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## How to Evolve Like Barbie

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You turn 50 and you lose ground to your rivals. Suddenly your wealth of houses, dream cars and ability to get as many Ken dolls as you want mean nothing. Everyone is lusting after younger dolls.

The icon who put the "plastic" in plastic surgery, Mattel's Barbie doll remains a well-known—and polarizing—cultural and social phenomenon. Introduced in the pre-dawn of the feminist movement, generations of women have grown up with her wardrobes, careers, friends, boyfriends, pets, playhouses, and flashy pink sports cars.

But a lot has changed in 50 years and Mattel, who introduced Barbie five decades and a billion units ago, is now rolling out a commemorative doll and conducting an "All Things Barbie" promotional campaign to perk up sagging sales.

Barbie's history, however, has reflected the evolving role of women. For example:

When Barbie debuted women made up only 38% of the workforce. Now they make up 60%.

In 1961 Barbie met Ken, love ensued, and they began dating (and did so until 2004). Back then the number of unmarried heterosexuals in long-term relationships numbered just under half a million. Today there are 6.5 million such happy couples.

Mattel introduced an Astronaut Barbie in 1965, but it wasn't until 1983 that Sally Ride became the first US woman in space.

In 1973, Nurse Barbie went to med school. Her specialty? Surgery. The percentage of female doctors back then? 10%. Now it's up to 35%.

In 1980 Barbie went multiracial with the introduction of the Black, Hispanic and "International" versions. Today, the number of people who identify themselves a "mixed race" is 5 million, which is up 25% since the beginning of the 21st century.

In 1989 Barbie served in four military branches, wearing uniforms approved by the Pentagon. The number of female veterans today numbers 1.8 million at an average age of 47.

In 1992 Teen Talk Barbie whined, "Math class is tough," prompting anger from parents and an apology from Mattel. Still, the number of math doctorates granted to women at that time was 23%. Today it's only slightly higher, at 29%.

1992 was also the first year Barbie ran for president, and based on sales did nearly as well as Hillary Clinton 16 years later with her 18 million votes in the Democratic presidential primaries. (Is a Barbie Secretary of State with a collection of pants suits in the offing?)

In 2004 Barbie and long-time boy-toy, Ken, broke up after 43 years and then reunited in 2006, which is a real storybook ending since today only 6% of divorced couples get back together.

However, unlike real women, Barbie hasn't changed physically and it's been noted that her measurements -- at 36-18-38 -- if rendered in the flesh, would make it impossible for her to stand. She's lost market share over the past decade, with domestic sales falling as much as 12% in recent years. And no matter what memories she evokes for moms, her target audience has grown younger, more sophisticated, and increasingly disinterested in the fantasy Barbie has to offer. What's worse, interactive dolls, toys, and video games have moved into the dream house neighborhood.


All the categories we study change over time, and this is no exception. Once considered edgy now seems relatively tame, especially when compared to real-life Barbies like Jessica Simpson, Lindsay Lohan and Britney Spears. More recently she's been replaced by Bratz dolls with pouty lips and by Hannah Montana fashion dolls.

Still and all, it's a real cultural and marketing event. Barbie, the iconic fashion doll with the top-heavy figure and high-heel arches is 50. And some fairytales do continue for girls even when women are long past the point of believing in them.

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