

Breaking the Mold—Consumer Hedonic Responses to Self-Transgressive Marketing in the Barbie Brand

Audrey Hanan

Aix-Marseille University

Isabelle Muratore

CERGAM, Toulon University

Gilles Paché

IUT TC Aix

Cite as:

Hanan Audrey, Muratore Isabelle, Paché Gilles (2025), Breaking the Mold—Consumer Hedonic Responses to Self-Transgressive Marketing in the Barbie Brand. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 54th, (123697)

Paper from the 54th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, Spain, May 25-30, 2025



Breaking the Mold—Consumer Hedonic Responses to Self-Transgressive Marketing in the Barbie Brand

Abstract

This paper examines Mattel's self-transgression strategy, offering Barbie dolls that reflect contemporary societal values and shifting cultural perspectives. Introduced in 2022, the transgender Barbie doll symbolizes a series of bold brand transgressions that challenge established norms, promoting greater diversity and inclusivity. A study in France revealed that consumers perceive the transgender Barbie doll as a “militantly committed” break from the original norm. However, the positive impact of this transgression paradoxically enhances the traditional—or stereotypical—Barbie doll, significantly improving consumers' hedonic attitudes. The findings suggest self-transgression may unexpectedly help relaunch flagship products whose marketing norms no longer align with societal changes. This research deepens understanding of self-transgression's inherent ambivalence, and from a managerial perspective, it underscores the concept's importance for brands aligning with evolving societal developments.

Keywords: *Hedonic attitude, Norm, Self-transgression.*

Track: *Product and Brand Management*

Introduction

Since her creation in 1959, the Barbie doll—a bubbly, long-legged blonde woman—has become a true cultural icon, widely recognized across the globe. Conceived by Ruth Handler, inspired by a sexy adult doll sold in West Germany, and later produced by Mattel, Barbie was based on what could be called a “revolutionary” idea: a doll that allowed young girls to envision themselves as future women—in contrast to the standard “baby” dolls that dominated the market at the time, which often emphasized maternal roles. The Barbie doll has long been a subject of controversy, repeatedly accused of promoting an unrealistic ideal of beauty—particularly regarding her extremely slim waist and generous bust (Rome, 2024).

Considering ongoing societal transformations, particularly toward greater inclusiveness, the Barbie doll had to evolve. Mattel responded by introducing new Barbie dolls that broke from the brand’s traditional standards, offering its customers a diverse range of dolls that reflect a changing world. In 2016, the Fashionistas line was launched, featuring Barbie dolls with different body types and builds, marking a significant departure from the classic silhouette. This was followed by dolls with a variety of skin tones, hairstyles, and facial features, all aimed at better representing the diversity of the real world. Moreover, Barbie dolls are now available in wheelchairs, with prosthetic limbs, or showcasing unique traits like vitiligo—demonstrating Mattel’s strong commitment to inclusivity.

The Fashionistas line departs from the brand’s traditional marketing norm, positioning it as a form of self-transgression from the original concept of the classic Barbie doll. Self-transgression refers to a product or service that breaks away from one or more specific marketing norms of a brand, often in response to societal pressures or issues demanding inclusivity and representation. By broadening its marketing approach, Mattel is sending a clear message to consumers that it is genuinely attuned to current societal changes. This message appears to be well-received, as the new range, which challenges the company’s usual marketing norms, made the cover of *Time* magazine in January 2016, featuring a coated Barbie doll with the provocative tagline: “*Now can we stop talking about my body?*”

Mattel’s marketing strategy, however, appears ambivalent. The stereotypical Barbie doll is still prominently featured on the shelves of specialty retailers, on websites, and in Mattel’s advertising and promotional campaigns.¹ Its sales have not declined in favor of the Fashionistas line, suggesting that traditional standards of beauty still resonate with a significant portion of consumers (Harriger, Schaefer, Thompson, & Cao, 2019; Rome, 2024).

¹ <https://shopping.mattel.com/fr-fr/collections/poupees-barbie-mode> (Last accessed: September 10, 2024).

In short, Mattel's inclusion efforts are generally well-received as a responsible stance, yet without undermining the iconic status of the traditional—or stereotypical—Barbie doll. The aim of this research is to better understand how acts of self-transgression affect consumer attitudes and how they can help brands adapt to new societal expectations. The central question addressed in the paper is as follows:

Does Mattel's self-transgression strategy, embodied by its new transgender Barbie doll, influence hedonic attitudes towards the traditional—or stereotypical—Barbie doll?

