

“All Girls Are Barbies”: A Feminist Critique of  
Nicki Minaj’s Barbie Persona

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## “All Girls Are Barbies”: A Feminist Critique of Nicki Minaj’s Barbie Persona

### Introduction

Whether it is as “Martha,” “Roman Zolanski,” or “Harajuku Barbie,” Nicki Minaj and her alter egos are always grabbing the attention of journalists, fans, and other hip-hop artists. As one of the newest members of an elite group of emcees and rappers within the hip-hop genre, Nicki Minaj displays her talent for theatrics by personifying some of her favorite alter egos. While other female emcees (femcees) have appeared throughout pop culture such as Lil’ Kim and Lauryn Hill, Nicki Minaj arguably is the first to obtain this level of fame and notoriety. The release of her debut album *Pink Friday* in 2010 was certified Platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America, making her the first artist to have seven singles on the *Billboard Hot 100* at once (Iandoli). There is no doubt that Nicki Minaj’s alter egos, especially Harajuku Barbie, have helped establish her as a powerful femcee and have given her a lasting place in hip-hop history.

Throughout Minaj’s time in the spotlight, her audience has seen her morph from one character to the next, all adorned with different outfits, different tonalities, and different postures. Her ability to seamlessly switch from one alter ego to the next then leaves audiences confused and star-struck. While Nicki Minaj’s character Roman might encourage heads to turn, her alter ego “Barbie” is the real attention grabber. As a member of the rap group Young Money, founded by Lil’ Wayne, Nicki Minaj was featured as the female voice on the hit track “Bedrock” in 2009. In the music video, Minaj is featured wearing a black wig with hot pink highlights and a “Barbie” insignia necklace. She established her Barbie persona with her lyrics, ultra-girly body language, and high-pitched flirtatious voice, which successfully prompted audiences to take

notice and the media frenzy to begin. The artist herself has almost become synonymous with her Barbie persona: a mix of dramatic wigs, doll-like makeup, stiff plastic robotic movements, and an army of fans she refers to as her own personal “Barbies” (Hawgood). Although the Barbie alter-ego has been used before in pop-culture, most notably by Lil’ Kim, Minaj has given the character a new, hyper-sexualized makeover.

Nicki Minaj argues that she intends to push the envelope for women, and to pave the road for female-dominance within not only the hip-hop music genre but society as a whole. Hip-hop has long been associated with misogynistic attitudes towards women, encouraging females to obtain their identity through erotic power and overt sexuality (Weitzer and Kubrin 10). Lewd images of undressed women sprawled on top of luxury cars are common scenes in hip-hop music videos. Women are seldom seen as powerful and intelligent human beings—instead they are portrayed as sex objects with nothing more to offer than their bodies. In an interview with *Interview Magazine*, Minaj talks about the strengths she wants to instill in her fans and wants “people—especially young girls—to know that in life, nothing is going to be based on sex appeal. You’ve got to have something else to go with that” (Rachel 1). She claims to encourage her female audience to achieve more than a subordinate role in society and to push past the age-old method of achieving power through mere sexuality.

Realizing that Nicki Minaj’s Barbie persona is influential, it is imperative to understand the message as a representation of postmodern feminism. Through this postmodern representation she attempts to empower women by encouraging them to attain a fierce hold over their sexuality and reclaim the power over their bodies, and thus themselves. Minaj’s goal of empowering women and nullifying male supremacy is somewhat achieved by bringing attention to the misogynistic attitudes held in hip-hop society. She clearly states in interviews and in her

lyrics that she doesn't believe there is a decent female role-model within hip-hop culture and hopes to pave the way for women to achieve the level of success and respect male rappers like Jay Z and others have enjoyed for years. While she does attempt to break new ground for women, she ultimately, perhaps inadvertently, promotes the same patriarchal standards that have plagued society for centuries. While her rhetoric might portray her as a hip-hop feminist, Nicki Minaj contradicts her message of female empowerment by using the sexualized Barbie persona and once again encouraging her female audience to use their bodies in order to gain attention and power.

