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REIMAGINING BARBIE. A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF ICONOGRAPHY AND CONSUMERISM IN THE AGE OF GENDER REEVALUATION

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***Abstract:** This paper critically analyses the motion picture *Barbie* (2023) within the context of gender discourse and consumer culture, exploring its dual role as a feminist artefact and a commodity. Drawing on seminal feminist theories, including Betty Friedan's critique of domesticity and Naomi Wolf's exploration of beauty as a social construct, alongside other scholarly works, including Robin Gerber's historical account of Barbie's creation, J. Lenore Wright's exploration of body archetypes, Mary F. Rogers' critique of Barbie culture, Juliette Peers' fashion doll evolution, and Kim Toffoletti's posthuman feminist perspective, the study interrogates the film's portrayal of feminist ideals against its commercial backdrop. By examining Barbie's impact on gender identity, societal norms, and consumer behaviour, the paper contributes to the nuanced debate on the interplay between feminist representation and media commodification, offering insights into the complexities of engaging with feminist themes in a consumer-driven landscape.*

***Keywords:** Barbie, consumerism, cultural icon, feminism, gender identity*

1. Introduction

Since her debut in 1959, Barbie has stood at the forefront of cultural and feminist discourses, symbolising a range of societal attitudes towards femininity, beauty standards, and gender roles. Drawing on Betty Friedan's work—*The feminine mystique*—this paper explores how Barbie represents both a continuation and a challenge to traditional female roles. Her critique of the “feminine mystique” as a limiting ideology that confined women to domestic roles provides a critical lens through which we can assess Barbie's impact on gender identity

and consumerism. Friedan used this concept to describe the dissatisfaction among women caused by imposed domestic identity (1974, pp. 11-27). This framework is essential for understanding Barbie's dual role as a beloved toy and a controversial symbol of gendered expectations.

Created by Ruth Handler, co-founder of Mattel, Barbie was inspired by her observation of her daughter playing with paper dolls and imagining them in adult roles:

Ruth had spent years convincing her designers, including Elliot, that there was a market for a mass-produced adult doll. Watching her daughter, Barbara, playing with friends in the early 1950s first brought the idea to mind. Ruth listened many times at her home in the Beverlywood section of Los Angeles as the girls played make-believe with paper dolls. (Gerber, 2009, p. 5).

This led to the creation of a three-dimensional doll that offered girls a new way to project their future selves. Over the decades, Barbie has been celebrated for breaking boundaries and criticised for reinforcing unrealistic body images and traditional gender roles, which made her a polarising figure in feminist critiques.

The release of the live-action film *Barbie* in 2023, directed by Greta Gerwig and starring Margot Robbie, marked a significant chapter in Barbie's legacy. Its unprecedented commercial success, grossing over a billion dollars globally, was as unexpected as it was monumental. It shattered box office records and ignited a renewed discussion on Barbie's place within the contemporary feminist movement. Through its vibrant narrative and critical acclaim, the movie has been lauded for exploring feminist themes yet critiqued for its potential commodification of feminist ideals. J.L. Wright (2021) highlights how Barbie represents a form of female liberation deeply intertwined with culturally appealing ideals, such as physical perfection, wealth, and professional success. While Barbie may appear to champion independence and career ambition—prioritising economic privilege over traditional domestic roles—her emphasis on beauty, self-presentation, and material success subtly reinforces masculine values. As a result, her projection of femininity, though powerful, ultimately masks her full potential to embrace feminist ideals (Wright, 2021, p. 95). This critique illustrates how Barbie's empowerment is constrained by the very capitalist structures she seems to transcend, challenging readers to question the authenticity of her feminist image.

This paper explores the intricate layers of Barbie's existence as a feminist icon and a commercial entity. By examining her historical evolution, cultural impact, and recent cinematic

portrayal, this study seeks to understand how Barbie navigates the complex interplay between promoting feminist values and engaging in commercial practices. Through this analysis, the paper will offer insights into the broader implications of Barbie's dual role on gender discourse and consumer culture, providing a nuanced perspective on her enduring influence in the age of gender reconsideration.

Continuing the exploration of Barbie's cultural and feminist significance, this study delves deeper into the critical reception of the film *Barbie* and its implications for feminist discourse. The motion picture, through its portrayal of Barbie's world juxtaposed with real-world gender dynamics, invites viewers to reconsider the doll's role in shaping perceptions of femininity and empowerment. Critics and scholars, such as Mary F. Rogers (1999) and J. Lenore Wright (2021), argue that Barbie embodies a paradox of female empowerment within a consumerist framework, highlighting the tensions between promoting positive gender ideals and perpetuating traditional consumer values. To fully understand Barbie's cultural significance, it is essential to consider the broader societal shifts over the past century. This includes changes in childhood experiences, the role of toys in consumer culture, and how both children and adults engage with fantasy. Barbie's impact intersects with various aspects of identity—such as gender, social class, race, sexual orientation, and age—while also reflecting the influence of media, fashion, and advertising. Additionally, her presence in physical and digital spaces underscores the complex interplay between cultural, psychological, and technological factors shaped by modern and postmodern influences (Rogers, 1999, pp. 152-153).

