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“BARBIE IS AS MUCH ABOUT FASHION AS SHE IS ABOUT CULTURE AND EMPOWERMENT”: FEMINISM IN BARBIE THE MOVIE AND ITS POSTFEMINIST MARKETING

Brooke Ashley Shepherd

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“BARBIE IS AS MUCH ABOUT FASHION AS SHE IS ABOUT CULTURE AND
EMPOWERMENT”: FEMINISM IN BARBIE THE MOVIE AND ITS
POSTFEMINIST MARKETING

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Communication Studies

by
Brooke Shepherd
May 2024

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ABSTRACT

The Barbie movie has been celebrated by fans for its feminist narrative. Although the film garnered appreciation from fans across the world, my thesis illustrates that it ultimately serves as a vehicle to promote a product, leading to question its feminist narrative. This mixed method study, which combines feminist textual analysis and feminist political economy analysis, investigates feminism and postfeminism within the Barbie movie and the marketing for the movie. The feminist textual analysis identified both feminist and postfeminist ideologies that are present within the film. The feminist political economy analysis identified the marketing for the Barbie movie as postfeminist. The results of the analysis indicate that Mattel turns female empowerment into a commodity that perpetuates gendered consumption and reinforces a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Barbie, Feminist, Postfeminist, Gendered Marketing

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Barbie is as Much About Fashion as She is About Culture and Empowerment”:
Feminism in Barbie the Movie and its Postfeminist Marketing

The popularity of the Barbie film has not only created a cultural impact but also a political one. Many fans proclaimed that Barbie is an, unexpectedly, emotional movie with self-love as the central idea (Gariano, 2023). In fact, women who suffer from anxiety and depression cherished Billie Eilish’s song that appeared throughout the Barbie movie “What Was I Made For?” Barbie questioning her world and existence was immediately relatable to those who viewed the film (Dowd, 2023). In China, the movie was surprisingly a success. With differing norms relative to gender in China, Barbie was celebrated for displaying direct, yet gentle, feminist rhetoric. Although it did have a political message, fans found it acceptable to share the film with their loved ones. In short, Barbie revived the dying conversation of equal rights in China (Wang & Zhao, 2023).

However, Barbie has received its fair amount of backlash. The film is banned in various countries for various reasons. Algeria and Lebanon banned the film for allegedly promoting homosexuality (Shafer, 2023), whereas Vietnam banned Barbie due to a nine-dash line that appears to be China's territorial claim over the Southern China Sea (Ives, 2023). Some well-known conservatives have taken issue with the film for the reasons stated above, along with messages that-

-they argue-- are anti-men (Sharf, 2023). Senator Ted Cruz shared his disgust with Barbie by mentioning it was Chinese propaganda made to appease the Chinese due to the nine-dash line. He reasoned that the little girls going to watch the movie would not know what it meant; therefore, it was specifically placed for China. Elon Musk hinted at his disdain for Barbie when he mentioned that he took a tequila shot every time the word patriarchy was said in the Barbie movie. Ben Shapiro, a conservative political commentator, even purchased Barbie dolls to ultimately pile them up and burn them (Flegenheimer & Tracy, 2023). Some liberals also took issue with the film. Some transgender women felt like the Barbie movie offered a cis-gender experience to womanhood, especially the ending scene where Barbie visits the gynecologist. They argue that this scene implies that having vaginas equates to experiencing womanhood (James, 2023).

Barbie is the highest-grossing release of 2023 and the top-grossing Warner Brothers film of all time (Stewart, 2023). Barbie the movie won seven Critics Choice Awards, six People's Choice Awards, two Golden Globes, and an Academy Award (Barbie-Awards-IMDb, n.d.). The film has made close to \$1.4 billion globally as of September 2023, and it is the highest-grossing film directed by a woman (Rubin, 2023; Stewart, 2023).

This thesis will investigate how feminism is negotiated in the Barbie movie through and despite the impact of the postfeminist corporate machinery that both created the doll (Mattel) and produced and promoted the film (Warner Brothers). Can the movie Barbie stand as a feminist narrative when it is based on a doll with

an extensive and disputed history of both promoting Western beauty standards and consumerism and when the blockbuster film structure is aimed at capturing the highest number of audiences regardless of their ideological positions? To address these questions, I will look at how Warner Brothers and Mattel utilize both feminist and postfeminist messages of the Barbie movie to enhance their profitability and how the corporate alliance has shaped and impacted the overall message that the director wanted to relay in the film. In order to illustrate the ways in which a media and a toy corporation alliance monetizes feminism, I will conduct a feminist political economy of media analysis, and I will use feminist textual analysis to identify key feminist and postfeminist messages in the film. Postfeminism is important in this study since the Barbie film highlights women's rights while it is juxtaposed with patriarchy that takes place in the Real World. In this thesis, I will juxtapose the feminist messages the film discusses along with the postfeminist marketing that takes place. First, through the following overview, I will introduce the following theoretical frameworks: feminism, postfeminism, and feminist political economy. Then, my thesis will discuss Mattel and Warner Brothers, the Barbie film, and an overview of the marketing strategies and tactics. Finally, I will emphasize the importance of researching how Barbie simultaneously depicts feminist and postfeminist ideologies as well as how Barbie encourages female consumption and ultimately takes a postfeminist marketing standpoint. Next, I will give an overview of the corporations that

created the film Barbie and their partnership to provide a political economy background to this text.

Mattel

Mattel is a global toy and entertainment company, held within the United States, that produces dolls, games, films & television, music, and digital content (About Us, n.d.). Mattel was founded by Harold Matson in 1945 along with the help of Ruth and Elliot Handler who were designers and engineers (History, n.d.). Mattel currently sells their products to over 150 countries worldwide (About Us, n.d.), has a market cap of about \$6.5 billion, and revenue of about \$5.2 billion (Forbes, n.d.).

According to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (2022a), Barbie is Mattel's most important brand, dominating the Hot Wheels and Fisher-Price brands, generating the most amount of sales from Mattel. Mattel considers Barbie to be one of their empowering girl dolls, along with the American girl dolls that, according to the company, impart valuable life lessons and confidence through play (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2022a). It is evident that Mattel purposely markets Barbie in this light because they admit to using purpose-driven marketing campaigns for Barbie in order to create more meaningful play. An excerpt from Mattel's annual report states "Barbie has inspired the limitless potential of every girl by showing them that they can be anything" (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2022a). In this

statement, Mattel is claiming that Barbie is a toy that has successfully influenced and empowered girls through her ability to pursue any profession.

Before the Barbie film came into existence, the Barbie brand's intellectual property (IP) was estimated to be worth around \$701 million. The main source of IP included trademarks such as Barbie's design, the color 'Barbie' pink, songs that mention Barbie, and parodies about Barbie. According to Wagmeister (2023), Mattel CEO Kreiz saw an opportunity to use the success of the Barbie doll to expand Mattel's IP. Surely, this is what inspired Mattel CEO Kreiz to move forward with Mattel creating the Barbie movie. Now, Mattel is using its existing IP along with the IP from the Barbie film to expand its company (Lindau & Holmes, 2023). After all, the film played a key-role in Mattel's goal of transitioning from a toy-company to an IP company that manages franchises (Acuna, 2023; Dockterman, 2023).

Warner Brothers

Warner Brothers is an entertainment company that creates, distributes, licenses, and markets film, television, animation, video games, and other digital and home entertainment. Warner Brothers was founded in 1923 by four brothers. Warner Brothers operates within three different segments: studio, network, and DTC (Direct to consumer) (WBD Stock Analysis, 2023). Although Warner Brothers receives more revenue from their network segment, Guttman (2024) mentions that the company is prioritizing its DTC segment. The studio is the second largest revenue-producing segment of the company and is responsible

for the production and distribution of a wide variety of film genres, including but not limited to horror, drama, comedy, and DC superhero titles (Guttman, 2024; Warner Bros. Company Overview, n.d.). Warner Brothers takes risks on creating “thrillers, adult dramas, coming-of-age stories, and period pieces” that Hollywood places on streaming services (Rubin, 2019). The network includes television markets and DTC consists of streaming services like MAX, Discovery Channel, and Food Network (Warner Bros. Company Overview, n.d.). According to the Warner Brothers company overview, the studio works collaboratively across every division of Warner Brothers, including film, television, games, and other consumer products (Warner Bros. Company Overview, n.d.). Warner Brothers has a market cap of about \$25.9 billion and has a revenue of about \$42 billion (WBD Stock Analysis, 2023). According to box office revenues, this places Warner Brothers as the third most profitable film studio in 2023 (Rubin, 2024).

Mattel’s and Warner Brother’s Partnership

Barbie is the first collaboration between Mattel Films and Warner Brothers Pictures (Mattel and Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019). During an interview with senior reporter Adrienne Pasquarelli (2023) from *AdAge*, Lisa McKnight, Executive Vice President and Global Head of Barbie and Dolls at Mattel, shared the collaborative process of marketing Barbie. Mattel worked with the president of Warner Brothers marketing a year before the movie's release to ensure the film's success. Warner Brothers would consult Mattel occasionally but ultimately took charge of marketing the film to ensure the box office would thrive. On the

other hand, Mattel was in charge of building the commercial activation by marketing experiences, lifestyle products, and their toy line (Pasquarelli, 2023). According to the New York Times, the financial arrangements that took place between Mattel Films and Warner Brothers Pictures are heavily guarded (Stewart, 2023). However, people who had knowledge of their arrangements disclosed that the agreement involved Mattel receiving a five percent share of the film's revenue along with compensation for owning the rights to Barbie. According to Verdon (2023), sales for Barbie dolls increased by 14% after the Barbie movie was released and is expected to drive sales for years to come. Although Mattel's representative refused to disclose financial arrangements with Warner Brothers, they predicted Mattel would make about \$125 million from the Barbie film (Stewart, 2023). Mattel CEO Kreiz stressed that this movie was not about selling toys; it was about creating quality content so that both Mattel films and their products would bring success and the business would skyrocket (Wagmeister, 2023).

Synopsis of Barbie the Movie

The Barbie movie starts with Barbie waking up in her dream house and having a perfect day, but the perfect day comes to an end when she notices a patch of cellulite on her thigh and that her feet are no longer pointed, they are flat. After experiencing what is labeled as malfunctioning issues, Barbie ventures to the Real World in hopes of finding her owner and becoming a properly functioning Barbie again. When Ken discovers that Barbie will be leaving, he

sneaks along for the ride in order to make a lasting impression on Barbie. However, while Barbie and Ken are in the Real World, they witness the unthinkable: the patriarchy. The Real World did not reflect the success of gender equity in Barbie Land. In the Real World, men are in charge which results in Ken being enchanted by power. On the other hand, Barbie experiences various sexist scenarios such as objectification and being catcalled. After discovering the patriarchy, Ken spreads the news in Barbie Land and transforms it into Kendom. For the rest of the movie, Barbie questions her world and her existence. She is faced with various decisions about rectifying Barbie Land, raising other Barbies' consciousness, and becoming a real woman (IMDb, 2023).

Research Question

The Barbie movie brought millions of moviegoers to theaters, including some who were interested in the feminist spin on Barbie and the hype surrounding it (Dockterman, 2023). Since the film ignited the enthusiasm attending the theaters and is praised for its feminist messages and its incredible marketing strategies, it is important to investigate the following:

- 1) Can the movie Barbie stand as a feminist narrative when it is based on a doll with an extensive and disputed history of consumerism and when the blockbuster film structure is aimed at capturing the highest number of audiences regardless of their ideological positions?

Methodology

Since my research question focuses on different aspects of the *Barbie* movie, the messages in the film regarding women's subordination in a patriarchal world, and the marketing of the film, I have conducted a feminist textual analysis as well as analyzed data using a feminist political economy standpoint. By conducting a feminist political economy analysis, I am able to gain insight into Mattel's marketing strategies, observing how Mattel navigates elements such as gender and female empowerment as they promote the film. By conducting a feminist textual analysis, I am able to gain information on whether the film conveys feminist or postfeminist ideologies. By combining these analyses, I can thoroughly assess if the film maintains a feminist narrative in the presence of Mattel using postfeminist marketing strategies.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is a qualitative research method used to interpret underlying ideologies and cultural assumptions of a specific text (Frey et al., 2000; Fürsich, 2009; McKee, 2001). There are multiple meanings within a text and individuals can interpret texts differently (Frey et al., 2000; McKee, 2001). I have used feminist theory to guide my study. Beside describing the content in the text and the messages embedded in the content (Frey et al., 2000), textual analysis also allows for individuals to highlight implicit patterns and the omissions of a text (Fürsich, 2009). These texts can be written, auditory, and/or visual and textual analysis can be used to analyze complex texts such as a film that

combines audiovisual messages. For example, the portrayal of a female character (Killian, 2019), including appearance and attire, becomes a lens through which the audience can understand the significance of the film. By conducting a feminist textual analysis, we can foster a deeper understanding of societal thoughts and attitude towards feminism and power dynamics among gender. It is imperative to analyze the *Barbie* film via a textual analysis in order to unravel the messages conveyed through the film.

To conduct a feminist textual analysis of the movie *Barbie*, I studied the movie as a whole, thematizing how the *Barbie* film conveys both feminist and postfeminist messages. I analyzed the plots, dialogue, and representations to evaluate whether they reinforce or challenge feminist ideologies by drawing from Feminist Theory. I acknowledge my own experiences and identity as a feminist cis-gendered, middle-class, Western, bi-racial American, a mixture of Mexican and Caucasian ethnicities, might have influenced how I approached studying the topic. Since I am the demographic that the film speaks to, in terms of my identity markers, I believe this places me in an advantageous position to critically analyze and assess how the film hails its viewers. I conducted a systematic feminist textual analysis, asking how each scene represented women and feminism, and I analyzed those representations reading them against mainstream ideologies of gender. So, my feminist textual analysis has been conducted through an ideological analysis framework.

I watched the *Barbie* film from start to finish several times. The first time I watched the film, I focused on absorbing the storyline without any specific analysis. The second time I watched the film, I documented all the elements that I recognized as feminist, such as pro-women's rights dialogues and strong women characters. The third time I watched the film, I documented everything that I identified as postfeminist, such as the reinforcement of Western beauty ideals and gendered consumerism. During this process, I paid attention to the monologue, the songs, the costumes, portrayal of characters, intersectionality, and representation. Afterward, I sorted through the aspects I labeled as feminist and postfeminist and created groups based on common themes. Finally, I created titles that encapsulated the themes.

The first major feminist theme I identified was the representation of women as strong, capable, independent, and accomplished agents. The sub-themes are 1) intersectional feminism, 2) sisterhood, female kinship, and comradery, and 3) Barbie's journey of self-acceptance and independence through emotions and contesting beauty standards. The second major feminist theme I found was 'tackling the patriarchy.' The sub-themes are 1) critiquing patriarchal societal norms, 2) representing the absurdity of misogyny in both Century City and Kendom, and 3) challenging hegemonic masculinity. The postfeminist themes I identified include 1) Barbie conforming to Western beauty ideals, 2) Outcasting non-conforming individuals in Barbie Land, and 3) Mattel turning feminism into a commodity. These themes were created based on their

prevalence and reoccurrence throughout the film, warranting an examination to uncover their potential implications.

Feminist Political Economy of Communication

The feminist political economy of communication approach was used to focus on the negotiation of feminism when it comes to the *Barbie* movie. Political economy of communication critically examines the power relations of media and communication, how the systems originated, their relationships with other establishments such as the state and capitalism, and their influence on media texts through an analysis of media ownership, market structures, and political power (Corrigan, 2018; McChesney, 2013). Feminist political economy of communication not only challenges both the production and consumption practices that are detrimental to women but also delves into issues related to identity, pleasure, and visible and invisible labor (Riordan, 2002). This examination is investigated through the lens of male-centered capitalism (Riordan, 2002). Besides addressing issues related to women, feminist political economy of communication also critiques men's control over women's labor which is exemplified through "velvet ghettos" (Steiner, 2014), women's low-pay, inadequate maternity leave policies, and the concept of family wage (Steeves & Wasko, 2002). Another important topic that is examined is men's political domination over women, which is evident through the lives and experiences of women being relegated to the private sphere, while men remain in the public sphere (Riordan, 2002). Altogether, these gendered structures negatively impact

women's economic and political life. Further details about feminist political economy can be found in the next chapter.

Feminist political economy of communication can inform individuals about the corporation's position on feminism by observing how they market their products. For instance, such an analysis can shed light on messages conveyed through promotional material. A feminist political economy analysis of the marketing surrounding the *Barbie* movie can inform individuals whether Mattel challenges or contributes to societal norms and power structures. The combination of feminist textual analysis and feminist political economy of communication will provide key insight to feminist messages in the film and will reveal how feminist messages get diluted through marketing and promotion. Publications such as *Insider*, *The New York Times*, and *Variety* were utilized since they report the film's marketing and promotion tactics (Corrigan, 2018). Various podcasts and interviews from *AdAge* and promotional material that contain key individuals in the making of *Barbie* were investigated as they contain key information regarding the production of *Barbie*. Mattel's website was also investigated to see how they were marketing their dolls. For further evidence, I used the posts from both Mattel's and Warner Brothers's official social media accounts: Barbie, Barbiecafeofficial, BarbieStyle, Barbiethalbum, Barbiethemovie, and Wbpictures. The combination of these methods allowed for a concise analysis of feminist messages in and surrounding the film.

I used the "burrowing down" and "listening in" technique while analyzing

how feminist messages are negotiated amidst corporate tactics. Burrowing down is the act of gathering information about business practices and listening in is the act of gathering statements about these business practices (Corrigan, 2018). I used a feminist political economy of communication framework to analyze both the marketing material and the discourse surrounding the film's marketing. I used Feminist political economy's attention to gendered production and consumption as a guide to analyzing the marketing material. Combining the "burrowing down and listening in " and the feminist political economy framework allowed me to analyze how gender was utilized to market the *Barbie* movie and to see whether Mattel used its feminist values in its marketing material. In order to make this decision, I looked for indications that Mattel incorporated feminism within their promotions on social media and other collaborations.

This thesis will address, through feminist textual analysis and feminist political economy analysis, if the *Barbie* movie can stand as a feminist narrative despite the doll's history of consumerism. Next, I will review literature regarding feminism, postfeminism, political economy, and Barbie's background. Then, I will conduct a feminist textual analysis of the messages in the *Barbie* movie and describe how they display feminist or postfeminist ideologies. Afterward, I will conduct a case study that thoroughly analyzes how feminism is negotiated in the marketing strategies used to promote the film via a feminist political economy of communication analysis. Finally, I will conclude with the implications and limitations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before I begin my feminist textual analysis and feminist political economy analysis of the movie Barbie, I will first provide an overview of Feminist Theory. I will explain the three waves of the feminist movement and the importance of including intersectionality in research. I will then review feminist media theories such as male gaze and female gaze and discuss literature on masculinity. Afterward, I will explain how corporations use postfeminist tactics to profit off female consumers and retain women's subordinate status within society. Then, I will problematize gendered consumerism from a feminist political economy perspective and explain how corporations use beauty ideals to profit on women's insecurities and prevent them from entering the public sphere. Finally, I will discuss how the Barbie doll was created, how Barbie contributed to the American class system, the controversies surrounding the Barbie doll, and how Mattel is continuously changing Barbie's brand image to become more inclusive.

Looking at Feminist Theory through the Three Waves of the Feminist Movement

Although specific beliefs amongst feminists may vary, Steeves and Wasko (2002) argue that all feminists share two core beliefs: 1) women are oppressed and 2) change is needed to resolve women's oppression. While feminists may share these core beliefs, their approaches to resolving women's oppression varies.