The use of an adopted persona is very common both in literature as well as day-to-day communication. Psychologist Carl Jung defined persona as a "mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual" (Jung, "Two Essays on Analytical Psychology" 190). This process of adopting another voice or mask has been studied extensively by literary scholars and communication studies scholars alike. Although Jung writes about persona from a psychology standpoint, persona is used by both authors and performers in order to help them tell a story. A persona can have a dramatic impact as a rhetorical device used by a rhetor to persuade his or her audience.

Walker Gibson's book, *Persona: A Style Study for Readers*, examines the effect persona and other literary devices can have on a piece of literature. When writing about an author's persona, Gibson acknowledges the connection between the rhetorical device and Aristotle's three rhetorical means of persuasion. Gibson notes that the first of these three building blocks of persuasion, the character of the speaker, is most closely involved with persona. After explaining the Latin origins of the word persona, meaning mask, Gibson writes about the effectiveness of "putting on an act" or "taking on a character." He states that "the means of communication we

choose, the roles we play, and the language we use, are creative decisions we make” (Gibson 4). Nicki Minaj undoubtedly uses her persona to develop her ethos as a performer, to boost music sales, while also attempting to send a message to listeners about the role of women in hip-hop and in society. Instead of letting her audience see her natural personality, she incorporates different personae to create interest among the public.

In this essay I would like to examine and evaluate Nicki Minaj’s use of the Barbie persona within her rhetoric. First, it is imperative for me to examine Barbie and to understand the history and connotations of the doll, the word, and the character. The history of the Barbie itself is the foundation of the Barbie persona and the doll as a cultural icon. I will then outline the ways that Minaj uses the historical context and American connotations of Barbie in her performances, initially through her appearance, then her physical movement, and lastly through her lyrics and voice. Once the essence of the Barbie persona has been outlined, I will implement a feminist criticism to critique Minaj’s rhetoric and to further understand whether her postmodern feminist Barbie message is helping to equalize the status of women and men in society or to widen the gap even more. While some might argue that Nicki Minaj's rhetoric denounces patriarchal standards and aims to equalize the status of women and men in society, I believe her goal is nullified with the use of her Barbie persona, ultimately encouraging women to use sex in order to gain power instead of promoting a message of acceptance and respect for women in their natural form.

### Background

As a native of Trinidad and Tobago, and later a resident of Queens Borough in New York City, Minaj grew up with an interesting perspective on American society. Siobhan O’Connor

interviewed Nicki Minaj for an article entitled, “Character Study: Just How Real is Nicki Minaj,” in 2010. In the article he highlights her rise to fame, her family, and the foundation of how she became the person she is today. Minaj sheds light on her tumultuous life with her drug-addicted and abusive father. In the interview she laments, “I thought we would just be happy, but with a drug-addicted parent there is no such thing as being happy. When you have a father who is stealing your furniture and selling it so that he can buy crack, you suffer” (O’Connor 2). Her mother encouraged her to express herself creatively and eventually suggested Minaj attend a performing arts school where she had an opportunity to practice her natural talent for the stage.

Nicki Minaj first received media attention after she released her first mix tape entitled *Playtime Is Over*. Initially the public was extremely dismissive and deemed her a misfit within the patriarchal world of hip-hop. The genre was overcrowded with men, with only a couple hyper-sexualized females who occasionally were included into the exclusive circle. Minaj claims that “the female rappers of my day spoke about sex a lot. . . and I thought that to have the success they got, I would have to represent the same thing. When in fact, I didn’t have to represent the same thing” (O’Connor 2). It was not until rapper Lil’ Wayne realized her potential and signed her onto his record label *Young Money Entertainment* that the public began taking notice. Almost immediately, Minaj was catapulted into fame as fans fawned over her schizophrenic lyrics and dramatic voices.

It was during the beginning stages of her blossoming career when Minaj began experimenting with her Barbie alter-ego and establishing it as a recurring character within her performances. Barbie’s high-pitched, doll-like voice was soon featured in every one of her songs. Minaj’s makeup also undertook a dramatic doll-like transformation with her signature multi-colored wigs, bright pink lipstick, and airbrushed makeup. Even though the Barbie character has

existed in American pop culture for decades, Minaj's Barbie persona is arguably a new take on the old classic.

