

# **Image Repair Analysis of Barbie's "#Unapologetic" OpEd**



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## Introduction

In 1959, Mattel introduced the Barbie doll. Collins, Lidinsky, Rusnock, and Torstrick reported that “Barbie was one of the earliest ‘adult-figured’ three-dimensional dolls to be manufactured for girls in America”.<sup>1</sup> They also noted that Mattel “was an innovator in marketing, employing experts trained in psychology to design advertising for the new medium of television.” Over fifty years later, Barbie had become “the No. 1 doll property in the US and the No. 1 worldwide property in the traditional toy industry.”<sup>2</sup> She boasts over 10 million Facebook likes; “99% of girls ages 3-10... own at least one Barbie doll” and girls aged 3-6 have an average of 12 Barbies; one Barbie doll is sold every three seconds (Mattel). Berman reported that “Parents have bought more than 1 billion Barbies” and that Barbie is “widely considered the most successful doll ever.”<sup>3</sup> This toy has emerged as a cultural icon and as such merits scholarly attention.



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Collins, Lidinsky, Rusnock, and Torstrick explained that, as is often the case, Barbie embodies contradictions. “Many scholars have noted the contradictory claims of Barbie merchandising: On the one hand, Barbie seems to teach girls that they can ‘do anything,’ and on the other, the primary theme of Mattel’s Barbie merchandise has been frilly clothes for an impossibly exaggerated female form.”<sup>4</sup> Mattel’s webpage illustrates these contradictions, observing that “More than 1 billion fashions have been produced since 1959 for Barbie and friends” and that there are “1,000+ different shoe styles in Barbie doll’s closet” while boasting that Barbie had been a positive role model with “close to 150 careers in her lifetime.” So, Barbie is a cultural icon that is subject to both praise and blame.

Crary reported that “two consumer advocacy groups often critical of corporate advertising tactics — the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood and the Center for a New American Dream — criticized Barbie as a flawed role model for little girls and launched a petition drive urging the Girl Scouts of the USA to end the partnership.”<sup>5</sup> This latest criticism erupted after pictures of Barbie in a swimsuit appeared in the 2014 Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue. Reimer explained that



Photo credit: this is one of several on sale on ebay. Credit: [http://www.ebay.com/itm/2013-SPORTS-ILLUSTRATED-Barbie-doll-50th-Swim-Suit-/191503424050?pt=LH\\_DefaultDomain\\_0&hash=item2c967e5a32](http://www.ebay.com/itm/2013-SPORTS-ILLUSTRATED-Barbie-doll-50th-Swim-Suit-/191503424050?pt=LH_DefaultDomain_0&hash=item2c967e5a32)

In a publicity stunt that is sure to irritate 13-year-old boys and feminist scholars, Sports Illustrated and toy-maker Mattel have teamed up for the magazine’s 50th anniversary swimsuit issue. Wearing an updated version of the black and white swimsuit she wore when she was introduced in 1959, Barbie appears on a giant billboard mock-up of the magazine cover and in a 4-page photo spread inside the magazine.<sup>6</sup>

Crary noted that “It can be argued that the combination of the swimsuit issue and the iconic doll is a natural. Swimsuits (and unrealistic body images) were never the same after the first doll rolled off the assembly line in 1959 and this is, after all, Sports Illustrated’s 50th anniversary swimsuit issue. There are magazines and toys to be sold.”<sup>7</sup> Barbie – and Sports Illustrated – broke new ground here. Of course, not everyone agreed that this ground should have been broken at all.

Pragmatically, sales of Barbie had tapered off in recent quarters. Townsend explained that “the doll also is in need of a sales boost. While the brand is still the largest toy property in the world, Barbie has posted two straight annual declines in revenue, including a 13 percent drop in the fourth quarter.”<sup>8</sup> A publicity stunt was called for and a four-page spread of Barbie modeling a swimsuit in Sports Illustrated was the tack chosen by Mattel. Elliott observed that

in fact “Mattel paid for the opportunity to integrate Barbie into the commemoration of the anniversary.”<sup>9</sup> Clearly, this was a publicity stunt designed to boost sales of Barbie and Barbie accessories.

