

PERSONAL FINANCE

How Barbie primed us for a life of conspicuous consumption

Barbie: Welcome to the pink, perfect world of consumerism



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July 19, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

I hate pink because of Barbie.

The doll and all her accessories made me feel left out as a little girl. There was no place for me in the pretty-in-pink club because my friends' parents could afford to buy multiple Barbies. (You couldn't just have one.)

There's always been criticism of how Barbie portrayed the perfect woman, creating a standard we couldn't replicate in our imperfect world. We can't all be blonde with exaggerated body measurements.

But Barbie symbolizes something more: conspicuous consumption.

Brilliant marketing helped transform Barbie into an icon of consumerism. She mesmerized young girls, teaching them to become insatiable shoppers long before Instagram and TikTok celebrity influencers pitched glamorous living.

With the release of Mattel and Warner Bros.'s "Barbie" movie, which hits theaters this week, I'm having flashbacks of the financial constraints of my youth.

It wasn't enough to have the blue-eyed doll. You had to have the multilevel Dreamhouse, the Corvette, and all those cute dresses and shoes. More than 100 dolls are sold every minute, according to Mattel.

And, of course, there was the carrying case to store your Barbie stuff.

I was raised by my grandmother, Big Mama, who didn't earn enough as a nursing assistant to deliver the dream of a

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Barbie universe. My sisters and I got the Kmart knockoffs. We made dresses from scraps of fabric from my grandmother's sewing box. Our male dolls were plastic wannabes, not nearly as dashing as Malibu Ken. Our accessories were kept in a shoe box.

How many people grew up to become shopaholics, because they are desperately trying to fill a void left by their Barbie-less childhood? Or are living above their means creating a lifestyle where they are never denied?

Do you dress up now, charging yourself into debt, not equating the compulsion to consume with the stylish Barbie of your youth?

The amount of merchandising around the movie is already excessive. Will yet another generation feel the pressure to keep up with Barbie?

At \$25, Barbie in Pink Gingham Dress is a popular item. There's the movie fashion pack of film outfits and accessories priced at \$50 (dolls not included).

In a 1959 commercial introducing the curvaceous plastic toy, a woman sings, "Barbie's small and so petite, her clothes and figure look so neat ... Someday I'm gonna be exactly like you, till then I know just what I'll do. Barbie, beautiful Barbie, I'll make believe that I am you."

The doll was sold for \$3. But it was the fashions — ranging from \$1 to \$5 at the time — that kids also coveted to round out the fantasy.

The branding of Barbie and all her accessories implicitly communicated the need to have it all — the clothes, the house, the car — to be cool.

As the mother of two daughters, I had planned to rebuff Mattel's materialistic values. I vowed only to give my girls books and toys that stimulated their minds. I promised myself that I wouldn't trap them into believing their hair, body and wardrobe determined their worth.

You've probably guessed how that worked out. The peer pressure my kids felt got to me.

So, they got their Barbies. But I got them Black versions, which were not available when I was in grade school. There were Black dolls in the Barbie world, but they were friends. The first Black friend of Barbie, Christie, was introduced in 1968. Later, the first Black and Hispanic dolls named "Barbie" were added in 1980.

I did stop short of purchasing the playhouse. It was just too darn much money. By the way, Mattel says, a Barbie Dreamhouse, introduced in 1962, is sold every two minutes.

One Christmas, when my eldest daughter was about 6, I panicked when I couldn't find the Barbie pink cash register she had on her list for Santa. For weeks, I searched for that toy, which was one of the hottest items that holiday season. It had a calculator, microphone and — egads — an imitation of a credit card swipe reader.

congratulated me.

My daughter played with that cash register for a hot second. Years later, I now use it as a prop when I teach kids and money workshops.

The many makeovers of Barbie — who now comes with more careers, skin tones, and, thankfully, curves — still don't negate the materialist aspect of her microcosm.

The release of the live-action movie is an opportunity to talk about what Barbie means, and how to guard against our children becoming laser-focused on the acquisition of things.

Playtime is perfectly fine for dialogues on dream homes, cute convertibles and fabulous fashions. But it's also an opening to teach children what else Barbie could do with her money.