The first-wave feminist movement, which took place around the late 1840s, established the women's suffrage movement. Susan B. Anthony, the leader of the movement, advocated for women's right to vote (Srivastava, et al., 2017). However, it is important to mention that the first-wave movement primarily concerned Caucasian, middle-class women. Women of color did not get the right to vote until 1965 (Marino & Ware, 2022). They also advocated for labor rights, anticolonialism, immigrant rights, and more.

The second-wave feminist movement, which took place around the 1960s, was characterized by the second-wave feminists advocating for the right to work, equal pay, reproductive rights, domestic violence, marital rape, and other family and workplace issues (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Srivastava, et al., 2017). Women's right to work and earn their own income liberated them from their financial dependency on men, granting women the choice between staying home and having kids or pursuing their own aspirations independently (Adkins, 2018). Second-wave feminism adheres to the belief that representation of women can reproduce dominant ideologies. They believe media visibility is misogynistic, contradictory, and can lead to conflicting thoughts and feelings about feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2004). Third-wave feminist attempted to differentiate themselves from second-wave feminist because media and pop culture depicted second-wave feminists as strict, man-hating, anti-pornography feminists (Steiner, 2014; McRobbie, 2011). Unlike second-wave feminism, third-wave feminists embrace the media.

Third-wave feminism, which emerged around the 1990s, attempts to settle gender issues through the use of media visibility, popular culture, and commercialism (Banet-Weiser, 2004; Srivastava et al., 2017). This is because third-wave feminists believe media visibility is empowering. Banet-Weiser (2004) states, “Third Wave Feminism (or sometimes “Girlie feminism”) embraces commercial media visibility and enthusiastically celebrates the power that comes with it” (p. 121). Although third-wave feminists dealt with issues of sex-positive feminism and intersectionality (Steiner, 2014; Srivastava et al., 2017), intersectionality is usually dismissed (Steeves, 1987; Steiner, 2014). The difference in media use causes a divide between second-wave feminists and third-wave feminists (Steiner, 2014).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was first coined by Crenshaw (1991) to investigate how race, gender, class, and sexuality (Nash, 2008) can impact the full experience an individual has. Crenshaw (1991) argued that traditional feminism did not cover women of color. In fact, women of color are more likely to be marginalized by their gender and race (Crenshaw, 1991). According to McCall (2005), this is because traditional feminism framed the discourse as male versus female, grouping all women together, disregarding their individual experiences. As evidence, Crenshaw (1991) explained the decisions in court cases regarding Black women. In one of the court cases, five Black women sued General Motors claiming that the employer’s seniority system was discriminatory against Black

women. Although the evidence revealed that General Motors did not hire Black women, it was found that they did hire females, so the court decided that there was no sex discrimination. Additionally, the court told the women that they could not move forward with their claim of racial discrimination because Black men were not discriminated against in this case. The court's decision illustrates how Black women can only be served justice if their experience of discrimination aligns with white women or Black men.

This court case also exemplifies the matrix of oppression (Ferber et al., 2007). According to Ferber et al. (2007), privilege and oppression exist in relation to one another, without oppression, there could not be privilege. Ferber et al. (2007) argue that every individual experiences varying degrees of privilege/oppression based on the components of their intersectionality. For example, a wealthy, Caucasian, heterosexual man will have more privilege than a Black woman. With this in mind, Aguayo-Romero (2021) argues that it is important to consider how structures oppress those with marginalized identities, especially since not all women experience the same extent of inequality (Steiner, 2014). Those with a marginalized identity are more susceptible to experiencing structural oppression when the laws, policies, and societal norms in a country are founded upon anti-black, classist, and colonial ideologies (Aguayo-Romero, 2021). For example, there are many cases of police brutality (Aguayo-Romero, 2021) that result in Black mothers losing their sons to police violence and other social injustices (LaVoulle & Ellison, 2017).

In sum, it is crucial to take intersectionality into account when analyzing media. According to Steiner (2014), media depictions of women “result from, reflect, and reproduce dominant ideologies” (p. 361). Therefore, intersectionality is essential because the way people are portrayed in media tells them how they should act based on their identity (Steiner, 2014). This concerns feminist scholars because this lack of true representation can cause women to limit their potential (Steiner, 2014). Overall, Crenshaw (1991) argues that any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot accurately address the subordination of individuals, especially Black women.

Male Vs. Female Gaze

According to Steiner (2014), most issues within feminism revolve around media-related issues, including representations of women and whether they are progressive or anti-feminist. This concern comes from a patriarchal culture that commodifies a woman’s sexuality and frames them in a subordinate position, which is exemplified through objectification (Caputi, 2015). Objectification, as defined by Caputi (2015), involves treating an individual as property, denying them autonomy, and framing the individual as a consumable object. This is a widespread issue in cinema. Killian (2023) argues that the male gaze is employed to sexualize and objectify female characters. According to Mulvey (1975), the sexualization and objectification of female characters provides audience members with visual pleasure in two ways: firstly, by looking at the individual on screen as an object of desire (imposing the male gaze); and

secondly, through identification of the man who is with the object of desire (ego libido). Mulvey (1975) reinforces this theme by noting that female characters often dress or behave in ways that have a sexual impact on both the male protagonist and the audience (Mulvey, 1975). For example, heroines are often depicted in provocative clothing as they fight for justice (Killian, 2023). If women are not portrayed as sexualized protagonists, they typically occupy secondary roles, functioning as an instrument to influence the male protagonist to behave in specific ways (Mulvey, 1975). On the other hand, male characters wield power and are not subjected to the same gaze as female characters. This exemption is due to the audience's identification with the male character, who has power and control, allowing audiences to observe the film through his perspective. Mulvey (1975) uses the film, *Vertigo*, as an illustrative example. Mulvey (1975) notes that the policemen within the film are perceived as dominant male figures who have wealth and power, however, their libido leads them to situations where they subject a woman to the male gaze and ultimately objectify her. As the male protagonist asserts dominance over the female character, she loses her glamor, ultimately reducing her to an object of possession for both the male protagonist and the audience (Mulvey, 1975). The sexualization and objectification of female characters are an outcome of films being constructed within a patriarchal society.

Killian (2023) argues that feminist films offer a viewpoint that transcends the confinement of the male gaze. Instead of reproducing outdated Hollywood tropes, feminist films focus on the inclusive representation of female characters

as well as insight into both feminist identities and the character's background and aspirations that make her more human rather than an object for sex appeal (Killian, 2023). Natasha, from Marvel's Black Widow, is a good example of the difference between the male gaze and female gaze. In Natasha's first appearance in Marvel, she was portrayed as a seductive model that Tony Stark was interested in. However, in Black Widow, she was depicted as brave and intelligent, her background story revealed her troubled upbringing, she wears more reasonable clothes to fight in, and she shuts down mansplaining (Killian, 2023). In short, feminist films focus more on a female gaze and celebrate women characters for their strength, independence, empowerment, and diverse narratives that break away from conventional roles.

Backlash Against Feminism: The Rise of the Hegemonic Masculinity and its Relationship to Male Gaze

The women's liberation movement, which took place in the 1920s, upset the power balance between men and women which made individuals question gender characteristics and search for ways to exhibit their power (Connell, 1990; Connell, 2001). One way to assert more power is to display masculinity. Masculinity is a (learned) socially constructed behavior that exists through actions of individuals (Connell, 1990; Connell, 2001). Masculinity is defined by its opposition to femininity (Connell, 1990). Masculinity juxtaposed with femininity to display the difference between men and women (Connell, 2001). Masculinity takes many forms throughout various cultures and historic periods (Connell,

2001; Steiner, 2014), however, for this paper, I will only focus on hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a socially dominant form of masculinity (Connell, 1990; Connell, 2001). It is the most current way to legitimize men's dominant position within society (Connell 1990; Connell, 2001; Steiner, 2014). Examples of engaging in hegemonic masculinity include appearing macho, dominant, and assertive as well as suppressing emotions, participating in homophobia, being competitive, and obtaining a masculine career along with a powerful position in the workplace. Engaging in any of these activities results in the reproduction of patriarchy (Connell, 1990; Connell, 2001). Although hegemonic masculinity may not be the most common form of masculinity within a certain culture, it is the type of masculinity that holds the most power (Connell, 1990; Connell 2001). Other masculinities, such as homosexual masculinity or marginalized masculinity are actively disapproved of. The hierarchy of masculinity illustrates the unequal shares of power that men have over women (Connell, 1990). Familiarizing oneself with hegemonic masculinity is important because the Barbie movie critiques it.

Willis (2022) argues that the hyper-sexualization of women contributes to hegemonic masculinity. Female characters who are praised for their looks are often portrayed as intellectually inferior to men and often have their value determined by the male character's love or attention for them. According to Willis (2022), emphasis on a woman's appearance encourages hegemonic masculinity because it objectifies women and gives power to men. This results in male

characters dominating the female characters by sexually objectifying them. According to Willis (2022), the hyper-sexualization of women in films encourages female subordination because this shifts the central focus of the plot from the female protagonist to the male supporting role. Altogether, Willis (2022) concludes that gender stereotypes, such as hyper-sexualization and objectification, uphold hegemonic masculinity and male dominance as a whole.

Postfeminism

During the 1980's, women's embrace of consumerism and media culture contributed to the rise of postfeminism. Having easily accessible feminist news in popular media was a triumph for women. It encouraged many institutions to include feminist values in their workplace policies such as law, education, medicine, and media, however, this victory was short-lived. The accomplishment of expanding feminist values is what fed society the idea that the fight for equal rights was over (McRobbie, 2004). The inclusion of feminist values in mainstream media and within the workplace is what led to postfeminism. Postfeminism is a belief where female empowerment has been achieved and all gender inequality issues have been resolved, which means there is no longer a need to advocate for women's rights (Banet-Weiser, 2018, McRobbie, 2004; McRobbie, 2011; Murray, 2013). Postfeminism upholds mainstream feminist values, while at the same time criticizing feminism for being an old-fashioned movement. Since feminism developed a negative connotation, many young women wanted to dis-identify with it (McRobbie, 2011). Liberal feminist discourses such as freedom,

choice, and independence are reshaped and integrated into media, marketing, and consumer engagement with a focus on a woman's body as a site of liberation (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Although some individuals may interpret this act as media visibility for women, it actually benefits the patriarchal system and corporations.

Independence, Freedom, and Agency

Postfeminism tells women that they are empowered when it comes to individual choices such as sex, work, and family. Both popular and political culture frame feminism as if it is an individual act. Individualism, within a postfeminist context, replaces true feminism with rivalry, self-help, and success based on an individual's ability (McRobbie, 2004; McRobbie, 2011). The government soon realized it can benefit from the individualistic perspective. The government allowed women to maneuver away from financial dependence on men, driven by the economic advantage of enabling them to work and earn their own income so they can participate in consumer citizenship (McRobbie, 2011). As a result of women's diligent efforts, the government promised women marital and sexual freedom, otherwise known as the sexual contract. The sexual contract made it so the sexual double standard was to be removed so women could freely have sex when they want, with whoever they wanted (as long as she did not become a single mother who was reliant on welfare). However, this was a false freedom made possible through a fabricated sense of equality (McRobbie, 2011). This concept can be best understood through what is known as the

double entanglement (Banet-Weiser, 2018; McRobbie, 2004; McRobbie, 2011). The double entanglement consists of “the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relationships” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 12). In other words, individuals were given a false freedom to benefit capital. Popular culture made this even more apparent. An example McRobbie (2004) gave is that media has framed sexual acts, like women flashing their breasts in public, as empowering, although it was really for male consumers pleasure (Steiner, 2014). Despite the newfound “freedom” that women have, there is an expectation to stay quiet and withhold judgment from women who make certain choices. If they speak out, some may say they do not actually support women, and therefore, are not a feminist. This disguise of “freedom”, “choice”, and “empowerment” has allowed men to successfully win back their sexist traditions, openly objectifying women (McRobbie, 2004). The illusion of empowerment, freedom, and choice places the responsibility on individual women to uphold feminist values, instead of society as a whole (McRobbie, 2004).

Feminist Political Economy, Consumerism and Gender

Political economy of communication investigates power dynamics within media and communication, explores both their origins and relationships with state and capitalism, and their impact on media (Corrigan, 2018; McChesney,

2013). Feminist political economy (FPE) looks beyond labor and class by considering how gender impacts capitalism (Riordan, 2002). FPE is concerned with how the media creates and maintains gender norms (Cox & Proffitt, 2012). FPE gives precedence to both the production and consumption practices of individuals. This is because consumption is meshed with the “reproduction of capitalism, class inequalities, and women’s oppression” (Riordan, 2002, p. 6). The feminist political economy approach evaluates both meso- and microlevels of capitalism in everyday life to examine how production and consumption are detrimental to women (Riordan, 2002). This examination reveals a worldwide gender pay-gap where females are paid less than males, illuminating the patriarchal oppression of women (Meehan, 2002; Steeves & Wasko, 2002). Furthermore, women have higher unemployment rates and encounter fewer opportunities to advance their economic status than men. Even if a woman were to obtain a good education and a secure career, she has a higher chance of experiencing sexual harassment within the workplace (Steeves & Wasko, 2002).

Gender differentiation within career fields creates velvet and pink ghettos for women (Steiner, 2014). Velvet ghettos are undervalued professions where women have trouble reaching higher positions like public relations. Pink ghettos are specific to professions that are historically dominated by women, such as nursing, nannies, and secretaries (Steiner, 2014). Both pink and velvet ghettos become cycles that drive out men and ultimately decrease the amount of pay. When it comes to journalism in particular, men and women are assumed to perform differently. Some individuals state that men report hard facts in an

objective manner while women primarily focus on news that is critical to women. An explanation for this is that women have more compassion and empathy than men. Although some may interpret this as praising women for their natural skills, this would reinforce gender stereotypes, resulting in women being confined to job ghettos (Steiner, 2014). This information may serve as great evidence that the patriarchal capitalist market is responsible for women's oppression (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Meehan, 2002; Steeves & Wasko, 2002). Unfortunately, women's oppression becomes more evident when gendered marketing occurs.

Gendered Consumption

The economy was booming around the 1950s but this was an illusion driven by consumer loans. United States debt accumulated because of the introduction of the credit card, which invited a buy now, pay later incentive. Even when the recession hit around the late 1950s, consumers continued to buy. Women and teenage girls were encouraged to spend money to improve the post-war economy (Record, 2002). Corporations took beauty ideals created by Caucasian, middle-class men and attempted to make them applicable for every woman. In order to attract men, women prioritized the improvement of their behavior, physical appearance, and their roles as wives and mothers (Record, 2002). Since the standard was to improve home care, females were designated as the household shoppers (Cox & Proffitt, 2012). Corporations made it so that the beauty standard would be unattainable and began to profit on women's insecurities. Many women and teenage girls would purchase products in an attempt to achieve these ideals, but they would never succeed (Record, 2002).

However, the marketing method of beauty and home improvement was a success for corporations because the media constantly told women that spending money equates to a happier life (Cox & Proffitt, 2012). Therefore, the consumption of products is linked to women's value and worth within society (Cox & Proffitt, 2012).

This attempt to achieve unrealistic beauty standards has stayed throughout the years. Around the early 2000s, reality television, along with other female-friendly programming, was created in hopes of reaching female audiences as consumers. These programs are masterfully designed to create an atmosphere where women are more inclined to purchase products while they watch the show and during commercials. Cox and Proffitt (2012) claim that these inclinations emerge based on the four levels of consumerism 'self-improvement, reward, a sign of affection, and a marker of elite status" (Cox & Proffitt, 2012, p. 299). The overall message of the levels of consumerism being that consumption equates to a better life and happiness. In turn of all this newfound financial freedom, women unknowingly surrendered their right to an active form of political participation (McRobbie, 2011). Popular culture industries, such as the fashion and beauty industries, implicitly persuaded women that it was more important to consume products rather than become active citizens who participated in political affairs.

Pink Profits

Postfeminism is a concept created by neoliberal capitalists who profit off of individualism and consumerism. According to Murray (2013), postfeminism

coincides with corporate interests. Consumer messages from the corporation are given to the female audience in forms of empowerment (Kearney, 2011; Murray, 2013). Popular culture industries, such as the fashion and beauty industries, implicitly persuade women that it is more important to consume products rather than become an active citizen who participates in political affairs. Essentially, these industries distract women from gendered issues and politics. Beauty modifications and other forms of self-improvement were thought of as best interests for women (Murray, 2013). As McRobbie (2011) stated, "Patriarchal power is stealthily handed over to the self-punishing regime of the fashion and beauty industry, which has the added value of promoting the idea that women self-police and have become their own toughest judges" (McRobbie, 2011, p. 183). This means women are prone to self-monitor their bodily appearance and life choices in a way that aligns with corporate interests (McRobbie, 2011; Steiner, 2014). Nevertheless, postfeminism is the abandonment of feminist politics and the embodiment of neoliberal capitalism (Banet-Weiser, 2018, para. 5). Neoliberal capitalism is a political-economic practice that places financial responsibility on consumers rather than enforcing regulations on corporations (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Recent corporate approaches aimed at encouraging women's consumption have expanded within the past several years (McRobbie, 2004), equating the consumption of women's products with supporting feminism.

One strategy used to attract female consumers is referred to as

commodity feminism. As explained by Murray (2013), commodity feminism is a tactic used to lure audience members to consume products. The company persuades audience members to be committed to their brand by implementing cause-branding. In this case, feminism is the cause that commodity feminism exploits to sell products. Cause-branding "...position[s] corporations to implement their identities to attract and retain consumers through a depth of involvement that draws on their emotions, actions, and identities to drive brand commitment" (Murray, 2013, p. 87). In other words, cause-branding fuses the corporation's identity with societal dilemmas to improve the corporation's image (Murray, 2013).

A set of practices that users engage in that companies seek to harness is self-branding. Self-branding is an act that involves using commercial approaches to publicly announce one's thoughts and values. Self-branding combines the use of female empowerment and consumer identity. Additionally, while individuals participate in self-branding, they are technically producing free labor for the company. An illustrative example is found in a study conducted by Kearney (2011). One video Kearney (2011) analyzed was titled "13-year-old Barbie Girls." The video starts with Barbie and Ken sitting down together. Then, six 13-year-old Caucasian girls start to dance suggestively, read magazines, brush their hair, and, overall, participate in acts of femininity. Kearney (2011) stated that this video displayed how young girls use YouTube as a form of self-expression and as a source to further explore/create their identities. Although creating one's own

identity can be empowering, it is a paradoxical experience online. When young girls try to create their identity online, Kearney (2011) argues they are being controlled by media and consumer culture. This video demonstrates how young girls participate in a postfeminist version of self-branding. They are promoting both the physical product (the Barbie doll) and the immaterial product (the relationship between consumer and brand). Kearney (2011) suggests that it is clear that the girls are branding themselves throughout the video when one considers the type of music that is being played, the outfits that are worn, the items they own, and the pink-colored bedrooms. The girls are empowered by engaging in traditionally hegemonic consumer culture.

Barbie's Origin

The Creation of Barbie

Ruth Handler created Barbie because she wanted her daughter to grow up with the freedom to interact with dolls in various ways beyond portraying motherly roles. Thus, Barbie was developed to inspire children to use their imagination and encourage them to explore limitless roles. Barbie was officially manufactured by Mattel around 1959 (*History*, n.d.; Nisa & Adi, 2023). Ruth Handler wanted to create a doll that all girls could identify with, and Mattel wanted a doll that was appealing to the majority of their target audience, Caucasian, middle-class Americans. With those goals in mind, a Caucasian, blue-eyed, straight-blond hair doll, named Barbie, was assembled (Goldman,

2021). Barbie was tall and slender which emphasized her curvaceous physique. Her design was inspired by a German escort doll named Lili, intended for gag gifts at bachelor parties (La Porte and Cavusoglu, 2023). Although Barbie's bodily proportions were unrealistic, she became the epitome of the American beauty standard (Nisa & Adi, 2023).