1. Objectives of the Research

Derived from the Latin *transgressio* (“to walk crookedly”), transgression is inherently linked to the existence of norms. According to Kennedy and Guzmán (2021), its purpose is to deconstruct these norms when individuals feel it is time to challenge or discard them. Transgression, therefore, seeks to break away from established norms and define new ones that better align with the evolving values of society. It represents the act of making progress at the expense of something else—encroaching on existing boundaries (Rey-Debove & Rey, 1993)—and freeing oneself from outdated norms, such as societal structures rooted in male dominance and patriarchy. Transgression evokes an unsubmitive, courageous character that drives progress by creating new norms that may ultimately anticipate future moral standards.

From a marketing perspective, Vézina and Paul (1997) highlight the deliberate nature of a brand's transgressive act, emphasizing that its purpose is to provoke and shock a specific segment of the public. Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda (2003), using quasi-religious language, even go so far as to describe it as an attempt to “offend.” However, several scholars caution that this strategy can have ambiguous and sometimes polarizing effects. On one hand, it enhances memorability and attracts attention, often amplified through the viral buzz generated by the transgressive act. On the other hand, it can undermine the relational variables a company has carefully built over time, potentially damaging consumer intentions to repurchase or support the brand (Chan, Li, Diehl, & Terlutter, 2007; Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson, 2013).

The work conducted by the French philosopher de Funès (2020) argues that transgression holds value only if it has meaning—that is, if it serves a purpose beyond itself, such as contributing to the common good. The essence of transgression likely lies not in the act of breaking norms itself, but in the motive behind it: by defying a norm, the brand takes a risk for a noble cause that transcends its own self-interest. Transgression becomes less problematic when it aligns with an ethical framework that opposes the “scandalous.” In this sense, it is

progressive, opening new possibilities. Brands' contemporary strategies of self-transgression reflect this vision, emphasizing values when they are pursued with reference to societal issues, such as the defense of the LGBTQIA+ community (Anand, 2024).

Recent research has explored a more “ordinary” form of transgression (Fournaise, Kessous, & Valette-Florence, 2023; Hanan, Moulins, & Valette-Florence, 2024). For a brand, this involves deliberately breaking away from socially established norms or from the original norms of the brand or industry (Aggarwal, 2004). When a brand breaks with its own norms, this is referred to as self-transgression, as the break is both conceived and implemented by the brand itself. This form of transgression is unique because the “norm setter” becomes the “transgressor.” Since the Covid-19 pandemic, several prominent brands have broken traditional codes by adopting recycled materials (Hemonnet-Goujot, Kessous, & Magnoni, 2022), aiming to be seen as virtuous by positioning themselves at the forefront of circular strategies. However, acts of self-transgression are not trivial, and it is important to examine consumer reactions, particularly in terms of hedonic attitudes, when the usual norm is challenged.

2. Research Method

An empirical study was conducted using the case of Mattel's Barbie doll, which has been transgressing its own marketing norms in recent years to offer more inclusive Barbie dolls in response to emerging societal issues and the brand's perceived low level of societal responsibility (Harpaz, 2016). As a result, Mattel needed to make significant changes but did so carefully to avoid damaging the established heritage and unique identity of the Barbie brand. In 2022, Mattel released a new Barbie doll with a trans-identity twist, modeled after the American transgender actress and singer Laverne Cox. With her realistic shape, distinctive facial features, diverse hairstyles, and inclusive representation, this new Barbie doll marked a clear departure from the stereotypical Barbie doll (see Figure 1).

While the transgender issue is currently a highly topical one, the new offering represents a profound transgression of the brand's usual marketing norms. The apparent paradox lies in the fact that, while Mattel promotes transgressive Barbie dolls, the stereotypical Barbie doll remains omnipresent in stores, whereas the Laverne Cox-inspired transgender Barbie doll is marketed exclusively online, through a dedicated Mattel web site called “*Barbie Signature*².” In this context, clarification is needed regarding the foundations of this major self-transgression, especially since its effects on consumers remain unclear and could influence

² <https://shopping.mattel.com/fr-fr/collections/barbie-signature> (Last accessed: September 10, 2024).

broader perceptions of brand inclusivity. To address this gap, the field investigation focuses on the consequences of launching new Barbie dolls that may be perceived as self-transgressive acts in relation to the traditional offering—the stereotypical Barbie doll.

Figure 1. The transgender Barbie doll



Source: Vogue France, May 31, 2022.

