

Teaching Children Emotional Intelligence:

A Closer Look at the Barbie Vlogs

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Abstract

In 2015, toy company Mattel began a YouTube vlog starring a 3D animated Barbie that featured many vlogs seemingly geared at increasing children's emotional intelligence. One concern about this promising resource is that previous research suggests that cultural relevance has a notable role in the receptivity of children's media content, and Barbie may not be the most versatile role model for children of all demographics. Using a quasi-experimental matched-groups design, this proposed research aims to evaluate the impacts of the Barbie vlogs on children's levels of emotional intelligence, and determine whether the children's ethnicity (Black or White, within the scope of this initial study) has any effect on the level of impact. I hypothesize that because the Barbie vlogs lack cultural relevance for Black children, the vlogs will have more of an impact on White children's emotional intelligence. These findings would suggest that there is a need for producers of children's media to make similar children's programs that are culturally relevant for Black children. These findings may also encourage educators to bring more culturally relevant media into their classrooms to increase the content's receptivity for a more diverse range of students.

Keywords: child psychology, diversity, educational media, trait emotional intelligence, cultural relevance

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On June 19th of 2015, Barbie posted her first video blog to YouTube. As of April 2021, there are 149 vlogs posted to the Barbie YouTube channel, and these videos have more than 13 million views in total (Barbie, 2021). The videos range in their content from DIY instructional videos to trendy online “challenges”. Though, like any vlogger, Barbie sometimes takes the time to sit down in front of the camera and talk about more serious things. These videos contain heavier content, such as her videos titled “How Are You Feeling? Sharing My Honest Thoughts,” “How to Forgive Someone,” and “Feeling Blue? You’re Not Alone.”

The team that produces the Barbie vlogs wrote Barbie’s character as a 17-year-old social media influencer (Mattel, 2018). Barbie takes on an older sister role as she speaks directly to the audience with thoughtful introspection. In “How Are You Feeling? Sharing My Honest Thoughts,” she laments,

“Today I am having a day where I feel like I am not in control of anything. And I don’t know what to do to fix it. But I don’t have to fix it. What I can do is: listen to myself and name the feelings I’m having. Try it: ‘I feel scared. I feel angry.’ We’re allowed to have feelings. Even the unpleasant ones.” (Barbie, 2020, July 31; 0:46-1:25).

Many programs in children’s media environments help kids learn about their emotions; how to identify, regulate, and express them. Notable examples include Sesame Street— a pioneer in educational children’s media (Fisch et al., 1999). Another notable PBS Kids program is Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood, a modern spinoff of Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. This show teaches kids emotional intelligence through “strategy songs” that model emotional regulation not just in the child characters but in parents- a strategy that is mindful of the fact that it’s beneficial for parents

to actively engage in the media alongside their children (Council on Communications and Media, 2016). Both of these examples are from PBS Kids, a broadcasting television network whose production involves insights from researchers in the field of developmental psychology. Sesame Street, in particular, has an impressive track record for producing effective media interventions for children; their *Little Children, Big Challenges* program has interventions parents' incarceration that has shown positive impacts on the wellbeing of children with incarcerated parents (Shlafer et al., 2017).

The Barbie vlogs appear to have been produced with active consideration of children's psychology, but the details of its production behind the scenes (other than info regarding voice acting and 3D animation techniques) seem to be undocumented or thus far unavailable to the public. It is important to consider that while PBS Kids is a nonprofit organization with its primary goal being to educate children, Mattel is a company; by definition, its primary goal is to accrue capital. It may be the case that as long as it sells, educational efficacy may not be the priority. But what makes the Barbie vlogs stand out is that they are targeted at an older age group; the Barbie vlog's target audience is 6-11 (Mattel, 2018) and PBS Kids' target audience is 2-8. Uncommon in media for older children, Barbie looks at and directly addresses the audience; a children's media technique put into popular use by Fred Rogers in Mr. Roger's Neighborhood (King, 2018, p. 353). Also similar to Rogers, Barbie appears to be very open and honest with her audience.

If Barbie's YouTube videos can effectively increase emotional intelligence, this could be a very beneficial learning resource for 6-11-year-old girls, especially given that around 81% of parents with kids 11 or younger let their child watch YouTube, with 34% doing so regularly. (Smith et al., 2018). However, there is room for concern that Barbie may not be a universally

relatable role model, which may impede her ability to get these messages across to all viewers. Perhaps viewers with marginalized identities are not able to see themselves and their community in Barbie, who is white and middle-class. While there have been substantial gains in the representation of people of color in media over the years, they continue to be underrepresented. According to the UCLA Hollywood Diversity report, Black characters make up 9% of all film roles despite making up 13.4% of the population, while White characters make up 77% of all film roles despite constituting just 60.4% of the population (Hunt et al., 2019). The present study aims to discover if the Barbie vlogs vary in their ability to teach emotional intelligence between Black and White audiences.

