissbrodt". The sassy adult comic-strip character Lilli had originally been created as novelty toy for men, she was a small doll with large bust and a seductive wardrobe (Scott, 2009: 34). However, Ruth saw the potential to adapt Lilli's features and market the doll to children, so she bought three German-created Bild-Lilli dolls and brought them back to the States (Scott, 2009: 34). As reported by *Marketing Espresso* (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>), Ruth was inspired to create a doll with adult features after seeing her own daughter playing with paper dolls depicting a mature shape due to the absence of 3D toys that did so. Until those years, boys but especially girls "were surrounded only by baby dolls to be cared for and played with as 'mothers'" (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>). Indeed, as reported by Talbot M. (2006: 80), quoting Ruth's autobiography, *Dream Doll* (1994), in the early 1950s the toy counters "were heavy with paperdolls of every



size, shape, and form, Barbara [Ruth's daughter] and her friends always insisted on buying only adult female paperdolls", thus children, especially young girls, were not interested anymore in paper dolls representing babies or children of their own age. Instead, they played with mature figures because they were able to project their dreams and their ideals for their futures as adult women. Toy's world presented those so-called fashion dolls who had more than one outfit; however, their shapes included "flat chests, big bellies, and squatty legs", as if they were overweight six- or eight-year-olds. Ruth recognised how essential it was to provide young girls with a completely new play pattern which "had never before been offered by the doll industry to little girls" (Handler, 1994, cit. in Talbot, 2006: 80). The creation of the Barbie was intended to provide girls with a versatile doll that could play the role of an adult, through which little girls could play 'grown-up', imagining themselves as adults and setting no limits in what they could do. Once back to Wisconsin, Ruth gave one Bild-Lilli plastic doll to her daughter Barbara and the others to Mattel's developmental team. Alongside designer Jack Ryan, Ruth redesigned the doll, and employed fashion designer Charlotte Johnson to create a wardrobe for this new adult fashion icon for children (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-VNctz3hX8&t=42s>). Ruth's vision was right, her child seemed to enjoy playing with the doll very much. Therefore, in 1958, Mattel successfully negotiated with Weissbrodt for the rights to the Bild-Lilli patent and the doll was able to enter the market to young girls in the United States (Scott, 2009: 36). After some adjustments to the doll's design, the Lilli doll changed her name into Barbie and was finally unveiled at the International Toy Fair in New York City on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1959, wearing a black and white striped bathing suit, a pair of over-sized white sunglasses, high heels, golden earrings with long blonde or brunette hair tided in a carefree beach-ready ponytail (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>).

### **3.1.2 Initial Scepticism**

At the beginning, the doll was met with scepticism, some sellers initially refused to sell a doll with adult features, having never seen anything similar before. As reported from Mattel, "toy buyers were sceptical because Barbie was unlike the baby and toddler dolls that were popular at the time"

(<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2023/03/09/barbie-facts-national-barbie-day/11434125002/>), her physique was the one of a well-developed woman. Parents also expressed concern at Barbie's mature body. Nevertheless, despite this preliminary opposition from sellers and parents, Barbie was an immediate sensation between young girls also due to Mattel's marketing strategy that completely bypassed the need to win parents over by launching an extensive television advertising campaign directed solely at children themselves. The doll was heavily advertised through a well-conceived media campaign on the Mickey Mouse Club television show (Scott, 2009: 36). Indeed, as reported by Talbot (2006: 77), the book *The Great Tween Buying Machine* (2004), written by Siegel D. L., Coffey T. J. and Livingston G., states that marketers counsel companies do not feel guilty about "going around moms" and advertising products parents dislike. And due to the "nag factor", parents are forced to meet their children's repeated requests for advertised items. Thus, this means of intensive advertising direct to children, made Mattel the first company to successfully exploit youth television advertising and harness the power of 'kid consumerism', resulting in the creation of a modern toy icon that went on to sell 350,000 units its first year alone (Scott, 2009: 36). Supporting these sells there was the little price this product asked, only 3 dollars each.

### **3.1.3 Barbie Relevance Throughout Times**

For the following decades, Barbie continued to evolve with the changing times and brought to cultural evolution through the years (<https://www.history.com/news/barbie-through-the-ages>). Notwithstanding her evolution, in the early 2000s, Barbie began to receive her first controversies due to her lack of representativeness of women around the world, in all their physics and nuances (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>). Therefore, Mattel introduced several different lines giving the dolls different characteristics and features until the latest examples depicting any kind of skin tone, shape and disability, to better let young children identify in the product. Since the very beginning, Ruth Handler claimed her willow "to create a doll that showed girls [...] that they could be anything" (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>) they wanted, the intention of Barbie

was to allow only girls, at the beginning, to identify themselves with a mature woman, who has choices and decision-making power over her future.

## **3.2 History of Skipper**

### **3.2.1 Skipper Origins**

As seen in Section 3.1 History of Barbie, throughout time, Barbie underwent an important evolution and development, considering her shapes and features. However, Skipper Madison Roberts, is an interesting example since this specific doll underwent many different changes and versions from her first debut in 1964 until present days (Paris, 1999: 65). The doll was conceived to be Barbie's little eight-years-old sister in order to counteract to criticism and scepticism from parents who saw Barbie as a questionable role model for girls because of her exaggerated sexuality and unattainable body shapes (Scott, 2009: 37); in addition to meet the demand for Barbie to have children (Paris, 1999: 65). Initially, Skipper was featured without breast and with normal flat feet, diametrically opposed to her "grown-up" sister, who was featured with a large breast and "strangely contorted feet [...] forever on demi-pointe" (Paris, 1999: 68).

### **3.2.2 Controversies**

Skipper was not immune to criticism, some models led to controversies, for instance when the Growing Up Skipper was released in 1975, parents had something to say about her transitional body, which "had not yet settled into either girlhood or teen life" (Paris, 1999: 66). This version of Skipper doll was able to grow, people may question about how a plastic doll could grow, well in this instance what grew was the doll's torso and the doll itself. Indeed, it was just needed to turn her arm in order to set her body into motion. Her torso was "composed of two layers: a softer plastic on top and a harder shell underneath". Whenever her arm was rotated, "the soft plastic rose up and away from the layer below, two cups set in the chest protruded out against the more flexible upper part, creating her breasts, and the underlayer of her torso became her new waistline" (Paris, 1999: 66). What has also changed from the first versions of Skipper is her outfit, "Skipper's postpubescent outfit, [...] exemplified her new sophistication", because inside the packaging there was an ankle-length "maxi" skirt

ready to replace her shorter girlhood skirt. Moreover, “she traded in her collar for a fetching blue scarf, tied fashionably around her neck, and slipped her flat Skipper feet, sockless, into white platform sandals that accentuated her newfound height” (Paris, 1999: 66). She was characterized as “the pinnacle of tastelessness” by her opponents and due to harsh criticism, "Barbie Genealogy," which contains an incomplete list of Mattel’s press kit, excludes her from its list of product highlights. As already mentioned in the Introduction, even the America author Lord, in her book *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* (2004), affirmed that “that Growing-Up Skipper "required from its owner a taste for the macabre” (Paris, 1999: 67); claiming that the doll “slipped into production at a moment when men managed the Barbie line, and it reflected a male rendition of a female coming-of-age”. In fact, for how Mattel presented the doll, “Growing-Up Skipper was quite bereft of higher goals, other than the conventional aspiration (still wildly popular today, although rarely attained) of becoming slim, tall, and curvy all at once” (Paris, 1999: 67). Nevertheless, although initial criticism this doll’s version “was successful enough to be produced through 1977 and to spawn a sequel, Growing Up Ginger”, Skipper’s friend (Paris, 1999: 66).

### **3.2.3 Skipper Changes Throughout Time**

As it can be seen from her first television commercial broadcasted, originally Skipper was dimensionally smaller than Barbie, she was 9.25 inches in height and only afterwards she became taller resembling Barbie’s nuances, acquiring a teenage appearance. At the beginning Skipper was featured as a little girl with blonde hair and blue eyes, just as if it was a miniature Barbie, then over time she grew up she started working as dog-sitter and as babysitter, changing significantly also in her appearance to a brown-hair brown-eyed girl.

## **3.3 History of Bratz**

### **3.3.1 Bratz Origins**

Since her debut, Barbie has been the “alpha doll” in girl's toy sphere, however, over the decades, many competitors and many different dolls have tried to achieve her success of “hugely profitable sovereignty over the imaginations of little girls” and

some of these rivals have also “briefly grabbed a small share of the fashion-doll” (Talbot, 2006: 74). This was only until 2001, year in which M.G.A. Entertainment idealised and realised a brand-new fashion doll called Bratz. Its design is credited to Carter Bryant, a doll designer and an occasional employee for Mattel, who one day brought M.G.A. Entertainment’s C.E.O., Isaac Larian, a drawing of a new doll he had in mind. At first sight, Larian thought it looked weird and ugly, luckily, that day happened to be hanging around his office his eleven-year-old daughter Jasmin, therefore he asked her opinion of the drawing. She just said that it was cute, but M.G.A. Entertainment’s C.E.O. was able to see a sparkle in her eyes. And since children say more with their body language than their voices, Larian agreed to pursue this project. However, for M.G.A. it was not easy to give Bryant's drawings three-dimensional form, in fact the design did not resemble human features, but more cartoonish ones. Presenting skinny bodies and large heads with prominent glossy lips rimmed with dark lip liner, puffed almond-shaped eyes adorned with thick crescents of eyeshadow and a vanishingly small nose, “as if the doll had undergone successive rounds of plastic surgery” (Talbot, 2006: 74). The challenge was so daunting that when Larian and his team presented the doll at the International Toy Fair held in Hong Kong in January 2001, they showed the venders only a rough sample, in which the hair was Scotch-taped on the doll itself. Later, in May 2001, as reported by an American fashion magazine, the *W magazine*, M.G.A. Entertainment, unveiled a whole line of Bratz fashion dolls, Cloe, Yasmin (inspired by Larian’s daughter, Jasmin), Sasha and Jade, each one with its own personal features and shades. These new dolls presented different characteristics compared to the ones of Barbie, wearing hyper-feminine, cartoonish and edgy looks (<https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/bratz-dolls-anniversary-deep-dive-history>). Indeed, *The Modesto Bee* in one of its advertisements defines them as “dolls loaded with attitude and fashion savvy”. As far as their looks are concerned, these dolls have claimed to appear as “pole dancers on their way to work at a gentlemen’s club” (Talbot, 2006: 74).

### **3.3.2 Bratz Compared to Barbie**

Bratz image was an opposite to that presented by Barbie, who portrayed a fashion icon of elegance and femininity in empowering young girls into imagine themselves as

anything they wanted, capable to pursue whatever career they aspire to. Bratz could never be imagined as dolls assuming the dozens careers Barbie has pursued over the decades, indeed their slogan defines Bratz as “The girls with the passion for fashion”, representing whatever is fashion and cute, as claimed by M.G.A. Entertainment’s C.E.O Larian (Talbot, 2006: 76). According to the author of *Power of the Purse: How Smart Businesses Are Adapting to the World’s Most Important Consumers-Women*, Warner F. (Talbot, 2006: 77), Bratz represent:

a future where young girls don’t need their dolls to show them the career choices they have open to them. They already know they can choose any career and pursue it. It’s a future where the rules about the size and shape of women’s bodies, and how women express their sexuality, are far broader and more open.

Whilst Barbie focused more on "aspirational qualities" to inspire young girls into pursuing unusual working carriers that women could never imagine to be performing before, as Chuck Scothon, one of the heads of Mattel’s Barbie line, stated (Talbot, 2006: 76). Moreover, differently from Barbie, Bratz can stand unassisted, element that represented an argument in favour of Bratz, since mothers have been reported to affirm that “they would never buy their daughters a doll that couldn’t stand on its own” (Talbot, 2006: 74-76). However, Bratz dolls’ appearance was still found extremely controversial.

### **3.3.3 The Bratz Pack**

The “Bratz Pack” M.G.A. Entertainment produced and put on the market consisted of four ethnically inclusive dolls presenting various skin tones and ethnicity: white (Cloe), Middle Eastern/Latina (Yasmin), Black (Sasha) and Asian (Jade). Nevertheless, Bratz were not conceived to be ethnically different, they simply wanted to be representative of the different ethnicities present in Southern California at that time, indeed they were conceived to reflect the racially diverse M.G.A. team itself (<https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/bratz-dolls-anniversary-deep-dive-history>). As affirmed by Larian himself (Talbot, 2006: 76), Southern California was an inspiration for Bratz, because it is a place where racial mixing is commonplace, and Bratz simply wanted to represent different ethnicities without labelling any of the dolls, but just

conveying difference. Therefore, according to Larian's vision, Bratz could not be sold separately to retail corporations, requirement that posed an issue, because the only doll people were interested in buying was Cloe, (<https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/bratz-dolls-anniversary-deep-dive-history>) the blonde blue-eyed doll similar to Barbie. Bratz dolls were conceived as a "multiracial pack" presenting slightly different shades and features, whereas the first black Barbie Mattel produced in 1968, seemed like stretch, "a well-meaning afterthought" (Talbot, 2006: 76). However, for what concerns the sales, since in October 2001 sale rates were not as expected, Toys R Us, an American toy, clothing and baby product retailer, cancelled its order for Bratz because initial selling were not as predicted. Hence, Larian had to borrow some money in order to widen Bratz's advertising campaign and by Christmas, Bratz dolls sales witnessed a significant boost (Talbot, 2006: 74). Since then, Bratz became increasingly popular worldwide, also becoming the top fashion doll in the United Kingdom and Australia. Thus, Margaret Talbot, in her article published by *The New Yorker* (2006: 74), states that although in 2005 Barbie sales remained high at three billion dollars, they declined by 12.8 per cent because of global sales of Bratz products that reached two billion dollars. As the toy-industry analyst at Wedbush Morgan Securities, Sean McGowan, states, quoted by Margaret Talbot (2006: 74), "Barbie is still an instantly recognizable brand name," however, "Bratz has now captured about forty per cent of the fashion-doll market, compared with Barbie's sixty per cent".