In March of 1959, the first Barbie doll was manufactured by the American toy company, Mattel, Inc. Immediately the doll faced a great deal of scrutiny for her over-sexualized features and incredibly unrealistic body-ratio ("Mattel Says It Erred"). Her popularity and universal availability has encouraged the doll to be referenced as an important and influential American toy. As a Professor of Sociology at the University of West Florida, Mary Rogers has extensively researched the role of Barbie in contemporary society. In her book, *Barbie Culture*, Rodgers defines the function of Barbie as not only the doll but as a cultural icon. She defines a cultural icon as "a cultural object that exemplifies some set of values, beliefs, and norms in society—gets a strong grip on a sizable part of the population" (Rogers 6). Since 1959 Barbie has been referenced countless times in American culture and has become synonymous with fakeness, distorted body image, and overt sexuality.

Along with Barbie's popularity and cultural icon status came a great deal of controversy over the message the doll was sending to young consumers. One of the sources of controversy was the release of *Teen Talk Barbie* in 1992, which could speak 270 different phrases ranging from "I love shopping" to "Will we ever have enough clothes?" Americans were especially upset over one of the phrases, "Math class is tough," which received public scrutiny from the American Association of University Women and ultimately led to the discontinuation of the talking doll ("Mattel Says It Erred"). Phrases such as these characterized Barbie as an unintelligent female who only values shallow materialism and her superficial image.

Barbie was referenced in our popular culture shortly after her debut in 1959. It did not take long for the public to add her to their lexicon of language and to reference her in various



venues. Artists began using Barbie as a muse while singers sang about the Barbie image in lyrics doused with satire and parody. The Danish-Norwegian dance-group *Aqua* released their song entitled “Barbie Girl” in 1997, which became a world-wide hit. The song has a repetitive, numbing quality and repeats the lyrics “I’m a Barbie girl in a Barbie world/ Life in plastic is fantastic” (“Barbie Loses Battle”). The song parodied Mattel’s Barbie doll by sexualizing the lead vocalist, Lene Nystrom, and highlighting the “plastic” stereotype the doll promotes among women. The American public quickly took notice of the parody, thus altering the image of the Barbie girl into a more comic character.

While several other references to Barbie have been made, it can be argued that no one has ever been as successful as Nicki Minaj at capturing the character both through presence and performance—ultimately creating a new persona. Nicki Minaj utilizes the hyper-sexual, ditzy, plastic image of Barbie to represent a dramatized view of what men expect women to be. By doing so, some claim that she intentionally parodies the Barbie girl image and is allowing women to break past the stereotype of what women should look like. On the opening track of her album *Pink Friday* titled “I’m the Best”, Minaj states,

I’m fightin’ for the girls that never thought they could win  
 ‘Cause before they could begin  
 You told ‘em it was the end  
 But I am here to reverse the cure they live in

It is clear to the audience that Minaj intends to empower women and pave the road for female success in the hip-hop industry. While her lyrics state her goal, the means by which she attempts to achieve that goal sends a different message. The negative connotations of the Barbie image in relation to feminism prevent Nicki Minaj from attaining her goal of female empowerment.

Instead she encourages the very same notions that she is fighting against. If Minaj were to have adopted a different pro-female persona that did not carry with it the negative connotations of Barbie, her goal of female empowerment would be much more attainable.

In terms of Nicki Minaj's roles it becomes difficult for her as a performer to balance between the character she would like to portray and the "front that has already been established" for her. As an African-American rapper attempting to make it into the highly selective circle of hip-hop elites, she has found herself bombarded with expectations both from society and the music industry. She is expected to fall into the role of the highly sexualized, explicit female performer, solely on stage to excite men and set an example for women. Minaj has clearly stated her desire to push past that social role that was predetermined for many female music performers and instead take a persona that is commonly associated with the very social role she was pushed into and re-appropriate it to create her own image and set a new example.