Barbie and the American Dream

Barbie was originally created for young girls across America (Nisa & Adi, 2023). In order to make Barbie more appealing to middle-class Americans, Mattel exacerbated Barbie and Ken's Americanness (Goldman, 2021; Nisa & Adi, 2023). Mattel ensured Barbie and Ken lived lifestyles that most United States citizens strived for. Around 1964, Barbie and Ken seemed to have successfully achieved the American dream by owning their "dream house", "dream kitchen", and multiple sports cars (Goldman, 2021). This emulated how people across the globe wanted to live (Goldman, 2021; Raynor, 2009). In the mid-1960s middle-class citizens, who already acquired their dream house and car, decided to spend their time traveling to exotic locations to display their status (Goldman, 2021). Mattel took notice of this capitalistic act and paralleled it with their dolls. Barbie and Ken slowly started to consume entertainment and engage in leisure activities (Goldman, 2021; Nisa & Adi, 2023). Shortly after, Mattel presented Barbie and Ken's participation travel by introducing a travel costume series. The travel costumes consisted of traditional outfits (that were not accurately made) from various countries such as Japan, Mexico, and Hawaii (Goldman, 2021).

This is problematic because as Goldman (2021) states “Barbie and Ken’s cultural cross-dressing metonymically invites the consumer to objectify the exotic other without ever actually invoking the image of the other’s body” (Goldman, 2021, p. 266). Although the cultural costumes were supposed to expand their range in consumers, Goldman (2021) states that it just affirms Barbie and Ken’s Whiteness. However, the (inadequate) acknowledgment of other countries outside of the United States commenced the beginning of Barbie’s global expansion. Although Barbie was being sold worldwide, only the rich elite could afford her. Therefore, affording Barbie became a symbol of class status (Bhadania, 2021; Goldman, 2021).

Barbie’s (Mis) Representation

Barbie’s Whiteness infiltrates every aspect of Barbie, even the ethnically diverse dolls (Bhadania, 2021; Goldman 2021; Raynor, 2009). Although Mattel attempted to expand its market by including the creation of ethnic dolls, many debate on whether these dolls are accurate representations. Goldman (2021) states “...in the popular media in the United States today, Latinos are typically either absent or misrepresented. When they are represented, it is often as negative stereotypes or as exotic characters” (Goldman, 2021, p. 268). For example, the first Hispanic Barbie was displayed in a box that had the words “Barbie Hispanica” which was grammatically incorrect (Goldman, 2021, p. 268). The Hispanic Barbie was dressed in a white shirt, red skirt, and had a rose around her neck. This was a very stereotypical outfit that was matched with her

stereotypical physical attributes such as dark hair, dark eyes, and dark skin. Goldman (2021) notes, however, that her skin tone was only slightly darker than sun-tanned Barbie. Clothing used in other editions of Hispanic Barbies were dressed in culturally traditional dresses, which discreetly molded Hispanic Barbie as foreign/exotic. Although Mattel intended to have consumers appreciate cultural differences, Goldman (2021) states that Mattel portrays Latinas in a way that homogenizes their culture.

Barbie's Influence on Ethnic Dolls

In recent years, Mattel has sold a variety of ethnic Barbies in which they all have the same clothes and accessories as Caucasian Barbie (Goldman, 2021). However, their skin color parallels that of Caucasian Barbie (Bhadania, 2021; Goldman, 2021). In fact, the only thing that separates Hispanic Barbie and Caucasian Barbie are their names. Hispanic Barbie's name is Teresa. Goldman (2021) states that even while Teresa is dressed in her Quinceanera dress, she looks more like a Caucasian Barbie in a costume than in her culture's traditional outfit. Goldman (2021) describes this lack of diversity best by saying "Cultural differences among diverse groups and nationalities are elided as Latinidad is reduced to one easily consumable, stereotypical identity-in-a-box" (Goldman, 2021, p. 269). According to Goldman (2021), this lack of diversity could have been done to 1) make the Latina doll more appealing to assimilated Latinas or 2) to effectively market the Latina doll in places that lack ethnic diversity (Goldman, 2021). The lack of differentiation between Hispanic Barbie and Caucasian Barbie

is even more apparent in Latin America. Most of the Barbie dolls in Latin America that are Hispanic have blonde hair. This factor makes them look identical to Caucasian Barbie (Goldman, 2021). Even some Black Barbies lack realistic representations of Black women. Around 1967, Mattel launched the first Black Barbie doll named “Colored Francine” which was a spinoff of the Caucasian Francine Barbie. Colored Francine shared the same features as her White counterparts making the doll unimpressive (Goldman, 2021; Han, 2023). Interestingly enough, Mattel seems to erase Colored Francine from their history by stating on their website that the first Black Barbie was Christie which arose ten years after colored Francine (Han, 2023; *History*, n.d.). Nevertheless, in most cases Black Barbie is just a Caucasian Barbie created with darker plastic. However, some doll collectors are able to find realistic representations created by certain designers (Raynor, 2009). Barbie dolls also follow the White standards of beauty in India. Barbie dolls were first sold around the 1990s in India. These Barbies had fair skin, a skinny waist, blue eyes, and wore either a saree or a salwar kameez. These fair-skinned Barbies contributed to the beauty standard in India, where Whiteness equates to superiority (Bhadania, 2021). Overall, ethnic Barbies tend to mirror Caucasian Barbie's physical attributes.

Barbie's Unrealistic Beauty Standards

Barbie creates unrealistic beauty standards (Bhadania, 2021; Fadel, 2023; LaVouille & Ellison, 2017; Raynor, 2009) that negatively impact body image (Rice et al., 2016). A woman who possesses Barbie's physique would have a “39-inch

bust, an 18-inch waist, and 33-inch hips” (Lind & Brzuzy, 2008). According to Rintala and Mustajoki (1992), a woman with these dimensions does not have enough body fat to menstruate. Despite this fact, many children who are exposed to Barbie result in internalizing the thin-ideal (Rice et al., 2016). This could lead to children partaking in various unhealthy eating habits. According to Wanless (2001), Barbie dolls could be the spark that lights the ignition to numerous eating disorders (Rintala & Munstajoki, 1992; Wanless, 2001). Eventually, Mattel created curvy Barbie dolls, however, the curvy dolls continue to depict uncommon bodily proportions (La Porte and Cavusoglu, 2023). A woman who possesses Barbie’s curvy physique would have a US size 4 waist, US size 6 hips, and stand at 5’6” whereas an average woman in the United States is a size 16. Also, a study revealed that girls were more likely to play with the original Barbie doll, excluding the curvy doll. This study reveals how deeply ingrained beauty standards are within Western society. According to La Porte and Cavusoglu (2023), Mattel’s unwillingness to create Barbie dolls that reflect realistic bodily proportions and emphasize their beauty showcases that their inclusive doll lines are purely a motive for profit.

Barbie’s Sexuality

Mattel created an image for Barbie that ensured she was not associated with any specific sexuality (Goldman, 2021). However, Rogers (2011) argues that consumers interpret Barbie’s sexuality vastly differently from what was originally intended. Contrary to how Mattel markets her, Barbie is a doll that has underlying

queer themes (Rogers, 2011; Zaslow, 2012). Since Barbie has an untapped sexual identity (Goldman, 2021), her sexuality can be interpreted in numerous ways. For example, the 24-minute parody video by Albetina Carri, an Argentine film producer, focuses on the issue of race and class between Barbies of various sexual identities. The Caucasian Barbie is an aristocrat who is dissatisfied with life and then enters a sexual relationship with her Hispanic Barbie maid. Although this film is shown in many LGBTQ+ film festivals, Mattel banned it from being shown in Mexico. According to Goldman (2021), the pornographic depiction of Barbie as a lesbian is problematic for Mattel. The film was found inappropriate by Mattel because it provided Barbie with a sexual identity when the corporation strategically avoided any associations regarding Barbie's sexuality.

Changing Barbie's Brand Image

Barbie was meant to be a feminist icon ever since she was originally created, however, she has experienced many marketing challenges (Pasquarelli, 2023). As previously mentioned, Barbie has a controversial history including but not limited to issues of inclusivity and diversity as well as creating gender norms and unrealistic beauty standards (Goldman, 2021). Mattel has also struggled with Barbie sales when there is new competition. According to Vered and Maizonniaux (2017), Mattel faced a decline in sales when the Bratz dolls debuted around 2001. In response, Mattel created the straight-to-DVD Barbie movies as a way to increase sales, providing a storyline for girls to base their play on. However, the straight-to-DVD Barbie films depicted many postfeminist ideologies such as every protagonist role being taken by a Caucasian Barbie, incorporating

a can-do attitude to achieve Barbie's goals rather than critiquing the blatant misogynist behavior that takes place within the film, and depicting Barbie in attire that accentuates her curvature. According to Vered and Maizonniaux (2017), the straight-to-DVD Barbie movies increased Mattel's Barbie doll sales until several years later, Mattel found themselves in a similar position. During an interview with *AdAge*, Lise McKnight disclosed that around 2012, Mattel realized that Barbie's consumer base was slowly declining. According to McKnight, Mattel discovered this decline was due to the corporation advertising to children instead of focusing on the larger brand message. Around 2015, Mattel had to create more meaning behind the brand in order to catch parents' interests in the product and increase sales. Mattel shifted their image by referring back to Barbie's original mission. McKnight stated:

“Barbie was always set up to be a role model, to be a female point of inspiration when it comes to empowerment. And she's always been an independent operator. She's had hundreds of careers and owning a Dreamhouse shows that she is financially independent...Since she was first created she was always supposed to serve as an empowering role model for young girls to believe that they could be anything when they grew up.” (Pasquarelli, 2023)

Mattel is clearly promoting careers for girls as a means for them to be able to participate in the neoliberal consumer economy. To showcase this change, Mattel proceeded to turn Barbie into a diverse and inclusive brand that inspired

limitless potential in girls (Pasquarelli, 2023). For example, the Inspiring Women series, which began in 2018 (*Barbie Inspiring Women*, n.d.), honors courageous women who created opportunities for girls to dream big such as Rosa Parks, Helen Keller, and Susan B. Anthony (*Barbie Inspiring Women*, n.d.; Pasquarelli, 2023). Mattel also had a role model series that created Barbies inspired by real women who were successful leaders in their careers, despite the challenges they have faced, such as Shonda Rhimes, Ari Horie, and Pat McGrath (*Barbie Celebrates International Women's Day, 2022*; Pasquarelli, 2023). The Inspiring Women series and Role Model series reinforces Mattel's concept that everyone is Barbie. After all, Barbie has existed through various forms, encompassing numerous careers, roles, and media representations.

Barbie the movie was created as a way to rebrand Barbie into a feminist text. The journey of bringing Barbie to the big screen took almost 15 years. The project went through two other studios before Warner Brothers. According to *Time*, one reason the film took a while to produce was because Mattel wanted to modernize the Barbie brand and establish that Barbie is more than one woman (Dockterman, 2023). Also, the difficulty of turning a hyper-feminine woman, like Barbie, into a feminist icon led to multiple failed attempts, resulting in the movie's hiatus (Nayman, 2023). As soon as Sony's rights to Barbie expired around 2018, Margot Robbie, the founder of LuckChap Entertainment, unearthed the *Barbie* movie idea and was interested in co-producing this project under her company LuckyChap Entertainment banner. LuckyChap Entertainment is a female focused film company that supports women directors and writes strong women

characters; the film production company is committed to empowering women through film (Brew, 2023; *Mattel and Warner Bros. Pictures to bring Barbie to the big screen starring Margot Robbie*, 2019). Margot Robbie secured partnerships with both Warner Brothers and Mattel films to initiate the production of Barbie (Authrur, 2020; *Mattel and Warner Bros. Pictures to bring Barbie to the big screen starring Margot Robbie*, 2019). Robbie Brenner, the Head Executive of Mattel films, stated that she strongly believed the *Barbie* movie had to be written by a woman since she felt a woman would accurately encapsulate female empowerment (Wagmeister, 2023). Brenner stated: “I think we felt pretty strongly that it needed to be told from a woman’s point of view. Not to say that a man can’t do it. But I think for ‘Barbie,’ this is the ultimate female-empowerment movie. It’s in the DNA of the movie. I think we all felt like it should be a female” (Wagmeister, 2023). The decision to choose a female director, and have a feminist film company co-produce, demonstrates how the producers of the *Barbie* movie prioritized creating a genuine female narrative that empowers women. According to *Time*, Gerwig was best fit for the director position due to her history of writing and directing Oscar-winning, feminist films such as *Lady Bird* and *Little women* (Dockterman, 2023). Both *Variety* and *Time* noted that Mattel entrusted Gerwing to create satirical comedy aimed at Mattel as she saw fit (Dockterman, 2023; Wagmeister, 2023). Brenner, along with other Mattel executives, decided that although it was scary, it was best to let the filmmakers have freedom to create their vision for the movie: Brenner stated: “But we all decided there were going to be moments where it might feel a little scary, but we’re going to be

rewarded for that. Being safe in this world doesn't work. We want it to be bold. Barbie is bold. She's done incredible things. She's a trailblazer. And that's what we did" (Wagmeister, 2023). Robbie Brenner noted that taking bold risks is exactly what Barbie would do and Mattel was committed to seek the reward at the end of the tunnel (Wagmeister, 2023). Overall, the Barbie doll has had its series of ups and downs which is why Mattel wanted to change her image. My research will provide insight on feminist messages and the marketing strategies of popular feminist films. Specifically, how the *Barbie* movie has incorporated feminist messages, what messages are being depicted, and how Mattel markets *Barbie*. In the next chapter, I will conduct a feminist textual analysis of the *Barbie* film that focuses on how the film depicts feminist ideologies.

CHAPTER THREE

UNRAVELING FEMINIST THEMES IN BARBIE

The Barbie film depicts a number of feminist ideologies such as strong female characters, which I thematized as the representation of women as strong, capable, independent, and accomplished agents. The film showcases both the Barbies and Gloria as successful women who are financially independent, challenging traditional gender roles. And I argue that the representation of women as successful beings challenges mainstream societal expectations and reinforces women's empowerment.

The Barbie film incorporates intersectional feminism by portraying Barbie as a doll of various races, genders, sizes, and abilities, which I thematized as intersectional feminism in Barbie the movie. In my analysis, I illustrate that all Barbies belonging to a diverse racial, gender and other social identities are represented as strong characters who are intelligent, self-made, financially independent, and have a variety of professional careers while contesting hegemonic White beauty norms. Additionally, the Barbie film showcases numerous moments of women working together, uplifting one another, and supporting each other, which I thematized as sisterhood, female kinship, and comradery. Both the Barbies and human women empower each other through words of affirmation, they encourage each other to embrace and love themselves, and they show comradery by working together to save Barbie Land.

This leads to the next theme where the Barbie film depicts self-love, which I thematized as Barbie's journey of self-acceptance and independence through emotions and contesting beauty standards. In Barbie Land, it is expected for the Barbie's to look and behave according to societal expectations. However, the film challenges societal expectations by showcasing Barbie learning to embrace her emotions and what she deems as imperfections. Barbie's identity is not defined by her relationship. Barbie prioritizes her own happiness and resists pursuing an unwanted relationship with Ken, contributing to breaking free from traditional gender norms.

Furthermore, tackling the patriarchy emerges as a significant theme, addressing issues such as absurd societal standards for women, the lack of gender diversity in the workplace and male dominance over women. The film explicitly had the characters engage in a struggle to deconstruct patriarchal structures in which women are subordinate, which I sub-themed as critiquing patriarchal societal norms.

Moreover, the film critiques the absurdity of misogynistic behavior that takes place within Century City and Kendom, which I sub-themed as representing the absurdity of misogyny in both Century City and Kendom. Lastly, the Barbie film illustrates the absurdity of hegemonic masculinity through the transformation of Kens becoming dominant figures, which I thematized as challenging hegemonic masculinity. Through these themes, I aim to explain the

ways in which the film accomplishes conveying feminist messages and ideologies.

Representation of Women as Strong, Capable, Independent, and Accomplished Agents

The Barbie film uses a number of visual and verbal representations to depict the women in the film as strong, capable, independent and accomplished individuals. The film showcases both the Barbies and Gloria as successful women who are financially independent, challenging traditional gender roles. The opening scene clearly portrays Barbie as an independent and accomplished woman by highlighting her various careers, financial independence, and owning her own luxurious assets. The film's opening scene features a narrator who introduces Barbie as a career woman: "Barbie may have started out as just a lady in a bathing suit, but she became so much more. She has her own money, her own house, her own car, her own career" (Gerwig, 2023). The narrator made it clear that Barbie worked hard to obtain everything she owns without reliance on Ken. Numerous Barbies are displayed for the audience to see Barbie's transformation from being a lady in a bathing suit into a successful career woman. Barbie is showcased as a nurse, flight attendant, pilot, astronaut, forest ranger, gold medalist, veterinarian, and firefighter. As Stereotypical Barbie drives around Barbie Land, the audience observes even more of her various careers.

The various jobs that Barbie has held make her a symbol of empowerment because not only does she have professional careers that come with power, like President and Supreme Court judge, but Barbie also has careers that are male dominated in reality, such as construction worker and garbage hauler. The audience is exposed to Stereotypical Barbie's success when they see her wake up in her own three-story Dreamhouse. As she walks over to her closet to choose what to wear for the day, the audience observes that Stereotypical Barbie's closet consists of dresses, jewelry, purses, and other accessories from the luxury brand, Chanel, which suggests that her career affords her expensive products while at the same time gives Warner Bros the opportunity for product placement, which I will expand on further on the next chapter. Similarly, after Stereotypical Barbie is done getting ready, she drives around Barbie Land in her pink 1957 Chevrolet Corvette. The audience can assume Barbie is more than financially well off since she is able to afford those items on her own.

Another scene that portrays Barbie as an accomplished and successful woman is when three Barbies win different Nobel Prizes for journalism, physics, and literature. The fact that each Barbie has won a Nobel Prize in different fields displays how capable and intelligent they are when it comes to diverse topics. The presenter awarded one Barbie a Nobel Prize for physics. The other Barbie was awarded a Nobel prize for journalism. In her acceptance speech she states, "I work very hard, so I deserve it" (Gerwig, 2023). The third Barbie was awarded with a Nobel Prize for literature. When the presenter states, "You're the voice of

the generation”, as she hands the award to Barbie, the Barbie accepting the award replies “I know!” (Gerwig, 2023). The Barbies' responses when they are accepting the award shows that they are confident in both themselves and their work. Not only are they aware that they can accomplish great things, but they are also aware that they can inspire others.

It's not just the Barbies that are portrayed as capable and accomplished, but also women in the human world are also portrayed as such. For instance, Gloria, the executive assistant at Mattel's headquarters who draws Barbie dolls and used to play with them with her daughter, Sasha, is assumed to be the breadwinner of the family because her husband is only briefly shown at home, practicing Spanish. Gloria's financial independence is also obvious from the all-electric car, 2024 Chevrolet Blazer, she drives. Both Gloria and Sasha are depicted as strong characters with a critical voice. The audience is given insight into Gloria's character through her drawings. Gloria draws unconventional Barbies, in hopes that one of her designs will come to life one day and wishes to normalize women feeling confident about themselves even though they do not meet societal expectations. Throughout the film, Gloria demonstrates having a strong critical voice by using her drawings and thoughts about Barbie as a way to critique and challenge societal norms. This is apparent through the paper Gloria is drawing on as the phrase, “Empowering the next generation through play” can be spotted in the top left corner of the page. By creating Barbies that do not meet

society's norms, Gloria is advocating for a more inclusive representation of women and a more accepting view of beauty.

Sasha's strength as a female character is shown poignantly in the scene at the lunch table at school, where Sasha and her girlfriends meet Barbie for the first time. The scene starts with Stereotypical Barbie trying to approach Sasha but a girl from school warns her not to talk to Sasha, mentioning that Sasha is the one who initiates conversations, not the other way around. Stereotypical Barbie decides to confront Sasha despite hearing this information.