### **3.3.4 Bratz and Barbie in Courtyard**

Since the launch the Bratz brand, M.G.A. Entertainment underwent several lawsuits with Mattel Inc. After Mattel sued, in April 2004, the doll designer Carter Bryant, "accusing him of developing his designs for Bratz while working at Mattel and taking them to M.G.A., thereby breaching his contract" (Talbot, 2006: 78); in April 2005 M.G.A. sued Mattel, accusing the company of copying the doe-eyed look of Bratz dolls mimicked in Barbie doll line "My Scene" (Talbot, 2006: 79). In response, in December 2006 Mattel, sued M.G.A. Entertainment, "of stealing its "intellectual infrastructure" including company secrets, business plans and 25 members of staff, and using it to build the Bratz empire" (Goddard, 2006), asking the company \$500

million (which are £256 million) a year. The lawsuit alleges that all credit for the Bratz dolls Sasha, Yasmin, Chloe, Jade and friends, legitimately belongs to Mattel suggesting that "MGA's rapid growth was not organic, but rather was based upon its theft of Bratz, [...] emboldened by the success of its illegal conduct, MGA has repeated — even expanded — its pattern of theft on numerous occasions" (Goddard, 2006). On 17<sup>th</sup> July 2008, a federal jury deliberated that Bryant had created the Bratz model comprising their characters and their names while he was working as a Barbie designer at Mattel. Thus, he is alleged of taking the designs to a competitor, M.G.A., "which began producing the Bratz line in 2001 and turned it into a product with more than \$1 billion in annual sales and licensing fees" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/18/business/18toy.html?searchResultPosition=1>) . The jury also declared that Isaac Larian, CEO of M.G.A. Entertainment, interfered with Mattel's contractual relationship with Bryant and that he and M.G.A. converted Mattel property to their own use. This was the verdict despite M.G.A and Bryant's claim that he was not employed by Mattel at the time he had designed the Bratz dolls. The dispute between the two giants of the toy world is still ongoing, however, both Barbie and Bratz represent the pillars of fashion dolls in children's childhood, known all around the world.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Barbie: Visual Analysis

#### 4.1 Qualitative Analysis

The first image under analysis represents a newspaper advertisement picture of the first Barbie model presented at the International Toy Fair held in New York City on 9<sup>th</sup> March 1959. The newspaper advertisement was published in *The Press Democrat* of Santa Rosa, California on Friday, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1959, it presents to the public this brand-new product, an all-new kind of doll “a real grown-up fashion model” as stated in Figure 6. The advertisement indicates the price required for this new “life-like doll”, quoting the text in Figure 6, exposing her large wardrobe of costumes and accessories.

**Barbie**<sup>T.M.</sup>

**TEEN-AGE FASHION DOLL!**

Barbie\* is a living doll, a real grown-up fashion model! She's a curvy 11½ inches with flesh-toned "skin"—and she stands alone. Her arms, legs and head move, so you can dress her with real fashion costumes and accessories—like those shown below. Barbie\* doll as shown—\$3.00.

**CHOOSE FROM OUR LARGE WARDROBE OF COSTUMES**  
Fine fabrics, coats with real linings and zippers, jeweled earrings, everything to make Barbie\* the most life-like doll ever created.

**COTTON CASUAL**—Sunback dress with circle skirt. White wedge-heel sandals. \$1  
**SWEATER GIRL**—Cardigan. Sleeveless sweater. Flannel skirt. Knitting equipment. \$3  
**WINTER HOLIDAY**—“Leather” coat. Hooded T-shirt. Pants. Zipper bag. Gloves. \$3.50  
**WEDDING DAY SET**—Formal satin & lace gown. Bouquet, gloves, even blue garter. \$5  
**BARBIE-Q OUTFIT**—Cotton sunback dress, hat, wedgies, apron, cooking utensils. \$2  
Plus many, many more! Costume sets do not include doll.

Figure 6: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 1959

The picture presents more text than the image itself because it is an advertising article promoting a novelty. However, it still partially complies with the ideal model proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), because in the upper left margin is provided a given information, something already known, namely the new Barbie doll presented at the International Toy Fair, precisely nine months before this article was published. Then the upper right margin represents a new ideal information, the name of the new product advertised and its description indicating also the selling price. In the lower part of the picture, both on the right and on the left margin there are some drawings representing all the possibilities of wardrobe costumes girls can buy in order to play with their brand-new toy. The drawings are something ideal, however, they represent a real possibility because below the drawings there is also a very brief description of each outfit and costume available, indicating also its selling price, inviting the viewers to buy the clothing sets to dress up the doll for any occasion. Perhaps, this description of the doll's wardrobe depicts a new information for the public, which is not aware of the unlimited costume sets possible. The participants in this case are Barbie's figure and the five drawings representing some of the possible options Mattel offers, they are not human or living elements, they are objects that create meaning because they want to convey a particular message: advertising this product and showing that it is something completely new, never seen before, affordable and with different opportunities. The process here is pictured by Barbie, a static object, all dressed up in her classic black and white bathing suit, high-heeled sandals, holding in her hand her iconic sunglasses, just as she was presented at the toy fair. Then, the five drawings represent the same figure in other costume sets: "Cotton casual", "Sweater girl", "Winter holiday", "Wedding day set" and "Barbie-Q outfit", they are meant to show some options the shops are selling. As already mentioned, in Figure 6 there is some written verbal component. In the message, the register used is not very high, however it is meant to be read by adults, because there are some lexes that could be difficult understanding for children, for instance: "11½ inches with flesh-toned 'skin'", "fine fabrics" and "wedge-heeled sandals". These description for the product advertised are intended to attract parents into buying this new toy for their children. Observing the kinesics, some of the participants, the Barbie photo and one of the drawings make direct eye contact with the public to create and establish an intimate relationship with

the viewers, because Barbie is getting in touch almost physically with the public. The relationship in terms of space between the participants, that is to say the proxemics, shows a certain closeness between the sponsored product, namely the Barbie doll. The five drawings seem to be interacting with each other, their poses are different from one another, and they are not represented close to each other just as they were all together, however, they still seem to be interacting together. This image is trying to sell a product, making it attractive and convenient by indicating the little prices required to buy each Barbie and each costume set.

The second advertisement picture is a product presentation picture, in the 60s Barbie was transformed from time to time into the most important female figures of the time: from the faces of the cinema to political figures (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>). However, the most important evolution arrived in 1965 when Mattel launched the first astronaut Barbie on the market, anticipating Neil Armstrong's first foot on the Moon, which happened just four years later, in 1969. The image shows the selling packaging in which Barbie astronaut was sold at the time.



Figure 7: Astronaut Barbie packaging, 1965

On this occasion, Kress and Van Leeuwen's hypothetical model of representing an image is not essential to be looked at, however, the packaging in which Barbie is contained is worth analysing through Kress and Van Leeuwen's general approach. From a visual standpoint, the main participant, Barbie, is to be found in the centre of the image, the doll has a blonde bob, red lipstick and make-up and she is dressed up as an astronaut. Another participant in the communicative situation is represented by the drawing of a man in the background wearing a worker's uniform with helmet, bringing Barbie the astronaut helmet to complete her space suit. Next to Barbie there is also the American flag, indicating America's supremacy in rocket science. The process represented here is an important moment, in which Barbie is approaching into flying into the outer space, until that time it was something completely unimaginable, and so the doll is imagined as the first American woman to explore the Moon. Also in this case a written verbal component can be found in the comic strip coming out of Barbie's head as one of her thoughts: "Yes, I am a rocket scientists", by saying this the doll demonstrates to women that even professions always associated with the male sex can also include and integrate the female sex (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>). The attitude of the participants, that is to say their kinesics, is serious because of the hypothetical mission Barbie is approaching. The man in the background has a huge bright smile, demonstrating he is very happy helping Barbie getting ready for what she is going to do. Both Barbie and the man make direct eye contact with the public to create and establish an intimate relationship with the buyers of the product, they are getting in touch almost physically with the children public, because this packaging is meant to be displayed on shop shelves to make children want to buy the product. Considering the proxemics between the participants, Barbie has a prominent position in the centre of the image, while the man plays a secondary role. In this picture, the intention is to sponsor a new Barbie model, giving the doll the power to become a symbol of a social battle for the female society, giving voice and importance to women who still had too little at the time, by doing this the intent to attract the public is achieved successfully.

Towards the end of 1960s, Barbie became increasingly successful, and Mattel thought of starting to represent and homage women celebrities of the history through

its dolls, as provide young girls with actual examples of the infinity possibilities they had for their future. Hence, in 1967 the toy manufacturer launched the first celebrity Barbie doll ever (Scott, 2009: 36), she was based on the famous British fashion model, “epitome of liveness and grace” (*Desert Dispatch*, 1967: 5), Twiggy and “she was the beginning of a long line of dolls made to resemble celebrities and fashion’s elite” (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>). Twiggy was the nickname for Dame Lesley Lawson, an English supermodel, actress and singer, who, during the swinging '60s in London, became a British cultural icon and a prominent teenage model (DeLibero, 1994: 41). The following newspaper advertisement published in *The Independent* of Richmond, California on Wednesday, 27<sup>th</sup> September 1967, advertises this new product to children through a drawing of the doll contained in her packaging.



Figure 8: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 1967

Even in this newspaper advertisement, the text present in the picture is the most prominent part of the image, because it is promoting a novelty by making it affordable for parents, offering a discount. Notwithstanding, the advertisement still partially complies with the ideal model to approach static images proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), because in the left part of the picture is provided both a real and an

ideal given information, something the public already knows. Namely, the drawings of the Twiggy doll presented inside her packaging and outside as if she was walking around. The drawings are something ideal, however, they represent a real possibility because they resemble the actual doll sold in toy stores. Then the right part conveys a new ideal information, besides the name of the new product advertised and its description, the focus of the text is on the selling price, which tempts the viewers into buying this brand-new doll because of the discount. The drawings represent the only participants in the communicative situation, and since they represent the doll inside and outside the box, the process is both static, showing the doll inside her packaging as she can be found on toy shops shelves, and dynamic, depicting the doll as if she was moving on her own once outside the packaging. The process represented here is pictured by the drawing of the Twiggy doll wearing iconic Twiggy makeup, a mini dress and boots. Originally, the doll wore “a yellow, green, and blue vertical-striped mini dress and yellow boots” (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>), however, since the advertisement is in black-and-white, colours cannot be seen. As mentioned above, in Figure 8 there is some written verbal component, which aims to speak to the public. In the text, the register used is not very high, however it is clearly meant to be read by parents, because of the vocabulary used that could result to be difficult for children to understand, for instance: “Twist’N Turn Waist”, “lifelike bendable legs” and “posin’ stand”. Moreover, the description of the product is addressed to parents because they are informed of a price discount on the Barbie doll, as stated by the heading of the advertisement “payless – red hot special!”. Therefore, they are attracted into buying this new toy for their children. Perhaps, since in the description of the doll it is stated that Twiggy “wears all clothes created for Francie and Casey”, the advertisement wants to inform the public that the doll wears the same outfits other dolls do. Which is a benefit for parents that can buy another doll able to wear the same clothes that wear other dolls they already purchased for their children. As far as the kinesics is concerned, one of the participants makes direct eye contact with the public to create and establish an intimate relationship with the viewers, namely the Twiggy doll inside the packaging as if she wanted to convince the viewer into buying the product. Whereas the other drawing of the doll outside the packaging seems to be looking down, as if she was looking directly at a child’s eyes, showing

what she is capable of doing. The proxemics, namely the relationship in terms of space between the participants, does not show closeness between the sponsored products. The two drawings do not seem to be interacting with each other, inasmuch as the doll outside the box is turning her back on the one inside the box. This picture is attempting to sell a product, making it attractive and convenient for adults by indicating the discount prices available.

In the 1960s, Mattel started to become more inclusive towards different ethnicities, therefore in 1968, the toy company thought of introducing a black doll in support of equal rights. Indeed, the fourth figure presented is again a newspaper advertisement published in the *Simi Valley Star* of Simi Valley, California on Wednesday, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1968, which advertises one of the first black dolls Mattel produced, Christie, Barbie's friend. The first original doll came donning "a mod-inspired swimsuit with a short '60s hairstyle" (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>). However, in Figure 9 the doll advertised is Talking Christie, a sequel of the first Christie, hence her outfit is different from the one described before.



Figure 9: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 1968

As already seen with Figure 6 and 8, the newspaper advertisement does not comply with the ideal model proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), because the pieces of information are not organised in the margins. However, contrary to what was observed in Figure 6 and 8, in this instance the text is in the left part of the picture, where ideal or real given information are generally provided. Whilst the image representing Christie covers the right part of the picture, generally where ideal or real new information are conveyed. Nevertheless, the message is sent successfully to the public. The participant in this case is just the Barbie doll wearing what seems to be a mini-dress, although, due to the low image resolution it is not possible to see it clearly. She is standing in front of the viewers with her head turned towards the audience. Her eyes cannot be seen, but the position of her head may suggest that she is looking directly at the public. The process pictured here represents Christie, which is a real static object, standing right in front of the public might indicate that the doll was walking but has now stopped to stare at the viewers directly in the eyes. The main written verbal component visible in the picture is the name of this new Barbie model “Talking Christie”, in order to present the novelty to the public, again intriguing and enticing children into buying the new product. Christie is presented as “Barbies Friend” and then afterwards there is the description of what she is able to do and how she is featured, “Say 6 phrases”, “Real eyelashes” and “Bendable legs”. Lastly, yet importantly, the price is expressed in fine print. Looking at the kinesics, as said before, Christie is potentially making direct eye contact with the public establishing in this way an intimate relationship with the viewers. Since the only participant in this communicative situation is Christie, there cannot be inferred any kind of relationship in terms of space between the participants, namely the proxemics, the doll is just being presented to the public.

From 1959 on, Mattel released many diverse dolls resembling Barbie but with different skin shades, however, they were always just friends of Barbie; 1980 marks a momentous change for Mattel, which for the first time is marketing the first African American Barbie, alongside with the first Hispanic Barbie, the first diverse dolls named Barbie. In the same year, more than 40 different international Barbie dolls were released (<https://www.history.com/news/barbie-through-the-ages>). The newspaper



advertisement published in *The Los Angeles Times* of Los Angeles, California on Sunday, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1981, promotes Hispanic Barbie and many other Barbie dolls.