Children's Emotional Intelligence/Expression & Education

Emotional intelligence has been defined as the ability to recognize, process, and regulate emotions of the self and others (Piqueras et al., 2019). A meta-analysis conducted by Martins et al. (2010) identified emotional intelligence as a positive predictor of overall mental health, and acts as a protective factor to children experiencing stressful circumstances (Petrides et al., 2017). Emotional intelligence is recognized as an important factor in children's development.

A 2019 study aimed to find possible pathways into childrens' psychosocial adjustment and see if gender had a mediating role (Piqueras et al., 2019). They looked at the combined effects of Trait EI and emotional/social problems. The participants were 268 Spanish children ages 8-12 ($m = 10.09$, $SD = 1.32$, 45.10% male) from two public educational centers in the Province of Alicante in Spain. They conducted a survey using the site, DetectaWeb. Regression and mediation/moderation analyses were done on the data. They found that Trait EI had a buffering effect against maladjustment risks. Trait EI was a direct determinant of psychosocial

adjustment, and emotional problems/social rejection were indirect determinants. For girls more than boys, lower Trait EI scores determined lower levels of psychosocial adjustment.

Another study examined parents' socialization of children's emotional expression (Scherr et al., 2017). 1,458 children ages 6-19 ($m = 12.7$, $SD = 4.0$; 49% female) living in Germany were interviewed. Facilitated by trained interviewers, the children were provided with a questionnaire in their homes. The questionnaire measured two factors- perceived parental approval of the child's emotional expression; "How do your parents like it when you show that you feel really happy/sad/scared/angry?" and the child's approval of TV characters' emotional expression; "How much do you like it when the characters show honestly that they feel really happy/sad/scared/angry?" Their hypothesis was supported; perceived parental approval had a consistent positive effect on children's expression of fear, sadness, anger, and happiness, and perceived parental approval had a positive relationship with children's approval of TV characters' emotional expression. This supports previous findings that parents socialize their children to express only certain emotions and to mask others (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Eisenberg (1998) also found that when parents' teach children to minimize negative emotions, children become less emotionally expressive and sometimes less socially competent.

Race, Culture, & Representation

In a qualitative study by Clark & Fleming (2019), researchers analyzed the impact that culturally relevant texts (CRTs) had on children's learning and engagement. For a text to be culturally relevant, it has to reflect the reality of minority children. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 preschool to third-grade teachers who had tried a curriculum with a focus on cultural relevance. The participating teachers taught at schools that had a population of children from diverse sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds. After interviews

were conducted, they were transcribed and coded for salient themes. They found that the CRTs acted as a catalyst for meaning-making, investment, and engagement with the reading. The children were able to use experiential knowledge to connect with the material. The teachers noted that reading comprehension and engagement were excellent when working with CRTs. Christ et al. (2018) conducted a similar study and found similar results.

In a retrospective study by Tukachinsky, R., Mastro, D., & Yarchi, M., (2017), analysis was conducted on the way Latino and Black Americans are represented on TV and if there was an association with these groups' opinions on their ethnic group. The researchers analyzed six waves of cross-sectional surveys from the ANES from 1988 to 2008. They then analyzed 12 seasons of the most popular prime time television shows from the same period. They found that a lack of representation or misrepresentation in media was associated with a negative psychological effect on those whose identities are underrepresented or represented negatively.

Given the reviewed literature, it follows that children's emotional intelligence and emotional expression is very important for healthy development, and media has the ability to foster emotional intelligence. Given the literature on the topic of race, culture, and representation, it follows that culturally relevant material increases childrens' engagement and that lack of representation or misrepresentation in media can have a negative effect on minority viewers.

Given these considerations, I hypothesize:

H1: Children who watch the Barbie vlogs will score higher on emotional intelligence than groups that do not.

H2: Because Barbie may only be relatable to only a portion of her audience, Black viewers who watched the vlog will show less improvement on TEI than White viewers.

Method

Participants

My sample would consist of 360 children between the ages of 6 and 11. Half of the participants would be Black (180), and half would be White (180). Because the Barbie vlogs were produced with a female audience in mind, all participants would be girls. All participants would be attending an elementary school in Oregon. Clustering would be used to select 10 elementary and K-8 schools in Oregon. I would reach out to the headmaster of each of the schools, explain the goals of the research, and ask permission to send out a letter to 720 parents/guardians (72 per school) requesting their child's participation in the study during school hours. These recruitment methods are modeled after those used by Harrington & O'Connell (2016), and their response rate was an average of 52%. For this reason, I would like to send out twice as many letters as my desired sample size. Responding parents would be used for the sampling frame.

Measures

Emotional Intelligence

The present study would use the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Child Short Form (TEIQue – CSF; Mavroveli et al., 2008). The TEIQue – CF measures nine facets of Trait Emotional Intelligence (TEI): adaptability, affective disposition, emotion expression, emotion perception, emotion regulation, impulse control, peer relations, self-esteem and self-motivation in children. The short form version of the questionnaire has 36 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from Completely Disagree to Completely Agree. The sum of these scores indicates the child's global TEI.