As part of this publicity event Mattel released an Op Ed attributed to Barbie titled “#Unapologetic.”<sup>10</sup> Rhetorical discourse can serve multiple goals. I argue that this message was not only designed to reinforce the Sports Illustrated publicity event but also to defend Barbie (and Mattel) from critics. This essay applies Image Repair Theory<sup>11</sup> to this message.

**Read the editorial here:**

<http://www.barbiecollector.com/news/barbie-swimsuit-barbie-oped>

### Image Repair Theory

Image repair is an area of inquiry within the more general area of crisis communication: Crisis communication also includes messages designed to respond to natural disasters and terrorism as well as image problems. Image Repair Theory argues that a person’s or organization’s image, face, or reputation is extremely important.<sup>12</sup> Threats to image seem to wait around every

corner, so it is important to understand persuasive messages that may help repair a tarnished image. Five general strategies of image repair discourse are identified, three with specific tactics. Each of these strategies will be discussed in this section and defined and illustrated in Table 1.

#### Denial

Simple denial has three specific tactics. Ones accused of wrong-doing may deny that the offensive act occurred, deny that they are to blame for the offensive act, or deny that the act was harmful. Any of these instances of denial, if accepted by the intended audience, have the potential to repair the damaged reputation. Furthermore, a persuader can try to shift the blame. If another person (or group, or organization) actually committed the offensive act, the accused should not be held responsible for that offensive act.

#### Evade Responsibility

This general strategy for image repair can take four forms. A persuader may claim that the offensive act was just a response to another

**Table 1. Image Restoration Strategies**

	Strategy	Key Characteristic	Example
<i>Denial</i>	Simple denial	did not do offensive act	Reagan did not trade arms for hostages
	Shift the blame	another performed act	“Someone else stole your bike”
<i>Evasion of Responsibility</i>	Provocation	responded to another’s act	“I broke your phone because I was mad that you didn’t pick me up after work”
	Defeasibility	lack of information or ability	late to meeting: “I wasn’t told the new location”
	Accident	mishap	“poor visibility caused my car crash”
	Good Intentions	meant well	“I meant to buy you a present, but I forgot”
<i>Reducing Offensiveness of Event</i>	Bolstering	stress positive traits	Bush boasted of first term successes
	Minimization	act was not serious	“It’s no big deal that I broke your CD, the music was crummy.”
	Differentiation	act less offensive than similar acts	“I borrowed your CD player, I didn’t steal it.”
	Transcendence	more important values	“I stole bread to feed my hungry child.”
	Attack Accuser	reduce credibility of accuser	Gingrich accused the liberal media of lying
	Compensation	reimburse victim	A waiter offered free desert after spilling on a customer
<i>Corrective Action</i>		plan to solve/ prevent recurrence of problem	“I will fix the damage I caused to your car.”
<i>Mortification</i>		apologize	Obama apologized for HealthCare.gov

offensive act (typically an act performed by the alleged victim), and that the persuader's response was a reasonable reaction to that provocation. Defeasibility argues that the persuader lacked the knowledge or ability to avoid committing the offensive act. A persuader can also argue that the offense was accident. Fourth, the persuader can claim that the act was actually performed with good intentions. Any of these strategies, if accepted by the audience, could reduce the accused's responsibility for the offensive act.

### *Reduce Offensiveness*

There are six different tactics that can be used to reduce the apparent offensiveness of the act. First, a persuader can bolster his or her own image to try to strengthen the audience's positive feelings toward him or her. These favorable feelings might offset the negative strategies feelings associated with the offensive act. Minimization argues that the act in question is not really as offensive as it seems. Differentiation tries to distinguish the act in question from other similar but more offensive actions. In comparison, the act performed by the persuader may not appear so bad. Transcendence is a strategy that tries to justify the act by placing it in a more favorable context. A persuader can attack the accusers, hoping to reduce the credibility of the accusations (or suggest that the victim deserved what happened). The tactic of compensation offers to give the victim money, goods, or services to help reduce the negative feelings toward the persuader. These six strategies may reduce the offensiveness of the act, helping repair the accused's image.