While rejecting the predetermined role that was chosen for her within the music industry, Nicki Minaj was faced with the difficult task of establishing a new identity and convincing her audience of its authenticity. This is where the Barbie persona was born. Whether it was a gradual process or an idea that was formed overnight, Nicki Minaj began changing her appearance and the context of her rhetoric. It was not very long before the media noticed the Barbie references and began talking about Minaj's cornucopia of wigs and whimsical wardrobes. Nicki Minaj did not start by rejecting the highly sexualized role female performers are cornered into: in fact, she was best described as a rapping femcee famous for her curves and her voluminous buttocks. In the beginning of her career she was very much an image of misogyny and sexism notorious within hip-hop culture. Her outfits were overtly sexual, her advertisements promoting her music were extremely suggestive, and her lyrics were raunchy and crass. In this case, this was exactly

the type of social role that had been dictated to countless other women within the music industry and Nicki Minaj was just another representation of the sexualized female America was all too familiar with.

As Minaj began obtaining more attention and the media started to notice her music, her look significantly changed. In her song, “Dear Old Nicki,” Minaj openly criticizes herself and talks about the change that she went through as an artist, stating, “but you was underground/ and I was mainstream” (Minaj). She refers to the version of herself before mainstream success as “you,” the underground artist who barely received recognition and was overcome with “rawness and... edge” (Minaj). The newer version of Minaj has received ample criticism from fans that have followed her music during the underground stages and urge Minaj to bring the “old Nicki” back. Minaj addresses her old underground self and sings, “you got your fans waiting/ tell me you ain’t six feet under” (Minaj). Regardless of the criticism she receives, Minaj is content with the fame she has received after breaking away from the predetermined role that the music industry and society had dictated for her as a female artist within the hip-hop industry.

### Method

In order to perform a feminist criticism of Nicki Minaj’s Barbie persona it is first necessary to briefly examine the history behind feminism and to define some of the key words that are associated with the term. There are three different waves of feminism in the United States. First-wave feminism falls historically between the years 1896-1920 and is signified by the Women’s Suffrage Movement. The authors of the book *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* cite the beginning of the first-wave “in 1848 at the women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her colleagues wrote

the ‘Declaration of Sentiments’” (Dicker and Piepemeir 8-9). The authors continue to discuss the central goal of the wave as “gaining a legal identity for women that included rights to own property, to sue, to form contracts, and to vote” (9). The abolitionist movement also played a significant role during first-wave feminism. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were both influential leaders of this wave.

Once the right to vote was obtained for women, feminists like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan took the stage and began demanding economic and social equality culminating into second-wave feminism. In this movement, lasting from the 1960’s to the present day, feminists tackle a wide array of issues ranging from female reproductive rights to equal rights within the workplace. Literature such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* as well as countercultural and civil rights movements helped ignite the second wave encouraging heightened feminist awareness and activism (Dicker and Piepmeier 9). The wave focused directly on “equal opportunities in employment and education, access to child care and abortion, the eradication of violence against women, and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment” (9). The efforts of second-wave feminists helped begin closing the gap between men and women in the professional world and also legally with the Equal Rights Amendment.

Although second-wave feminism is still ongoing, there are certain feminists who have broken off to form the third-wave feminism movement. After experiencing the effects of first and second wave feminism and realizing its emphasis on the white, middle-class women, women of color and lesbians began voicing their experiences, thus mobilizing the third wave. This wave, which encompassed a larger demographic of the female population in America, “called for a recognition that identity is intersectional- in other words that gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are interlocking and that oppression is not experienced simply along one axis” (Dicker

and Piepemeir 9). This wave began in the early 1980's and was a result of a growing population of minority women who wanted to address race and identity equality within society as well as a combination of many other causes (10-11). This third wave of feminist ideology came as a result of the conservative Reagan and Bush administrations, leading to the formation of organizations like the Third Wave Foundation and the Riot Grrrls who "used their punk rock sensibilities to create music that proclaimed their defiance of sexist norms and confining gender roles" (11). Although it is true that many goals of the second wave are carried through to the third wave, feminists from the third wave are responding to "a world of global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism and environmental degradation... [and] are therefore concerned not simply with 'women's issues' but with a broad range of interlocking topics" (10). Third-wave feminism attempts to take a step away from gender, using ambiguous language that strongly discourages female or male roles within society. Feminists associated with this wave "use beauty, sex, and power strategically" (12) examining pornography and other sex work either with a sex-positive stance or an anti-pornography position.