Sasha: You've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented.

Stereotypical Barbie: I think you have that the wrong way around.

Sasha: You represent everything wrong within our culture.

Sexualized capitalism, unrealistic physical ideals-

Stereotypical Barbie: No no no, you're describing something stereotypical. Barbie is something so much more than that.

(Gerwig, 2023)

After Sasha ends her rant about Barbie, Sasha confidently declares that she is powerful and does not need Barbie to tell her that. Sasha explicitly lays out the issues that Barbie has created within society such as unrealistic beauty standards, sexualized capitalism, and rampant consumerism. This scene indicates that Sasha is not afraid to stand up for herself and express her personal beliefs, which makes her a confident, independent character.

Lastly, Gloria and Sasha depict strength when they are confronted by the Kens, while they are in the car, attempting to leave Barbie Land. Instead of going back to the Real World and allowing the downfall of Barbie Land, Gloria and Sasha decide to resist the patriarchy and actively support the Barbies in reclaiming and restoring Barbie Land. This scene depicts both Gloria and Sasha as strong, independent characters because they refuse to conform to the patriarchy. They are the ones who come back for Stereotypical Barbie, encourage her to get back on her feet, and initiate a revolution.

Altogether, these scenes depict the representation of women as individuals who can perform and excel in any career, including male-dominated careers. The female characters within the Barbie film are successful because of their own hard work and dedication. They do not rely on any man in order to lead a lifestyle in which they can indulge in items other than necessities. In addition to property ownership, three Barbies are awarded with a prestigious Nobel Prize. These Barbies know they are worthy of recognition and do not question themselves or the quality of their work. Lastly, the female characters are strong and independent because they stand up for what they believe in. Gloria and Sasha, along with the Barbies, choose to resist the patriarchy and restore Barbie Land. From these examples, it is discernible that the female gaze (Killian, 2023) is used to emphasize the female character's strength, independence, and empowerment.

Intersectional Feminism in Barbie. The Barbies in the film are not all depicted as stereotypical, able-bodied Caucasian dolls, instead, they are represented as Barbies belonging to various races, sizes, and abilities. Regardless of their diversity, what is common about them is that each is depicted as successful in their professions. A few Barbies are shown to have disabilities throughout the film. The first Barbie is a woman of color, who is a veterinarian, and is portrayed utilizing a wheelchair. The second Barbie with a disability is a Caucasian gold medalist Barbie with a prosthetic leg. As the movie continues, the third Barbie, a Caucasian Barbie with a prosthetic arm, appears in the President's office. The inclusion of Barbies with various disabilities aligns with feminist ideologies by challenging social norms and advocating for representation (Killian, 2023). Depicting Barbies, who are disabled, as successful women, emphasizes Barbie's strength and capabilities. Barbie is capable and accomplished regardless of her ethnicity or disability.

In addition to the inclusion of disability, the film's feminism also comes from the fact that women are represented in different sizes and genders. There are two Barbies who are curvy in Barbie Land. One is a Barbie who is a lawyer, and the other is a Barbie who is a Nobel Prize presenter. Although these Barbies are curvy, they are not referred to as curvy Barbies, they are simply Barbie. Also, there is a doctor in Barbie Land who is played by the transgender actress Hari Nef. Similarly, this Barbie was not referred to as transgender Barbie, she was referred to as Doctor Barbie. This representation was welcomed with

appreciation by the transgender community because Doctor Barbie was portrayed as any other Barbie (James, 2023). Additionally, the film included a cameo of Earring Magic Ken, whose original apparel and accessories were based on the gay community in the 90's (Savage, 1993). While Earring Magic Ken's appearance in the film is brief, it serves as representation for the LGBTQ+ community.

The film portrays intersectional feminism by presenting Barbies from diverse ethnic backgrounds as strong figures. The diverse range of Barbies illustrates that success is achievable for Barbies of all racial backgrounds. For example, when Stereotypical Barbie is driving through Barbie Land, there is an Asian pilot Barbie who flies an airplane over stereotypical Barbie and greets her. As Stereotypical Barbie continues her journey, she passes by a mountain that looks like Mount Rushmore; a pink mountain that has four sculpted women heads: a Caucasian Barbie, Black Barbie, Asian Barbie, and Hispanic Barbie. In addition, to the diverse representatives of Barbie Land on their Mount Rushmore, there are Black Barbies and other Barbies of color that are a part of the supreme court. The diversity present in the supreme court illustrates how women of various ethnicities collectively hold power within Barbie Land. Leading this diverse land is President Barbie, a Black Barbie who is loved and highly respected by everyone in Barbie Land. The depiction of women from various ethnicities, abilities, and genders as successful can encourage female audience members to realize their full potential (Steiner, 2014).

The Barbie movie rejects hegemonic White beauty norms by depicting Barbies from distinct ethnic identities as existing on an equal plane of femininity. For example, there is a Barbie that is wearing a pink Hijab and conservative green suit in the audience of the Supreme Court. In addition, all of the Black Barbies have a variety of curls or locks in their hair. At the beginning of the movie, when the movie illustrated the life of Barbies in Barbie Land, none of the Barbies were hypersexualized (LaVoulle & Ellison, 2017) or expected to meet Caucasian beauty norms. Barbie Land was depicted as a place where all of the Barbies felt comfortable and confident to be themselves regardless of their racial, religious or ethnic origin and ability.

Sisterhood, Female Kinship, and Comradery. Another aspect that makes the *Barbie* movie a feminist film is the portrayal of sisterhood. President Barbie encourages the Barbies to uplift one another by expressing how amazing each other are. While President Barbie observes both Stereotypical Barbie and other Barbies engaging in positive affirmations, she is touched and tells the Barbies that she loves them. In this scene, sisterhood is demonstrated through Barbies' mutual support for one another and use of positive affirmations. The encouragement to uplift one another shows comradery and solidarity amongst the Barbies. President Barbie's expression of love further illustrates the deep bond that the Barbie's have with one another.

Another example of sisterhood occurs when Stereotypical Barbie encounters a woman named Ruth. Ruth extends a warm invitation to

Stereotypical Barbie to sit and have a cup of tea. Ruth observes Stereotypical Barbie, absorbing every detail, and mentions that Barbie looks different. Stereotypical Barbie replies, "Oh that's not how I normally look, I usually look perfect" (Gerwig, 2023). To this Ruth replies, "I think you are just right" (Gerwig, 2023). There is a brief moment where nothing is uttered between them, and they share a smile. This is an example of sisterhood because Ruth is helping Stereotypical Barbie feel confident by giving her words of affirmation. Despite Stereotypical Barbie's self-perceived flaws, Ruth embraces Barbie and attempts to help her see her own beauty.

Apart from words of affirmation, sisterhood is depicted as vulnerability, support, and understanding. One example of this is when Gloria rescues Stereotypical Barbie from the Mattel executives. Gloria, Sasha, and Barbie drive away from the Mattel executives and showcase vulnerability, support, and understanding through the following dialogue:

Gloria: So, I've been a little lonely lately and I found those Barbies we used to play with-

Sasha: I thought we gave those away.

Gloria: Well, I started playing with them and making drawings like we used to do. Remember? Because I thought it would be joyful-

Stereotypical Barbie: Was it?

Gloria: No, It wasn't. I got sad and weird, and then the drawings got sad and weird, and maybe because I couldn't be like you... I ended up making you like me?

....

Stereotypical Barbie: I think I owe you ladies an apology. I thought that Barbie had made the Real World better, but the Real World is forever and irrevocably messed up!

Gloria: Well, the Real World is not perfect, but you inspired me. (Gerwig, 2023)

Both Gloria's and Stereotypical Barbie's disclosure of inadequacy reflects their shared understanding of the challenges that life has thrown at them. Despite hearing Barbie's mistakes, Gloria encourages her by stating Barbie inspired her. Altogether, deciding to be vulnerable with each other shows how they both prioritize connection and empathy with each other over potential embarrassment. Similarly, Gloria and Sasha share a moment of encouragement and understanding with each other. When Gloria and Sasha are in the car watching Allan fight off the Kens so they can escape Kendom, Sasha tries to persuade Gloria to turn the car around and help the Barbies. Although Gloria is disheartened because she feels her drawings are responsible for the outcome, Sasha reassures Gloria that her drawings were impressive because they revealed her true self. Throughout the film, Sasha and Gloria's relationship lacks warmth, affection, and connection. However, this scene sparks an understanding

between the characters. Although Sasha is not fond of Barbie, she recognizes the deep connection that Gloria has with the doll. Sasha's insistence to go back and save Barbie Land reflects how she cares for Gloria and encourages her to pursue her aspirations.

Last, but not least, the most impactful example of sisterhood occurred when the Barbies collaborated to save Barbie Land from the patriarchy. Gloria, Sasha, Allan, Stereotypical Barbie, Weird Barbie, and the discontinued dolls decided to work together and save "every single Barbie" (Gerwig, 2023), starting with President Barbie. Once every Barbie was saved, they worked together to get to the constitution before the Kens to restore Barbie Land. In traditional movie plots, women are pitted against each other, however, the Barbies, along with Sasha, Gloria, and Allan, decided to collaborate, fight against the patriarchy, and restore Barbie Land.

Barbie's Journey of Self-Acceptance and Independence Through Emotions and Contesting Beauty Standards. The *Barbie* movie illustrates Barbie's transformation from being perfect to suddenly perceiving herself as flawed, starting her journey of self-acceptance. The transformation begins at Stereotypical Barbie's blowout party when she randomly gets thoughts of death. The following day, nothing seems to be going right for Barbie. Instead of waking up perfectly, as usual, Stereotypical Barbie wakes up exhausted, her breath stinks, she is embarrassed about falling due to her flat feet, and she notices cellulite on her legs. Although Stereotypical Barbie is unaware of this, these

experiences are projections of societal beauty standards affecting Gloria. Insecurity engulfs Stereotypical Barbie; thus, she goes on a journey to the Real World to rid the cellulite and return to her perceived perfection. While the cellulite seems to be a postfeminist aspect, it also serves as a portrayal of the beauty standards that are imposed on women (Yang, 2024). When Stereotypical Barbie visits the Real World men sexualize and objectify her, intensifying her insecurities. In a different scene, Stereotypical Barbie sits down at a bench to concentrate on finding the human who is playing with her, she pauses to observe the vast range of human emotions- happiness, sadness, anger, and love- shedding her first tear. Stereotypical Barbie, who is touched by this moment, greets an elderly woman who is sitting next to her on the bench and tells her she is beautiful. This scene reflects Stereotypical Barbie's acceptance of what society deems as imperfections such as allowing herself to feel emotions as well as embracing the natural process of aging (Yang, 2024).

Ken's disrespect, the drastic change of Barbie Land, and Barbie's loss of self-perceived perfection lead Stereotypical Barbie to have an emotional breakdown. Stereotypical Barbie no longer looks "perfect", like she did at the beginning of the movie. Gloria attempts to comfort her by saying she understands how Barbie is feeling, but it doesn't work. Everything that society has projected on Barbie finally caught up to her and affected her mentality. Eventually, Gloria gets through to Barbie with an uplifting message and helps Barbie feel confident. Stereotypical Barbie embraces her emotional depth and

believes she is both worthy and capable enough of pursuing more in life.

Ultimately, Barbie decides to become human, symbolizing self-acceptance and an understanding of her place in the world.

Additionally, Barbie exhibits independence as she prioritizes her friendships, self-discovery, and personal growth over traditional romance narratives. This is illustrated in Stereotypical Barbie's blowout dance party, where the Barbies prioritize dancing with each other rather than the Kens. Stereotypical Barbie was dancing planned choreography with the Kens but then left the Kens to go dance with a group of Barbies. While the Barbies were dancing, they discussed how much fun the party was, how they all looked and felt beautiful, and how they were having the best day ever. After the party, Ken closes his eyes, puckers his lips, and leans into Stereotypical Barbie. When she does not reciprocate, Ken opens his eyes, takes a step back, and acts like nothing happened. When Ken requests to sleep over at Stereotypical Barbie's house, Barbie does not feel pressured to allow him to do so. Instead, she stands firm on her answer and explains that she does not want Ken over. This embodies a feminist ethic as it goes against a traditional romance narrative of female characters chasing after love (Banet-Weiser, 2009). Plus, it was girls' night and she would rather spend time with the other Barbies, like she does every night. Lastly, Stereotypical Barbie rejects Ken's advances and, instead, helps him discover that Kens are enough whether or not they have a Barbie by their side. Ken thinks the solution is to be in a relationship with Barbie, but Barbie counters

by telling him that he is not defined by his relationship or his job occupation; Ken is valuable without Barbie's presence. This scene captures how Barbie prioritizes her independence and boundaries. Instead of compromising with Ken, she finds a solution that benefits both of them.

Another example that illustrates Barbie's independence from Ken is when Sasha, CEO and Barbie discuss how the Barbie story should end. The CEO states: "Well that's easy. She's in love with Ken." Sasha did not think this was a good enough ending for Barbie and Barbie confirms that she "is not in love with Ken" (Gerwig, 2023). Once again, Stereotypical Barbie stands her ground and refuses to conform to patriarchal expectations. Throughout the film, the audience is shown that Barbie never needed or wanted Ken. Ken does not seem to provide her with things she does not already have. Barbie has her own money, house, car, career, and girlfriends to support each other. The one thing Stereotypical Barbie expresses wanting is something that she could not receive from Ken or anyone else. "I want to be a part of the people that make meaning, not the thing that is made. I want to do the imagining, I don't want to be the idea" (Gerwig, 2023). Barbie wants to be human and experience the emotions she witnessed in the Real World.

In summary, Barbie's journey of self-acceptance and independence is inherently feminist because it is one of the central aspects of her narrative. The film utilizes the female gaze (Killian, 2023) which highlights Barbie's character development, identity, and aspirations, ultimately portraying her as a character

with depth and complexity. Additionally, Barbie's journey challenges traditional gender roles. According to Banet-Weiser (2004), girls were portrayed as unintelligent, insecure, dependent side characters before the 1980s, when narratives often followed a postfeminist storyline. During this time, women were portrayed as individuals who feared being single for their entire lives and therefore prioritized romance, marriage, and motherhood over their careers (Banet-Weiser, 2009). However, Barbie's self-acceptance and independence departs from the postfeminist narrative.

Tackling the Patriarchy

There are numerous instances in which Barbie the movie directly confronts patriarchy. The film confronts the patriarchy by critiquing societal norms, misogynistic behavior, and challenging hegemonic masculinity.

Critiquing Patriarchal Societal Norms. One notable confrontation with patriarchal norms occurs during Gloria's speech. Gloria's speech to Barbie is well-known for calling out the contradictory world that women live in. Society upholds beauty and behavioral standards that women must perform in order to appease men (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Record, 2002). Women are required to navigate a delicate balance in order to conform to society's expectations (Record, 2002). Gloria explicitly lays out these expectations to the audience as such:

You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're

supposed to love being a mother but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people. You have to answer for men's bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out you're accused of complaining. (Gerwig, 2023)

Through Gloria's speech, the audience gains insight to the impossible expectations women are faced with. These absurd expectations can cause mental health issues, eating disorders, and reinforce a continuous patriarchal cycle within our society. Unrealistic beauty and behavioral standards are designed to keep men and corporations in control (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Record, 2002).

In addition to her speech, Gloria also proposes a new Barbie doll to the CEO of Mattel.

Gloria: Okay, what about ordinary Barbie? She's not extraordinary. She's not president of anything, or maybe she is. Maybe she's a mom. Maybe she's not. Because it's okay to just want to be a mom, or to wanna be president, or a mom who is president. (Gerwig, 2023)

Throughout the film, the audience observes some of the challenges that Gloria faces. Gloria's memories unveil how her relationship with her daughter, Sasha, has drastically changed. Barbie was a joyful pastime used as a form of bonding between Gloria and Sasha, but as Sasha matured, she outgrew both the

doll and her connection with her mother. This issue, in addition to the societal expectations that Gloria faces, is portrayed in the film as leading toward mental health issues. It becomes apparent that Gloria's drawings of Irrepressible Thoughts of Death Barbie, Full Body Cellulite Barbie, and Crippling Shame Barbie are "weird, dark, and crazy" because they reflect everything Gloria pretends not to be. Instead of being open with the issues she faces, Gloria internalizes her depression and loneliness through the drawings of her dolls (Gerwig, 2023). Gloria's proposal of an ordinary Barbie can aid in combating beauty standards and behavioral standards. She acknowledges that, regardless of what women choose to do with their lives, they all want to get through the day feeling good about themselves. Overall, Gloria critiques the universal pressure that women face: how to look, act, and present themselves.

Another example of critiquing patriarchal norms occurs when Stereotypical Barbie and Ken visit the Real World for the first time. Both Barbie and Ken are dressed in matching pink roller-skating outfits. Stereotypical Barbie is shown wearing a retro leotard over a pair of pink spandex and Ken wears a pink tank top with a matching retro vest and pair of shorts. They both have a matching visor, neon yellow elbow and knee pads, and neon yellow roller skates. As they skate their way through Venus Beach, they are met with crowds of people staring at them. Barbie is whistled at by some boys, laughed at by a group of girls, and given a thumbs up by a man. On the other hand, Ken is met with nods of approval and compliments. Barbie confides in Ken, expressing that

the people at Venus Beach make her feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. Barbie's feelings are out of the norm because in Barbie Land "Barbie doesn't get embarrassed" (Gerwig, 2023), they are portrayed as confident women. Ken is surprised by Barbie's statement and does not feel the same way. Ken states that he feels, "admired but not ogled... and there is no undertone of violence" (Gerwig, 2023). Ken's statement is a reflection of men in society. Barbie's experience of immediate sexualization is juxtaposed with Ken's experience of admiration.

Additionally, the women in the *Barbie* movie are faced with certain scenarios in which the Kens exhibit chauvinistic tendencies. These tendencies emerge after Stereotypical Barbie visits the Real World. When Barbie comes back from her trip to the Real World, she notices that the Barbies are brainwashed into loving the patriarchy. After Gloria gives her famous speech about contradicting expectations that women face in society, she realizes that delivering the speech to brainwashed Barbies returns them to their normal selves. After this discovery, Gloria uses feminist monologue, speaking about the universal experience women have with male chauvinism to free the brainwashed Barbies. The first brainwashed Barbie that the group tried to recover is President Barbie. As soon as President Barbie is in the truck, Gloria tells her, "You have to be their moms, but not remind them of their mommy. Any power you have must be masked under a smile" (Gerwig, 2023). After President Barbie hears this message, she breaks free from the spell and returns to her usual self. Gloria's

statement critiques patriarchal norms by highlighting the contradictory standards men have within relationships. Under patriarchy, men are socialized to exert dominance over all gendered people. The second sentence of Gloria's message pertains to how women must conceal their power with a smile to avoid being called negative labels such as 'bitch.' This scene depicts a symbolic resistance to patriarchal societal norms. President Barbie's return to normalcy, prompted by Gloria's statement, symbolizes her liberation from societal expectations.

The last example of critiquing patriarchal norms occurs when Gloria attempts to restore Lawyer Barbie. Similarly to President Barbie, Lawyer Barbie was swiftly snatched and placed into the pink mobile car. Gloria tells Lawyer Barbie, "You have to find a way to reject men's advances without damaging their egos. Because if you say yes to them, you're a tramp, but if you say no to them, you're a prude" (Gerwig, 2023). After hearing this message, Lawyer Barbie returns to her usual self. Gloria's message highlights the double standards that are placed on women by men. Unlike Gloria's previous statement to President Barbie about concealment of power being a solution, this statement depicts how women are placed in a lose-lose situation, where accepting advances means they are a "tramp" and rejecting advances means they are a "prude." Gloria's statement highlights the unrealistic standards placed on women.