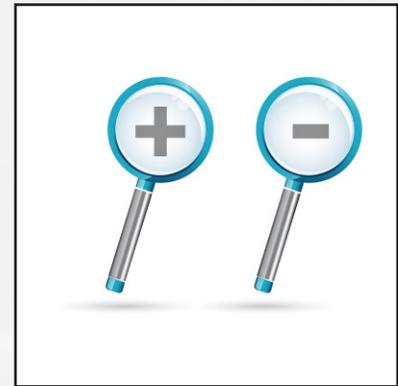


Photo credit: digitalart at freedigitalphotos.net

### *Corrective Action*

Corrective action occurs when a persuader commits to repair the damage from the offensive act. This strategy of image repair can take two forms. The persuader can promise to restore the state of affairs before the offensive act (repairing the damage) or the persuader can promise to prevent recurrence of the offensive act (preventing future offensive acts).

### *Mortification*

The final image repair strategy admits committing the offensive act and to ask for forgiveness. An apparently sincere apology could help restore the persuader's image with the intended audience. This strategy can take various forms, including admitting guilt, asking for forgiveness, expressing regret or remorse, and apologizing. There is no accepted standard for which elements must be present for a defense to qualify as "an apology." Ambiguity exists in the statement "I'm sorry."<sup>13</sup> This could represent an expression of guilt and remorse but it could also be nothing more than an expression of sympathy (i.e., short for "I'm sorry for what befell you"). Some persuaders may attempt to exploit this ambiguity, hoping that the audience will accept "I'm sorry" as an apology without actually confessing to any misdeeds.

Numerous studies have investigated image repair in a variety of contexts, including corporate rhetoric.<sup>14</sup> So far we have not seen image repair from (that is, attributed to) a toy. With this typology in mind, we will turn to analysis of Barbie's "#Unapologetic" image repair message.



Photo credit: Stuart Miles//FreeDigitalPhotos.net

### **Critical Analysis of Barbie's Image Repair Discourse**

This image repair effort employed three image repair strategies: primarily denial and bolstering but with a bit of attack accuser thrown in. Of course, this message was written by Mattel, but I will write with the fiction that Barbie is the author. Mattel

could have simply issued a press release with its arguments, but it chose a different approach. Everyone knows Barbie is a toy, but Mattel chose to craft its defense tongue-in-cheek as if Barbie could speak, so it is reasonable to analyze this discourse as it was offered (always keeping in mind the fiction being employed here). She acknowledges the immediate source of criticism: “Upon the launch of this year’s 50th anniversary issue, there will again be buzz and debate over the validity of the women in the magazine, questioning if posing in it is a blow to female equality and self-image.” Her answer is a clear and direct “No.”

### *Simple Denial*

Barbie declares that “Barbie® dolls” aren’t the problem. Models choosing to pose in a bikini aren’t the problem. The assumption that women of any age should only be part of who they are in order to succeed is the problem.” Clearly she denies that appearing in *Sports Illustrated* is an offensive act. She also posed a rhetorical question: “In 2014, does any woman in the issue seriously need permission to appear there?” The point is, of course, that she did nothing objectionable by appearing in this issue. Use of denial – arguing that she did nothing wrong – is consistent with the strategy of bolstering, discussed next.



Photo credit: [Target] and <https://storify.com/cbccommunity/barbie-unapologetic-sports-illustrated-campaign-co>



Photo credit: wax115

### *Bolstering*

In addition to denial the defense employed bolstering. Barbie conceded that “I am a doll” acknowledging the fundamental irony of this defense, but stressed that “I was designed by a woman and mother determined to give girls a way to play, to imagine and to dream.” At base she was not a man’s creation but designed by a woman who was a mother. She promoted use of imagination and dreams for girls, which are laudable goals, tending to bolster Barbie’s reputation. She also boasted that “My bathing suit now hangs beside a Presidential power suit, Pastry Chef hat, and Astronaut gear in a wardrobe reflecting the more than 150 careers I’ve pursued to illustrate for girls that they can achieve anything for which they aim.” She argued here that she was a positive role model for girl, embodying the many possibilities available

to them. She declared that “Today, truly anything is possible for a girl. Let us place no limitations on her dreams, and that includes being girly if she likes.” She asserted that she is a positive role model for girls, illustrating the aspirations available to girls and promoting this ideal. Interestingly, she turns one argument (that girls and women should not be judged by appearance) around: “Let her grow up not judged by how she dresses, even if it’s in heels; not dismissed for how she looks, even if she’s pretty.” The argument here is that Barbie possesses positive qualities apart from her looks. So, Barbie worked to bolster her reputation.