All three waves of feminism share the goal of breaking down the sexist restraints of patriarchy, or male dominance, within society and encouraging equality among genders. From this stems many different tactics or devices used to equalize the playing field. Sex-positivity, a movement encouraged by postmodern feminists, "criticizes the restrictions on women's sexual behavior and denounces the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active" (Vance 35-36). Disidentification, the contrast to *identification*, is a term studied by Diana Fuss in her book, *Identification Papers*. In it she writes that "what at first may appear to be a refused identification might in some cases more accurately be termed a disavowed one – an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious" (Fuss 62). By understanding the use of

disidentification we can come closer to understanding what widens the gap between genders and what can close it.

In order to draw attention to the unjust and immoral patriarchal standards that are present in our world, feminists will participate in consciousness-raising, which “provides a model of the transformations involved in coming to feminist consciousness: becoming aware of inequalities, identifying our own part in them, and then taking steps to change them” (Dicker and Piepmeier, 13-14). Similar to consciousness-raising, the reappropriation of derogatory terms can be a very persuasive and effective tactic used by feminists. In 1968, Joreen Freeman, a feminist attorney, authored *Bitch Manifesto*—a paper attempting to reappropriate the word “bitch” and use it to empower women. The manifesto claims that a bitch is “aggressive, assertive, domineering, overbearing, strong-minded, [and] spiteful...A bitch occupies a lot of psychological space. You always know she is around. A bitch takes shit from no one. You may not like her but you cannot ignore her” (Freeman). Freeman’s manifesto attempts to take the concepts that men use to disempower women and reappropriate it into a tool to assert power. Although this is a controversial method of equalizing the gender gap, it does serve as a means of encouraging dialogue about derogatory language that is used against women.

The media serves as one of the main targets of feminists because of the unrelenting degradation of women in music videos, television shows, and movies. The common saying “sex sells” is all too familiar for feminists who have made it their life goal to eradicate the hyper sexuality and dumbing down of women as they are portrayed in the media. There is a clear lack of strong empowered females on the television screen. Numerous feminist critics have examined the music industry as a huge source of female objectification. A.S. Van Dorston states that “the objectification and subordination of women is currently being challenged by creative performers

and directors who are masterfully using postmodernist techniques to manipulate, deconstruct, and reconstruct prevailing constructions of female sexuality”. In Van Dorston’s essay on feminism in MTV videos, he goes on to state that “within the boundaries of female sexuality, feminist videos fit into a sort of mainstream counterhegemony that [was] previously ignored. With more women and blacks watching more music videos than any other group of teenagers, these formerly marginalized viewpoints can have a powerful influence on the entertainment industry” (Van Dorston). It is important for women understand how to use their influence in order to encourage positive female representations in the media.

Feminists look to the work of female artists such as Madonna, who take patriarchal standards and turn them on their head by using humor and irony. In Madonna’s “Material Girl”, the singer “copies the exploitative portrayal of Marilyn Monroe in ‘Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend’ and then subverts it by surrounding herself with powerless, personality-less male dancers” (Van Dorston). The disidentification of Marilyn Monroe’s overtly sexual nature is a technique used by Madonna to challenge patriarchal stereotypes encouraged by the media. On the other hand, feminists can also look at these same messages being sent by female performers such as Madonna and criticize the sexual nature of their music videos and their lyrics. Although artists such as Madonna might be attempting to equalize gender roles, they are sometimes inadvertently encouraging the objectification of women.

In 1959 Erving Goffman began studying the concepts of impression management and self-presentation as an imperative aspect of interpersonal communication. In his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman writes about the social roles that we all must take on as members of a society. This performance aspect of communication is important and interesting, especially when looking at the restrictions that persona and impression management

place on the performer. Goffman claims that “when an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it” (Goffman 28). By introducing the idea of social roles and the concept that certain roles are predetermined for us, Goffman encouraged further investigation on how these predetermined roles are established and whether or not it is possible to reject the role altogether.