Representing the Absurdity of Misogyny in both Century City and Kendom.

The absurdity of misogynistic behavior is illustrated when the power dynamics of Barbie Land have reversed, and the Kens are in control. The film shows the

Barbies in a subordinate position and hypersexualizes them in the beach scene. While the Barbies are cheering on the Kens who are playing volleyball, the Barbies are dressed in revealing clothing that shows their midriffs and cleavage. The members of the Supreme Court are dressed in sexy cheer outfits, other Barbies are dressed in bikini tops and short skirts, and President Barbie is dressed in a short red dress carrying bottles of beer and plastic cups. President Barbie goes up to a Ken playing volleyball and says, "Have a brewski beer" (Gerwig, 2023). President Barbie starts to play with the beer bottle, mimicking the sound of an airplane as the beer bottle flies through the air. Then, President Barbie says, "This is so much fun. This is so much better than being president!" (Gerwig, 2023). Afterward, merman Ken and mermaid Barbie appear. Stereotypical Barbie witnesses the interaction that occurs between them. Mermaid Barbie tells merman Ken, "Have a brewski beer. My big guy is thirsty" (Gerwig, 2023).

This scene satirically depicts society's expectations of gender roles, specifically how women are expected to dress and behave. The male gaze (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975) is used in this scene to depict how society expects women to dress sexy, cater to men's needs, and have men be in a position of power. Not only does this scene objectify women, but it also illustrates the misogynistic behavior of asserting male dominance (Blake et al., 2021) due to the Barbies being portrayed as unintelligent women who serve men. This portrayal is emphasized when President Barbie is depicted playing with a beer

bottle and stating that she is having more fun serving the Kens than from being president.

A second example of when the film portrays the absurdity of misogynistic behavior occurs when Stereotypical Barbie confronts Ken about the transformation of Barbie Land.

Ken: Look, I'm just having some brewski beers at my Mojo Dojo Casa House. (Ken swings a golf club and breaks Barbie's flowerpot with it) You can stay if you want. As my bride-wife or long-term-low-commitment-distance girlfriend. What do you say? Brewski beer me? (Gerwig, 2023)

Ken's terms that he uses to describe his and Barbie's relationship reflects an objectifying and dismissive approach to their relationship. Ken sees Barbie as someone he can take advantage of by offering her to serve him beer. Furthermore, the destruction of Barbie's property showcases Ken's lack of regard for Barbie's possessions and feelings as well as hostile and disrespectful behavior (Blake et al., 2021) that is present within misogynistic individuals.

A third example highlighting the absurdity of misogynistic behavior occurs when Physicist Barbie comes out of the house in a sexy maid costume complete with fishnet leggings, a choker necklace, and heels.

Physicist Barbie: Where are my hungry boys? Who wants snacks?

Stereotypical Barbie: I am so happy to see you. Can you believe what's happening? Physicist Barbie: I know. Isn't it great?

Doctor Barbie: Anyone need a brewski beer?

Stereotypical Barbie: What are you doing? You're a doctor! (Gerwig, 2023)

This scene highlights the absurdity of misogyny in *Kendom* and how women are portrayed through the male gaze (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975). The maid ensemble, a popular archetype of female subordination, was utilized to emphasize the submission of the Barbies under the male gaze. Once again, these Barbies who were accomplished, educated, and were in powerful professions were reduced to unintelligent objects under the patriarchal gaze of the Kens. Physicists Barbie's newfound joy in serving the Kens as well as Doctor Barbie's joy in being a "helpful decoration" illustrate the expectations that are placed on women when it comes to their careers, beauty standards, and roles. The scene of the Barbies giving a random Ken foot massages also depicts the expectations of traditional gender norms. Women are expected to dress sexy but also play the role of a mother: serving men dinner, drinks, and giving them foot massages.

A fourth example of the film representing the absurdity of misogynistic behavior appears when Ken is looking for a well-paying job in Century City, believing that being a man is the only qualification he needs for a job in the Real World. In one of the scenes, Ken approaches a businessman inquiring about a job and the following conversation exemplifies how the patriarchy is discreetly intact in hiring practices despite labor laws that prohibit gender discrimination in the Real World.

Ken: I'll take a high-level, high-paying job with influence, please.

Businessman: Okay, you'll need at least an MBA and a lot of our people have PhDs.

Ken: Isn't being a man enough?

Businessman: (whispers) Actually, right now, it's kind of the opposite.

Ken: You guys are clearly not doing patriarchy very well.

Businessman: No!...haha...we are doing it well, yeah. We just...hide it better now. (Gerwig, 2023)

Besides depicting issues that occur within society, this scene illustrates Ken's sense of entitlement and dominance over women based on his gender. This scene illustrates the contempt (Blake et al., 2021) that misogynistic men have towards gender and workplace equality.

A fifth example is when Ken inquires about whether or not he can perform surgery and asks a female doctor. However, Ken is under the assumption that the female doctor is not a doctor because she is a woman. Instead of believing her, Ken orders her to get him a coffee and other equipment to perform an appendectomy. Suddenly, a random man in scrubs passes by them and Ken chases after him thinking he is the doctor because he is a man. This scene depicts misogyny because it illustrates sexist sentiments (Blake et al., 2021) that misogynistic men hold towards women within the workplace. Ken contributes to perpetuating stereotypes by assuming that corporations hire individuals based on

gender instead of skills and qualifications. Additionally, Ken behaves as if the doctor is inferior to him because she is a female.

Lastly, the absurdity of misogynistic behavior is illustrated when the Mattel executives brought Stereotypical Barbie to Mattel's headquarters to prevent further complications. The executives convince Stereotypical Barbie to get in the doll box, but before she complies, she asks if she could meet the woman in charge, the CEO. Will Ferrell's character states that he is the CEO, but Barbie is not pleased with that answer, so she asks about the CFO. To Barbie's surprise, a man was the CFO. So, Barbie asks about the COO, which turns out to be another man. Her last guess was the President of the Barbie division, but again, that was another man. Then, the lowest-level worker tells Barbie, "I'm a man with no power, does that make me a woman?" (Gerwig, 2023). The CEO says he knows where she is going with this and mentions they have had at least two women that work there at one point in time, they have gender-neutral bathrooms, and every single one of the men that work there love women.

This scene depicts the absurdity of misogynistic behavior through the lack of gender diversity in the workplace. The fact that there are no women working in management positions showcases that there is a velvet ghetto (Steiner, 2014) for women in the workplace. Also, the film connects lacking power to being a woman via the worker's statement "I'm a man with no power, does that make me a woman?" (Gerwig, 2023). Furthermore, the film critiques how women's inequality is often overlooked and trivialized in the workplace via the CEO deflecting

Barbie's concerns and mentioning that the corporation has gender-neutral bathrooms. The gender-neutral bathrooms are a superficial attempt at inclusivity since Gloria is the only woman who works with the Mattel executives.

In conclusion, the male gaze is used to depict the absurdity of misogyny, specifically, how women are perceived as objects of desire in Kendom. The Barbies are portrayed as ditzy, sexy, and only wanting to serve the Kens. This is a problem that is relevant within society because there are misogynistic men who look down on women and believe they are only good for sex appeal. Additionally, the absurdity of misogyny is illustrated when Ken ventures to Century City and learns that men have more power than women. Due to this discovery, Ken believes that only men have the credentials to be of value in both the public and private spheres. All of these scenes that illustrate the absurdity of over-the-top male misogyny become powerful tools to point out and name the existing societal patriarchy today.

Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity. The *Barbie* film critiques hegemonic masculinity through satire. The Kens transition from occupying a subordinate role within Barbie Land to wanting to be dominant like men in the Real World. Their subordination is illustrated by the fact that they do not hold any positions of power in Barbie Land, instead, Kens only occupy careers such as lifeguard, surfer, or beach. Furthermore, the narrator exemplifies Kens subordinate role when she states, "Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day when Barbie looks at him" (Gerwig, 2023). In addition to not having a

powerful career, the Kens have no power in their relationships. When Ken wanted to spend time with Barbie, he would cross his fingers and hope that she would say yes. Ken was insecure about his lack of authority in the relationship which would be depicted by him challenging other Kens. For example, Ken was told that Barbie didn't want him around since she didn't ask him to accompany her on her trip to the Real World. Instead of asking for permission to tag along, knowing he would be denied, Ken hides in the car and surprises Barbie with his presence later. Ken also has an absence of power that is depicted through their appearance. At first, the Kens all wear matching sets of buttoned shirts and thigh-high shorts, perfectly styled hair, and the absence of facial/body hair. Later in the movie, the audience discovers that this was because the Barbies styled them. Ken states "You know, now that Barbies aren't around for everything, we can do our hair however we like" (Gerwig, 2023). This shows how the Kens had no power even when it came to their appearance. However, Ken stops listening to Barbie as soon as he enters the Real World.

Ken first witnesses the portrayal of hegemonic masculinity as soon as he enters the Real World. Construction workers cat-call Stereotypical Barbie by asking her, "You got fries with that shake?" among other sexist catch cries (Gerwig, 2023). Barbie is obviously bothered by these remarks. Despite Barbie's feelings, Ken smirks when the construction workers tell Barbie these lines, but immediately looks serious when Barbie refutes and says they (Barbie and Ken) do not have genitals. As Barbie walks away, Ken tries to impress the construction

workers and gain their approval by telling them, “I have all the genitals” (Gerwig, 2023). This scene depicts feminist ideologies by showcasing and recognizing the objectifying (Killian, 2023) remarks that women receive from men. By showcasing these issues, the film is spreading awareness of the devaluation of women. Furthermore, it satirically showcases the flaws within our society by illustrating how men seek approval from other men, instead of standing up for women who are in these scenarios.

Barbie is also seen as a profitable object to Mattel (both on-screen and off-screen) and an object of sexual desire in the Real World (La Port & Cavusoglu, 2023). An example of this is when the CEO tells Barbie, “Get in the box you, Jezebel!” (Gerwig, 2023). Jezebel is a term that has been used to discipline White femininity. According to Jackson (2015), Jezebel is a character in the Bible who became a metaphor for any woman who was seductive and dangerous. Therefore, when the CEO refers to Barbie as Jezebel, he is sexualizing and objectifying Barbie. Additionally, Barbie is sexualized and objectified by the men she encounters in the Real World. When Barbie first arrives at Venice Beach in her rollerblading costume, she is met with men whistling at her, cat-calling her, and a random man spansks Barbie on the bottom. Both the CEO and random men in Venice Beach attempt to degrade Barbie by acting dominant which contributes to the reproduction of patriarchy (Connell, 1990; Connell, 2001).

Another example of the film satirically critiquing hegemonic masculinity occurs when Ken comes across Century City. A man exits the gym, Flex House, section of the building, wearing a huge fur coat and black sunglasses. The man nods to Ken while saying “what’s up man?” (Gerwig, 2023). A huge smile appears on Ken's face as he nods his head back. Then, more men come out of the gym giving each other fist bumps as they congratulate each other on the great work out they did together. Inside the gym, the men are yelling to each other “you’re the man!” (Gerwig, 2023) as they hit punching bags and Ken seems to be gaining confidence from this. Next, a Hummer approaches and two male police officers, wearing cowboy hats, on horses pass by the scene. Then, Ken is inside Century City and watches three men in business suits having a conversation about work. A woman, who seems to work under them, approaches the men and the man raises his index finger at her, dismissing her, while stating “Not now Margret” (Gerwig, 2023). When Ken witnesses this, he mimics both the gesture and the disapproving facial expression. After, Ken rides up an escalator that has a screen displaying various montages of men. A mixture of photos and short videos appear on screen of men drinking beers, the four men on Mount Rushmore, men on the dollar bills, cowboys, male managers, men working out, men playing sports, a scene from *Grease* of the male characters wearing leather and dancing next to their cars, and the final image is of Sylvester Stallone wearing fur jackets (Sylvester Stallone is best known for his role in *Rocky Balboa*, a boxing movie). Ken realizes that men are in charge in the Real World,

chuckles to himself, and exclaims “yes!” This scene critiques hegemonic masculinity by satirically critiquing the power men hold. The scene at the gym exaggerates stereotypical depictions of masculinity by having the men congratulate each other and reinforce their masculinity through words of affirmation and fist bumps. Furthermore, Ken mimicking the expressions and gestures of the man illustrates how hegemonic masculinity is a learned behavior (Connell, 1990; Connell, 2001). Moreover, the montage of men performing traditionally masculine roles, humorously reflects male dominance and power within society. Altogether, this scene highlights the absurdity of masculinity and how easily someone can become influenced to participate to reap rewards.

Lastly, the film critiques hegemonic masculinity through Ken transforming Barbie Land into Kendom. Shortly after picking up some books about the patriarchy, Ken decided to go back to Barbie Land to share his discovery about men ruling the Real World. This information completely transforms Barbie Land; the Kens adopt misogynistic tendencies towards and results in removing the Barbies from their roles/positions of power. In turn, the Barbies became brainwashed and behaved in ways that supported the patriarchy. When Barbie, Gloria, and Sasha return to Barbie Land, they are exposed to symbols of hegemonic masculinity that Ken brought from the Real World such as a more masculine appearance, manly sports, and the Western cowboy aesthetic. When Barbie drives to her Dream House, she sees that it has been transformed into Ken’s Mojo Dojo Casa House, which incorporates a Western cowboy theme.

Many of the Kens wore cowboy hats, cowboy boots, and had wooden ponies as a display of dominance and power. The identity of a cowboy is linked to hegemonic masculinity. Firstly, the word “cowboy” is a masculine term, limiting the participation of cowboy culture to men. Secondly, association of masculinity with the term “cowboy” originates from a long history intertwined with issues of class, power, and violence (Moore, 2014). Cowboys are associated with the working-class. Working-class occupations, such as roping and branding animals, are considered masculine (Moore, 2014). Society's perception of gender roles reinforces the association of manual labor and toughness with manliness. Additionally, cowboys assert their strength and dominance in order to maintain their status in society, linking violence to manhood (Moore, 2014). Furthermore, the violence that a cowboy displays was used to assert their dominance over women and minorities (Moore, 2014). Therefore, when the Kens adopt the identity of a cowboy, they are reflecting their power and dominance over the Barbies.

Conclusion

In summary, the *Barbie* film is a feminist text because it challenges traditional gender roles, showcasing that both Barbies and humans can be successful women who are financially independent. The film challenges societal expectations by portraying women excelling in various professions, including male-dominated careers. Barbie's own house, car, and career, along with winning Nobel Prizes, serve as a powerful rejection of gender norms. This

empowerment extends to Gloria, as she also has a successful career, is the assumed breadwinner of the household, and has her own car. The film highlights women's agency by giving the female characters a strong critical voice and showcasing them as being active agents in fighting against the patriarchy. The film works intentionally to depict women of diverse positionalities as part of the Barbie universe. Comradery and female kinship are evident throughout the film as the women encourage one another through words of affirmation and by teaming up to take over Kendom together. Additionally, the film challenges societal expectations by showcasing Barbie's embrace of her emotions and perceived imperfections, breaking free of traditional gender norms. Barbie's autonomy is highlighted as she prioritizes her own happiness and independence from Ken. The film further deconstructs societal norms by depicting women confronting the patriarchy and questioning the subordination of women. It also critiques the absurdity of misogynistic behavior that takes place in Kendom and Century City, questioning gender-based discrimination. Lastly, the film extends its critiques of societal norms to hegemonic masculinity by demonstrating the absurdity of hegemonic masculinity.

The following section will explore postfeminist contradictions that lend critique to Barbie as an exclusively feminist media.

CHAPTER FOUR
POSTFEMINIST MESSAGES OF BARBIE AND HOW BOTH WARNER
BROTHERS AND MATTEL
SUPPORT POSTFEMINIST THEMES

The *Barbie* film depicts postfeminist characteristics and engages in a postfeminist marketing strategy. There are numerous instances where Barbie is sexualized and shapes both her appearance and behaviors off societal standards, which I thematized as 'Barbie conforms to societal standards and is sexualized throughout the film.' The male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) is discernible in the film exemplified by the sexualization of Barbie through camera angles that accentuate Barbie's long legs and bosom. I will explore how Barbie is sexualized and conforms to Western beauty standards via the plotlines regarding Barbie's fear of cellulite and objectification.

In addition to conforming to societal standards, Barbie Land excludes people who do not conform to societal standards, which I thematized as 'outcasting non-conforming individuals in Barbie Land.' Midge, who is pregnant, Weird Barbie, and discontinued Barbies, one of which is associated with the LGBTQ+ community, are ostracized from Barbie Land and live with Weird Barbie in her Weird House, away from the other Barbies and Kens. I will illustrate how having outcast Barbies and Kens reinforce societal standards and marginalizes

those who deviate from them, and this is why this is contradictory with sisterhood and intersectionality that also exist in the film.

The *Barbie* film promotes consumerism by framing Barbie as a fashionista and including product placement, which I thematized as ‘Mattel turns feminism into a commodity.’ The product placement takes away from the feminist message of the film, showcasing that consumerism is a primary source of empowerment. Additionally, Mattel markets towards a female audience, encourages fans to consume both Barbie brand related products and Barbie dolls, frames Barbie as a party girl, and turns feminism into a commodity, which I thematized as ‘postfeminist marketing surrounding the *Barbie* film.’ Mattel executive McKnight has stated in an interview with Pasquarelli (2023) that Mattel's target audience are girls and fans of the brand through a purpose-driven message. This purpose-driven message is actually a cause-branding strategy that gives false empowerment to women. Mattel also uses the 1980s “girl power” marketing strategy (Banet-Weiser, 2004) that focus on empowering girls through consumerism, exemplified by the #Barbiecore trend which encourages rampant consumerism of the Barbie brand and brand collaborations, reinforcing beauty standards and contributing to women’s economic inequality. Mattel markets Barbie as a sexy-party girl which objectifies Barbie, reinforces Western beauty standards, and encourages consumerism. Lastly, I will discuss how Mattel takes advantage of the hype surrounding the film about women’s empowerment and markets the film prompting ‘pink power’ to appeal to women consumers.

Barbie Conforms to Societal Standards and is Sexualized Throughout the Film

There are several scenes in the *Barbie* movie where Stereotypical Barbie is sexualized. The film starts via a contrast between traditional baby dolls and Barbie dolls. Barbie is made out to be a solution to ending stereotypical gender play through the narrator's monologue:

Since the beginning of time, since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls. But the dolls were always and forever *baby* dolls. The girls who played with them could only ever play at being mothers, which can be fun, at least for a while anyway. Ask your mother. This continued until...(Gerwig, 2023)

The narrator's monologue gets interrupted via a visual of a towering Barbie doll dressed in a black and white one-piece swimsuit, complete with black heels, gold earrings, blue eyeshadow, red lipstick, and white sunglasses.

The scene described above creates a binary, conveying to the audience that motherhood lacks empowerment while depicting a so-called empowering figure (Barbie) as a sexy, independent, party girl. This depiction creates a capitalistic and individualistic agency which is problematic because this form of agency places the responsibility on individual women to uphold feminist values rather than a collective responsibility (McRobbie, 2004). Replacing the mother

role with a sexy, independent, party girl creates an expectation that women need to look and behave like Barbie in order to be deemed as powerful.

Additionally, the *Barbie* film sexualizes and objectifies Stereotypical Barbie from beginning to end. This is exemplified through the portrayal of Stereotypical Barbie as an object of desire (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975) by all of the Kens in Barbie Land. The Kens compete with one another in order to gain Stereotypical Barbie's attention/approval. Ken gets jealous that Simu Lui's Ken danced with Stereotypical Barbie, so he danced his way over to her to be near her as well. Then, Simu Lui's Ken performed an awesome backflip in front of Stereotypical Barbie and made Ken look bad by saying "I bet you can't do a backflip like that Ken" (Gerwig, 2023). Simu Lui's Ken does not seem to have a romantic interest in Stereotypical Barbie but sees her as an object to win over in order to be better than Ken.