The field survey was conducted in France during the spring of 2024. Two rounds of data collection were carried out using questionnaires: the first focused on the stereotypical Barbie doll, while the second examined Mattel’s new transgressive offering—the transgender Barbie doll. The questionnaires were distributed via social networks, with a one-week interval between the two to mitigate the test effect and ensure diverse participant engagement. Respondents indicated their level of agreement or disagreement with each item on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” A total of 750 participants completed questionnaire 1, and 443 completed questionnaire 2, reflecting a variety of opinions and demographic backgrounds.

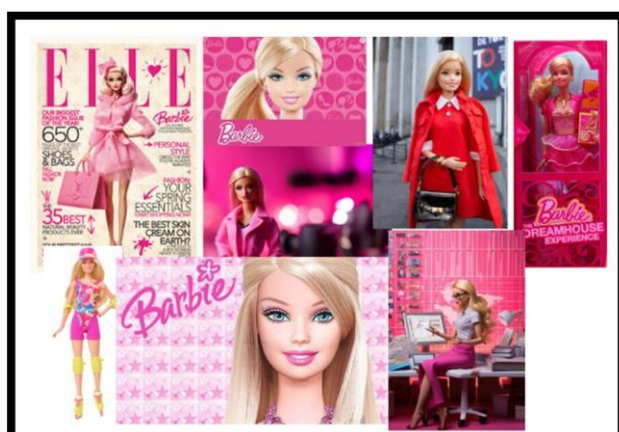
The first questionnaire presents an image of the traditional (stereotypical) Barbie doll to assess respondents’ perceived norm and hedonic attitude toward traditional beauty standards. The second questionnaire exposes consumers to the transgender Barbie doll (see Figure 2), and evaluates the sense of transgression triggered by this doll, analyzing the comparative

change in hedonic attitudes toward both the transgender and the stereotypical Barbie dolls. Three validated scales were used in the research, focusing specifically on the central variables—perceived norm, transgression, and hedonic attitude:

- For transgression, the Fournaise et al. (2023) scale supplemented by the Hanan et al. (2024) scale (see Table 1),
- For perceived norm, measured by the “conformism” dimension, the Fournaise et al. (2023) scale again (see Table 1),
- For hedonic attitude, the Broniarczyk and Alba (1994) scale with (a) I like this Barbie; (b) I appreciate this Barbie; and (c) I am favorable to this Barbie.

Figure 2. Visuals of the two questionnaires

Visual of questionnaire 1



Visual of questionnaire 2



Table 1. Scales for evaluating perceived norm and transgression

Perceived norm	Transgression	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – This Barbie doll meets the standard Mattel Barbie style – This Barbie doll embodies the traditional design elements of Mattel Barbie – This Barbie doll resembles the classic Mattel Barbie – This Barbie doll represents a typical Mattel Barbie 	<i>Avant-gardism</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Barbie brand makes original proposals – The Barbie brand takes a revolutionary approach – The Barbie brand ventures into uncharted territory
	<i>Provocation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Barbie brand embraces provocation – The Barbie brand undertakes bold initiatives – The Barbie brand generates controversy – The Barbie brand makes disorienting proposals
	<i>Unpredictability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Barbie brand takes unexpected initiatives – The Barbie brand is unpredictable – The Barbie brand appears where you least expect it
	<i>Militancy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Barbie brand takes a strong stand on societal issues – The Barbie brand has an activist side to drive change – The Barbie brand addresses societal issues
	<i>Usefulness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The transgression initiated by the Barbie brand is unnecessary – The transgression initiated by the Barbie brand is unjustified – The transgression initiated by the Barbie brand is incomprehensible

Source: Adapted from Fournaise et al. (2023) and Hanan et al. (2024).

3. Major Results

First, both exploratory and confirmatory analyses confirmed the psychometric validity of the measurement instruments. Principal component analysis with VARIMAX rotation was used to verify the dimensionality of the scales and validate the alignment of each dimension with its respective construct (Costello & Osborne, 2009). This analysis further ensured that the scales reliably measured the intended concepts. The results of the scales are consistent with existing literature, supporting their robustness in various contexts. Second, differences in outcome variables—both *a priori* and *a posteriori*—were examined using analysis of variance (ANOVA) with SPSS. The pre-transgression sample was coded as 0, and the post-transgression sample as 1, allowing for a clear comparison between the two groups.

The mean brand familiarity score is 5.08 ($t = 128.603$; $p < 0.0001$), indicating that the sample is familiar with the brand and can therefore recognize its normative associations. An analysis of means (F-test significant at $p < 0.0001$; $F = 815.999$; $df = 1$) reveals that the stereotypical Barbie doll in visual 1 aligns with the brand's established marketing norm, as perceived by respondents. When thinking of the brand, participants associate the traditional—or stereotypical—Barbie doll with their expectations (mean = 5.19). Exposure to the transgender Barbie doll, however, leads to a significant decline in the perceived norm, with the mean score dropping from 5.19 to 2.95. This suggests that consumers perceive the transgender Barbie doll as less representative of the stereotypical Barbie doll norms. This noticeable deviation from the perceived norm highlights the need to examine the transgression's dimensions in more detail.