Barbie directly addressed the question of whether it was appropriate for her to have posed for *Sports Illustrated*:



I, for one, am honored to join the legendary swimsuit models. The word “model,” like the word “Barbie®,” is often dismissed as a poseable plaything with nothing to say. And yet, those featured [in the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue] are women who have broken barriers, established empires, built brands, branched out into careers as varied as authors, entrepreneurs and philanthropists. They are all great examples of confident and competent women.

She argues here that appearing in this issue was something to be proud of, not cause for shame. She celebrates the many possibilities available to Barbie and, by implication, to all girls, placing Barbie in a positive light.

Barbie poses questions and advocates ideals: “Isn’t it time we teach girls to celebrate who they are? Isn’t there room for capable and captivating? .... Be free to launch a career in a swimsuit, lead a company while gorgeous, or wear pink to an interview at MIT. The reality of today is that girls can go anywhere and be anything. They should celebrate who they are and never have to apologize for it.” And Barbie embodies this attitude, titling her OpEd “#Unapologetic.” There may be a need for image repair here, but not for an apology. The declaration that she is unapologetic is consistent with her use of denial of wrong-doing: Having done nothing wrong no apology is needed.

#### *Attack Accuser*

Attacking her accusers is not a major component of her image repair effort. Still, she suggests that “It’s simpler to keep me in a box—and since I am a doll—chances are that’s where I’ll stay.” It is her critics who wrongly try to place limitations on her. This strategy was neither made explicit nor developed further.

#### **Evaluation**

This message can be evaluated on many levels. I will address two questions: Was this message persuasive? Does it adequately answer criticism of Barbie? These strategies are appropriately chosen: denial and bolstering have the potential to improve Barbie’s (and Mattel’s) image. Attack accuser lurks in this message, but the message did not make this strategy explicit and it was not an important component of the defense. Although the irony of using Barbie as a spokesperson was an interesting and clever twist, it seems unlikely that this defense will change the minds of many of Barbie’s critics. It could very well reinforce those who already have favorable attitudes toward Barbie. So, this message (like many others) is likely to be more effective with some audience members than others. The problem is that the defense does not resolve the basic conflicts inherent in Barbie. It does model an unrealistic ideal to millions of young girls. But on the other hand Barbie also illustrates (both through clothes and girls’ play with the dolls) that a girl can be anything from a CEO to an astronaut – or a fashion model. Those whose attitudes are based more on the “unrealistic ideal” have little reason to change their opinions toward Barbie. However, those whose attitudes are founded more on “be anything you want” could have had those attitudes strengthened. I do not believe this defense hurt Barbie’s (or Mattel’s) image; however, there is no reason to expect that a major shift in attitudes from this message. In fact, the decline in Barbie sales continued, dropping 21% in the third quarter of 2014.<sup>15</sup>



### Conclusion



This essay investigates the image repair effort from “Barbie” after she appeared in Sports Illustrated’s annual swimsuit issue. The defense denied that she was an inappropriate role model and bolstered, arguing that she personified the ideal that girls (and women) could be anything they wanted. Although Barbie is only a toy doll, she was a huge profit center for Mattel so this defense should not be dismissed as mere whimsy. This OpEd was definitely part of a publicity effort (although not a particularly successful one), but it is an interesting instance of corporate image repair as well. This message shows that image repair can appear in many guises, including that of a doll. Attempts to

repair a damaged (or threatened) image are used throughout society. It is important to understand how this kind of persuasive discourse works.

## Endnotes

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