Furthermore, Barbie is portrayed through the male gaze (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975) which sexualizes her and reinforces Western beauty ideals. For example, Barbie is depicted as an object of desire when she first arrives at the beach in Barbie Land. The camera starts out with a close up on her long-shaved legs and slowly moves further out to show her backside as she struts her way over to her friends. As soon as Barbie is seen by everyone on the beach, they immediately greet her saying "Hi Barbie!" (Gerwig, 2023). This camera angle and immediate attention from others was designed to purposely display how Barbie is someone to be desired. Instead of emphasizing the female character's physique,

Killian (2019) argues a feminist portrayal should prioritize defining her by her actions.

The Barbie doll, with its Caucasian features reinforces Western beauty ideals, which include being fair skinned, blonde, blue eyes, and thin with an hourglass figure (Bhadania, 2021). In the film, Barbie also reinforces this Western beauty ideal. This is exemplified through a scene near the end of the film where Barbie is crying and saying that she is not pretty anymore. At that point, the regular flow of the film is disrupted and the narrator states, "Note to the filmmakers: Margot Robbie is the wrong person to cast if you want to make this point" (Gerwig, 2023). The film engages in self-reflexivity and self-criticism to show the audience that the film's producers realize that Margot Robbie, the actress who played Stereotypical Barbie, fits Western beauty ideals and is not ugly. The film producers make an acknowledgment that the actress they casted perfectly fits into the Western beauty ideal in order to maintain the feminism of the film, nevertheless, this does not change their decision to cast Margot Robbie.

Additionally, another scene that reinforces Western beauty ideals is the scene where Ruth tells Barbie to close her eyes and then a video montage of Caucasian women appears. This montage depicts Caucasian women expressing affection towards one another, whereas two Black females appear without loved ones. The video showcases the Caucasian, middle-class, American girl experience. American weddings, birthdays, and other social gatherings were incorporated in the montage; however, the montage did not show the

experiences of women of color. The videos only included what appeared to be cisgender, heterosexual, women who fit the “girl next door” archetype. The *Barbie* movie missed the opportunity to advance their feminist narrative by including women of various ethnicities participating in their cultural traditions and showcasing their experience of being a woman. Barbie’s appearance (Bhadania, 2021), along with the montage of Caucasian American women, sends a message about ideal femininity. The Western beauty ideal is harmful because it can pressure women of other ethnicities to attempt to meet unattainable White beauty expectations (Bhadania, 2021), equating Whiteness with superiority.

The last example of conforming to societal beauty ideals occurs when Barbie discovers she is “malfunctioning.” Stereotypical Barbie notices that she has flat feet and Weird Barbie points out that Stereotypical Barbie is already getting cellulite. Weird Barbie told Barbie that she opened a portal and had to go fix it or else she was going to get worse.

Weird Barbie: Look at your upper thigh.

Stereotypical Barbie: (Gasps) What is that?!

Weird Barbie: That’s cellulite. That’s gonna spread everywhere.

And then you are going to start getting sad and mushy and complicated.

Stereotypical Barbie: No! What do I have to do?... (Gerwig, 2023)

While individuals, like Yang (2024), may have interpreted the scene as a satirical feminist scene, it is critical to acknowledge that the *Barbie* film caters to all ages.

Therefore, it is important to analyze the message conveyed in the scene, especially to children who may not fully comprehend the satirical nuances. This scene suggests that Barbie's emotional state and cellulite is a problem that needs to be solved, or else Barbie will become ugly. In fact, the whole reason Barbie went on her journey in the first place was to get rid of the cellulite and prevent herself from getting uglier. The Barbies even put up a banner that read, "Bon Voyage to reality and good luck restoring the membrane that separates our world from theirs, so you don't get cellulite!" Another scene that captures this moment occurs in the middle of the movie. Barbie arrives at Mattel headquarters and asks the CEO "What can I do to repair the time rift in the spacetime continuum, get my feet back, and the one cellulite gone, and just genuinely not turn into Weird Barbie?" The film continuously emphasizes Barbie's negative portrayal of cellulite. By the film's conclusion, Barbie never explicitly accepts or loves her cellulite.

Outcasting Non-Conforming Individuals in Barbie Land

The *Barbie* film depicts situations in which certain characters are excluded from Barbie Land, reflecting postfeminist ideologies. The first doll who is purposely excluded in Barbie Land is Midge. Midge "was Barbie's pregnant friend." The past tense of usage of friendship indicates that Barbie and Midge are no longer friends. The Narrator continues by stating "actually, let's not show Midge because she was discontinued by Mattel because a pregnant doll is too weird" (Gerwig, 2023). The pink song lyrics include "Hey Midge, never mind"

(Gerwig, 2023). When Stereotypical Barbie throws a blowout party, Midge is shown for a brief second dancing by herself. Near the end of the movie, the CEO of Mattel visits Barbie Land and screams when he sees Midge, then states “Oh, Midge, I thought we discontinued her.” The CEO’s reaction to Midge’s presence reflects how unwelcome Midge truly is.

The *Barbie* movie reinforces mainstream ideologies of family by outcasting Midge who is presumed to be a single mother. Midge appeared alone in every scene, without a Ken by her side. The absence of a reference to the father of Midge’s baby leads one to assume that Midge is a single mother. The exclusion of Midge echoes the societal treatment often faced by individuals who have a child out of wedlock. This treatment is a reflection of the sexual contract (McRobbie, 2011); Barbies are allowed to be sexy and do as they please with their body, as long as they do not become a single mother.

In addition to excluding expecting mothers, the film depicts the exclusion of individuals who do not fit within societal beauty standards. Weird Barbie is outcasted because she's eccentric, ugly, has short hair, and is coincidentally older than other Barbies.

Lawyer Barbie: I heard that she used to be the most beautiful Barbie of all but then someone played with her too hard in the Real World.

Doctor Barbie: And now she's fated to an eternity of making other Barbies perfect while falling more and more into disrepair herself.

That and we all call her Weird Barbie both behind her back and also to her face.

Stereotypical Barbie: She's *weird!* (Gerwig, 2023)

This scene illustrates how the Barbies in Barbie Land want nothing to do with Weird Barbie. The Barbies purposely avoid her because she does not meet mainstream Western beauty standards. This is exemplified in another scene when Stereotypical Barbie has a meltdown inside of Weird Barbie's "Weird House" (Gerwig, 2023), indirectly calling Weird Barbie ugly.

Weird Barbie: Why didn't the brainwashing work on you?

Stereotypical Barbie: My exposure to the Real World must have made me immune. Either you're brainwashed or you're weird and ugly, there is no in-between.

Weird Barbie: Sing it, sister. (Gerwig, 2023)

While the Barbies appear feminist by supporting and encouraging each other in Barbie Land, they ostracize individuals who they think do not conform to mainstream Western beauty ideals. When the Barbies from Barbie Land refer to her as "Weird" Barbie, they are reinforcing harmful beauty standards. The act of excluding Weird Barbie from their social circle goes against feminist ideologies (Killian, 2023) such as inclusion, diversity, and dismantling societal norms.

Lastly, the *Barbie* film continues to depict the discontinued dolls, such as Earring Magic Ken, who is seen as belonging to the LGBTQ+ community (Savage, 1993), as outcasts. Both Barbies and Kens who are discontinued by

Mattel live with Weird Barbie in her Weird House, showcasing that discontinued dolls share a similar status with Weird Barbie. However, unlike Weird Barbie who is instrumental in helping Stereotypical Barbie and Gloria in their fight against patriarchy, the other outcast dolls only make an appearance in the house but are never a part of the sisterhood alliance for dismantling patriarchy. The overlook of intersectionality clearly goes against a feminist narrative.

Mattel Turns Feminism into a Commodity

In addition to the characters and plots identified above that go against feminist ideologies, the way that the *Barbie* movie is promoted by both corporations and its collaborations with other brands also contribute to the film's postfeminist ethos. Recognizing the corporate branding around the film, Greta Gerwig satirically addresses how Mattel turns feminism into a commodity by alluding to female empowerment without making any references to feminism in one of the scenes. In the scene where the CEO of Mattel is having a business meeting with his executives, he asks, "What do we really sell? We sell dreams, imagination, and sparkle. And when you think of sparkle, what do you think of after that? Female agency" (Gerwig, 2023). Reducing female agency to sparkle emphasizes superficial qualities, implying feminist issues can be achieved through consumerism, and overlooks the significant aspects of feminism such as a woman's autonomy. The film is self-reflexive regarding how such marketing strategies turn feminism into a marketable product rather than actually engaging in feminist politics. However, while likely intended as satire, the real irony is that

Mattel actually follows this marketing method by transforming the Barbie brand into a feminist narrative driven by profit. As previously mentioned, Mattel noticed that their Barbie doll sales were declining in the early 2000s. The corporation created specific doll lines as an attempt to give meaning to the brand and garner parental support for the message. Associating women's empowerment discourse with a commodity without intending to enact change demonstrates the company's postfeminist tendencies.

Warner Brothers also contributes to this by not associating the film as feminist in its promotional materials. The *Barbie* the movie's official social media account also refrained from characterizing the film as feminist. For example, the Barbie Movie account on Instagram posted screenshots of reviews from X (Twitter),

To the shock of no one, Greta Gerwig's #BarbieMovie is a dream house of cheers and tears. A whimsical & emotional journey of self-discovery & growth. Margot Robbie & Ryan Gosling are PERFECTION while the production design & costumes are SUBLIME. No longer can we say she's everything, he's just Ken. THEY are everything (Barbiethemovie, 2023e)

Another screenshot from the same Instagram post read:

This is truly a delightful film that everyone can love. If you think it looks too 'girly' or not for you, you couldn't be more wrong. It's incredible how universal the themes are, this is gonna blow up the

box office. Congrats to the entire cast & crew!" (Barbiethemovie, 2023)

The reviews that are chosen to showcase on Instagram to promote the movie emphasize self-discovery, universal themes, and how successful the actors are in bringing doll characters to life. These screenshots may have been purposely selected, avoiding feminism, to target a broader audience, especially since the director and cast think people attach different meanings to the word feminism. Margot Robbie stated "I think some people hear the word feminism means that doesn't mean men... I think some people hear the word feminist and associate a lot of negative baggage with the word" (Ferguson & Freri, 2024). Additionally, M.G. Lord, who is a cultural critic, investigative journalist, and author of "Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll", shares that the Mattel executives treat the word 'feminist' as if it were radioactive (Fidel, 2023). Although the corporations lean away from explicitly labeling the film as a feminist movie, the director and cast members think of the film as a feminist text. For instance, in an interview, Greta Gerwig stated:

Barbie...exists in the "both/and", not the "either/or." She's not either good or bad- diving into the complexity of it and not running away from it, but like looking at all the thorniness and stepping into it and also looking at all the thorniness and stepping into what is the negotiation of what women need to be, and how to give them

something other than a tightrope to walk on, is how it feels feminist to me. (Ferguson & Freri, 2024)

Although Gerwig and the cast embrace their film as feminist, the entire postfeminist marketing machinery is powerful enough to pinkwash their message as I will exemplify below.

The corporations are encouraging the film's feminist fans to support the film by embracing the color pink, as illustrated by their social media posts. For example, the official *Barbiethemovie* account posted “The color of the day (and this summer 😊) is 💖 BARBIE PINK 💖. Happy #NationalPinkDay Barbies and Kens!” (*Barbiethemovie*, 2023b). This caption demonstrates how pink was the focal point of the promotional message, encouraging fans to associate pink with the *Barbie* movie. The hashtag further emphasizes the importance of the color pink, reinforcing that pink is associated with Barbie.

Although both Mattel and Warner Bros. use the color pink to promote the film, one can infer that it is the fans who fill the color pink with personal meaning and significance, especially since the corporations do not label the film as feminist in their marketing and promotion. The way that Warner Brothers and Mattel market their film resembles how corporations have marketed strong women characters since the 1980s, which is via a “girl power” marketing strategy (Banet-Weiser, 2004). According to Banet-Weiser (2004), girl power demonstrates the contradictions of third-wave feminist politics. Corporations use the girl power marketing strategy as a way to showcase their lead female

characters as empowered girls, but their empowerment is implicitly connected to high consumerism. The marketing strategy used is contradictory in nature: representing girls as powerful, strong, and independent in the media and commercializing the idea of girl power. Banet-Weiser (2004) suggests that a television advertisement of an empowered Barbie doll is the perfect example of girl power marketing. Therefore, it becomes evident that Mattel and Warner Brothers embrace this strategy by simultaneously creating a movie that empowers Barbie while fostering consumer opportunities. In the next sections, I discuss how Mattel and Warner Bros take advantage of the 'pink power' trend through product placement and partnered collaborations.

Brands Featured in the Film: Merchandising and Product Placement

Product placement was obvious throughout the *Barbie* film. Various brands had their spotlight in the movie such as Chanel, Birkenstocks, Chevrolet, and Duolingo. The apparel brands were easily slipped into the film by making Barbie a fashionista. Barbie's consumerism is exemplified when Barbie tells Gloria "everything I bought and own will totally inspire you. And we can change clothes again!" (Gerwig, 2023). The first scene incorporating product placement is the opening scene to the film. The original Barbie doll, valued at \$27,000 in pristine condition (Bhaimiya, 2023), was portrayed towering over the children when they discovered Barbie for the first time. This is significant because in this scene, Barbie is represented as a commercial product with high-resale value.

Another example of product placement occurred when Stereotypical Barbie was deciding what to wear from her closet full of Chanel products. Stereotypical Barbie had Chanel purses, wallets, jewelry, and clothing. On the other hand, the Kens did not have any obvious branding. Deciding to only market expensive brands to female audience members overlooks how women are financially disadvantaged and underpaid within society. The Barbie film creates an appetite for women to purchase Chanel clothing and accessories by associating Barbie's female empowerment with consumerism, thus reinforcing the ideologies of capitalism.

Besides the Chanel-branded clothing that the audience sees in Stereotypical Barbie's closet, the film also mentions some of Barbie's most iconic looks that she wore as a doll. Barbie's feminist narrative takes a turn when Ken discards a handful of clothing from her house:

Ken: Barbie take your lady fashions with you! Take your Celebrate Disco Bell Bottoms and your Ice Capades Pretty Practice Suit and Dazzling Show Skirt!

Gloria: (Gasps) Those are archival.

Ken: Your Pajama Jam in Amsterdam sets. And your Pretty Paisley Palazzo Pants!

Stereotypical Barbie: Not the Palazzos! (Gerwig, 2023)

After Ken throws out Barbie's clothing, Barbie starts crying and throwing a fit. This scene illustrates Barbie's stereotypical attachment to fashion, limiting the

true potential of empowerment for her character. Ken naming each clothing piece by name coupled with Gloria's acknowledgement of their historical significance reveals how shallow this seemingly feminist narrative is while also revealing Mattel's true goal is to raise their IP instead of creating a dimensional character.

Additionally, product placement occurred when Stereotypical Barbie was at Weird Barbie's house seeking advice. Weird Barbie told Stereotypical Barbie that she had to choose between going back to how things were (high heel) and knowing the truth (Birkenstock, the brand which is known for its flat, comfortable sandals). The Birkenstock product placement takes away from the feminist narrative by imposing gender stereotypes and reducing the feminist narrative to a consumerist choice. When Barbie decides that she would rather wear the pink heel and return to normal, the film sends a message to the audience that hegemonic femininity and being a sexy party girl are integral to Barbie's identity. Because high heels accentuate and draw attention to a woman's legs by making them appear more toned and sexier, women wearing high heels are associated with sex appeal. In addition, Birkenstock is transformed into a feminist brand because the brand contests sexy footwear.

Furthermore, product placement occurs when Gloria helps Barbie escape by driving away in her Chevrolet. In fact, every scene in the *Barbie* movie that involves the car was meticulously edited into an actual advertisement for Chevrolet during commercials (Southside Chevrolet, 2023). Taking scenes from the *Barbie* movie itself and turning it into a commercial exemplifies how

corporations capitalize and commodify feminist narratives. By blending feminist narratives with promotional agendas, the boundaries between empowering feminist storytelling and consumerism become blurred. This raises questions about why the film was really made: to empower girls or to gain profit.

Partnering Brands that are not Directly Included in the Film

Barbie the movie had a \$150 million marketing budget and a \$145 million production budget (Rubin, 2023b). Due to the substantial amount of money dedicated to marketing, Warner Brothers and Mattel partnered with over 100 international partnerships to guarantee the widespread distribution of the movie *Barbie* (Acuna, 2023). These partnerships included numerous food, clothing, accessory, interior design, novelty items, and game companies including but not limited to: Swoon, Pinkberry, Truly beauty, Moon cosmetics, NYX cosmetics, OPI nail polish, CHI hair care, Kit-sch beauty accessories, Boohoo, Forever 21, Zara, Pacsun, Bloomingdales, Crocs, Aldo, Spirit Halloween, Xbox controller, and Funboy (Pauly, 2023). According to an interview with Mattel executive McKnight, the brands were chosen based on if they were reflective of Mattel's values such as inclusivity and that the majority of Mattel's collaborations target the female audience and young adults who are fans of the brand (Pasquarelli, 2023). This is exemplified through Warner Brothers Picture's repost from @pinkberryswirl:

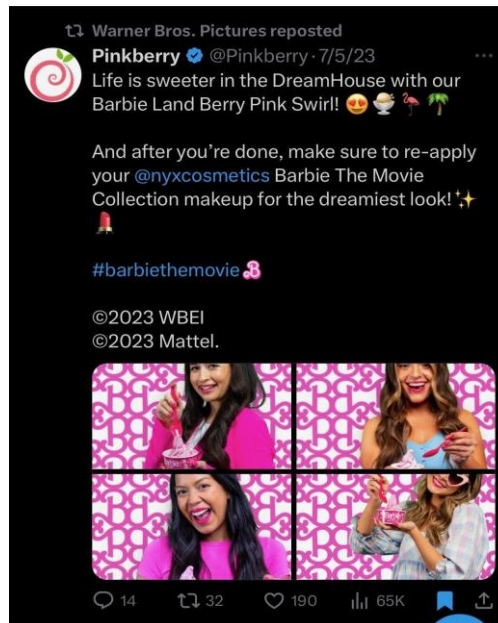


Image 1. Pinkberry Advertisement via (Twitter) X

Social media post reads: “Life is sweeter in the DreamHouse with our Barbie Land Berry Pink Swirl! And after you’re done, make sure to re-apply your @nyxcosmetics Barbie The Movie Collection makeup for the dreamiest look! 🍷👄” (@Pinkberryswirl).

This advertisement hails girls only which is evident from the fact that only girls are featured eating ice cream in their pink NYX lipstick. It diverts female consumers from gender politics and subtly encourages them to prioritize enhancing their appearance through the use of makeup. The young girls in the advertisement reinforces the notion of ingraining a focus on appearance from a young age. Showcasing the lipstick on girls from diverse ethnic backgrounds exemplifies the use of intersectionality to showcase how the product looks on various skin tones, thereby broadening their consumer base. Also, this advertisement reinforces the color pink by incorporating a pink backdrop, and

having the girls wear pink lipstick, shirts, and sunglasses, while eating pink ice cream. The use of pink within the advertisement is most likely to guide audience members to associating pink with Barbie.

Additionally, Mattel marketed to female consumers through their pop-up Malibu Barbie cafes across America. According to Mattel executive McKnight, one of Mattel's main focuses was creating experiences that fans could engage with (Pasquarelli, 2023). On Instagram, the cafe promotes its various photo opportunities, activities, and a pink food/drink selection towards women. For example, one post of a mother and daughter received the caption: "Nothing better than a mother-daughter day out at the Barbie Cafe! #Barbie" (@barbiecafeofficial). Another example is a post of a girl dressed in pink sitting on a pink bench with the caption stating, "Confidence is the best accessory #Barbie" (@barbieofficialcafe). The captions attempt to link sisterhood and female empowerment to the Barbie brand. The account appears to place an emphasis on showcasing Barbie dolls of various ethnicities around the cafe, however, the majority of the content contains Caucasian women enjoying the cafe together.