Socioeconomic Status

In order to control for socioeconomic status (SES) and capture a more clear effect of race, SES will be measured through the Family Affluence Scale (FAS; Currie et al., 1997). This scale was developed for children to reliably estimate their family's SES. It contains four items; family car ownership, having one's own (unshared) room, the amount of computers the family owns, and the number of times the child has been on vacation during the past year. The results are scored from 0-7, with 0-3 being low, 4-5 being intermediate, and 6-7 being high. The four results are then averaged into a single SES score. In previous studies, it was shown to have good criterion and construct validity (e.g., Boyce et al., 2006).

Design & Procedure

Participants in the Black and White groups will be randomly assigned to the experimental group, the neutral stimulus control group, or the control group with no stimulus. For each group, $n = 120$; 60 Black and 60 White. Group 1 will be the experimental group (who will watch the Barbie vlog video), group 2 will be the neutral stimulus control group (who will watch a different video of the same genre and length), and group 3 will be the control group with no stimulus (who will not watch any videos).

Procedure

Participants will come into a reserved room in the school for a study "investigating children's media interests." Children in group 1 will be shown the Barbie vlog, "How are you feeling? Sharing my honest thoughts" and children in group 2 will be shown a different video of the same genre and length. Next, children in all groups will be administered the TEIQue – CF, followed by the Family Affluence Scale to determine if their SES will be labeled low, intermediate, or high. Finally, the children will be debriefed and thanked. All children will receive a free book to take home from a selection of Black culturally relevant children's books

that will be made available.

Anticipated Results

To test my hypothesis, I would use a 3x2 factorial ANOVA, with one variable being race (Black and White) and the other being experiment group division (groups 1, 2, and 3). The output variable would be TEI score, and SES will be entered as a control variable. If H1 were supported, the results would show that the experimental group yielded significantly higher TEI scores than both control groups. If H2 were supported, the results would show that Black participants in the experimental group showed less improved TEI scores than White participants.

Discussion

Theoretical & Practical Implications

If the results support that a child's race has an impact on how effectively the Barbie vlogs can teach emotional intelligence, this will extend the findings of past studies (Clark & Fleming, 2019; Christ et al., 2018) that showed the positive impact of culturally relevant reading materials on Black children's engagement with learning material. My research will support that these findings hold true not only when applied to reading materials but animated videos. Additionally, this research would extend these findings to show that culturally identifying with characters not only influences engagement, but also impacts the efficacy of learning emotional intelligence.

Given my hypothesis is supported, this might encourage Mattel or other children's media producers to create programs similar to the Barbie vlogs that foster emotional intelligence but are more relatable to diverse audiences. These findings might also influence parents' and guardians' decisions to select more diverse media for their children to interact with. Teachers, as well, may decide to choose more culturally relevant media to incorporate in their curriculums given these findings.

Limitations & Future Directions

Ideally, I would have liked to examine the effect of watching the Barbie vlogs in a longitudinal design. For the purpose of maintaining simplicity in this study, I avoided having to work with statistics across several measurement times, and for this reason I chose to take only one measurement of EI directly after watching one Barbie vlog. I imagine that positive effects would be more likely if the child was watching the vlogs consistently over time. Future research should evaluate the ability of the Barbie vlogs to increase emotional intelligence over time.

Secondly, as opposed to in the home environment, the YouTube video that children will watch will not be self-selected. Both Black and White children will be instructed to watch the Barbie vlog video. But at home, the Barbie vlogs may not be getting clicks from a diverse audience of children, even if the vlogs would be effective in their messaging to a diverse audience. A gap in self-selection would be consistent with social identity theory and the well-established finding that individuals seek out media that confirms their social identity (Park, 2012). Future research may be interested in analysing the YouTube video selection process in a diverse range of children to see if the content that they choose to watch is influenced by shared race and/or perceived relatability of those featured in the content. Additionally, for the sake of simplicity, my study only compared Black and White identities. Future research should be done on other marginalized identities.

Because the Barbie vlogs are targeted at a female audience, my sample will include only female participants. Given that women tend to score higher than men in emotional intelligence and empathy (Clark et al., 2015), it could be argued that boys have a greater need for this kind of intervention. Future research focused on children's media and emotional intelligence should evaluate media that is either targeted at boys or all genders of children.

Another limitation is that while my study will look closely at the vlog's cultural relevance, there are other concerns that the vlog poses. A reputable albeit non-academic guide on the production of children's media for different age groups stated that a piece of children's media will be more appropriate and effective if the protagonist of the piece of media is similar in age to the target audience (Van Sickle, 2018). The target audience for the Barbie vlogs is between the ages of 6-11 (Mattel, 2018). However, the producers of the Barbie vlog intended to write Barbie as a 17-year-old social media influencer. It is still plausible that 17-year-old Barbie acts as an effective role model for at least a portion of her audience, but it could also be argued that the positive mindsets and behaviors Barbie demonstrates might be perceived as more achievable if they were modeled by a younger character. Future research might look more closely at how the protagonist's age relates to the effectiveness of media interventions like the Barbie vlogs.

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