**“WORLD OF BARBIE®”**

**Western Barbie® and Her Horse “Dallas”**  
Gorgeous Barbie in her Western outfit has her very own palomino to love and take care of. If sold separately, 24.87  
**SAVE 4.99**  
**\$19<sup>88</sup>**

**Hispanic Barbie®** \$8<sup>88</sup>  
Glamorous! Poseable! Includes dress, shawl, jewelry and shoes #1292

**Golden Dreams Barbie®** \$9<sup>88</sup>  
The doll who glitters like gold comes with a 5-piece costume and hair accessories.

**My First Barbie®** \$5<sup>88</sup>  
Easy to dress, comes with a complete 4-piece outfit #1875

**Barbie® Dream Pool®** \$49<sup>88</sup>  
The ultimate pool is here! 2 ft. long, 2 ft. wide! Completely furnished with furniture, barbecue, poolside accessories and more! Dolls not included.

**Barbie™ Western Set** \$11<sup>88</sup>  
Vest, cuffs, belt, cowboy hat, spats, western string tie lets you dress up like a gorgeous Western star!

Charge-It. Use Your Visa Or Master Card.

**TOY WORLD**

7

Figure 10: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 1981

The picture again presents text and images as it happened with Figure 6, Figure 8 and Figure 9, however, in this advertisement the text is conspicuous as images are. This Figure matches with what was observed in Figure 6 and 8, namely the drawings are on the left part of the picture, where the ideal or real given information are to be found and Barbie text descriptions are on the right part of the picture, where ideal or real new information are. Therefore, the advertisement partially complies with the schematic

model of how an image is composed, proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). The six drawings are something ideal, however, they also represent a real possibility because they resemble actual Barbie dolls toy shops are selling to the public. In the lower left margin, a real information is given, since a young girl is represented playing with the “Barbie Dream Pool” set. Next to her, in the lower right margin, another real information is provided, namely the “Barbie Western Set” girls can buy in order to “dress up like a gorgeous Western star!” (as reported in the text in Figure 10). On the right side of the drawings there are very brief descriptions of each product sold, indicating also their selling price, inviting the viewers to buy the items. Perhaps, since the descriptions of the dolls are on the right part of the picture, they convey some pieces of new information for the public, which is not aware of the brand-new Barbie products. The participants in the communicative situation are the four dolls and the Barbie Western Set’s drawings, which are objects placed to create meaning, and the young girl’s drawing, a human living elements. The process comprises all the drawings, however, they are not doing something altogether, every participant is doing its own personal actions, without caring for the others. As already happened in Figure 6, Figure 8 and Figure 9, the verbal message present in the picture aims at advertising these Barbie products, indeed after providing a brief description of each product, the prices are reported, showing that they are extremely affordable items. For what concerns the register used, it is not very high, because it is meant to be read both by adults, who have to be attracted by the products and the affordable prices, and by children, who have to be enticed into wanting these toys. Looking at the attitudes of the participants toward the public, namely the kinesics, some of the participants make direct eye contact with the public, establishing therefore an intimate relationship with the viewers. Whereas other participants look in other directions, avoiding completely their audience. As far as the proxemics is concerned, as it can be deduced from the process explanation, the relationship between the six drawings is anything but close, it is clear though a first glance that the dolls, the young girl and the western set have nothing in common. There is no relationship between them, each one is minding their business as if the other participants were not present in the advertisement, they are posing different poses one from another and they are not interacting.

Since her first launch, Barbie takes on the most diverse professions, becoming a surgeon, a waitress, a veterinarian, a nurse and even a flight attendant, in fact since 1959, Barbie has had over 75 occupations (Scott, 2009: 34). In 1985, comes to the surface Day-to-Night Barbie, presented by Mattel as a CEO in order to celebrate “the workplace evolution of the era” and show little girls they were capable of doing everything they wanted. As reported by Mattel, “Day-to-Night Barbie could go from running the boardroom in her pink power suit to a fun night out on the town” (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>).



Figure 11: Day-to-Night Barbie packaging, 1985

As happened with Figure 7, this advertisement picture is a product presentation picture in which Kress and Van Leeuwen’s hypothetical model of representing an image is not essential to be looked at, however, the packaging in which Barbie is contained is worth analysing through Kress and Van Leeuwen’s general approach. Inside the box can be seen only one participant with human features, Barbie is in the centre of the picture and is wearing a smart office pink suit, as if she was ready to head out to her office.

All around the doll there are other objects that convey the idea of her being ready for her day to get started, for instance, a white and pink briefcase and a white and pink hat. This presentation of the product aims to send a particular message to the public, and especially to young girls, that they can become whoever they want, despite the fact that at the time some professions were only held by men, this doll gave women a hope, convincing them that they can aspire to be whatever they dream of being. However, the label at the bottom margin of the packaging only says “Day-to-Night Barbie”, there is no clear written indication of her exciting career as a CEO. More importance is given to the fact that her beautiful suit becomes a glamorous gown once she is done with her office day, as suggested by the two pictures placed on the surface of the packaging. In this occasion, the kinesics, depicts a fairly serious environment, Barbie represents an important figure for the bright city life, and she is ready to do her job. Anyway, the two images on the surface of the packaging emphasize on the doll’s ability to change from her business suit to a glamorous evening gown, thus detracting from the fact that she represents a key role within society. Here Barbie makes direct eye contact with the public to create and establish a relationship with the children who want to buy the product, namely young girls who aspire to become influential and prominent figures in the working world, because this packaging is meant to be displayed on shop shelves to make children interested in the product. Considering the proxemics between the animate and inanimate participants, Day-to-Night Barbie seems to be ready to live her life to her fullest in the city, working during the day and partying overnight.

More than any other brand in the world, Barbie has worked with fashion designers (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>). Mattel first fashion partnership ever, which the start of many fashion collaborations to come, was in 1985, when Oscar de la Renta collaborated with the toy company to create “a line of designer clothes for Barbie”. The newspaper article published in the *Newsday Suffolk Edition* of Melville, New York on Sunday, 24<sup>th</sup> February 1985 aims at promoting this partnership between Mattel and Oscar de la Renta. The line of designer clothes was introduced by the same stylist at a black-tie dinner at Waldorf-Astoria in 1985 and was constituted of four gowns, which debuted donned by four life-sized dolls, namely the actresses Cathy Lee Crosby, Genie Francis, Rebecca Holden, and former Miss America Suzette Charles.



Figure 12: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 1985

This newspaper article aims at presenting and promoting the partnership between Barbie and Oscar de la Renta and the pieces of information are not organised in the margins of the picture, therefore it does not comply with the framework proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996). The whole figures represented are placed in the centre of picture, without any distinction between what is ideal or real and what is already given or new. The four real figures represented are to be found in the left and right margins of the picture, and a very brief description of what they represent is provided to the audience at the bottom of the image. Notwithstanding, the promoting message conveyed by the figures is sent successfully to the viewers. The participants in this case are two women and two Barbie dolls, each of them is wearing an elegant gown designed by Oscar de la Renta in honour of Barbie, who “like other women of stature, [...] has her own designer”. The two women, as reported in the description are “former Miss America Suzette Charles, left, and actress Cathy Lee Crosby” modelling grown-up sized renditions of Oscar’s creations, whilst in the centre of the picture can be seen two Barbie dolls, both of them wearing Oscar’s gowns. The figures are all standing in front of the viewers as if they wanted to be admired. The process pictured here represents the two Barbie dolls, which are static objects, standing right in front of the public staring happily at the viewers directly in the eyes, whilst Suzette Charles and Cathy Lee Cosby are staring towards the left of the picture, because they are modelling in order to present the new collection. The only written verbal component visible is

the description of what the images represent, positioned at the bottom of the picture underneath the four figures to present the novelty to the public. As said before, in this instance according to the kinesics, the two Barbie dolls make direct eye contact with the public establishing in this way an intimate relationship with the viewers. Whereas the two women look into other directions, without minding the viewers. Looking at the proxemics, in this case, a certain closeness between the two Barbie dolls is shown, they seem to be friends going out together, enjoying their elegant night. Suzette Charles and Cathy Lee Cosby, instead, are just promoting the collection, presenting the brand-new outfits to the audience in order to bring “runway fun to young fashion lovers, sparking their imaginations and creativity” (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>).

In 1992, Mattel introduced the first Barbie running for president ever. This “first President Barbie came with an American-themed dress for an inaugural ball and a red suit for her duties in the Oval Office” (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>). Again, she was conceived to “inspire girls to believe they can be anything—including leader of the free world”. The newspaper witty article published in *The Montgomery Advertiser* of Montgomery, Alabama on Sunday, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1992, presents and promotes this new aspirational doll as a candidate running for presidency.



Figure 13: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 1992

This newspaper presentation picture, attached to the article, does not comply with the ideal model proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), indeed it depicts the scene of Barbie becoming president of the United States without organizing the information in the margins, thus without following the schematic representation of image composition. Indeed, the entire picture aims at presenting the public this brand-new Barbie doll, representing therefore something new, from left to right, both in the upper and lower parts of the image, notwithstanding sending successfully the message to the viewers. President Barbie greeting her fellow citizens from the White House lawn after being elected represents the main participant in the communicative situation. She is wearing an elegant “tailored business suit” (as reported in Figure 13), with long neat hair. The process, namely what is happening in the scene, presents the Barbie doll waving happily to the public as if she had just won the elections. Even in this instance, the written verbal component is found under the picture saying, “America’s favorite doll has emerged on the campaign scene; the new ‘President Barbie’ doll comes with this tailored business suit”, clearly stating Barbie’s popularity among the public and perfection in everything, to the point of leading a country. This strategy is implemented to promote this new product Mattel is selling, to the public, thus inviting young girls to buy this new doll. For what concerns the attitude of the participant towards the audience, Barbie smiles and makes direct eye contact with the public to create and establish an intimate relationship with the viewers, indeed she is getting in touch almost physically with the public. Generally, the whole picture presents and promotes the novelty to the public, intriguing and enticing children into buying the new product.

In the 1990s a new Barbie model appeared on the scene, Totally Hair Barbie, with over 10 million dolls sold worldwide, she is in Guinness World Records (<https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/best-selling-barbie-doll>) as the best-selling Barbie doll ever. The newspaper advertisement analysed was published on *The Palm Beach Post* of West Palm Beach, Florida on Sunday, 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992, in the section named “gift guide advertising section”.

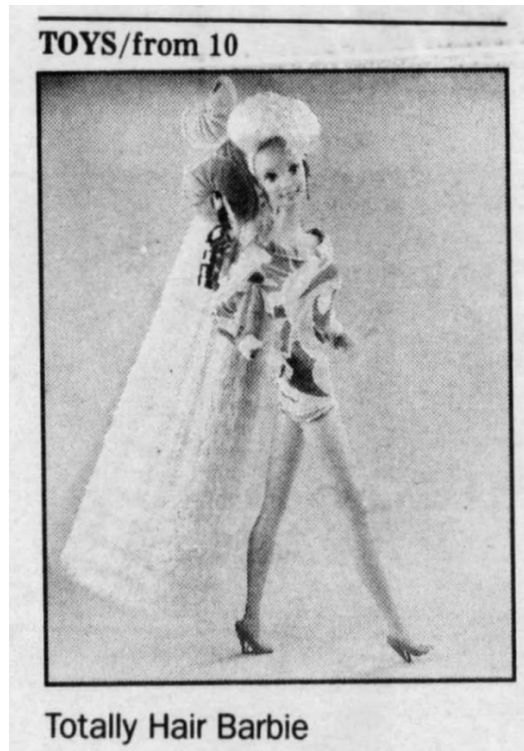


Figure 14: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 1992

This newspaper advertisement does not comply with the ideal model proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), because the pieces of information are not organised in the margins, the whole picture represents something new, from left to right, both in the upper and lower parts of the image, nevertheless the message is sent successfully to the public. Under the picture, the name of this new Barbie model is clearly visible, and the whole picture shows the novelty to the public, intriguing and enticing children into asking their parents for this new product. The participant in this case constitutes of one Totally Hair Barbie, dressed up in a mini-dresses and with long blonde hair touching her toes arranged in a half pulled back hairstyle. The process pictured here represents the Barbie doll, depicted as if she was happily walking somewhere, but constantly looking at her viewers. The only written verbal component is the name of this new Barbie model “Totally Hair Barbie”, positioned in the left margin of the picture, right under the doll, to let children know about this new product Mattel is selling in every toy shop, inviting young girls to buy this new doll. Evidently, this was a strategic advertising move, as sales of this specific Barbie model skyrocketed. The article underneath the picture describes what comes with the doll in the packaging, it says that the doll “comes with five different hair accessorises and DEP Styling Gel”.



Looking at the kinesics, Barbie smiles and makes direct eye contact with the public to create and establish an intimate relationship with the viewers, because she is getting in touch almost physically with the public.

As reported in Section 3.1.3 Barbie Relevance Throughout Times, the 2000s marked a very tough time for both Mattel Toy Company and the Barbie doll, the market changed and Mattel was harshly criticised for not representing the diversity of women around the world, in their physiques and colours. Mattel had to keep up with times changing and, in order to stay on the side of little girls, the toy company had to find sustainable models to prove its influence in inspiring young girls (<https://27esimaora.corriere.it/articolo/da-doris-day-a-ava-duvernay-cosi-barbie-si-e-nutrita-di-cinema/>). Indeed, in 2015, the toy company launched the limited-edition Barbie Sheroes, which “celebrated female heroes who inspire girls by breaking boundaries and expanding the possibilities for women everywhere” (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>). The newspaper article published in *Tulsa World* of Tulsa, Oklahoma on Wednesday, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2015, promotes these one-of-a-kind lookalike dolls, which were created for each of the Shero honourees and were auctioned off at the Power of Women Luncheon held in New York City in April 2015.