The analysis clearly demonstrates that the transgender Barbie doll is perceived as transgressive, as evidenced by the significantly higher scores compared to the mean score of 3.5 ($t = 74.135$, $t = 76.730$, $t = 76.897$, and $t = 69.536$; all $p < 0.001$). The dimensions of “militancy” ($m = 4.2393$), “avant-gardism” ($m = 4.1392$), “unpredictability” ($m = 4.0218$), and “provocation” ($m = 4.0006$) stand out notably. In contrast, the perceived “usefulness” dimension of the transgression is very low ($m = 2.86$; $t = 35.505$). This suggests that the act of self-transgression is not seen as pointless or unjustified. Thus, the cognitive dimension of the perceived necessity of the transgression is closely linked to high scores for the “avant-garde” and “militant” nature of the transgressive act.

As previously mentioned, the effect of the transgression was assessed by measuring the hedonic attitude towards the stereotypical Barbie doll before and after exposure to the transgender Barbie doll. The results indicate that the stimulus, i.e., exposure to the

transgender Barbie doll, positively influences the hedonic attitude towards the stereotypical Barbie doll. Specifically, an ANOVA conducted on the normalized scores (F-test significant at $p < 0.0001$; $F = 47.651$; $df = 1$) shows a greater tendency to appreciate the stereotypical Barbie doll after exposure to the transgender Barbie doll, with the mean score increasing from 3.75 to 4.36. The transgender Barbie doll does not diminish the appeal of the stereotypical Barbie doll; on the contrary, it seems to enhance its appreciation.

The result is particularly interesting when considering the hedonic attitude towards the transgender Barbie doll, which has a mean score of 3.16. Notably, the change in hedonic attitude towards the stereotypical Barbie doll before and after exposure to the transgender Barbie doll shows an increase of 0.61. This increase is almost identical to the difference between the initial hedonic attitude towards the stereotypical Barbie doll (3.75) and the hedonic attitude towards the transgender Barbie doll (3.16), which is 0.58. Thus, the presence of self-transgression, as reflected in the lower score for the hedonic attitude towards the transgender Barbie doll, paradoxically enhances the hedonic attitude towards Mattel's traditional offering. In short, *after exposure to the transgender Barbie doll, consumers report a greater affection for the stereotypical Barbie doll.*

4. Implications and Research Avenues

Generations of young girls and boys have grown up playing with the stereotypical Barbie doll. Aware of significant societal changes and evolving consumer expectations, Mattel has made efforts to partially “break the mold” from which it originated by introducing Barbie dolls with diverse morphologies, identities, and cultural backgrounds. One of the company's most recent strategies for self-transgression of the original marketing norm is the introduction of a transgender Barbie doll, representing a new era in the depiction of women, gender fluidity, and diversity. This bold move challenges deeply ingrained “codes” within Western societies, pushing the boundaries of inclusivity, acceptance, and progressive societal change that reflect shifting values.

Mattel's self-transgression sparks a debate: does the transgender Barbie doll truly convey a message of liberation, or is it merely an extension of the marketing system, reinventing itself with supposedly more inclusive representations to meet societal demands, enhance brand relevance, and appeal to a broader audience? A survey of 443 consumers offers some insightful answers. On one hand, the transgender Barbie doll is indeed perceived as a transgression. On the other hand, this transgression is seen as both militant and justified, reflecting a growing

awareness of diversity and societal progress. In other words, this act of transgression is viewed as a meaningful commitment, aligning with the evolving values of consumers.

A paradoxical effect of the transgender Barbie doll on consumers' hedonic attitudes towards the stereotypical Barbie doll emerged. Specifically, the stereotypical Barbie doll benefits from a more positive hedonic attitude once consumers are exposed to the transgender Barbie doll. This act of self-transgression leads to a greater appreciation of the traditional product, despite the transgender Barbie doll representing a departure from conventional norms. This suggests that introducing transgressive products can enhance the appeal of a brand's flagship products, creating an unexpected yet effective marketing dynamic. Marketers might therefore consider launching "disruptive" products, not for their immediate success, but for their ability to generate demand for more traditional items in their portfolio, ultimately boosting overall brand visibility.