The term persona has multiple meanings stemming from its foundation in theatre, literature, psychology and communication studies. In order to understand the use and function of a persona it is important to understand its “multiple meanings, from its Latin root, related to theater; through the ambiguity of its French derivation, *personne*, referring to both a presence and an absence; to Jung's use of the term in analytical psychology” (Bouttiaux, Dehaen, and Turine). Psychologist Carl Jung placed a heavy emphasis on the development of an individual's persona in order to adapt to the social world. In order to prepare for adult life in the external world he claims that the adoption of a flexible persona will aid personal growth. On the other hand, he claims that “the danger is that [people] become identical with their personas- the professor with his textbook, the tenor with his voice” which could lead to “the shallow, brittle, conformist personality which is ‘all persona’ with its excessive concern for ‘what people think’” (Jung, “Memories, Dreams, Reflections” 416). These individuals who completely identify with their persona become fully reliant on maintaining their public image and obsessed with being what society expects them to be. It is definitely important to examine Jung's study of persona and understand the delicate balance between simply adopting a flexible persona and wholeheartedly becoming the persona. Nicki Minaj's Barbie persona is constructed through all aspects of her performance: her physical appearance including hair, makeup, and clothing, her voice, her facial expressions, and her lyrics.



## Analysis

Nicki Minaj's Barbie persona can most clearly be seen with her outward appearance. When Minaj performs on stage or is seen out in public, she is always wearing a wig. Her hair is the first to make a statement, whether it is a large neon-green beehive or a black and white polka dotted bob, her wigs are always shocking. Oftentimes Minaj can be seen wearing a platinum blonde wig cut with bangs that frame her face. This look is very iconic of the Barbie persona. Minaj is also famous for her dramatic doll-like makeup. She will always be seen wearing incredible amounts of eye makeup, false lashes, bubblegum pink lipstick, and flawless skin. Her nails are always painted bright neon colors, while her clothing is loud and over-the-top. Her outfits heighten her sexuality by drawing extra attention to her breasts and her backside. She will usually be seen wearing a corset top that accentuates her breasts and tight, shiny pants that leave little to the imagination. She dramatizes her curves and contributes to the hyper-sexual image of the Barbie persona. Almost nothing about Minaj's outward appearance is real: from her nails to her clothes to her eyelashes, everything is fake and exaggerated.

There has been a huge movement among the black community, feminists, and other minority groups that encourage women to wear their hair naturally. The movement promotes the resistance of chemical straightening, perms, weaves, and extensions as a symbol of female empowerment and true beauty (Claytor). In an article in *USA Today*, author Shari Rudavsky sheds some light on the natural hair movement. She claims that women relied on celebrities like Erykah Badu and India Arie to help change the status quo when it came to hair in the African American community. Before Badu began sporting her natural hair, black women felt societal pressure to use relaxers and weaves in order to achieve a more European look (Rudavsky). While Badu and Arie encourage women to embrace the natural beauty of their hair, Nicki Minaj goes

against the movement by sporting wigs—encouraging women to wear synthetic hair and revert back to following the mainstream European standard of beauty. The way in which Minaj changes the standard of female beauty to support synthetics and fakeness is harmful to women’s self-perception. Psychotherapist Alicia Nicole Walton argues that the natural hair movement is about more than the physical shape of a woman’s hair but rather lends itself to “a discussion on self-esteem and body image” (Rudavsky). Feminists argue that a woman being comfortable with her skin and accepting of their natural form is the first step to denouncing the hold patriarchy has on women and her beauty (Bartkey). It is harmful to women in regards to their self-image and in rewriting society’s standards of a “beautiful woman”. Nicki Minaj, as a supposed example of female empowerment, reverses that message and discourages the donning of natural hair.