Figure 15: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 2015

As seen in Figure 13 and Figure 14, the picture does not comply with the framework to investigate static picture proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) because the pieces of information are displayed in the entire picture, they are not organised in the margins, nevertheless the intention of showing the novelty to the public is successful. The whole picture represents something new, these one-of-a-kind lookalike dolls honouring six female icons who have pushed boundaries and expanded opportunities for women. The participants in this picture are these six Barbie Shero dolls, as reported by the description underneath the figure, namely: the actress and animal welfare activist Emmy Rossum, the country singer-actress Trisha Yearwood (as suggested by the microphone next to her), the film director Ava DuVernay (as the director's chair conveys), the 5-year-old fashion designer Sydney "Mayhem" Keiser, the Broadway star Kristin Chenoweth and the Lucky magazine editor-in-chief Eva Chen (as the magazine in her hand hints). All of them were chosen by Mattel because of their ability to break barriers expanding possibilities for women and empower the younger generation. All six of them are standing in front of the viewers as in a group picture of six friends, all donning completely different outfits, matching with their personalities and their own personal style. They are in the centre of the picture, posing in front of the public; as can be noted from a close observation of Figure 15, there are some elements which help the audience in imagining what the profession of each doll is. The process pictured here represents three of the six Barbie dolls staring at the viewers directly in the eyes, creating in this way a connection with the audience, meanwhile the other three have their eyes pointed to the left of the picture. The only written elements in the picture, as already mentioned is the description of the participants in the image, which helps the viewer identifying which powerful female the dolls resemble. As far as the relationship in terms of space between each participant is concerned, the six Barbies seem to be fairly happy, enjoying their time together because they all have a big bright smile on their face. The aim to present young girls this special edition conceived to inspire them is achieved. In fact Barbie Sheroes cannot be found in stores, thus cannot be purchased by the public, they were only designed "to honour and encourage powerful female role models who are leaving a legacy for the next generation of glass ceiling breakers", as Evelyn Mazzocco, general manager of Barbie, stated in her interview for *Tulsa World* (2015).

Since in the 2000s, Barbie's unique shapes and features begin to be considered too exaggerated and restrictive, providing the public a negative image of women, only concentrated on aesthetic and beauty (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>), Mattel was able to listen and understand to the new needs of the public, and began a major rebranding operation to expand its horizons. Hence, in 2015 the Fashionistas line is launched, bringing a major innovation in Barbie's history, offering Barbie models closer to the reality of their audience. Indeed, as many as 7 different skin tones, 24 hairstyles, 22 eye colours and 3 sizes: petit, tall and curvy are represented. With the Fashionistas family, Mattel finally opened the doors to inclusivity, which is why, in 2015 the magazine TIME (<https://time.com/barbie-new-body-cover-story/>) dedicated its cover page to this revolutionary Barbie line. The article related to this cover page was titled "*Barbie's Got a New Barbie*" by Eliana Dockterman. This turning point with Barbie's features was so impactful and everyone was pleasantly surprised. For the very first time the doll was changing her stereotyped image as a blonde, tall and slim but shapely woman, welcoming and praising diversity so that the whole public could feel included.



Figure 16: Time cover page, 2015

The cover page picture presents a dialog line, almost as if the Barbie doll was directly addressing the public asking whether now the controversy over her stereotypical figure might finally cease, since Mattel has embraced all diversity by making major changes in its production line. In this case, the picture partially complies with the schematic representation proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) of how an image is composed, because in the left part of the picture a completely new information is given, the new shaped Barbie's profile can be clearly seen in the foreground. However, she is easily recognizable since she is always represented with her classical features of blue eyes, fair skin and blonde hair. On the other hand, in the right side of the figure an ideal message is written, the direct question posed by Barbie, "Now can we stop talking about my body?", covers the whole right side of the cover page. The only one participant in the communicative situation is Barbie, clearly fed up with the continuous criticism she has been receiving from years and asking for an approval. The kinesics here depicts a profoundly serious environment, Barbie is depicted in profile not looking directly to the audience and not establishing a relationship with it. She seems to be tired of the controversies and the judgements over her body shape and skin tone arisen in the previous years. Even if Barbie is represented alone, the proxemics conveyed might indicate her will to go on with her life, finally in peace, being accepted by everyone because her features became more inclusive.

In 2018, in a bid to promote "empowering role models from the past and present to inspire more girls" (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>), Mattel launched a campaign, called #MoreRoleModels. This campaign was conceived to honour extraordinary women from all around the world on the occasion of International Women's Day. The newspaper advertisement published in the *Asbury Park Press* of Asbury Park, New Jersey on Sunday, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2018, promotes these feminine role models in a wave of empowerment feminism, because as Lisa McKnight, Mattel's senior vice president, affirmed, you cannot be what you cannot see.



Figure 17: Barbie newspaper advertisement, 2018

This presentation picture does not comply with the schematic representation model of image composition proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), indeed the pieces of information are displayed from left to right in the whole picture, not caring about their organization into margins. The whole picture shows the new Barbie line released and this intention of showing the public the novelty to arise interest in parents and children is successfully achieved. In this picture, the participants are twelve Barbie dolls, each of them different in some features, depicting “modern-day role models from around the world”. From left to right, the picture presents: Vicky Mart ın Berrocal (Spanish entrepreneur and fashion designer), Xiaotong Guan, (Chinese actress and philanthropist), Bindi Irwin (Australian conservationist), Sara Gama (Italian soccer player), Chloe Kim (American snowboarding champion), Martyna Wojciechowska (Polish journalist), Nicola Adams OBE (British boxing champion), Yuan Yuan Tan (Chinese prima ballerina), Patty Jenkins, (American filmmaker), H el ene Darroze (French world-renowned chef), Hui Ruoqi (Chinese volleyball champion) and Leyla Piedayesh (German designer and entrepreneur). They are all dressed in totally different outfits, giving the audience an idea of what is the specific personality of each doll and thus highlighting what their talent is. They are all posing together in front of the public, indeed the process pictured here is again very static as if it was a group picture. The verbal component of the message consists only of the description of what is represented in the picture, “Mattel’s new line includes sports figures such as snowboarder Chloe Kim and Mexican artist Frida Kahlo”, namely a more specific explanation of what the audience can see. However, Chloe Kim is present in the picture whereas the renowned artist Frida Kahlo cannot be seen, but the in the newspaper

article she is mentioned, as well as the famed pilot Amelia Earhart and the NASA mathematician Katherine Johnson, which are the main subjects represented in another campaign launched in the same year, the Inspiring Women doll line. As far as the kinesics is concerned, all the Barbie dolls seem to be very happy because they are smiling. Practically all of them are staring at the viewers directly in the eyes, establishing in this way a relationship with them. From this point of view of the proxemics, it can be felt a general closeness between all the Barbie dolls, coexisting and celebrating physical diversity along with a broader spectrum of occupation.

#### **4.2 General remarks**

The purpose of this visual analysis was to gain better understanding on how Barbie image has changed throughout the years, through the analysis of newspaper advertisements and Barbie packaging pictures. Notwithstanding the controversies, Barbie was able to stay relevant throughout the decades without losing her appeal as both fashion trend-setter and aspirational model for inspiring young girls (Talbot, 2006: 76). Since her first debut, Barbie has always been one of the main toy children played with, this was because of her appearance as an adult woman, which gave girls the opportunity to imagine their future, believing they were able to do anything they wanted. From the analysis of the material proposed in this study it can be easily seen that for many years, from Barbie's first presentation to the world in 1959 until the early 2000s, the doll achieved her aim to let women and young girls feel included in society, giving voice to their rights to be considered citizens on an equal footing with men. However, the fact of bringing to the public an image of women too stereotyped, with time arose several controversies on her role in children everyday life, because she could not be inclusive and representative of all the variety present in the world. This is exactly why Mattel set to work and implemented all possible strategies to ensure that every person in the world could recognise themselves and feel represented in a Barbie doll.

In all the twelve images presented in the visual analysis, the goal to promote each Barbie doll line is successfully achieved. From the newspaper advertisements to the arrangement inside the packaging of the dolls, Mattel has always managed to arouse interest in the public, keeping this product at the top sales for all these years.

Therefore, all the pictures presented are meant to advertise the new product released by the toy company to the general public despite the fact that the twelve figures do not totally comply with the ideal model of representing static images. Nevertheless, even if Kress and Van Leeuwen's model is not always fully followed, the message is successfully conveyed to the public and especially to children, giving Barbie the chance to make play increasingly inclusive, by depicting a wide a range of body shapes, skin tones, varying disabilities and important role models. In addition to representing over 250 careers and inspiring playsets, creating endless storytelling possibilities (<https://shop.mattel.com/collections/barbie>). In fact, as affirmed by Mattel's Executive Vice President and Global Head of Barbie and Dolls, Lisa McKnight, as quoted by People (<https://people.com/human-interest/new-barbie-fashionista-line-includes-first-barbie-with-behind-the-ear-hearing-aids/>), it is "important for kids to see themselves reflected in product and to encourage play with dolls that don't resemble them to help them understand and celebrate the importance of inclusion".

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Skipper: Cluster Analysis**

#### **5.1 Qualitative Analysis**

The cluster analysis conducted in this Chapter, focuses its attention on Barbie's first little sister, Skipper, analysing how her figure changed and developed throughout times, since her first debut in 1964. Indeed, through the visual analysis of ten different television commercials produced over the years, it will be possible to observe an evolution concerning her physical appearance and the role model she displays in children's play. Thus, Skipper represents the case study under analysis in the present research, reporting the results obtained through the visual analysis conducted using Baldry and Thibault's (2006) framework for cluster analysis. The clusters in which the television commercial are divided aim at highlight this process of evolution, trying also to detect the marketing strategies implemented by Mattel to promote Skipper to the public, hence carefully observing the doll's physical and behavioural changes according to cultural and societal development towards a version of the doll increasingly independent from Barbie figure.

##### **5.1.1 Skipper First Commercial**

As stated in Section 3.2.1 Skipper Origins, Skipper first debuted in 1964 as Barbie's little eight-year-old sister. In this first commercial, a kind feminine adult voice over a classical merry background music of flutes and piano, names and shows the public other dolls Mattel already released, stating "You all met Mattel's famous Barbie, Ken, Midge and Alan, but you haven't met Skipper!" (from minute 00:01 to minute 00:07). Thus, Skipper is presented as Barbie's little sister with beautiful long hair to brush, as it can be seen in Figure 18, which refers to minute 00:12.





Figure 18: Skipper first appearance, 1964.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBJ2zO-tl58>

This first cluster presents Skipper doll for the first time ever, she is the main character of this section, wearing a t-shirt and a hairband on her head. The other participant in the scene is the hand of the little girl present in the commercial, who holds a small hairbrush and is busy combing the doll's hair. Therefore, the process sees the little girl interacting with the doll by playing with her hair. The pictures are in black-and-white, since at the time television was broadcasted only black-and-white, thus the colours cannot be seen. The register is informal, the language used is simplified and is employed to promote something concrete, hence the new Skipper doll, with the aim of engaging children's attention into this new product and the joyful classical music in the background conveys the idea of a relaxed atmosphere in which the womanly voice describes calmly Skipper's features. Skipper's attitude towards the public establishes an intimate relationship with the viewers, since she makes direct eye contact with her audience. For what concerns the relationship in terms of space with the little girl, the two participants seem to be remarkably close, the girl might represent a motherly figure caring for the doll by gently combing her hair.

Then the commercial continues adding new pieces of information about Skipper, affirming that she is "exciting" (as stated by the presenter in minute 00:16) and that she is smaller than Barbie, but because of that she has her "very own fabulous fashion", with clothes made to look exactly like Barbie's, as supported by Figure 18.1, which refers to minute 00:20.



Figure 18.1: Skipper clothes resembling Barbie clothes, 1964.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBJ2zO-tl58>

In this scene, Skipper is dressed in an elegant coat with a matching hat, on her right there is Barbie, donning the same outfit as Skipper. In this section in particular, Barbie cannot be seen, only her hand is visible in the right margin of the picture. Again, the participants in the communicative event are Skipper and the girl's hand. This time the girl is holding a crutch with the aim of showing the public how Skipper clothes resemble perfectly those of Barbie. Skipper is always looking directly at the audience's eyes, thus establishing an intimate relationship. In this case, the proxemics between the participants is not as close as it was before, the girl here is used just to promote the brand-new doll.

Subsequently, Skipper is showed wearing many different outfits for many different occasions, as it is stated in minute 00:25 "Skipper loves to go everywhere with Barbie", from ballet rehearsals, to skating along with Ken, to carnival parties. Towards the end of the commercial, the woman presenting provides some suggestions on where to buy Skipper along with her news fashions, and to pay attention to find the tag when buying this doll, in order to buy the original Skipper, as it can be seen in Figure 18.2, referring to minute 00:52.



Figure 18.2: Genuine Skipper, 1964.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBJ2zO-tl58>

This last cluster advertises the “genuine Skipper” (as reported in minute 00:53), showing in the foreground Skipper donning a beautiful sleeveless dress and a large hat, with a tag on her left arm, to guarantee her authenticity. The girl in the background can be perfectly seen, she is wearing a light colour shirt and a headband, displaying with her hand Skipper’s authenticity tag. Here again Skipper is making eye contact with the viewers, thus establishing a relationship with them. The little girl, instead, is looking at the doll smiling as if she was really happy by playing with Skipper. The proxemics in this instance does not show a relationship between the participants, they are not interacting with one another, the girl is just happily staring at the novelty, suggesting every little girl in possess of a Skipper doll, might be extremely happy. The soundscape of this commercial consists of a happy classical background music throughout the all video. The spoken verbal component of the message is conveyed by a female presenter throughout the whole commercial, using simplified and informal language to be easily understood by children. In fact the activity of brushing Skipper’s beautiful long hair is repeated twice, once in cluster referring to 00:12 minutes, and the other at minute 00:45, hence tempting young girls into wanting this new product. The selling information provided are directed to parents who might want to buy this new doll for their children. All these elements contribute to creating something that engages the attention of young children, specifically young girls at that time, and promotes the brand-new Skipper.

### 5.1.2 Growing Up Skipper

The most controversial Skipper doll ever produce by Mattel was the Growing Up Skipper model, as previously reported in Section 3.2 History of Skipper, 3.2.2 Controversies, her debut in 1975 led to much debate. As stated by Paris (1999: 66), her box promised that with a crank of the arm, girls could "make her grow from a young girl to a teenager in seconds!", leading the doll to change from cute to curvy. Hence Barbie's little eight-year-old sister grew into a teenager just by turning her arm. The television commercial begins showing two young girls playing with Skipper and a young feminine voice over a flutes background music stating that this doll model is "two dolls in one" (at minute 00:03). In Figure 19, referred to minute 00:16, one of the little girls playing with the doll is turning her arm to show her development.