On a theoretical level, this research contributes to the literature on transgression by focusing not on norms external to the brand, but on the marketing norms established by the brand itself. It introduces the innovative concept of self-transgression, a strategy increasingly adopted by brands seeking to distance themselves from their established norms to better reposition themselves in response to societal and consumer-driven changes. To date, there has been little empirical research—particularly quantitative studies—measuring the effects of self-transgression on consumer behavior, especially in terms of long-term brand loyalty. The study of the transgender Barbie doll, therefore, offers valuable insights into the impact of self-transgression, providing a deeper understanding of consumer reactions and evolving attitudes.

In terms of research avenues, it would be valuable to explore other effects of self-transgression, such as its impact on brand personality evolution, consumer trust, emotional connection, and purchase intention. Cross-cultural studies would also provide insights into the similarities vs. differences between countries in how "committed" self-transgression is represented. Complementary analyses could reveal the influence of cultural and contextual factors, for example, by comparing consumer reactions in the United States, where the Mattel brand originated, with those in European or Asian countries, where values and societal norms often differ, affecting the acceptance and perceived authenticity of transgressive products.

References

- Anand, M. (2024). *Impact of consumers' political ideology on their evaluation and response to brand transgressions*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Minneapolis (MN): University of Minnesota.
- Broniarczyk, S., & Alba, J. (1994). The importance of the brand in brand extension. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 31(2), 214–228.

- Chan, K., Li, L., Diehl, S., & Terlutter, R. (2007). Consumers' response to offensive advertising: a cross cultural study. *International Marketing Review*, 24(5), 606–628.
- Dahl, D., Frankenberger, K., & Manchanda, R. (2003). Does it pay to shock? Reactions to shocking and nonshocking advertising content among university students. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 43(3), 268–280.
- de Funès, J. (2020). Transgresser, par-delà bien et mal [Transgressing beyond good and evil]. In M. Flis-Trèves, & R. Frydman (eds.), *Transgression: scandale ou nécessité? [Transgression: scandal or necessity?]* (pp. 141–143). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France. (in French).
- Estellon, V. (2005). Eloge de la transgression [In praise of transgression]. *Champ Psychosomatique*, 38(2), 149–166. (in French).
- Fournaise, T., Kessous, A., & Valette-Florence, P. (2023). When luxury brands use recycled materials: consumer and professional viewpoints on a transgressive effect. *Décisions Marketing*, 110, 191–216.
- Hanan, A., Moulins, J.-L., & Valette-Florence, P. (2024). Toward a solution to retailer food waste? Influences of ordinary transgression on symbolic associations and the relationship with the brand. *Recherche & Applications en Marketing*, 39(3), 67–99.
- Harpaz, B. (2016, January). For the world's most scrutinized body, Barbie has a new look. *Associated Press*. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/relationships-general-news-celebrity-parenting-b6a09511e0644463a1e419bcd789844f> (Last accessed: July 6, 2024).
- Harriger, J., Schaefer, L., Thompson, K., & Cao, L. (2019). You can buy a child a curvy Barbie doll, but you can't make her like it: young girls' beliefs about Barbie dolls with diverse shapes and sizes. *Body Image*, 30, 107–113.
- Hastings, M., Nicolas, L., & Passard, C., eds. (2012). *Paradoxes de la transgression [Paradoxes of transgression]*. Paris: CNRS Editions. (in French).
- Hemonnet-Goujot, A., Kessous, A., & Magnoni, F. (2022). The effect of sustainable product innovation on the consumer–luxury brand relationship: the role of past identity salience. *Journal of Business Research*, 139, 1513–1524.
- Kennedy, E., & Guzmán, F. (2021). No matter what you do, I still love you: an examination of consumer reaction to brand transgressions. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 29(2), 594–608.
- Osborne, J., & Costello, A. (2009). Best practices in exploratory factor analysis: four recommendations for getting the most from your analysis. *Pan-Pacific Management Review*, 12(2), 131–146.
- Parry, S., Jones, R., Stern, P., & Robinson, M. (2013). “Shockvertising:” an exploratory investigation into attitudinal variations and emotional reactions to shock advertising. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 12(2), 112–121.
- Rey-Debove, J., & Rey, A. (1993). *Le nouveau Petit Robert [The new Petit Robert dictionary]*. Paris: Editions Le Robert. (in French).
- Rome, E. (2024). Perspective. Barbie: food for the soul or fanciful nostalgia? *Advances in Nutrition*, 15(3), Article 100182.
- Vézina, R., & Paul, O. (1997). Provocation in advertising: a conceptualization and an empirical assessment. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 14(2), 177–192.