After taking one look at any of Nicki Minaj’s music videos it is apparent how her movements try to emulate Barbie. In her video for “Super Bass” the opening scene shows Minaj in a platinum blond and hot pink wig with wide, false eyelashes and playful, bright pink lipstick staring at the camera and blinking wildly (Minaj). Her motions are very quick in the video and robot-like. The physicality of her movements encourages the viewer to think of a doll or a robot-like Barbie. Her grin is always wide and her eyes look as if there is not much thought behind them. She stares lustfully at the camera, winking, and sucking in her lips. The scene is cut short only to show an image of a hot pink convertible that seems to be a direct replica of the one Barbie is famous for. Nicki Minaj is next shown dripping a hot pink liquid onto her breasts from a champagne glass in the middle of a pool while her mouth gapes open and she suggestively stares at the nearly naked men watching her (Minaj). The scenes in her videos are rich with allusions to Barbie. Her sharp movements are very important in creating the Barbie persona and promoting the doll-like character she is presenting as her alter-ego.

Although most female rappers reference sexuality in their lyrics, Nicki Minaj does so in a much different way. In order to establish her Barbie persona within her songs, Minaj sings in a style that is difficult to describe. Her voice is a mixture of harsh raspy tones, a high-pitched uber-girly voice and everything in between. She combines a British accent in her melodies while also staying true to Barbie with her quick, sharp, flirty statements that remind you, this is Nicki Minaj. She references herself as Barbie many times throughout her lyrics. She begins the song “1234” with the quick statement, “It’s Barbie bitches,” and then continues to sing, “I’m the Barbie/ keep alotta plastic” (Minaj). Her lyrics are short and to the point, referencing Barbie and “plastic” to remind the listener of the persona she is trying to emulate. Minaj recognizes that women can generally relate to the message she is spreading, simply because a certain degree of materialism does exist in every human being. Whether you are a woman curious about the Barbie message or a man who is infatuated by her physical appearance, Nicki Minaj continually uses different aspects of performance to communicate her message. She uses her voice and her lyrics to command attention to her music and to promote her plastic Barbie persona.

The overt sexuality of Minaj’s outfits act to uphold society’s dark history of female objectification and ultimately supports patriarchy. Traditionally, women on stage were encouraged to dress in a way that entices men and serves as an example for female audiences to mirror. In this case, Nicki Minaj is not taking any real steps to break down those stereotypes and to set an example for women. Instead of wearing clothing that does not highlight her sexuality but rather emphasizes her vocal ability, or the nuances of her performance, she wears bra tops and underwear placing even more emphasis on her voluptuous body. In a way, it could be argued that Minaj is an example of a post-modern feminist and is expressing a sex-positive ideology. Sex-positivity encourages women to take their sexuality in their own hands and to equalize the

sexual playing field. By dressing in an overtly sexual manner, it could be that Minaj is encouraging fans to do the same and to take control of their own sexuality.

Minaj attempts to reappropriate the meaning associated with the Mattel doll by embracing the persona and taking it a step further. Mattel's Barbie traditionally exclude minority women from its collections. The iconic doll, and the symbol of the perfect woman, is indeed white with blonde hair and blue eyes. In order to reappropriate the image, it is essential that Minaj come from a minority background to create a greater contrast between the Matell doll and her own Barbie persona. It is important to understand Nicki Minaj's message as also stemming from third wave feminism. As a woman of color, she aims to create a dialogue about black girls and women who are often viewed in a secondary or subordinate position. Aligning with the goals of third wave feminists, she wishes to introduce a dialogue about ethnicity and race along with female empowerment. Using Barbie as a tool in developing her persona, she attempts to reappropriate a mainstream white icon, thus creating the "Black Barbie." She attempts to use this reappropriation a third wave feminist message of linking race and gender.

Although the promiscuousness of her wardrobe might in some ways break down sexual barriers, the "fakeness" of Nicki Minaj should be a great concern to feminists. Her repetitive use of synthetic wigs dyed using the wide spectrum of the rainbow send the wrong message to women in regards to their natural hair. Even more, it tells black women that to be beautiful one should don a wig or attempt to emulate the style of the wig on your own real hair. Her fake hair and fake nails do little to reject the objectification of women and instead encourage the same patriarchal standards she claims she promotes. Not only is Minaj powerfully embracing the Barbie persona, but she encourages her fans to do the same by calling them "Barbs." By naming

her fans after herself she creates an incredibly strong following encouraging them to emulate her and the Barbie persona.