Besides food and makeup, fashion partnerships were prioritized since, as Mattel executive McKnight stated, "Barbie is as much about fashion as she is about culture and empowerment" (Pasquarelli, 2023). Therefore, with that corporate agenda in mind, Mattel collaborated with a variety of fashion companies from high-end, mid-tier, and affordable (Pasquarelli, 2023). As a result, the color pink has infiltrated every Barbie product, and pink color fashion apparel has been marketed in association with female empowerment.



Image 2. Zara and Forever 21

Barbie clothing by Zara (left) and Forever 21 (right)

This is exemplified in the marketing of Zara and Forever 21, which are global fast fashion brands. The marketing strategy that Mattel uses illustrates an emphasis on improved appearance through consumption. Mattel's partnerships with clothing, makeup, nail, and hair companies encourage girls and women to buy *Barbie* branded products to improve their appearance. By purchasing Barbie products, girls and women have the opportunity to embody both Barbie's passion for fashion and feminism. Mattel also engages in a watered-down version of cause-branding strategy. Mattel reduces feminism to postfeminism by associating the color pink with female empowerment. According to McKnight, Mattel targets its adult audience by creating a purpose-driven message so they will consume more Barbie products (Pasquarelli, 2023). Mattel's marketing strategy creates the perception of consumers' political involvement. Some

individuals may purchase Mattel's products because the brand advocates for women's rights. Mattel aims to expand its consumer base to include those advocating for women's rights. By operating as such, Mattel is able to prioritize its profit while masquerading as a corporation that cares about women's rights. Altogether, Mattel turns feminism into a commodity by using cause-branding marketing strategies aimed towards women.

#Barbiecore and the Trend of Wearing all Pink

Fans engage in free marketing, and thus self-branding, for the *Barbie* film. Arguably, the most apparent way that fans show their support for the movie is wearing the color pink. Wearing all-pink attire as a way to emulate Barbie's style has become a trend referred to as #Barbiecore. Not only do the fans associate the color pink with Barbie, but even Mattel has copyrighted the shade of pink, Pantone 219 c, as "Barbie pink" (Lindau & Holmes, 2023). After Mattel owned the rights to that color, many celebrities wore all-pink attire on the red carpet as a nod to Barbie (Lindau & Holmes, 2023). Fashion shows dedicated to Barbie-themed clothing collections featured runway models with blonde hair wearing vibrant Barbie pink outfits. Niki Minaj, whose fans are called Barbz, has even made references to Barbie in her lyrics and music videos by using the color pink and Barbie's signature brand logo (Lindau & Holmes, 2023).

Currently the hashtag #Barbiecore has about 1.1 billion views on TikTok. Many influencers, such as fashion influencer @the.navarose, who has 5.8 Million followers on TikTok, have participated modeling numerous outfits with various shades of pink (Rose, 2023). This trend gained immense popularity because it is

something that anyone can participate in. Undoubtedly, the trend's inclusivity encouraged individuals to dress in stylish, all-pink, attire to see the movie (Lang, 2023; Rubin, 2023b). An example of #Barbiecore is evidenced in a video posted by the official Barbie account on Instagram which encouraged fans to wear pink through their caption "Popcorn pairs perfectly with #Barbie Pink 🍷🍿 Keep showing us your #BarbieTheMovie theater looks this weekend! #Barbiecore" (Barbie, 2023). This depiction is significant because it showcases that Mattel encouraged fans to participate in the #Barbiecore trend. The #Barbiecore trend garnered attention, created hype, and engaged fans in creating free marketing. Though clearly it seems that there's evidence (from the Instagram quote above) that Mattel sought to harness that trend once it gained traction. This is evident through another post on Instagram (Barbiethemovie, 2023) that thanked fans for their enthusiastic participation, affirming the success of the marketing tactic.

Although #Barbiecore originated from wearing all-pink clothes, it eventually became anything pink themed, including furniture. Both fans and celebrities have participated in a social media trend of creating their own Barbie DreamHouse by collecting pink furniture. This pink furniture trend has been covered in the *Articulardigest* article where Lawrence (2022) suggested that the #Barbiecore house trend creates a safe space for girls to be unapologetically girly. Although this #Barbiecore furniture trend may have been started by fans, Mattel showed its full support for it by posting the *Articulardigest* article on the official X (Twitter) Barbie account with a comment that read "Have to agree🍷💕" (Barbie, 2022a). It is likely that Mattel used the *Articulardigest* article to influence

more female consumers to support the *Barbie* movie by participating in #Barbiecore and purchasing pink products from affiliated brands.



Image 3. Barbiecore Becomes Pink Furniture

The #Barbiecore trend encouraged rampant consumerism. Life-size Barbie box photo opportunities were located in theaters, encouraging many fans to wear all-pink attire and pose as Barbies as they took photos inside the box (Blair, 2023). This trend went hand-in-hand with purchasing an emotional support Barbie. Emotional support Barbie dolls are dolls that are similar to the person, in appearance and career, obtained to reconnect with their inner child (Willingham, 2023). Many fans would bring their emotional support Barbie dolls to accompany them to the *Barbie* movie. If fans did not have pink clothing items in their closet, they were encouraged to purchase items to complete their “movie-going look” (Johnston, 2023). Dressing up and purchasing new clothes places pressure on women to conform to beauty standards and contributes to women's economic inequality.



Image 4. Lifesize Barbie Box from @Barbie on Instagram

Participating in the #Barbiecore trend encourages women to brand themselves as Barbie. By wearing Barbie products, they become postfeminist citizens who ‘empower’ themselves through consumerism. Through this example, we can observe that the *Barbie* film incorporates critiques of the patriarchy, while at the same time, the marketing encourages gendered consumption that feminist political economists have critiqued. Gendered consumption is harmful because it essentially gives false power to women through consumption, ultimately reinforcing the capitalist white supremacist patriarchy.

While Mattel is celebrating fans creating their own pink DreamHouse as a safe place to be unapologetically girly, Airbnb utilizes the pink furniture trend to give fans an opportunity to rent Barbie’s Malibu DreamHouse. A three-story Airbnb house was painted pink and transformed into Barbie’s Malibu Dream House for fans to explore. There was also a Ken inspired portion of the house to

give fans access to his Mojo Dojo Casa House (Acuna, 2023; Pasquarelli, 2023; Pauly, 2023). According to Mattel executive McKnight, Mattel created a program with Airbnb to promote the *Barbie* film and ensure fan involvement (Pasquarelli, 2023). Mattel benefits from free content made from fans about their visit to Barbie's DreamHouse. In short, Mattel's collaboration with Airbnb capitalizes on fan engagement and dismisses expanding on a larger feminist narrative.

Mattel Markets Barbie as a Sexy-Party Girl


One of the most prominent reasons that the marketing for the *Barbie* film is postfeminist is because it only presents Barbie as a sexy-party girl. Majority of the marketing surrounding the *Barbie* movie involved throwing Barbie pink themed parties. This is showcased through Margot Robbie's response when she was asked who the *Barbie* film was for:

This is such like a thing people say when they do press for a movie- they're like 'it's for everyone' but this was literally crafted to be everyone. This, Greta said from the beginning, 'this is a *big* party and *everyone* is invited.' (Barbiethemovie, 2023d)

The party marketing strategy chosen focuses more on the fun Barbie has than the feminist struggle and triumph Barbie achieves in the film.

Mattel promoting and presenting Barbie as a party girl can be further exemplified by the content of Mattel's official social media accounts. There are many videos and pictures framing Barbie as a party-girl by repeatedly using Barbie's monologue from the film: "Nothing big planned...just a giant blowout party with all the Barbies, planned choreography, and a bespoke song" (Gerwig,

2023). Numerous posts referred to the monologue from the film in their captions, exemplified by a caption that reads, “Didn’t have anything big planned, just a giant blowout party in Mexico City with 20,000 of our closest Barbies and Kens ❤️” (Barbiethemovie, 2023c). The posts that referred to Barbie’s monologue in the film, incorporated videos of Margot Robbie, the actress who played Barbie, wearing pink outfits, taking photos with fans, and had pink confetti falling from the sky. The world tour seemingly aided with the expansion of the consumer base by showing Barbie is for everyone across the world.

Another example of the presentation of Barbie as a sexy-party girl is when @Barbiethemovie posted a 36 second video with the caption “Sorority house  DreamHouse! ❤️” The video contained the text “Barbie sorority watch party.” It showed various universities across America having a sorority watch party. The video contained predominantly Caucasian women dressing in pink, indulging in pink desserts, dancing, and taking pictures while the “Barbie World” song by Nikki Minaj and Ice Spice (that appears at the end of the *Barbie* movie) played in the background:

And I'm bad like the Barbie (Barbie). I'm a doll, but I still wanna party (party). Pink 'Vette like I'm ready to bend (bend). I'm a ten, so I pull in a Ken. I'm a Barbie girl (girl), Pink Barbie Dreamhouse. The way Ken be killin' shit, got me yellin' out like the Scream house (woo). Yellin' out, we ain't sellin' out. We got money, but we ain't lendin' out. We got bars, but we ain't bailin' out. In that pink Ferrari, we peelin' out, I told Tae bring the Bob Dylan out. That

pussy so cold, we just chillin' out. They be yellin', yellin', ye-yellin' out. It's Barbie, bitch, if you still in doubt (ooh). (Barbiethemovie, 2023)

The Barbie account strategically angled this post, with the content and song, in a way that conveys the message that partying while watching the *Barbie* movie is a sister bonding experience. Agency through partying is problematic because it focuses on women having the freedom to dress, have fun, drink, and engage in sexual activity without restrictions (McRobbie, 2011). Both men and corporations' benefit from this because men can sexualize and objectify women (McRobbie, 2011) without consequence, and corporations' profit from selling sex appeal, which both work against a woman's interest. Although the post mainly contains Caucasian women, this post is also an intersectional nod to Black feminism. By using this song in the marketing, Mattel is attempting to expand their consumer base to African American women.

An additional example of Barbie being sexualized through marketing is exemplified through the cover of *People* magazine. The way Ken is positioned under Barbie appears as though he is looking up Barbie's dress. Ken's suggestive grin and thumbs up while looking up Barbie's dress, transforms what could have been an innocent photo of Barbie into a photo for the male gaze (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975), sexualizing Barbie for men's pleasure. Barbie appears to be unaware of Ken's gaze. The lack of consent also contributes to transforming this image into a sexually charged dynamic (Caputi, 2015). This reinforces hegemonic masculinity as it turns Barbie into an object of desire and

gives power to men (Willis, 2022). Overall, the cover of People magazine undermines the feminist message within the film and reinforces gender norms.



Image 5. Barbie the Movie Cover on People Magazine

Furthermore, both the director and cast of Barbie participated in Barbie's sexualization. During an interview with Kelly Clarkson, America Ferrera mentioned the cast's sexualization of Barbie.

Margot: We had a Barbie Sleepover. It was as fun as it sounds. It was Greta's idea. I can't take credit. We all went to Claridges, which is a really gorgeous hotel in London. We all shared beds and wore our pajamas and ordered room service and played games and I found out that America is exceptionally competitive. America: I'm extremely competitive. And nobody told me that it was a sexy Barbie sleepover. So, everybody was in really pretty silky nightgowns and I was in my grandma floral twin set.

Margot: She simultaneously looked like an old lady and a five year old at the same time. (Kellyclarksonshow, 2023)

When Margot Robbie compares America Ferrera's pajama choice to an old lady/child, she is implicitly stating that there is an expected way for a woman to dress in order to be sexy. This reinforces the idea that women must conform to beauty standards in order to be considered attractive. Also, the association between an elderly woman and lack of sex appeal suggest that as women age, they are no longer found attractive. Not only does this show that the director sexualized Barbie by throwing a sexy Barbie sleepover, but it also shows how Barbie is connected to consumerism. Claridge's is a five-star hotel where the grand piano suite costs about \$14,000 USD a night and the signature suits/penthouse prices are not even listed (*Claridge's*, n.d.). The fact that the cast threw a sexy pink Barbie sleepover in this hotel showcases the link between the Barbie brand and high-end consumerism.

Mattel also markets the album based on the film soundtrack via a party theme and suggests listening parties. "Be the first to hear our new music from @barbiethemovie & #BarbieTheAlbum at an Exclusive Early Listening Party near you ❤️" (Barbiethalbum, 2023a). Eventually, the brand even started to promote throwing parties for dolls. The official Barbie Style account posted a picture of a Barbie doll with a mini version of the Barbie Album. The caption reads "Every blowout party needs an epic soundtrack- with no skips guaranteed! The official Vinyl Movie Soundtrack Set features 17 tracks in and inspired by

#BarbieTheMovie, complete with a doll-sized replica for your own @BarbieTheMovie dolls to throw a party of their own. Available now exclusively @MattelCreations 🎵 🎧 ❤️ #BarbieTheAlbum #MattelCreations #Barbie #BarbieStyle ” (Barbiestyle, 2023b).



Image 6. Barbie the Album

In a different post, a Black Barbie doll and Caucasian Barbie doll were positioned to have a movie night watching the *Barbie* movie together. @Barbiestyle posted the caption “#BarbieWatchParty, anyone? ❤️ You can now watch #BarbieTheMovie at home, and we’re celebrating by following along with @BarbieTheMovie as they share trivia and more, starting at 5PM PT today! 📺 🍿” (Barbiestyle, 2023a). This may have been done to influence the younger girls to embrace Barbie, especially since Mattel executive McKnight has mentioned that Mattel focuses on the dolls more than the message when

targeting younger girls (Pasquarelli, 2023).

Overall, marketing Barbie as a sexy-party girl reinforces several postfeminist ideologies. Media, marketing, and consumer engagement that focuses on a woman's body as a site of liberation falls within the realm of postfeminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Therefore, Mattel uses postfeminist marketing strategies (McRobbie, 2009) by portraying Barbie as a sexy-party girl, equating her agency to have fun and sexy with female empowerment. This approach in marketing gives power to both men and corporations, diverting women's attention to maintaining their youthful appearance rather than engaging in gendered issues and politics (Murray, 2013). Also, portraying Barbie as a sexy-party girl may influence women to emulate her, since women are prone to self-monitor their bodily appearance and life choices in a way that aligns with corporate interest (McRobbie, 2011; Steiner, 2014). These representations encourage women to spend more money on beauty products to look like Barbie, which can contribute to further financial disadvantages (Meehan, 2002; Steeves & Wasko, 2002). Ultimately, marketing Barbie as a sexy-party girl contributes to the continuation of patriarchal power.

The Rise in the Production of Barbie Dolls After the Movie

Mattel's toy line does little to advance the feminist narrative. Instead, Mattel is using their growing Barbie fan base to increase their profit and encourage consumption. Mattel executive McKnight stated that Mattel has been using multiple social media channels to connect with fans (Pasquarelli, 2023). On Barbie's X (Twitter) account, multiple posts incorporated celebrities and Barbie

dolls participating in the #Barbiecore trend (Barbie, 2022a; Barbie, 2022b).

Another post from the official Barbie account had several images of the new Ken doll that has the iconic sweater “I am Kenough”. The caption reads “He may be #Kenough, but we bet you can’t get enough of him. Your best opportunity to own this Ken doll inspired by Ryan Gosling’s performance in #BarbieTheMovie ends November 14 at 11:59 PM PT, so don’t wait any longer! Pre-order now” (Barbie, 2023c). One can infer that these posts were created to encourage followers to purchase dolls from the film.

It did not take long for the production and consumption of Barbie products to spike after the film. Mattel announced the release of their official Barbie dolls from the *Barbie* movie on June 1st, 2023 (*Mattel Announces New Product*, 2023). Majority of the dolls are Margot Robbie’s Barbie in various outfits from the movie such as the retro skating outfit, pink jumpsuit, pink western outfit, gold disco jumpsuit, pink gingham dress, and her plaid matching set. Other characters from the *Barbie* movie are also listed on Mattel’s website such as President Barbie, Gloria, Weird Barbie and a few different Kens. Ken has several outfits from the *Barbie* movie that he is presented in such as his inline skating outfit, black and white western outfit, pastel beach set, denim matching set, faux fur coat and black fringe vest, and white and gold tracksuit. A fashion pack is available with three iconic outfits that Margot Robbie’s Barbie wore in the *Barbie* movie. However, in order to access other outfits, customers must purchase specific dolls wearing those outfits. In addition to the dolls, Mattel also sells featured items from the movie such as the pink Corvette that Barbie drives in

Barbie Land as well as a replica of Barbie's three-story Dream House (*Barbie the Movie Dolls and Playset*, n.d.). Mattel justifies their wide range of doll options by emphasizing that children can engage with the characters and stories they have seen on screen (*Mattel Unveils Additional Products*, 2023). Mattel's justification for the increase in dolls provides further evidence that Mattel prioritizes commercial success rather than contributing to feminist discourse.

Mattel markets the "Barbie the Movie Collectible Gloria Doll Wearing Pink Power Pantsuit" by using the 1980s "girl power" marketing strategy (Banet-Wieser, 2004). Mattel emphasizes the color pink that Gloria wears and associates it with empowerment. Mattel made a deliberate choice to create the Gloria doll wearing the pantsuit outfit. This decision held cultural significance, as the pantsuit became a popular symbol of equality around 2016 when Hilary Clinton wore it in her first lady painting. According to Mateer (2019), Clinton wore the pantsuit as a way to challenge traditional gender norms and, after the appearance of it, many women started to wear it in solidarity. In the product description for Gloria, Mattel subtly conveys the dolls empowerment: "Inspired by the Gloria character in Barbie™ The Movie, this collectible Barbie® doll commands the room in her all-pink power pantsuit, big bouncy curls, and stunning multi-color platform heels. Talk about the power of pink!" (*Barbie the movie collectible Gloria doll wearing pink power pantsuit*, n.d.). Mattel drew inspiration from Gloria's attire in the film, transforming her purple blazer into a vibrant pink doll suit. It is worth noting that Mattel never explicitly mentions feminism in the product description. Instead, it seems the corporation reduces

women's empowerment to wearing a jumpsuit as opposed to skirts and dresses and calling them "power jumpsuit" and "power pantsuit."



Image 7. Gloria's Pink Power Jumpsuit

Mattel also associated the color pink with female empowerment with "Barbie The Movie Collectible Doll, Margot Robbie As Barbie in Pink Power Jumpsuit" (*Barbie the movie collectible doll, Margot Robbie as Barbie in pink power jumpsuit*, n.d.). Stereotypical Barbie's product description completely avoids mentioning feminism and the patriarchy.

In the likeness of Margot Robbie as Barbie in Barbie™ The Movie, this collectible doll is dressed in head-to-toe pink. Her look is pulled straight from a memorable scene in the movie -- down to her printed hair scarf and big sunnies! (*Barbie the movie collectible doll, Margot Robbie as Barbie in pink power jumpsuit*, n.d.)

The "memorable scene" that Mattel is referring to is when Stereotypical Barbie, Gloria, Sasha, Weird Barbie, and Allan take down the patriarchy together. The

absence of acknowledging the feminist ideologies present within the film exemplifies how Mattel dances around mentioning feminism within their marketing.



