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CC: Influence: Behavioral Science & Communication Class
Subject: Barbie: Made by Me

Barbie has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I used to spend hours as a child making up stories about my dolls, transforming bedrooms into made-up worlds and clothing into entire personalities. But like many people who grew up with Barbie, I also started to see the paradoxes she stood for: a representation of empowerment and creativity, but also of pressure and perfection. These conflicts still influence how people view her today, particularly younger generations.

Barbie needs to change from being a representation of perfection to a celebration of individuality as society moves toward authenticity and individuality. This analysis reimagines Barbie as a platform for creativity rather than conformity by applying behavioral science principles. "Barbie: Made by Me," a proposed 2026 initiative, combines nostalgia and contemporary inclusivity by enabling customers to create and personalize their own dolls. The campaign connects creativity, confidence, and belonging in a way that feels incredibly personal and joyfully human through **identity-based motivation**, the **endowment effect**, and **social proof**.

From Perfect Doll to Personalized Icon

Barbie's story has always been one of contradictions: she is beloved but also criticized, she is classic but finds it difficult to stay up to date. Today, her biggest challenge is striking a balance between the values that contemporary consumers demand—authenticity, inclusivity, and individuality—and the nostalgia that generations adore.

Barbie was a symbol of social comparison bias for many years, pushing people to evaluate themselves against idealized norms. Her glitzy proportions, which once represented ambition, now frequently feel exclusive. **Negativity bias** perpetuates those earlier views, even in spite of Mattel's continuous diversity initiatives. Barbie must exhibit authenticity beyond superficial product variety because research indicates that regaining trust necessitates consistent, credible signals of change.

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Additionally, Barbie's messaging has vacillated between performance and empowerment, causing **cognitive dissonance** for customers who wish to support her principles but perceive conflicting intentions. **Framing theory** serves as a reminder that how a message is delivered affects how it is understood. Audiences become disengaged when Barbie appears unaltered despite her claims to celebrate "limitless potential." In order for Barbie's representation to feel as genuine as her words, Mattel needs to synchronize its message, design, and experience.

Meanwhile, play has evolved. Children today co-create rather than merely play. Because they incorporate **choice architecture** and participatory design into their ecosystems, platforms such as Roblox and LEGO flourish. In contrast, Barbie feels stagnant because she is still primarily a "finished product." She needs to give people creative control over her appearance, behavior, and self-expression to remain relevant.

Though skepticism persists, numerous reinventions—from career Barbies to inclusive dolls—have brought about progress. Many people view these changes as reactive rather than reflective, which leads to **reactance bias**, which is the tendency for consumers to resist persuasion when they perceive insincerity. The way forward necessitates openness and action, demonstrating actual empowerment rather than making empty promises.

Unpacking Barbie Through the LAVEC Lens

She's already starting to use different language. **Goal framing** and **self-efficacy bias** are used by campaigns such as "You Can Be Anything" and the "Barbie Dream Gap Project" to emphasize potential over perfection. However, sentimental overtones can occasionally weaken that message. By employing straightforward, empowering language that presents Barbie as a creative tool for self-expression rather than a finished figure, the Made by Me approach bridges this gap.

Barbie's long-standing connections to success and beauty once triggered **ideal self bias** and **status signaling**, which feel out of date in a culture that values relatability. Using the schema congruity theory, Made by Me reinterprets these connections, associating Barbie with originality, creativity, and identity formation. By allowing customers to create their own dolls, the outdated **anchoring bias** of what Barbie "should" look like is challenged, and a new default is established: Barbie is whoever you want her to be.

Identity-based motivation is naturally activated by Barbie's values of inclusivity, empowerment, and imagination. However, values are only effective when they are communicated consistently. When one incongruent act outweighs numerous positive ones, misaligned collaborations can lead to **trust asymmetry**. By putting these ideals into practice, Made by Me encourages customers to create inclusivity rather than merely being informed that it exists.

Barbie still embodies a special emotional duality: inspiration for kids and nostalgia for adults. **Affective conditioning** and **anticipated pride**—the joy associated with creative achievement—are the sources of that bond. Her perception is still skewed by **social comparison** bias, though. By using **emotional contagion** to spread confidence and pride through creation rather than appearance, the Made by Me experience turns admiration into shared joy.

Once focused on private play, Barbie's community now flourishes through online storytelling. Just like Mattel, her reputation is shaped by her parents, collectors, and creators. This same spirit of participation is brought into physical spaces by the Made by Me retail pop-up. **Social proof** and **collective efficacy** are increased when participants see hundreds of customized Barbies on display in real time, serving as a reminder that self-expression is not only accepted but also infectious.

"Barbie: Made by Me" Retail Pop-Up (2026)

Through "Barbie: Made by Me," an immersive retail and digital experience created to reintroduce Barbie as a symbol of creativity and belonging, Mattel can realize this vision in 2026.

Using touchscreen stations or the companion app, visitors create their own dolls inside the Made by Me pop-up, selecting attributes like body type, skin tone, attire, and accessories. Every choice increases ownership, utilizing the **endowment effect**, which states that people value things more when they create them themselves. When a design is finished, hundreds of other Barbies light up in color and motion on a communal display wall. As excitement, pride, and curiosity spread throughout the crowd, the effect is electrifying—**social proof** in action.

Individual expression becomes a social movement as each participant receives a digital copy of their work to share online. "This Barbie was made by me" turns into a declaration of identity as well as a caption. These posts would gradually fill feeds with authentic representations of Barbie, redefining her persona through personal creativity as opposed to corporate propaganda.

Local "Barbie Galleries" that highlight regional diversity may also feature the installation in museum exhibits, retail partners, and educational settings. By visually demonstrating that inclusivity is the norm rather than the exception, these displays would support descriptive norms. Barbie's emotional relevance is restored, and Mattel's trust is restored through experience and openness.

Barbie's impact has persisted because she embodies the hopes, paradoxes, and transformations of the world. I witnessed as a child how her stories influenced my imagination and how I saw myself; now, she has the opportunity to do so once more, but this time through participation rather than projection. Barbie is transformed from a static product into a dynamic platform for creativity and community through Made by Me. The **endowment effect, social proof, collective efficacy**, and **identity-based motivation** are behavioral science concepts that Mattel can use to transform Barbie into something more enduring than reinvention: renewal. The following chapter brings happiness back, reaffirms trust, and establishes self-expression as the new norm for play.