Figure 19: Growing Up Skipper and the ruler, 1975.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x26JWEZO3CE>

This first cluster shows Skipper's evolution from little girl to "a tall slender teenage girl" (as stated from minute 00:09 to 00:12), the ruler on her left clearly indicates the different heights of the doll, before and after turning her arm. The main character here is Skipper, wearing a short red and white skirt with a red tank top, her features continue to resemble Barbie's, namely long blond hair and blue eyes. The only human element present is the girl's hand for activating the process of growth. In this scene the

participants depict a playtime moment, in which the two girls are making the doll grow to be able to create new scenarios and new adventures with this new doll. At that time colour television broadcasting was introduced, hence television commercials like this began being broadcasted in colour resulting in becoming more attractive for children, making them interested in a specific product.

When Skipper turns into a teenager her outfit changes, and in minute 00:19, *Growing Up Skipper* is presented as a teenage girl wearing more sober clothes, thus an ankle-length version of her previous skirt. Indeed the two girls have changed her outfit according to her new age.



Figure 19.1: *Growing Up Skipper* as a teenager, 1975.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x26JWEZO3CE>

In this scene Skipper is donning her “glamorous teenage skirt” (reference to Figure 19.1) and her “fetching blue scarf” (Paris, 1999: 66) around her neck. The faces of the two girls who are playing with the doll can be easily identified, one reflected in the mirror as Skipper and the other watching the scene from behind the mirror. They are both smiling, hence suggesting they are having fun while playing with this two-in-one doll, creating a close relationship with her. As far as the kinesics is concerned, in this frame nobody is looking at the public, nor the doll nor the girls, maybe suggesting that this new doll model is too interesting to take one's eyes off her. The doll is not even

looking at herself through the mirror, she has her eyes turned to the left, as if she was indifferent to everything and everyone, just like a teenager. The kind voice presenting and the music in the background create a relaxing atmosphere for children who can listen to what is said and understand. Hence, the language used is simplified and the register is informal in order to attract children who can understand what it is said.

### 5.1.3 Hot Stuff Skipper

In 1984, Mattel introduced Hot Stuff Skipper, this doll model was dressed in sports clothing and was presented together with Barbie dressed in the same way. At the beginning of the commercial, the usual kind feminine adult voice presents this new model, and at minute 00:04, she is represented seated on the ground next to Barbie.



Figure 20: Hot Stuff Skipper and Barbie, 1984.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJLHcYfTRwg>

In this initial cluster Barbie and Skipper are the main participants in the communicative event, they are donning colourful workout clothes, as if they were starring in the 1983 American romantic drama dance film, *Flashdance*. As seen in previous commercials, a girl's hand is playing with the dolls by lifting one of Skipper's legs as if she was exercising with her sister Barbie. Barbie is looking directly at the viewers, whereas Skipper is looking on the right of the figure, presumably at the girl who is playing with her. The two dolls can be easily distinguished, besides their features resembling, because, even if seated, Skipper is smaller than Barbie and does not present much



breast. Moreover, her flat feet suggest her as Skipper, as reported in Section 3.2.1 Skipper Origins. In this scene the soundscape consists of a low background music, to allow the woman voice to present the product to the audience.

Then the background music becomes louder and overcomes the voice, a cheerful song starts playing and a woman sings: “we girls love having lots of clothes” (from minute 00:05 to minute 00:08). Hence, a chorus composed of many women voices describes Skipper’s outfits always by singing a song. Towards the end of the commercial, at minute 00:24 until the end, the woman voice presenting comes back and provides more details over what is contained in the Hot Stuff Skipper packaging box.



Figure 20.1: Hot Stuff Skipper and Barbie, 1984.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJLHcYfTRwg>

This last cluster shows Skipper seated on the ground, wearing a hot pink leotard, a red mini-skirt, a pair of white tights, light-blue leg warmers and a pair of trainers. Moreover, all around her there are all the objects and clothes that come with the doll, namely: a pair of yellow sweatpants, a light-blue headband, a pair of flat yellow ballet shoes, a pair of pink “mirror glasses that shine” (as defined in minute 00:18), a pair of pink shorts, a light-blue sweatshirt and two hair-brushes. For what concerns Skipper’s attitude towards the public, her head is turned towards the audience, thus she is establishing an intimate relationship with the public by looking directly into the viewers’ eyes. According to the proxemics, there is no clear relationship between the doll and all the objects surrounding her, she is just depicted with her mini bright colour

wardrobe. Hence, the many assorted colours of her clothes are used to attract children. In this cluster the background music fades to let the woman explain some important details, however it is always present even if it is not as loud as before. The woman voice promotes the new product to children with the aim of attracting their attention and enticing them into asking for a new doll, the music in the background contributes in creating something that engages children. From this moment on, Skipper will be always presented through joyful songs describing what she is doing and how she is portrayed, the women voices presenting will be increasingly less.

#### **5.1.4 Teen Fun Skipper**

From an eight-year-old girl, Skipper turns steadily into a teenager, indeed in 1987 Mattel released Teen Fun Skipper. However, the commercial examined in this analysis dates back to 1988, because the resolution quality of the image was better. In this commercial many young girls portrayed as if they were holding a parade for Skipper in a green park, affirm that Skipper is the “teen of the year” (minute 00:04). They are marching in the park carrying a banner that reports the inscription “Skipper” and lots of balloons, thus in this commercial Skipper is presented by a crowd of screaming girls. Then the new Teen Fun Skippers are presented to the public by three young girls at minute 00:07, as referred in Figure 21.



Figure 21: Teen Fun Skippers, 1988.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DIYLBbJsHs>



The cluster pictures six participants, three Skipper dolls and three young girls. The three young girls present the new dolls by shouting “Three Skippers!”, they seem to be extremely excited by these Mattel’s brand-new products. These three Skippers are, Cheerleader Teen Skipper, Party Teen Skipper and Workout Teen Skipper (from left to right). The dolls are just represented still, seated or standing, ready to play with the girls. Both dolls and girls are wearing stylish clothes, thus the atmosphere is the one of a party because there are confetti all over the table next to the dolls and the soundscape consists of a dynamic dancing music. Moreover, the background is in quite dark colours and neon lights as if they were all in a disco club for a night of fun all together. Looking at the kinesics represented in this frame, the three girls and the three dolls are all making eye contact with the audience to create and establish an intimate relationship with the public, because they are almost getting in touch physically with the viewers. Concerning the proxemics, the three girls seem to be remarkably close one another, smiling happily because they are playing together with their new dolls. Cheerleader Teen Skipper, Party Teen Skipper and Workout Teen Skipper are not represented as if they were moving, neither as if they were interacting with each other, they are just waiting for the three girls to play with them.

Then the commercial continues with the voice of a young lady singing a description of the three Teen Fun Skippers, from minute 00:09 to minute 00:23. For each version of the doll, it is described the main activity she performs and what her features are, repeating again, at minute 00:23, that she is “the teen of the year”. The Teen Fun Skipper dolls are said to have pompons they can shake, to love playing majorettes, working out with weights, wearing party dresses and sharing ice creams. Finally, from minute 00:24 until the end of the commercial, the usual feminine adult voice enunciates the names of the three versions of the Skipper doll, in order to promote them to the public, stating, moreover, that they are not sold together.



Figure 21.1: Cheerleader Teen Skipper, Party Teen Skipper and Workout Teen Skipper, 1988.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DIYLBbJsHs>

In this instance, the three dolls are presented to the public seated on the ground, surrounded by all the objects that come with them whenever buying the packaging in the toy stores, for instance: cheerleader pompoms, a megaphone, a tray with ice cream cups, weights and hairbrushes. The objects and the clothes pictured are all very bright and coloured, thus engaging children's attention into these products. The dolls are represented with similar features; however they have three different hairstyles: Cheerleader Teen Skipper has two light brown pigtails, Party Teen Skipper has long blonde hair and a side ponytail and Workout Teen Skipper has big curly blond hair. They are easily identified since their names are clearly stated in big white capital letters under each of them. The three Teen Fun Skippers are represented as if they were waiting for someone to play with them, they are looking directly at the public's eyes to establish a relationship with the children who are viewing the commercial enticing them into asking their parents to buy one of them. As happened in the preceding cluster (Figure 21), the three dolls are not interacting with each other even if they are seated close to one another. Indeed, as already mentioned, they do not need to interact between them because they are just waiting for a child to play with them. In this section, the soundscape consists of a cheerful background melody which does not overpower the voice of the young happy lady describing the three dolls.

### 5.1.5 Skipper Babysitter

Over the years Skipper grew more and more, in fact, in 1990 she embarked for the first time on the babysitting career with her best friend Courtney, the two girls were considered big enough to take care of other babies. This television commercial starts with a group of young girls dancing over a hip-hop music on a white staircase. Meanwhile, a young voice-over asks the viewers: “Guess what we are doing after school... Babysitting!”. This job is seen as something fun from these girls who are dancing, since one of them at minute 00:04 affirms “That’s cool!”. Then the two dolls are revealed to the public, the blonde Skipper and the brunette Courtney (referenced at minute 00:09, Figure 22)



Figure 22: Skipper and her friend Courtney babysitting, 1990.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pyQfpcU3s>

In the communicative situation described in this frame there are four participants, Skipper, Courtney and the two babies the dolls are holding. They are seated on what could be a pillow or anything else that could be soft. Here the background music changes completely and turns into a lullaby, the woman singing narrates what the two dolls are doing, namely they are rocking the two babies into sleep. Skipper and Courtney look very elegant, they are donning beautiful colourful clothes and ribbons tied in bows on their heads. Besides, the two little babies are dressed in bright colours,

one of them is even holding a baby toy in his/her hand. All four are making eye contact with the public, hence creating a relationship with the viewers. The spoken component of the message is clearly stated in a simplified language to let children understand what is happening. According to the relationship in terms of space between the participants, Skipper and Courtney seem to be remarkably close, they are rocking the babies they are babysitting together, they seem also extremely happy because they are both brightly smiling. The two little babies are smiling too, they do not seem inclined to fall asleep within a short period of time. This cluster aims at presenting Skipper involved in a new activity that requires maturity because it is full of many responsibilities.

Subsequently the commercial shows the babies wrapped in their hot pink blankets, being fed through their baby bottles. The soundscape is always the one of a lullaby and sometimes typical satisfied infant sounds can be heard. When the babies are finally sleeping two girls whisper together about what they should do now, the background music changes again into a more dynamic melody and the song sings “Skipper puts on her music and we rock-a-by too”. This is precisely what happens in Figure 22, referred to minute 00:22.



Figure 22.1: Skipper and Courtney dancing, 1990.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pyQfcpU3s>

The main characters in this frame are Skipper and Courtney represented as if they were dancing together. Two hands, probably of the two girls that were whispering before, are holding them standing up. In the background people can hear little girls' squeals

and laughter, indicating that the girls playing with the two dolls are having a lot of fun. According to the kinesics, Skipper and Courtney are not looking at the public, they are too busy dancing and having fun together, therefore they do not have time to establish a relationship with the public. As already mentioned in the visual analysis of Figure 22, the dolls are wearing beautiful dresses, more precisely Skipper has a white and pink cropped t-shirt matching with a white and pink skirt with flat pink shoes and a pink ribbon tied in a bow over her head. Whilst Courtney has a white, pink and green T-shirt and a white and pink skirt with flat green shoes and two green ribbons tied in two bows over her head. In order to listen to their music, they are also provided with a pink stereo, hold by Skipper and a green recorder with headphones, worn by Courtney. As far as the proxemics is concerned, Skipper and Courtney seem to be really best friends, they are working together and whereas they are working, they enjoy their time dancing to some music. This will turn into Skipper's main job in the long run, indeed today Mattel presents the doll as a wonderful babysitter.

Right at the end of the commercial, a feminine voice-over providing purchasing information and promoting a new male doll, namely Kevin, Skipper's boyfriend. Thus supporting the fact that Skipper is growing up, because right now she even has a boyfriend. The woman voice tries to entice children into buying this male doll showing him next to Skipper and stating "Don't they look cute together?"

### **5.1.6 Pet Pals Skipper**

In 1992, Skipper grows up and is increasingly entering the world of work, she wants to become independent earning money to live her own life, therefore she tries also a career as a dog-sitter. In this television commercial she is presented by two girls, one of them is holding the doll and presents her to the public saying that Skipper takes puppies for a walk everywhere. The music that is playing in the background is cheerful and very dynamic, the blonde Skipper is shown in Figure 23, displaying minute 00:04, walking around in a beautiful summer day with a light blue sky.



Figure 23: Skipper dog-sitter, 1992.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZMjnJySRaI>

This cluster shows Skipper walking in what it seems to be a park, while holding a dog. They both constitute the main participants in the communicative situation. However, there is another participant, which is the arm of a girl who is holding the doll to make her walk around. Skipper is donning flat pink shoes, a pair of yellow cycling shorts, pink zebra print mini-skirt and t-shirt and a pink ribbon tied in a bow over her head. The dog she is holding is white and has a pink bow over its head and a pink collar around its neck, it seems to belong to the maltase dog breed. In this frame Skipper is looking directly at the public's eyes, thus establishing an intimate relationship with the viewers, whereas the dog is looking towards the right side of the picture. For what concerns the relationship between these two participants, they seem to have a close connection, Skipper is smiling and the dog seems to be at ease in her arms. Probably it got tired from the walk with Skipper and now it is resting. The cheerful background melody becomes a song and the voices of many girls singing narrate what happens in the commercial.

Then the commercial continues and Skipper's best friend Courtney comes up saying that she lost her kitty, everything is clearly explained through the cheerful song the girls' chorus is singing. Thus, Skipper tries to find the cat and in this second cluster referred to minute 00:16, Skipper found the kitty over a tree and tries to rescue it.



Figure 23.1: Skipper rescuing a cat, 1992.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZMjnJySRaI>

Here Skipper and the brown cat are the main characters in the communicative event. The doll is represented stretched out towards a tree branch, arms raised, with the intention of saving Courtney's cat. Skipper is donning the same pink zebra print t-shirt as in the preceding cluster (Figure 23) and the cat has a pink ribbon around its neck. In the lower right corner it can be glimpsed a girl's arm holding the doll towards the tree, whereas in the upper right corner two silhouettes can be seen, one is Courtney and the other is a male doll, probably Kevin, Skipper's boyfriend. Besides the fact that the cat is stuck on the tree, the background music is not dramatic at all, instead, the cheerful song continues happily singing "Pet Pal Skipper really saves the day" (from minute 00:16 to minute 00:17). Clearly in this situation, Skipper is not making eye contact with the viewers, because she is busy rescuing the kitten from the tree, indeed she is staring at the cat, which is turning its back to the public. Concerning the relationship between the participant, the doll is really close to the cat, trying to reach it on the tree branch to get it back to its owner, hence Skipper is trying to help a friend in need, maybe suggesting the children who are watching that is important to help anyone who needs help.