Image 8. Barbie's Pink Power Pantsuit

Additionally, Mattel also embraces postfeminism marketing tactics when it comes to Ken. The “Barbie the Movie Collectible Ken Doll Wearing Denim Matching Set” is posed in a way that sexualizes him, focusing on his abs and boxers. The product description reads “Inspired by Ken's character in Barbie™ The Movie, this collectible Ken® doll wears a head-turning denim look. With his unbuttoned vest and iconic Ken® boxers peeking out from his jeans, he captures all of film Ken's signature style!” (*Barbie the movie collectible Ken Doll wearing denim matching set*, n.d.). Mattel also states that the “glimpse of Ken® logo underwear at his waistline adds an extra pop of personality!” (*Barbie the movie collectible Ken Doll wearing denim matching set*, n.d.). The “personality” that Mattel is referring to is the hegemonic masculinity that Ken acquires after visiting

Century City. In fact, while Ken wears this attire in the *Barbie* film, he talks over Barbie, corrects her on the name for Kendom, and accepts Barbie back as his long-term-low-commitment-distance girlfriend. Producing the Ken doll in denim may encourage children to reenact scenes that perpetuate harmful traditional gender stereotypes and harmful power dynamics.



Image 9. Ken's Abs

Lastly, Mattel goes against the feminist ideologies presented in the film by marketing Ken as an object of desire and by disregarding Barbie's autonomy.

The product description for the Little People figures states the following:

Four of the film's characters are brought down to Little People® figure size and styled in memorable outfits, including the Barbie® character in a gingham dress, a President Barbie® figure in a pink & gold dress, her handsome beau Ken® in his beachy attire (with swoon-worthy abs), and her business meeting-ready friend, Gloria.”

(Little people collector Barbie: the movie special edition set for

Adults & fans, n.d.)

Not only does Ken get sexualized by Mattel mentioning his “swoon-worthy abs”, but Mattel continues to market Barbie and Ken as a couple by referring to Ken as her “beau”, overlooking Barbie’s stated desire to be independent from him at the end of the film.

Conclusion

In conclusion, postfeminist ideologies are present in both the *Barbie* film and the marketing surrounding *Barbie* the movie. The film incorporates the male gaze (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975) which sexualizes and objectifies Barbie throughout the film. She is portrayed as an object of desire by both the Kens and men in the Real World as well as an object to make money off of by Mattel. This sexualization is underscored by the camera angles that accentuate her long legs and bosom. Additionally, Barbie’s portrayal of Western beauty ideals, perpetuates unrealistic standards onto women. The exclusion of Midge, Weird Barbie, and the discontinued dolls reinforces societal norms, contradicting the sisterhood narrative in Barbie Land. The exclusionary aspect of the film perpetuates stereotypical behavior towards individuals who deviate from standards within society. The product placement within the film, not only distracts from the feminist message but it also equates consumerism with empowerment and turns feminism into a commodity. The intertwining of sexualization, conforming to Western beauty ideals, exclusion of individuals, and turning feminism into a commodity creates a postfeminist narrative within the film.

Moreover, the marketing of the *Barbie* film utilizes postfeminist marketing strategies such as 1980s “girl power”, cause-branding, and encourages self-branding. Mattel markets female empowerment through consumerism, exemplified by the emphasis of #Barbiecore. Additionally, Mattel incorporates intersectionality within their marketing collaborations as an attempt to expand their consumer base since the film revolves around white femininity. Also, Mattel frames Barbie as a sexy-party girl by focusing their marketing on blowout parties and sharing content that highlights Barbie’s sex appeal. Lastly, Mattel does not work on advancing the feminist narrative with the toys from the film. Instead, Mattel focuses on the color pink and associates it with female empowerment, exemplified by Mattel emphasizing pink power outfits on the *Barbie* the movie collectable dolls. Mattel goes against feminist ideologies by marketing Ken as an object of desire. Altogether, the marketing of the film does not incorporate feminist ideologies, demonstrating that Mattel cares more about expanding and monetizing their IP than spreading the feminist message of the film. This becomes evident when considering how postfeminist representations and marketing strategies put limitations to feminist messages conveyed in the film.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Conducting a feminist textual analysis showcased that the *Barbie* movie is simultaneously feminist and postfeminist. According to Killian (2023), feminist films emphasize the representation of diverse female characters and the characters' identity, aspirations, strength, empowerment, and independence. Feminist films break away from the conventional narrative by including a more in-depth look at the female characters and having them be active agents in the story rather than being a sexy side character (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975). During my feminist textual analysis, two major feminist themes appeared: 1) representation of women as strong, capable, independent, and accomplished agents and 2) 'tackling the patriarchy,' which suggests that the film challenges the patriarchy directly.

Throughout the film, the female characters are portrayed as intelligent, successful women who have a strong critical voice, which I thematized as the representation of women as strong, capable, independent, and accomplished agents. This is exemplified through Barbie winning Various Nobel Prizes and having "her own money, her own house, her own car, and her own career" (Gerwig, 2023). Gloria also shares this success because she is the assumed breadwinner of the family, is an executive at Mattel, and has her own car. Both Gloria and her daughter, Sasha, have strong critical voices because they stand up for what they believe in. Sasha was not afraid to tell Barbie all of the ways she

has negatively impacted society, unrealistic beauty standards and rampant consumerism to name a couple. Gloria also used her drawings –Irrepressible Thoughts of Death Barbie, Full Body Cellulite Barbie, and Crippling Shame Barbie– as a way to fight against societal standards.

There are several feminist sub-themes that emerged under the representation of women as strong, capable, independent, and accomplished agents. The first sub-theme that appeared was intersectional feminism in Barbie. All Barbies, regardless of ethnicity, gender, size, or ability were portrayed as strong, capable, independent, and accomplished agents. Each Barbie was showcased as successful in their professions, which challenges the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Not only did the Barbies have careers that held power, such as being a president or a judge, but they were also successful in traditionally male-dominated careers such as being a pilot or construction worker. In addition to diverse careers, each Barbie was portrayed as beautiful the way she was-- wearing a hijab, locks in her hair, or pantsuit-- challenging both Western beauty ideals and the hyper-sexualization of Black women (Bhadania, 2021; LaVouille & Ellison, 2017).

The second feminist sub-theme that emerged was sisterhood, female kinship, and comradery. The female characters in the Barbie film place importance on uplifting one another with words of affirmation, encouraging each other to pursue their dreams, and inspiring each other to become better individuals. The most prominent example of sisterhood is when Stereotypical

Barbie, Gloria, Sasha, Weird Barbie, Allan, and the discontinued Barbies plan to take over Kendom and restore Barbie Land. During this time, Gloria encourages Stereotypical Barbie and the others to come together in solidarity and fight against the patriarchy. This showcases that the female characters in *Barbie* the movie are strong women who empower other women and are active agents in their own story, rather than being depicted as a sexual object for the male gaze (Killian, 2023; Muvery, 1975). While the male gaze often depicts women as mean girls who are pitted against each other (Killian, 2023), sisterhood challenges and critiques this trope. Additionally, sisterhood can also be found within the fans of Barbie. The *Barbie* film resonates with audiences which is evident in how women come to the theaters bringing their mothers, daughters, and girlfriends (Kuo, 2023). Watching the movie together and dressing up together is a bonding experience for the female audience. The movie even sparked a trend where women post a moment or collage of moments from their own life that are common girl experiences, using the Billie Eilish song "What was I made for?", and hashtag the video "#girlhood" (Arnold, 2023). Furthermore, sisterhood is a necessary aspect for the feminist movement. Women must come together to take on the patriarchy, which is why postfeminism works to separate women by focusing on empowerment through individualism (Steiner, 2014).

The third, and final, feminist sub-theme that emerged was Barbie's journey of self-acceptance and individualism through emotions and contesting beauty standards. Barbie experiences transformations in her life such as having a

variety of emotions besides happiness, bad breath, thin hair, flat feet, and cellulite, which makes her feel as though she is no longer pretty. Although she is not aware at first, these experiences happen because she is connected to Gloria who is negatively impacted by societal beauty standards. Near the end of the movie, Barbie decides to turn human and accept all of these so-called flaws that are created by society. Barbie's journey of self-acceptance is feminist because it gives her character depth (Killian, 2023) and showcases her inner strength to contest beauty standards (Yang, 2024).

Barbie is represented as an individual who is independent, empowered, and single; whose identity is not defined by her attachment and relationship to Ken. Barbie's individualism is reinforced by rejecting Ken's advances, standing her ground, and refusing to conform to patriarchal expectations. When the CEO tells Barbie that her happy ending is being in love with Ken, she tells him no and pursues her aspirations of becoming human. Barbie creates a solution where Ken and herself can be happy as individuals, reflecting Barbie's independence and strength to stand up for herself. Altogether, Barbie is depicted as prioritizing her friendships with other women, self-discovery, and personal growth, which challenges traditional female roles (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975).

The second major feminist theme I found was 'tackling the patriarchy.' There are many instances where the characters explicitly verbalize and demonstrate how women have been subordinate to men, leading to the characters taking action against dismantling patriarchy. Since I have identified

various approaches to addressing the patriarchy within the film, I have categorized this topic into three feminist sub-themes.

The first feminist sub-theme of 'tackling the patriarchy' is critiquing patriarchal societal norms. Much of Gloria's monologue fills this theme as she is the character who cures the brainwashed Barbies by explicitly verbalizing the nonsensical standards that are imposed on women by patriarchal societal norms. For example, Gloria told President Barbie, who was temporarily brainwashed by the patriarchy after Kens takeover, that women have to act like mothers in their romantic relationships but not remind their partner of their mom and hearing this restored President Barbie to her original identity. Perhaps the most well-known part of the film is where Gloria tells Stereotypical Barbie that it is impossible to be a woman, listing all of the behavioral standards and beauty standards that are made to be purposely unachievable by Caucasian men and corporations (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Record, 2002). Bringing these impossible standards to light challenges the contradictory norms that society has created (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Record, 2002).

The second feminist sub-theme of 'tackling the patriarchy' is representing the absurdity of misogyny in both Century City and Kendom. When Ken first visits Century City, he notices that men have power and have dominance over women. Ken eventually assumes that the only requirement for a career is to be a man and that women do not have the capability to work in a male-dominated career. Portraying Ken as satirically misogynistic challenges workplace sexism by

shedding light on the stereotype that suggests women are more suitable for careers that require compassion instead of having a particular skill set (Steiner, 2014). This critique extends further as Stereotypical Barbie discovers that there is a lack of women in top leadership positions in Mattel, serving as a reflection of the velvet ghetto within society (Steiner, 2014). Additionally, Ken is inspired by the dominance men have in Century city and decides to bring the patriarchy to Barbie Land. When Stereotypical Barbie, Gloria, and Sasha arrive at Barbie Land, they see that it has been transformed to Kendom. The trio witnesses the brainwashed Barbies dressed in revealing attire, serving the Kens brewski beers. The Barbies are stripped of their professional roles and intelligence, which succumbs them to the patriarchy. Instead of being figures of empowerment, they are transformed into figures for the male gaze (Killian, 2023; Mulvey, 1975).

The third, and final, feminist sub-theme of 'tackling the patriarchy' is challenging hegemonic masculinity. The film depicts exaggerated forms of masculinity in both Century City and Kendom. In Flex House gym, men are portrayed as macho, giving each other fist bumps, congratulating each other on their workout, and telling each other "You're the man!" (Gerwing, 2023). Also, there is a video montage that Ken runs into while he is in Century city. This video showcases men playing sports, drinking beer, being cowboys, wearing black leather outfits, and pictures of Rocky Balboa. Eventually, Ken brings his idea of patriarchy to Barbie Land, transforming Barbie's DreamHouse into Ken's Mojo Dojo Casa House. The houses are all decorated with a cowboy aesthetic and the

Kens walk around wearing cowboy boots, hats, and have wooden ponies. This cowboy aesthetic was strategically incorporated by Greta Gerwig to serve as a means to display dominance over the Barbies (Moore, 2014). According to Moore (2014), cowboys have a long history of showcasing hegemonic masculinity. When the Kens engage in dominant and assertive behavior, it actively contributes to the reproduction of the patriarchy (Connell, 1990; Connell, 2001). Juxtaposing the former Barbie Land with Kendom exemplifies how ridiculous hegemonic masculinity is and by doing that the film makes a strong feminist stance that women are subordinate to men within a patriarchal world.

Although the *Barbie* film depicts feminist ideologies, it also incorporates postfeminist ideologies and employs postfeminist marketing strategies. According to Killian (2023), postfeminist films use the male gaze to frame women as objects of desire and individuals who are pitted against each other. During my feminist textual analysis, two major postfeminist themes appear: 1) Barbie conforms to societal standards and is sexualized throughout the film and 2) outcasting non-conforming individuals in Barbie Land.

Throughout the film, Barbie is sexualized and conforms to societal standards. This is exemplified through the Kens seeing Stereotypical Barbie as an object of desire in Barbie Land and also in the Real World (La Port & Cavusoglu, 2023). As evident from the Kens fighting over Stereotypical Barbie and the camera angles used to showcase her pretty features and outfits. The camera angles that accentuate her long legs and bosom further exemplify

Stereotypical Barbie's sexualization (Killian, 2023). In addition to being sexualized, Stereotypical Barbie also conforms to behavioral and beauty standards. This is showcased through the song "Pink", where the acronym for pink stands for pretty, intelligent, never sad, and cool (Gerwig, 2023). Excluding intelligence, these are the standards that are created by and benefit Caucasian men and corporations (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Record, 2002). This standard for the Barbies remains for the entire film. Stereotypical Barbie further conforms to beauty standards by repeatedly wanting to get rid of her cellulite and meeting the Western beauty standard of being thin, yet curvy and blonde (Bhadania, 2021). This Western beauty standard has the potential to negatively influence women trying to achieve impossible standards (Bhadania, 2021), and as a result, giving more money to corporations in an attempt to look like Barbie (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Record, 2002).

The second postfeminist theme is outcasting non-conforming individuals in Barbie Land. The Barbies and Kens in Barbie Land outcasts other dolls who do not conform to societal standards. To start out, Midge, who is a pregnant doll, is a social outcast that the narrator, CEO, and other Barbies intentionally leave out of conversation because she is pregnant. Midge's treatment is a reflection of the sexual contract where women are allowed to be sexual and have fun as long as they do not become mothers (McRobbie, 2011). The discontinued dolls live with Weird Barbie in her Weird House, away from the rest of the Barbies and Kens. Earring Magic Ken, who is welcomed by the LGBTQ+ community (Savage,

1993), is one of the discontinued dolls who are outcast. Unlike Weird Barbie, Earring Magic Ken and the other discontinued dolls are not a part of actively dismantling the patriarchy. This shows the limitations of intersectionality and sisterhood that I identified as two aspects that contribute to the film's feminist message earlier. Although the Barbies in Barbie Land prioritize sisterhood, Midge is not included in the sisterhood because she is pregnant. While there is a diverse range of Barbies and Kens, they are only depicted as heterosexual, resulting in another reason to ostracize Earring Magic Ken, aside from his discontinuation.

Altogether, the film challenges women's disempowerment and misogyny, in a thought-provoking manner, emphasizing the importance of diversity and women's empowerment. There are some very direct feminist messages in the *Barbie* film such as Gloria's monologue where she explicitly states the contradictory and impossible standards that are imposed on women by a patriarchal society, showcasing Mattel's attempt to rebrand Barbie as a feminist brand. Although the film is celebrated for its feminist messages (Fadel, 2023), it is not groundbreaking feminism.

Despite media visibility of feminist issues, women are not free from "the commercial power of mass media" (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p.125). In contrast, acknowledgment of feminist issues relies on the commercial power of mass media. This parallels the operations of Dove's CFRB. In the analysis for Dove's

campaign for real beauty (CFRB), Murray (2013) found that Dove uses a cause branding marketing strategy to influence consumers to purchase their products. According to Murray (2013), cause branding fuses the corporation's identity with societal dilemmas to improve the corporation's image. For example, through the CFRB, Dove declared its resistance to the dominant ideal beauty standard (Caucasian, thin, tall, and sexy) by presenting women and girls of different ages, shapes, and sizes (Murray, 2013). CFRB reels in the audience by making them believe they are part of a movement that will change beauty standards but in actuality, audience members purchase products such as soap, shampoo, and deodorant, that have them conform to the hegemonic standard of beauty (Murray, 2013). Mattel operates in a way that is extremely similar to Dove's CFRB.

Mattel and Warner Bros actively avoid calling the film feminist, most likely to avoid associating the negative connotation of the word to their brand (Ferguson & Freri, 2024). Instead, Mattel uses a 'purpose-driven' message to increase profit by catering to parents of children who will be purchasing the dolls (Pasquarelli, 2023). It is discernible that Mattel's 'purpose-driven' message is really the 1980s 'girl power' marketing strategy (Banet-Weiser, 2004), now referred to as 'pink power.' This is exemplified through Mattel encouraging female consumers to participate in the hashtag #Barbiecore trend. Mattel is prepping their consumers to associate pink with female empowerment and then selling dolls that wear a 'pink power jumpsuit' and a 'pink power pantsuit.' In

other words, Mattel is sending a message that girls can do or be anything, but they first need to buy pink items from partnered collaborators or dolls from their brand.

Marketing Barbie as an empowered sexy-party girl who is in love with Ken completely contradicts the feminist narrative from the film. At the end of the film, Stereotypical Barbie clearly states her wish to be independent from Ken and by marketing Barbie as a sexy-party girl who is dating Ken, Mattel reinforces postfeminist ideologies. By going through with this marketing, Mattel overlooks the feminist ideologies in the film, reinforces the Western beauty standard, and associates female empowerment with individualism and capitalism.

Both the *Barbie* film and the marketing for the film emphasize Western beauty standards. Although the film included intersectionality by having a diverse cast, the film and dolls available for purchase mainly revolve around Stereotypical Barbie and Ken. While there were about seven different Stereotypical Barbie dolls for sale, Gloria and President Barbie were the only dolls from the movie that were made that did not fit the Western Beauty standard of being Caucasian, thin, blonde, and blue-eyed. Even so, both the various actresses who played Barbies and the dolls that were created for purchase are considered conventionally attractive. The emphasis on (White) beauty creates an avenue for Mattel to market beauty products to female consumers.

According to McRobbie (2011), individualism is encouraged because the government knows it can benefit from women's financial independence. Mattel

also benefits from women's financial independence by encouraging female consumers to purchase makeup, clothing, and accessories to replicate the likeness of Barbie. As Murray (2013) stated, "The postfeminist citizen's pursuit of beauty engages her consumer power and self-governance, aligning her identity with the goals of institutional power" (Murray, 2013, p. 86). Therefore, women who purchase Mattel products are giving power to the corporation. The more women try to achieve impossible beauty standards, the more money, power, and control they give to corporations, which results in women's financial subordination (Cox & Proffitt, 2012; Record, 2002).

Overall, the *Barbie* movie is simultaneously feminist and postfeminist while the marketing for the movie is strictly postfeminist. The feminist ideologies incorporated in the film are overshadowed by the film serving as a well-carried-out advertisement of Barbie. Ultimately, the Barbie doll is a product that contributes to gendered consumption and fails to meaningfully challenge a patriarchal society.

Limitations and Future Research

Research findings could be enhanced by a reception analysis that interrogates how fans of the film respond to both the feminist and postfeminist messages of the film. It would help further expand how audiences embrace feminist messages in film and if they feel that the postfeminist messages promote the subjugation of women to the commercial system. Future research would

benefit from gathering data about the audience's thoughts on Barbie through social media videos, captions, and interviews.

Additionally, parasocial research may be beneficial in seeing how the film affects the beliefs and consumer behaviors of audience members. This could provide insight to why some female consumers contribute to brand loyalty. Future research would benefit from investigating if the reality of Mattel's marketing strategy could change the meaning of the film for the audience. Also, incorporating the difference between what Greta Gerwig intended versus how the audience interpreted the message could showcase if the film was successful in conveying feminist messages.

Furthermore, expanding on other texts, such as *Adage*, might be beneficial. Including more trade magazines and interviews with Mattel CEO Kreiz could provide a more in-depth look at the marketing practices that Mattel and Warner Brothers use. Expanding this information could provide a deeper understanding of how other corporations may promote future dolls/movies.

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