



Exposure to Barbie: Effects on thin-ideal internalisation, body esteem, and body dissatisfaction among young girls



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ABSTRACT

Barbie doll ownership is high among girls in early primary school. It has been suggested that exposure to Barbie impacts negatively on body image. The present study sought to investigate the effect of exposure to Barbie on young girls' thin-ideal internalisation, body esteem, and body dissatisfaction. Participants were 160 girls (aged 5–8 years) from Adelaide, South Australia. They were randomly allocated one of three Barbie conditions (physical engagement, physical observation, print observation) or to a control toy. Results indicated that exposure to Barbie, irrespective of format, led to higher thin-ideal internalisation than exposure to the control, but had no impact on body esteem or body dissatisfaction. This suggests that interacting with Barbie may encourage girls in early primary school to adopt a preference for a thin body, but with no immediate effect on body image. The long-term impact of Barbie exposure on body image remains unknown.

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Introduction

Body image concerns disproportionately affect women and girls over their male counterparts in many different Western societies (Ambrosi-Randic, 2000; Muth & Cash, 1997; Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2013). Although there are likely to be numerous societal and developmental factors contributing to this disparity, a number of commentators (e.g., Dittmar, 2012; Tiggemann, 2011) have suggested that Barbie dolls, which are sold in 150 countries worldwide (Mattel, 2016), may promote internalisation of the thin ideal in young girls. Although thin-ideal internalisation has been demonstrated in girls as young as 5 years (e.g., Birbeck & Drummond, 2003; Hayes & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010), the link between Barbie doll exposure and thin-ideal internalisation has yet to be established. Furthermore, the small amount of experimental research into the link between acute Barbie exposure and body image has produced mixed findings (Anschutz & Engels, 2010; Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2006; Jellinek, Myers, & Keller, 2016). The present study sought to examine the extent to which exposure to Barbie dolls influences internalisation and body image among 5- to

8-year old Australian girls. A second question was whether playing with a Barbie doll in a functional manner would lead to more positive body image outcomes relative to other forms of Barbie exposure (e.g., viewing images of Barbie).

Barbie doll ownership is very common among young girls in many different countries, with an estimated 59% ownership rate among U.S. 4- to 7-year olds (Sherman & Zurbriggen, 2014), and over 80% ownership rate among 6- to 9-year old Australian girls (Slater & Tiggemann, 2016). Barbie's high level of market penetration has led to the establishment of Barbie as an iconic representation of the female ideal (e.g., Kuther & McDonald, 2004; Wright, 2003). During her history of over 50 years, Barbie's hair, facial features, clothing, accessories, and careers have regularly changed, yet with the exception of a slight decrease in her bust and a small increase in hip width in the 1990s, her figure has remained largely stable throughout this period (Lind & Brzuzu, 2008; Urla & Swedlund, 2007). Barbie has a 5-inch bust, a $3\frac{1}{4}$ inch waist, and $5\frac{3}{16}$ inch hips (Mattel, 2012), which in adult women would translate to a 39-inch bust, an 18-inch waist, and 33-inch hips (Lind & Brzuzu, 2008). Research emphasises the fact that Barbie's physical proportions do not realistically reflect the measurements of real women and are essentially unattainable (Brownell & Napolitano, 1995; Norton, Olds, Olive, & Dank, 1996).

As both an unrealistic symbol of ideal feminine beauty and a toy marketed at young girls, Barbie has attracted much

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criticism (e.g., Dittmar et al., 2006; Pedersen & Markee, 1991; Smolak, 2011; Turkel, 1998; Walter, 2011). This criticism is founded in the belief that playing with Barbie can lead to internalisation of the thin ideal and subsequent body image concerns among young girls (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). While it is commonly accepted that play in general contributes to the internalisation of ideals and values (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Thompson et al., 1999), and that internalisation of thin ideals negatively impacts on body image (Clark & Tiggemann, 2008; Dittmar & Howard, 2004), the connections between Barbie and thin-ideal internalisation are yet to be empirically established.

Research on thin-ideal internalisation in girls younger than 8 years has been limited, but there are indications that girls in the first years of school may be influenced by the body shape of attractive characters (Harrison, 2000) and that they hold body ideals at the leaner end of the spectrum (Harrison & Hefner, 2006). Pre-schoolers (age 4 and under) have been shown to prefer thinner body types over larger body types (Holub, 2008; Spiel, Paxton, & Yager, 2012) and girls aged 3½ to 5½ years also display more positive attitudes towards thin and average shaped dolls in comparison to fat dolls (Worobey & Worobey, 2014). It remains unknown exactly when body dissatisfaction might develop. However, a recent systematic review reported that 20–70% of 3- to 6-year old girls experience body dissatisfaction (Tatangelo, McCabe, Mellor, & Mealey, 2016).

By age 6, there is strong evidence that the desire for a thinner body is prevalent among girls (Birbeck & Drummond, 2003; Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2004). This desire to be thinner appears to be symptomatic of the internalisation of a thin ideal evident among 5- to 6-year-old girls (Brylinsky & Moore, 1994; Penny & Haddock, 2007) that remains stable throughout childhood (Evans, Tovée, Boothroyd, & Drewett, 2013; Tatangelo & Ricciardelli, 2013), adolescence (Brown & Slaughter, 2011; Sands & Wardle, 2003) and adulthood (Brown & Slaughter, 2011). Notably, the desire and preference for thinness in 6-year-old girls is not seen in 6-year-old boys (Ambrosi-Randic, 2000), which suggests that society disproportionately communicates messages of thinness to girls. Although there are likely to be numerous societal contributors (e.g., media, peers), dolls emphasising thinness (e.g., Barbie, Bratz, Disney Princesses), which are marketed at young girls, may contribute to this gender disparity.