The last cluster analysed for this commercial refers to minute 00:24 and presents Skipper with all her pet pals to the public. The joyful music in the background



continues playing and the girls' chorus suggests that with Skipper and her friends it is "Totally fun" (at minute 00:24).



Figure 23.2: Skipper and her Pet Pals, 1992.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZMjnJySRaI>

The participants in this communicative event are many, there are three dolls, namely Skipper, a male doll who might be Skipper's boyfriend, Kevin, and Courtney (from left to right). Moreover, there are their pet pals, which are two dogs and a cat, all of them are provided with all the objects their owners need in order to take care of them. In this frame, there could be also seen very clearly the two girls playing with the dolls, the one on the top left margin is smiling towards the other while playing and the other on the lower right corner is smiling looking at Skipper's dog drinking from its bowl. They are all depicted in what seems to be a garden, Skipper and Courtney are sat on the ground and Kevin is standing between them. The image is very colourful, the dolls' clothes present animal prints in bright colours, namely Skipper wears her pink zebra print outfit, Kevin dons his orange tiger-print suit and Courtney is dressed in her cow-print skirt. Additionally, this time, over the doll's t-shirt it can be seen another shirt with a picture of their pals, which could not be seen in the previous clusters because it was always covered. The two girls are represented happy while playing with the many objects the three dog-sitters came with, indeed there are kennels, food bowls and balls for the pets to play with. Concerning the kinesics, the only participant who is looking



at the viewers directly in the eyes is Kevin, Skipper and Courtney are staring to the left side of the picture and the two girls are not minding the public since they are playing together. Hence they are not establishing a proper relationship with the public. In this instance the proxemics represents a typical playtime moment between two girls, they set their dolls ready for their job as dog walkers, indeed the three dolls appear as motionless as statues, while the smiling girls are ready to play together with this recent version of Skipper.

### 5.1.7 Teen Skipper

As already mentioned, Skipper is not a little girl anymore, she is represented more and more like a teenager, increasingly resembling Barbie's features. In this period she even gets her own phone (Phone Fun Skipper, 1996 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5TRXYppNS4>). In this commercial she is presented with a small breast and with an extremely small waistline, totally different from her first eight-year-old versions. The commercial starts with two girls dancing over a dynamic hip-hop music, the background is not something real, it is the drawing of a colourful park. Then Skipper makes her entrance, running after a butterfly on the song's words "So cool so new, Teen Skipper! That's you!" (from minute 00:02 to minute 00:06) and a group of girls' voices singing. However the cluster under analysis refers to minute 00:08, when Skipper is entirely presented to the public.



Figure 24: Teen Skipper, 1997.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nF1RJPCiVw4>

This initial cluster depicts Skipper, who is swishing her hair because she just turned towards the public, in order to look at her viewers right in the eyes. She is wearing a trendy and cool teenage outfit, with a cropped pink and light blue t-shirt, a pair of high-waist jeans with a white belt. She is just standing in front of the public so that anyone could see her properly. Her long blonde straight hair seem to be blowing in the wind even her lock of hair tied in a braid and decorated with a flower clip. The doll stands out from the circular yellow background framed by and orange square. The soundscape consists of the same lively music from the beginning of the commercial. As previously mentioned, the doll's attitude towards the public tries to create an intimate relationship with the children watching the commercial, indeed Skipper makes direct eye contact with them. In this frame she appears to be completely alone thus there cannot be any kind of relationship in terms of space between the participants, the only relationship is the one with the public watching.

The background music continues and the song sang by the girls' chorus describes and shows Skipper's features, namely her trendy outfit, including her pink sneakers and sunglasses. Then something more is shown, the fact that under her trousers she is wearing a swimsuit and that she can have tattoos. Therefore, towards the end of the commercial, at minute 00:23, Skipper is depicted with tattoos on her arms.



Figure 24.1: Two versions of Teen Skipper, 1997.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nF1RJPCiVw4>

In the communicative situation depicted in this cluster there are four main characters, namely two dolls a brunette and a blonde one (from left to right), two different models of Teen Skipper, and two girls, a blonde and a brunette (always from left to right). The two girls are playing with the two dolls, applying glittering stickers on the Skippers and on themselves just as if they were real tattoos. Since they are playing, the girls are happily smiling to each other, pointing to where they had just applied the stickers to their Skippers, they also have some stickers on their cheeks. The blond girl dressed in pink is holding the brunette Skipper whereas the brunette girls donning a light blue shirt is holding the blonde Skipper. Both dolls are wearing a cropped t-shirt and a pair of high-waist jeans with a belt. The background of the picture is a rainbow of colours, hence it is not clear where the four participants are. The soundscape in this case is the same as in the previous cluster, namely a lively hip-hop melody and a chorus of girls' voices singing. As far as the attitude of the participant toward the public is concerned, the two dolls are making direct eye contact with the public, maybe trying to engage the viewers establishing an intimate relationship with them. Whilst the two girls are just looking at each other busy playing together. Hence, the proxemics here shows a degree of understanding between the two girls playing, they are having fun and they are smiling admiring Skippers' new tattoos.

At the end the song sang in the commercial repeats that Teen Skipper is “So cool so new”, thus promoting this version of the doll to the children who are watching, moreover the girls singing assert decisively at minute 00:24 that they love this new Skipper, maybe suggesting that every child possessing this doll would love her.

### **5.1.8 Fashion Party Teen Skipper**

In the 2000s Skipper becomes a fully-fledged teenager, Mattel released Fashion Party Teen Skipper, a new version of Skipper provided with make-up tools in order to get ready for her night out with her friends. The commercial starts with a feminine voice over a dancing music saying “Teen on the scene” (at minute 00:01) and three girls presenting the dolls to the public. Then a song starts playing and as always a chorus of girls' voices starts describing what these dolls do to have fun, and at minute 00:10 a verse of the song says “wearing trendy make-up” suggesting it is something fun.



Figure 25: Fashion Party Teen Skipper, 2000.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsAs7j4dgS4>

This scene shows one next to the other, the blonde Skipper, increasingly resembling Barbie features, and a blonde girl. They look terribly similar, both having blonde hair half tidied in a curly side ponytail and they are both putting lipstick on their lips. They are represented over a hot pink background, therefore there is no indication or reference for a space collocation. Both of them are making direct eye contact with the viewers, thus creating an intimate relationship with the public and attracting children's attention. The proxemics in this instance does not show a real closeness between the participants, however both the doll and the girl seem really happy about doing their make-up together. The intention for this commercial is to engage the attention of the children who are watching television showing them something they have never seen before, a doll provided with make-up that also children could wear.

The television commercial continues displaying different disco looks and outfits Skipper can wear to go partying with her friends. The background keeps changing colours, as if the doll was already in the disco. Then the three girls from the beginning of the commercial come back at minute 00:21, each of them holding in their hand one of the three different versions of Fashion Party Teen Skipper.



Figure 25.1: Fashion Party Teen Skipper, 2000.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsAs7j4dgS4>

Here the three girls are all dressed in pink outfits, however they are donning different pieces of clothing, namely the first girl to the left is wearing a pink dress, the second girl in the centre of the image is wearing a pair of trousers and a t-shirt and the last girl on the right, who is the same girl that was doing her make-up with Skipper in the previous cluster analysis, is dressed with another pink dress. They are all walking towards the public, holding their dolls as if they wanted to give one to the child watching the commercial. Skipper is represented in many different versions, unfortunately, due to the poor resolution quality of the image, they cannot be seen properly, however from what it can be discerned, one of the dolls, the one on the right is featured with dark skin for the first time ever. Indeed, at the time, the 2000s, as already mentioned in Section 3.1.3 Barbie Relevance Throughout Times, Mattel was harshly criticized for not being representative and inclusive of all the different ethnicities around the world (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>), thus introducing also a Skipper doll in a different skin tone would be a strong marketing strategy. The soundscape in this section consists of the same dancing music as the beginning to indicate that the dolls are ready to hang out to “make the fashion scene”, as reported in minute 00:18. For what concerns the kinesics, all the participants in the picture have their eyes turned towards the viewers, they are all making eye contact with the public, establishing in this way an intimate relationship with the viewers. The three happy girls are modelling with their new dolls

in their hands, ready to play together, letting the three Skipper dolls party together and having fun. This commercial is trying to engage children's attention on a new inclusive product, which provides more skin tones in Skipper's image.

### 5.1.9 Barbie & Her Sisters Dolls

Around 2010, Skipper changes her main features which made her Barbie's little copy for all these years, namely her blond hair. In this commercial Skipper is not so little anymore, there are two more sister Mattel thought of introducing, Stacie and Chelsea, both of them are littler than Skipper, and their features resemble the ones of Barbie just as it once happened with the little Skipper at the beginning, in 1964. In this cluster referring to minute 00:02, all Barbie's sisters are presented to the public.



Figure 26: Barbie & Her Sisters, 2010.

Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo\\_DnADP\\_Cg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo_DnADP_Cg)

The main participants in the communicative situation are Barbie and her sisters, they are presented as if they were four photos placed on a pink photo album page. They are not doing anything, just staring in front of them smiling happily. Barbie is represented through her clichéd image of a beautiful blonde-hair blue-eyes woman, those features are also present in Stacie and Chelsea, notwithstanding their faces possess more childish traits. Skipper, instead, is represented differently from her usual, with long black hair adorned with a pink shadow. This would represent Skipper's main feature from this moment on, her blonde hair is no longer the typical representation of Barbie's



little sister. The soundscape from the beginning of the commercial consists of a cheerful and dynamic song stating from the beginning “Introducing Barbie and her sisters”, and then the four dolls are presented to the public through their photos. They are all making eye contact with the viewers establishing in this way a relationship with the public. The photos are not still, because the dolls hair are blowing in the wind, therefore they could be identified as small videos. The four sisters do not seem to have a relationship between them, because they are just represented through four images, inserted together in an album page. However later in the commercial it can be seen that their relationship is really close.

Subsequently, the four dolls are presented to the public one by one, highlighting their most important skill or characteristic. Skipper is identified as a “Techie Cool”, hence as a tech-savvy, an expert in the technological field, as reported in minute 00:05.



Figure 26.1: New Skipper, 2010.

Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo\\_DnADP\\_Cg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo_DnADP_Cg)

This section presents this new version of Skipper, namely a teenage girl with long dark hair. The picture is divided into two parts, the left part shows Skipper skating along with Chelsea. Skipper is on her skateboard listening to music through her MP3 earphones and Chelsea is riding her push scooter. Both of them are wearing a colourful helmet for safety reasons. The right part of the picture illustrates a closer view over Skipper, who is wearing a light blue helmet a pink and blue striped t-shirt with white

sleeves and a bow drawn in the front and a pair of red-purple-coloured cycling shorts. She has her light pink earphones plugged in her ears, connected to a pink MP3. The background of both the two parts of the image represents a beachy landscape, with palms and a cycle path for the dolls to ride. The soundscape consists of the cheerful and dynamic melody of the previous cluster, in which the names of the dolls are sang and their characteristics are just enunciated. The language used is rather simplified with very few specific terms such as “Techie Cool”, so that children could understand the typical features of the different dolls and find the one with whom feeling more represented. According to the attitudes of the participants towards the public, in the left part of the image Skipper and Chelsea are looking in front of them because they are skating around and they need to pay attention on what they are doing. Whereas, in the right part of the image Skipper is making eye contact with the viewers, thus creating and establishing an intimate relationship with the public, in order to attract children and entice them into wanting this product. The proxemics can be identified only in the left part of the picture, because the two participants are skating together, they are represented as two happy sisters, having fun together on a beautiful sunny day. Continuing with the commercial, the four dolls are shown doing many different activities together, namely sharing the vanity and doing pillow fights before going to sleep.

The following television commercials over the four sisters show them involved in many different adventures, for instance: going camping (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9CYFEWqAKeI>), going to the amusement park, going to a rock concert (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v71S6XGA7l4>), walking together on a horse ride (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yd4qRBpnkh0>) and going on a cruise ship ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A5xG\\_xLN6c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A5xG_xLN6c)). Supporting the fact that they are very close and their relationship is the one of a very good friendship over their sisterhood.

#### **5.1.10 Barbie Skipper Babysitters - Stroller and Potty Training Playsets**

As already mentioned in the previous cluster analysis in Section 5.1.9 Barbie & Her Sisters Dolls, around 2010 Skipper changes her typical features and acquires her own personal features, which made her break away from the Barbie image she had always



resembled. Her distinctive and unique feature therefore lies in her dark hair with a purple lock. In this 2018 commercial, Skipper is represented as what has become her main occupation, namely babysitting, as referenced at minute 00:02.



Figure 27: Skipper strolling to the park, 2018.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN6rX8Wb-yI>

The main participants in this section are Skipper and the toddler in the stroller. The commercial starts with a dynamic music and a chorus of girls singing what Skipper is doing, namely “strolling to the park and having fun”. Skipper is donning a grey tank top with a stamp, a jeans skirt and a pair of light pink shoes, she is walking the child she babysits in what seems to be the drawing of a park in the background. Hence, the landscape is imaginary considering also the purple tree drawn on the left of the picture, however it resembles a colourful imaginative park. Skipper’s typical features are clearly seen, she has her new dark hair with a purple lock in the front and her flat feet are wearing those flat light pink trainers. The toddler in the stroller is holding her pink stuffed bear and has a baby bottle on the stroller tray, in case she was thirsty. The other participant in the communicative situation is the hand of a girl holding the doll and making her walk. The kinesics of the participants sees the baby making eye contact with the viewers and creating a relationship with the public, whilst Skipper is looking in front of her, towards the right of the picture, in the direction in which she is walking. The relationship in terms of space between the two dolls suggests a close relationship, Skipper is taking care of the baby because her parents are busy, therefore they need to

get along well for Skipper to perform her job at the best of her possibilities. This job of babysitting is very important since Skipper needs to demonstrate she is mature enough for the many responsibilities this job requires to tackle with.