There are some critics who still argue that Nicki Minaj has blasted through the hip-hop industry and revamped the age-old patriarchal standards that have endured. In an article in the *New York Times*, Jon Caramanica highlighted the success and the impact of Nicki Minaj when he stated, “she has spent so much time and effort dismantling traditional female rap archetypes—the vixen, the tough broad” (Caramanica). I agree that through Nicki Minaj’s Barbie persona, a certain level of consciousness raising occurs. Audience members who wish to look past the exterior message and physicality of Minaj’s Barbie persona may understand it as a very advanced way of reappropriating the image of Barbie and questioning the value hip-hop culture places on women. Although this might be Minaj’s goal, it is not successful because the majority of her audience is not willing to look to the concealed messages and rather fixates on the external Barbie persona. Rather than break away from the social role the hip-hop industry has tried to box her into, she is simply supporting a new set of stereotypes that degrade and objectify women. Her clothing aims to assert her power by objectifying herself and expressing her sexuality. Instead of demonstrating her intelligence and ability, she uses her body as a means of grabbing male attention- as if having the attention of a man is equivalent to having power over him.

### Conclusion

The rhetoric Nicki Minaj uses in her music and interviews express her desire to “play with big boys” and show other women that they can be just as powerful as men, yet her Barbie persona does just the opposite. The persona she adopts follows in the same footsteps women have been resisting for centuries: a highly sexualized, unintelligent female will change her hair,

clothing, nails, and makeup simply to attract a man. The cover art of Nicki Minaj's album *Pink Friday* features "exaggerated Barbie imagery in order to call attention to the artificiality of her appearance. One outstretched leg, shiny as plastic, is more than double the length of her torso. She has no arms, and her breasts are thrust so high they cover her collarbone. These out-of-whack proportions and missing limbs communicate the impossibility of the femininity she embodies" (Todd). Minaj's "Barbs" will inevitably use this image as a representation of their role model and attempt to emulate the message she is sending.

The problem with the persona Minaj adopts stems from the connotations and the history it carries with it. The image of Barbie's "blond hair, blue eyes, wasp-thin waist and improbable curves have embodied American culture's ludicrous yet deeply harmful beauty standards. These beauty standards are grounded in racist notions that associate whiteness with virtue and loveliness" (Todd). By creating a "Black Barbie" Nicki Minaj hopes to reappropriate the image but "given this history, the lure of Barbie for [Nicki Minaj] might seem to reflect an internalization of white beauty standards" (Todd). Instead of reappropriating the image, Minaj simply seems to use this persona in order to gain mainstream acceptance. In her debut studio album, *Pink Friday*, Nicki Minaj opens up with the track, "I'm the Best." She exclaims in the song, "I'm fighting for the girls that never thought they could win" (Caramanica). Minaj's goal of female empowerment is real, yet her method of rejecting patriarchy seems to be more concerned with pushing a persona, which will in turn encourage sales of her album and her merchandise.

On December 2, 2011, the Mattel Corporation released a new, one of a kind doll, the Nicki Minaj Barbie. The Barbie, donning hot pink hair, a poofed-up ultra-feminine skirt, and pink heeled boots is no doubt an iconic imitation of the hip-hop star (Schneider). Critics claim

that the Nicki Minaj Barbie is not much of a change from the iconic femcee herself. While Minaj's goal of encouraging women to strive for the same level of power and success as men is indeed valiant and important, her method of achieving that goal is ultimately harmful to women. In an article for *The Grio*, an African American news portal, Lori Adelman begs the question, "At what point does the narrative of an aggressive female hip-hop artist with crazy sex appeal, and solid street sensibilities become just the opposite -- a tale of faux-bravado, empty rhetoric, and deceptive stage gimmicks that only thinly masks a desperation to transcend the confines of one's true identity?" Nicki Minaj's Barbie persona fails to reach the point of female empowerment and instead encourages women to gain power through the use of their bodies. With millions of fans watching the young star, Minaj has a major platform to raise consciousness, defy the objectification of women, and reject patriarchy—thus setting an example for women all over the world. Rather than encouraging females to rely on their intelligence and ability to equalize the gap between men and women, Nicki Minaj parades standards of plasticized sexuality as a means of garnering media attention, financial success, and power.

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