Socio-cultural theory (Thompson et al., 1999) provides an appropriate framework for understanding how girls may develop a preference for thinness. The theory emphasises the relationship between children's body image development and the culture in which they are socialised. Specifically, it suggests that shared societal beauty ideals are transmitted via various socio-cultural channels (e.g., peers, media – including toys) and then, although often unrealistic and unattainable, they are internalised by women and girls. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with appearance is then a function of how closely individuals conform with these beauty ideals (Tiggemann, 2011).

Thompson et al. (1999) affirm that play is an important socialisation process relevant to body image and recognise that dolls such as Barbie are a means of providing children with a tactile, tangible representation of the body. Likewise, Urla and Swedlund (2007) suggest that dressing and undressing Barbie, and arranging her hair gives children a tactile and intimate sense of Barbie's body. It is therefore plausible that playing with Barbie gives young girls a somewhat distorted perception of a normal female body and promotes the internalisation of a thin ideal. To date, qualitative research involving 4- to 6-year-old girls has found that girls of this age focus on Barbie's appearance during play and when talking about Barbie (Markee, Pedersen, Murray, & Stacey, 1994). In addition, retrospective research has found that 10- to 13-year-old girls report viewing Barbie as a symbol of perfection and physical beauty during early childhood (Kuther & McDonald, 2004). Not

only is Barbie herself thought to communicate thin-ideal promoting messages (Thompson et al., 1999), but it is also possible that she may act as an instrument for other societal influences such as parents, peers, or the media to inadvertently promote this theme. Empirically, however, the impact of Barbie on body image among young girls is yet to be firmly established.

Three experimental studies (Anschutz & Engels, 2010; Dittmar et al., 2006; Jellinek et al., 2016) have attempted to empirically investigate the effect of acute Barbie doll exposure on young girls' body esteem and body dissatisfaction. The first, an English study by Dittmar et al. (2006), examined the relative effects of exposure to images of the unrealistically thin Barbie, a more realistically-proportioned doll, Emme (Mendelsohn, 2003), or a no-doll control condition, on body esteem and body dissatisfaction in a sample of 5- to 8-year old girls. They found that overall body dissatisfaction scores were significantly higher for girls in the Barbie condition, relative to the other conditions. This finding suggests that Barbie may indeed negatively impact on girls' body image. Dittmar et al. (2006) also found that the effect of Barbie on body dissatisfaction was moderated by age such that relative to images of Emme and the control group, only participants in the younger age groups (aged 5½ to 7½) were significantly impacted by exposure to Barbie, whereas the participants in the oldest year group (aged 7½ to 8½) were not.

One possible explanation for Barbie's lack of influence on participants in the oldest year level (aged 7½ to 8½ years) may be that around this age girls' exposure to Barbie reaches saturation point. Consequently, girls in this age bracket may have already internalised Barbie's thin-ideal messages so that further exposure has no additional effect. This idea is congruent with Dittmar et al.'s (2006) novel finding that participants in the oldest age group displayed the greatest discrepancy between their actual body size and their ideal adult body size after exposure to Emme. While Dittmar et al. (2006) used this measure as an indication of body dissatisfaction, it could also be considered a proxy for thin-ideal internalisation. Thus girls in the oldest age group may have already internalised a thin ideal and therefore rejected the larger beauty ideal Emme conveys.

Anschutz and Engels (2010) attempted to replicate and extend the work of Dittmar et al. (2006) by conducting a similar study with 6- to 10-year-old Dutch girls ($N = 117$), but with actual dolls instead of images of dolls. The participants were asked to spend 10 minutes playing with a Barbie doll, an Emme doll, a Tyler doll (another realistically proportioned doll), or a Lego control. Contrary to Dittmar et al.'s (2006) finding, Anschutz and Engels (2010) found no main effect of exposure condition. Nor did they find any main or interaction effect with age.

Most recently, Jellinek et al. (2016) sought to examine the effect of doll type and style of clothing (revealing vs. modest) in two separate samples of 112 girls aged 6 to 8 years in the U.S. Similar to Dittmar et al. (2006) they found that playing with Barbie in comparison to a full-figured Tracey doll was associated with lower body esteem. They also found that playing with a full-figured Tracey doll decreased body size discrepancy (body dissatisfaction) relative to playing with Barbie and that clothing type did not influence this effect (Study 1). Their findings suggest that girls tended to desire an appearance closer to the doll that they interacted with. The impact of age was not examined.

Anschutz and Engels (2010) proposed that the reason for the contrast in findings between their study and that of Dittmar et al. (2006) was that their participants physically played with the dolls, whereas Dittmar et al.'s (2006) participants viewed images of dolls. This latter form of doll exposure may have had a similar effect as thin models in magazines, which have been shown to increase body dissatisfaction in adult and adolescent samples (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Perhaps images of Barbie, like images of thin models, draw attention to and endorse

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