The commercial then continues enunciating, always through the song sang by the girl's voiceovers, the many activities Skipper performs during her babysitting job, namely "taking care of kids" (minute 00:06) helping them in their "potty time" (minute 00:08). And towards the end of the commercial, precisely at minute 00:14, all the different playsets are illustrated to the public by the usual adult feminine voice.



Figure 27.1: Skipper Babysitter playsets, 2018.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN6rX8Wb-yI>

This frame appears at the end of the commercial, where the voice of a young woman over the same dynamic music of the beginning of the commercial provides parents with pieces of information about the playsets toy stores are selling. The three playsets depicted are from left to right, the stroller playset provided with all the accessories needed to walk around the park, the high chair playset for toddlers to eat and the potty training playset that is equipped with sink, potty with flushing feature to help Skipper potty train toddler. In each playset, Skipper is wearing different pieces of clothing, showing that she has many different possibilities. The main participant in this communicative situation is the huge Barbie inscription written over a white background, behind the three playsets. In front of it, Skipper is represented in the three playtime situations, in each of them, the dolls are looking directly at the public's eyes,

thus creating an intimate relationship with the children who are viewing the commercial. All the three situations show a remarkably close relationship between Skipper and the toddlers she is babysitting, they seem to get along well, they are all happily smiling. As reported by Mattel in the description underneath the video, the aim of these playsets is to help children being imaginative while playing, creating many different scenarios with all the colourful accessorises provided with the sets. Thus this commercial aims at engaging children’s attention, enticing them into wanting one of these playsets.

At the end of the commercial Mattel wants to let children know that they are capable of doing anything they want in life, hence at minute 00:20, the toy company enunciates its world-wide famous slogan, “You can be anything”.

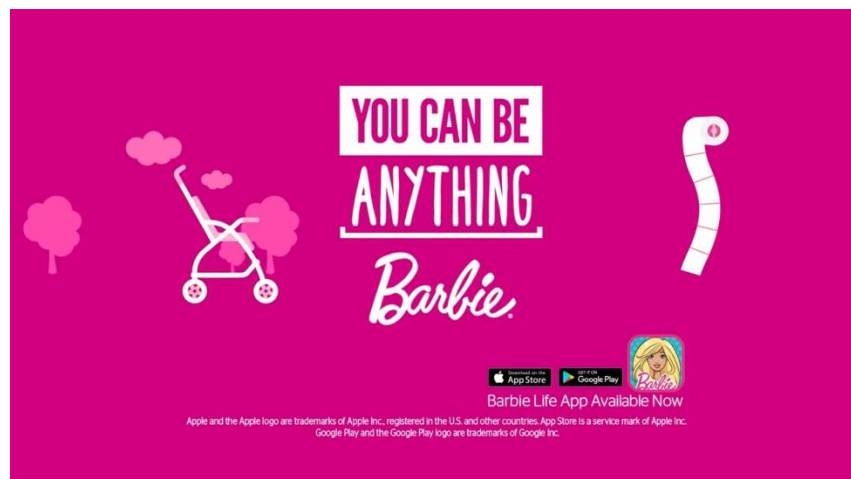


Figure 27.2: You can be anything, 2018.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fN6rX8Wb-yI>

This last section presents Mattel’s slogan as main participant in the communicative situation. The main feminine voice of the preceding cluster reads the sentence aloud to the public, its intention is to inspire all young children watching the commercial into imagining themselves as anything they want. The slogan is written in big white capital letters right in the centre of the image, over a clichéd hot pink background. Barbie’s brand name is clearly visible under the slogan, stating very clearly which doll’s brand name is it sponsored. On the sides of the sentence, there are the drawings of a stroller and a toilet paper roll, which refer to Skipper’s playsets advertised in the commercial.

## 5.2 General Remarks

The purpose of this cluster analysis was to examine in great detail the figure of Skipper, Barbie's little sister, through ten television commercials Mattel published throughout the years. This analysis was worth making because Skipper could be identified as the doll who grew along times, thus undergoing many changes concerning her representation. Namely, she grew from being an eight-year-old girl with the physique and the body shapes of a little girl, to becoming a young independent woman who works as a babysitter and has her own typical and peculiar features. Indeed the doll's body shape at her first debut in 1964, was totally different from Barbie's slender figure, she was visibly littler in height, presenting childish traits and of course not curvy at all, even if she always resembled Barbie in some of her features such as the blonde hair and the blue eyes. Whereas in recent years she grew in age, becoming higher and curvier, featured with dark hair with a purple shadow. Her typical trait of possessing flat feet, however, has been a constant from her first launch until present days. Therefore, Skipper is an emblem of development from infancy to young adulthood, from being a miniature copy of Barbie to becoming a young independent woman who has her own job. Nevertheless, as far as the jobs she performs and has performed are concerned, Skipper has always performed stereotypically female occupations such as dog-sitting and babysitting. She has never been represented as a president, an astronaut or an architect, as was the case with Barbie. Skipper just went on many different adventures, did a lot of things with her friends but was not capable of being anything like Barbie.

The analysis conducted over the sample commercials, has been of great assistance in regard of examining the evolution and the development of this precise figure from when firstly introduced until the early 2000s. However, notwithstanding her evolution, she always remained Barbie's little sister. In all the ten commercials presented in this cluster analysis, Mattel's intention was to promote the different versions of Skipper to the public, mostly targeting children. Hence, the use of music and songs is fundamental for children who watch television daily and are constantly listening to the same commercials, because the melodies of the songs sang attract children, who are able to record them in their minds and to remember them for a long time. In fact, the repetitions of some small little sentences in the songs sang in the

commercials result in being extremely easy to learn. Moreover, the use of bright colours for the dolls' representation and the settings catches children's attention as well as the simplified language and the informal register which are easy for children to understand. Thus, the promoting intention is successfully achieved, succeeding in sending the message conveyed. From the doll's commercial recorded, Mattel has always managed to arouse interest in the public, supporting the selling rates of the doll even when promoting the most controversial Skipper doll ever, Growing Up Skipper. Therefore, all the clusters and the sections presented and analysed implementing Baldry and Thibault's (2006) framework for cluster analysis, depicted Mattel's intention to advertise to the general public every new product released. Even though all the cluster examined present different characteristics when analysing their visual aspects, the message is successfully conveyed to the public and especially to parents when the recorded voices provided purchasing pieces of information, and to children when they made use of engaging and repetitive music and songs to attract their attention. All the elements previously mentioned, then, are put together to present and promote new products, and moreover, they contribute to create something that engages the attention of young children.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Bratz vs Barbie: Visual Analysis**

#### **6.1 Qualitative Analysis**

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Section 3.3.1 Bratz Origins, in 2001 a new fashion icon begins to make its way into the world of children's toys; the innovative, irreverent and avant-garde in style Bratz (<https://marketing-espresso.com/barbie-compie-64-anni-come-cambiata-nel-tempo/>). The present visual analysis aims at highlight the principal differences between the figures of Barbie and Bratz, in order to expose the divergences in values and ideals the two different dolls embody for the general public and in particular for the little ones.

The analysis presented in this Chapter focuses on a newspaper page published in *The Sacramento Bee* of Sacramento, California on Saturday, 8<sup>th</sup> December 2001. This newspaper page is titled “*It’s a doll’s world*” (as reported in Figure 28) and was printed by the toy store Toys R Us, with the purpose of promoting and boosting sales in the run-up to Christmas. Here many dolls’ advertisements can be found to entice especially young girls to request some of these toys as Christmas presents. However, what is interesting to examine here is how Barbie and Bratz are advertised to the public, what features and what characteristics the two different toy companies focus on. Therefore, Figure 28 is analysed by dividing it into two parts and examining them one at a time. Firstly, the upper part of the picture, which concerns the brand-new doll, recently released on the market by Isaac Larian's M.G.A. Entertainment, the Bratz (6.1.1 Bratz Advertisement Qualitative Analysis) is carefully investigated. Secondly, the lower part, which advertises the worldwide famous Mattel’s Barbie doll in many different nuances (6.1.2 Barbie Advertisement Qualitative Analysis) is thoroughly inspected. Overall, the newspaper page presents its content by stating very clearly in the centre of the page what it is about, in order to quell any kind of doubt.

**Bratz**  
 Mix 'n match 4 outfits to make 20 styles... plus a Bratzpack, funky shoes & more. Ages 3-up.  
 MGA Entertainment  
 242937 242953  
 Items not sold separately online.  
 .com value pak #456759  
 Includes 4 dolls.  
 Online special \$59.99

**Key Charm Cuties Mansion**  
 Fold-up house rolls on wheels to go with you. Open it to make jewelry!  
 Ages 6-up.  
 Spin Master  
 Online item # 285407

**What's Her Face Doll Gift Set**  
 Give her unique expressions & faces with stamper markers & glitter stickers. Ages 3-up.  
 Mattel  
 Online item #s  
 Caucasian 298471  
 African-American 309578

**Jam 'n Glam Barbie**  
 "Flip" each doll's hairstyle into wild colors... plus accessories! Ages 3-up. Dolls sold separately.  
 Mattel  
 Online item #s  
 Christie 197206  
 Barbie 197776  
 Teresa 197241

**Radio-Control Barbie Corvette**  
 Ages 3-up.  
 Doll sold separately.  
 Mattel  
 Online item # 197869

**Barbie Star Skater**  
 She twirls and spins like a real skater! Ages 3-up.  
 Mattel  
 Asian 390092  
 Online item # Caucasian 390073

**It's a doll's world!**

**14.99** your choice

**12.99** your choice

**19.99** reg. 29.99  
**Save \$10**

**29.99**

**26.99** Exclusive

**14.99** ea. **New! for 2002**

shop online at [www.toysrus.com](http://www.toysrus.com)

Sale prices valid December 9 - 15, 2001

Figure 28: Barbie and Bratz newspaper advertisement, 2001

### 6.1.1 Bratz Advertisement Qualitative Analysis



Figure 29: Barbie and Bratz newspaper advertisement, 2001 – Bratz advertisement detail

In Figure 29, two brand-new Bratz dolls are advertised through a very brief description of the products pictured on the left. Notwithstanding, the advertisement still partially complies with Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) schematic model of representing static images. As a matter of facts, in the right part of the picture a completely new information is provided, namely the name and the description of the new products M.G.A. Entertainment is selling to the public. These pieces of information presented might be analysed as new ideal information delivered to temp children and advise parents on what are the suggestions for Christmas 2001. Whilst, in the left part of the image there are the two dolls, which can be identified as something real and already given, since Bratz were released at the beginning of 2001, thus in December they should be widely known by the general public. Both Bratz dolls are non-living objects,



however they represent a real possibility because they are the actual dolls toy stores are selling to young girls. The two dolls represent the main participants in the communicative situation, they are dressing as if they were going on a mountain trip, with stylish après-ski boots, long high-waist trousers, cropped jumpers, backpacks and pom-pom beanies. Hence, the process represented here suggests that the dolls are ready to set off on an adventure together. As mentioned earlier, the only written verbal component present in the picture is the description of what is represented, namely “Mix ‘n match 4 outfits to make 20 styles... plus a Bratzpack, funky shoes and more”. Most probably, it aims at speaking directly to the adult public, showing how, just by buying one Bratz doll, children are provided with many different play sets. Moreover, the description indicates both the minimum age children must be to play with the dolls (“Ages 3-up”) and their price, hinting also at some online offers “Includes 4 dolls, Online specials \$59.99”, so as to entice parents to buy this novelty for their children’s Christmas presents.

As far as kinesics is concerned, namely the attitudes of the participants towards the public (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996), just one of the two participants makes direct eye contact with the public thus creating and establishing an intimate relationship with the viewers. One of her arms is raised waving to the audience as if she wanted to ask the viewers to enjoy her friend and her in their mountain trip. In the meantime, the other doll towards the right side of the page, as if she was overthinking about all the things she needs to bring with her for the trip. In general, both dolls give the impression of being girls with an attitude, sassy and irreverent. As far as the relationship in terms of space between the participants is concerned, the two dolls do not show clear closeness between them, however, since they seem to be ready for a trip together people could hypothesize, they are two close friends who are getting ready for their departure. The two sponsored products do not seem to be interacting with each other in a happy relationship, they are not smiling, possibly because of their innate sassy attitude which characterizes the Bratz brand. The advertisement comprehensive with the two dolls and the description, is attempting to promote these products to the public, even trying to make them attractive and convenient for parents by indicating the selling prices and the online offers.

## 6.1.2 Barbie Advertisement Qualitative Analysis

**WORLD'S** **29<sup>99</sup>**

**12<sup>99</sup>** your choice

Teresa

Christie

Barbie

Barbie

Barbie

**26<sup>99</sup>** exclusive

shop online at [www.toysrus.com](http://www.toysrus.com)

**What's Her Face Doll Gift Set**  
Give her unique expressions & faces with stamper markers & glitter stickers. Ages 3-up.  
Mattel  
Online item #'s  
Caucasian 298471  
African-American 309578

**Jam 'n Glam Barbie**  
"Flip" each doll's hairstyle into wild colors... plus accessories! Ages 3-up.  
Dolls sold separately.  
Mattel  
Online item #'s  
Christie 197206  
Barbie 197176  
Teresa 197241

**Radio-Control Barbie Corvette**  
Ages 3-up.  
Doll sold separately.  
Mattel  
Online item # 197869

**Barbie Star Skater**  
She twirls and spins like a real skater! Ages 3-up.  
Mattel  
Asian 390092  
Online item #  
Caucasian 390073

**New! for 2002**  
**14<sup>99</sup>** ea.

Sale prices valid December 9 - 15, 2001 US

Figure 30: Barbie and Bratz newspaper advertisement, 2001 – Barbie advertisement detail

As already seen in Section 6.1.1, also in this occasion different dolls are advertised through a very brief description, however the lower part of the newspaper page in Figure 28 focuses on many different Barbie dolls with the intention of promoting them to the public thus incentivising Christmas' sells. In Figure 30, the products pictured in the image surround the written text, nevertheless, the advertisement still partially complies with the ideal model to approach static images proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), because the pieces of information are not properly organised in the margins. Indeed, in the left part of the picture there is something the public already knows, namely the photos depicting four different Barbie models. They all represent a real given information, since they are Barbie dolls already known to the public. Instead, in the right side of the picture there is a completely new information, the real representations of a new Barbie model, Barbie Star Skater, as suggested by the alert "New! For 2002". The text description is in the centre of all those subjects, notwithstanding, the message is sent successfully to the public. The participant in this case are six Barbies, wearing many different outfits, the three dolls in the top left

corner, Teresa, Christie and Barbie, are dressed as if there were heading to a party, wearing high heels, silver-plated trousers and skirts and criss-cross neck tops. Only Teresa is wearing a fur coat. Underneath, in the lower left corner, there is Barbie seated in her Barbie Corvette ready to set off for new adventures, donning a beautiful hat to protect herself from the sun.

In the right-hand side of the picture there are two representations of the new Barbie Star Skater, both of them donning skating suit and ice skates, however they differ from each other because of their hair, Barbie has a high ponytail, whereas the other version of Barbie Star Skater, which is presented in a smaller picture, has a short bob. The process pictured here represents three different settings, Teresa, Christie and Barbie, Jam 'n Glam Barbie, seem to be happy and ready to go partying together with their original wild colour hairstyles. Instead, Barbie in her beautiful car gives a more relaxed vibe, she seem comfortable in her own vehicle, self-confident about her driving skills. Lastly, Barbie Star Skaters are happy in their cute skating outfits, waving at the public as if they were leaving the rink, once their performance was over. As already disclosed, the main written verbal component visible in the picture is the description of the Barbie models advertised from the newspaper: "Jam 'n Glam Barbie", "Radio-Control Barbie Corvette" and "Barbie Star Skater". All of them, after being named, provide a very brief description of what these products are in order to inform the parent who want to buy these toys as presents for their children and to entice children into asking them to Santa. Indeed, in each description it is indicated the minimum age children must be to play with these dolls ("Ages 3-up"). The descriptions aim at promoting already existing Barbie products and advertising brand-new ones. Moreover, next to each of the dolls or of the products, the price is expressed in fine print, to inform parents about the cost for each product advertised.

As far as the kinesics is concerned, the three Jam 'n Glam Barbies do not look directly in the public's eyes, they seem minding their own business, whilst the Barbie seated in the Corvette and the two Barbie Star Skaters make direct eye contact with the public, establishing in this way an intimate relationship with the viewers. The two Barbie Skaters, as stated above, are also waving at their audience thus establishing a friendship's relation with the parents and the children watching them. As for proxemics, namely the relationship in terms of space between each participant (Kress

and Van Leeuwen, 1996), the three different play settings, suggest different kind of relationships. The Jam 'n Glam Barbies seem to have a pretty close relationship since they are three happy friends getting ready to go to a party together. Barbie's relationship with her Corvette seems to be happy and unbothered, because she is smiling while driving her own car towards unknown destinations. Finally, the two Barbie Skaters seem to have a more professional relationship, they are two separate entities that deal more with the public than dealing with each other.

## **6.2 General Remarks**

This visual analysis has compared and contrasted the figures of two of the top fashion dolls sold worldwide, Barbie and Bratz. In spite of much controversy from parents and toyshops and in spite of the lawsuits they have faced, Mattel's Barbie and M.G.A. Entertainment's Bratz, have been able to stay relevant throughout the years. Always keeping on top of sales among the children toys' field, since their first launch, respectively Barbie in 1959 and Bratz in 2001, until present days (Talbot, 2006: 74). Therefore, the analysis has examined the main differences in the representation of these feminine role models, in order to expose the divergences in terms of values and ideals that the two dolls embody for the general public and in particular for children.

Through the examination of the newspaper page advertisements published by *The Sacramento Bee* in December 2001, it is quite clear how Barbie and Bratz represent different ideals of femininity and uplift two extremely different representations of women in terms of physical appearance. All of which is expressed through different strategies implied by Mattel and M.G.A. Entertainment in marketing and advertising the two dolls. Namely, emphasizing distinct characteristics and features of the products, according to what is their aim and ideal for the two toy companies. On the one hand, Bratz dolls are represented just as their slogan conveys, "The girls with a passion for fashion" (Talbot, 2006: 76), in fact the two dolls advertised are represented wearing fashionable clothes, being glamorous even when getting ready for a skiing week in the mountains. Never losing their innate sassy nature, as expressed by their attitudes and their gaze. On the other hand, also the many Barbies are advertised so as claimed by their slogan, "You can be anything" (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>), giving young girls the hope and the

opportunity to imagine themselves becoming anything they want to be in their future, making them believe they are able to do anything they want in their life (<https://corporate.mattel.com/brand-portfolio/barbie>). For instance, Barbie driving her own car conveys an idea of independence and self-confidence in setting off in her solo trip, or Barbie Star Skater conveys the values of commitment and sacrifice in order to become a world-famous ice skater. Thus, giving girls, and any person who identifies with Barbie, the possibility of imagining themselves as strong and independent, capable of anything in life. For what concerns the different quantity of dolls advertised, it is important to remember that at the time the newspaper page was published, in 2001, Barbie dolls were widely known from the general public, since they debuted in 1959, whereas Bratz dolls were still considered a novelty as their launch dates back to July 2001 (Talbot, 2006: 74). However, notwithstanding their different physical representations from one another, Bratz and Barbie were able to have a great appeal in the public maintaining their sales at high rates throughout the years (Talbot, 2006: 74).

In the two figure details presented in this second visual analysis, the intention to promote each the different dolls enticing children into dreaming and asking for them as Christmas presents, is successfully achieved. The newspaper advertisements produced by Mattel and M.G.A. Entertainment managed to arouse interest in parents, also by describing in a brief but effective manner the principal doll products toyshops were stocked. Despite the fact that the newspaper advertisements just partially follow the model proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) for representing static images, the message is successfully conveyed to the public and especially to children.

## CONCLUSIONS

In order to help children to achieve their full potential, parents, teachers and caregivers must provide them a relaxed and enjoying safe environment (Shodmonova and Panjiyeva, 2023: 925). The activities of playing games and playing with toys promote the creation of a safe and relaxed environment which hugely contribute to children's "learning, creativity, problem solving, personality development, mental health, cultural development and moral development" (Önder, 2018: 149). Although, too frequently in the learning process, games are considered as childish, distracting and a waste of time from teachers and even children (Balboni, 2019: 195). Indeed, children need to make time to play games and play with toys as much as they need to make time for formal education (Önder, 2018: 149). This chronological overview over the worldwide Barbie doll's evolution overtime, showed how Mattel was able to keep up with the evolving times and managed to listen to and respect what its audience needed. In fact, despite being often criticized for promoting gender stereotypes and for her unrealistic physical proportions, Barbie evolved with the times to reflect social and cultural changes, being able to stay relevant throughout the years. Since the early 2000s, Mattel Toy Company underwent a major rebranding to annihilate the ongoing controversies by readapting and revolutionising Barbie's too classical features, which created unreachable beauty ideals, trying to be more inclusive and representative of the entire world, indeed, Barbie's strength lies precisely in her power of representation. It is for this reason that, as claimed by Lisa McKnight, the company is "committed to continuing to introduce dolls featuring a range of skin tones, body types and disabilities to reflect the diversity kids see in the world around them" (<https://people.com/human-interest/new-barbie-fashionista-line-includes-first-barbie-with-behind-the-ear-hearing-aids/>).

Concerning Skipper analysis, her figure might represent the only Mattel's doll model who was able to grow from being an eight-year-old girl to an independent teenager who managed to depart from the image of Barbie, becoming almost an autonomous and clearly recognisable entity due to her peculiar features. As reported by Paris (1999: 70), "in this doll, the inherently displeasing limitations of Barbie's anatomy had been partially transcended. Skipper's plastic body could be reimagined

as a kind of plasticity, an openness to various possibilities.” Indeed, her image evolved from being Barbie faithful little copy to becoming a young woman ready to enter in the working world as a babysitter. Thus, because of her undeniable development, Skipper managed to being always identified as Barbie’s little sister though being able to create her own identity characterised by her remarkable features, namely her flat feet and her punkish hairstyle, which detached her from the stereotyped Barbie image. Notwithstanding the fact that the only professions in which she is and was involved are just stereotypically female occupations, namely dog-sitter and babysitter. Hence, Skipper does not spread the same ideal of empowerment as Barbie does, inducing young children into reaching their full potential.

According to Bratz and Barbie comparison, even if the sample analysed is very narrow it can be clearly seen how the two fashion dolls are related with two different ideals of women and therefore send a different message to their public, in particular to children. In fact, Barbie leading motto, “You can be anything” (<https://www.barbiemedia.com/timeline.html>) as clearly stated in the general remarks of Chapter Six, *Bratz vs Barbie: Visual Analysis*, suggests children that they can aspire to become whatever and whoever they want, because Barbie aims at inspiring the limitless potential in every girl (<https://corporate.mattel.com/brand-portfolio/barbie>). Thus, proving children that there are no barriers in imagining themselves and in what they can become in their future. Whereas Bratz’s slogan affirms that these dolls are “The girls with a passion for fashion” (Talbot, 2006: 76), hence clearly indicating that those dolls are just interested in fashion, and therefore they are fashionable in every situation. Despite the fact that Bratz doll line is believed to appeal young children because racial difference was made clearly visible from the beginning by M.G.A Entertainment (as reported in Section 3.3.1 *Bratz Origins*), thus representing race “as another kind of “accessory” that signifies “hipness,” without incurring the actual costs and consequences of real-world racial signification” (Guerrero, 2008: 190). However, Bratz do not uplift any aspirational power or quality, they are not represented in the working field gaining money to conduct their lives. As reported by Guerrero (2008: 188), they are “shaping the ways in which today’s generation of little girls are creating an image of themselves in relation to femininity, consumerism, and difference”.

There are at least four potential limitations concerning the results of this study.

A first limitation concerns the narrowness of the material examined. Indeed, the use of only a sample of twelve newspaper advertisements and packaging presentation pictures in *Barbie: Visual Analysis*, in order to describe Barbie's evolution and journey of development in the relationship with the general public, and more specifically with young children, both boys and girls, from the beginning to the present days. The narrowness of the sample analysed also concerns the material examined in *Skipper: Cluster Analysis*, which investigated only ten television commercials advertising the different doll models throughout the years from 1964 to 2018, and mostly the newspaper advertisement page investigated in *Bratz vs Barbie: Visual Analysis*, which presented the comparison in advertising the two fashion dolls for the year 2001 only.

A second potential limitation could be identified in *Skipper: Cluster Analysis* in the necessity of choosing only some commercial videos and not being able to describe and analyse every television commercial of the different Skipper versions ever created. The personal choice could be claimed to have brought a too personal view on the evolving stages of the doll, thus inducing the public into believing that Skipper followed her own evolution besides Barbie. Moreover, since Mattel's official YouTube channel only publishes recent commercial, avoiding the old ones, the videos selected for the analysis come from many different YouTube channels, element that might render the analysis unreliable. Therefore, the analysis might be argued for not analysing properly every kind of development and change in the product.

A third limitation could be detected in the various sample collected for all the three analyses. In fact, the newspaper pictures, the packaging pictures and the videos examined in the Visual and Cluster analyses cannot be identified as a proper corpus since a visual corpus is usually something organised and annotated to be searched using specific software for visual analysis, which was not done for the present research because of the inability to find a software capable of doing so.

The last limitation of the present research could be found in the wideness of the material analysed, because between the twelve pictures under analysis in Chapter Four, were slightly different in terms of how they presented the product, indeed some of them were newspaper advertisements, some others were just presentation pictures illustrating newspaper articles and some were Barbie's packaging pictures. However, in order to answer the specific research question on how Barbie has changed overtime,



this wideness of the sample could be excused. Despite all these limitations, the present analysis indicates that Mattel's ability to change overtime by listening to the public needs was essential in making Barbie a long-lasting product, continuing to be among the top selling products in the children's toy market. Indeed, as announced by Mattel itself in February 2022, "Barbie brand was named the 2021 top global toy property of the year for the second consecutive year" (<https://corporate.mattel.com/news/barbie-named-2021-top-global-toy-property-of-the-year-per-npd>).

Since, the narrowness and diversity of the material taken into consideration could represent a limitation in the research, future research should focus on a more detailed and perhaps specific sample, to obtain much more accurate results. Hence, future research could provide more specific information about the marketing and advertising strategies implied by Mattel's company to attract customers, by selecting the material to be analysed more precisely. By dealing with the television advertisements realized for each Barbie placed on the market, or exclusively with newspaper articles promoting every Barbie line ever made, or by analysing in detail the packaging of the dolls produced. And maybe investigating the figure of Skipper in more depth, in greater detail and precision. Moreover, future research could concentrate into further examine the dichotomy between Barbie and Bratz perhaps dwelling on how their relationship evolved throughout times.

The results achieved by the multimodal analyses displayed in the present study show that Barbie and Bratz advertising campaigns proposed by Mattel Toy Company and M.G.A. Entertainment, respectively, have been effective despite not having strictly followed Kress and Van Leeuwen's framework to investigate static pictures. In fact, through the strategies adopted they both stayed relevant throughout the years, following the evolving of society's thoughts towards a more inclusive, representative and welcoming vision of the world, hence maintaining their skyrocketing sale rates. As well as happened with Skipper television commercials which were able to present and promote many different Skipper versions in spite of displaying clusters which had different characteristics according to Baldry and Thibault's (2006) framework for cluster analysis. Indeed, Skipper might be identified as the only doll who grew from childhood to young adulthood. Therefore, Mattel achieved into creating a doll, who resembled Barbie's features but was able to develop and change acquiring her own

personal identity, detaching herself from the Barbie figure.

In conclusion, the ability of Barbie dolls mainly, but also Bratz dolls, to stay relevant along times, thus supporting children, who bought and are still buying them, in their overall development as educational devices (Önder, 2018: 147) is fundamental. Because playing with dolls enables little ones to have positive play-based interactions with adults, peers or on their own, creating playful settings that resemble real-life situations and experiences in which they will probably find in their future. Hence, having the chance of collecting many different dolls is resourceful for children, who can create countless different plots and thus develop their cognitive, linguistic and social interaction skills (Healey et al., 2019: 2) in a fun way. In addition to provide children with good examples of how to behave in fairly and correctly with the others, following noble ideals, such as helping whoever is in need, as stated in Section 5.1.6 Pet Pals Skipper. As well as having from a very young age a perception of the extraordinary diversity existing in the world, so as to always welcome and accept different ethnicities, personal features or disabilities in a positive way, without considering them strange or unpleasant.

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