Furthermore, the movie's success exemplifies the intricate balance between leveraging feminist themes for commercial gain and genuinely contributing to feminist discourse. This phenomenon raises questions about the authenticity and impact of feminist narratives in mainstream media, suggesting a need for a critical evaluation of how feminist values are commodified and disseminated.

This study posits that Barbie, both as a toy and a cultural phenomenon, occupies a unique position at the intersection of feminism and commercialism. By examining the evolution of Barbie's image, from her origins to her cinematic representation, and analysing the public and critical reception of the Barbie movie, the present analysis aims to shed light on the complexities of engaging with feminist themes in a consumer-driven landscape. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of Barbie's enduring legacy and its broader cultural and social

implications, offering a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities her dual role presents as a feminist icon and a commercial product.

Barbie stands at the intersection of posthuman and feminist theory, symbolising a shift from traditional representations of gender and identity to more fluid and mutable understandings. Her plastic form, symbolic of both the consumerist drive and the modern mannequin, is a critical point of convergence for discussions on post-gender identities. This notion positions Barbie not just as a toy but as a precursor to posthuman figurations, where the body is unbound from conventional significations and open to endless reconfiguration.

Toffoletti (2007) presents Barbie as a figure that redefines conventional understandings of the body and identity by positioning them as fluid, flexible, and open to transformation. Barbie encourages a view of identity that is not bound by rigid, traditional frameworks but, instead, embraces the potential for change and reconfiguration. This positions her as a precursor to posthuman theories, where identity is no longer tied to biological or socially constructed norms but is seen as something that can be endlessly reshaped.

One of the most significant contributions Barbie makes, according to Toffoletti, is her role as a “bridging” figure. She spans the divide between modern and postmodern cultural debates surrounding gender, representation, and identity. In this way, Barbie reflects aspects of both eras: she is a product of a consumerist society that underlines material success and appearance (modern), while also embodying the fluidity and deconstruction of fixed meanings characteristic of postmodern thought.

Additionally, Toffoletti emphasises that Barbie’s plastic body symbolises the dual nature of female identity in consumer culture—Barbie represents both the female consumer and the object of consumption. This duality highlights the paradox of empowerment and objectification. As a doll that consumers are invited to mould and manipulate, Barbie’s very form challenges traditional gender norms by introducing a body that resists any fixed interpretation. Her plastic, malleable nature allows for limitless reconfigurations of identity, positioning her within posthuman discourse as a figure that challenges the stability of bodily meaning.

In other words, Barbie’s iconic form is more than a toy or cultural icon—it represents the complex relationship between gender, consumerism, and identity in contemporary society. Toffoletti suggests that Barbie’s body embodies the potential for gender and identity to escape the confines of fixed societal expectations, offering a vision of identity that is dynamic, transformative, and unbound by conventional gender roles. This anticipates broader

conversations in posthumanism, where the body is not merely a site of control but a space of possibility and reinvention (Toffoletti, 2007, pp. 59-60).

Reflecting on Barbie's enduring presence in cultural and consumer landscapes, I would like to argue that her story invites a critical examination of how femininity and empowerment are constructed and disseminated in contemporary society. Barbie has long been a figure of both fascination and contention, especially for second-wave feminists, who view her as emblematic of more significant societal issues surrounding femininity and capitalism. Early critiques by semioticians and sociologists framed Barbie as a symbol of late capitalist constructions of femininity. In this view, Barbie is not just a toy but an icon that reinforces fixed gender roles, heterosexual norms, and consumerist values (Urla and Swedlund qtd. in Toffoletti, 2007, pp. 59-60). Through her standards of dress, body shape, and behaviour, Barbie is said to teach young girls what it means to be feminine in a capitalist society—where beauty, compliance, and consumption are central to identity.

Moreover, Barbie is seen as promoting an idealised version of womanhood that is predominantly white, heterosexual, and materially focused. Scholars like Motz (1983), O'Sickey (1994), and Rogers (1999) argue that Barbie encourages girls to become consumers of products and ideals that align with traditional gender roles. In this sense, Barbie's influence extends beyond her role as a toy; she becomes a tool through which young girls internalise societal expectations about femininity, appearance, and behaviour.

Toffoletti (2007) further argues that Barbie embodies the idea that women, like commodities in capitalist culture, are objects to be purchased, consumed, and controlled. This notion predates Barbie herself and is rooted in the broader critique of capitalist systems, where women's bodies and identities are often commercialised and manipulated to fit societal ideals. Toffoletti compares Barbie to the shop window mannequin, another static figure representing the commercialisation of the female body. Both figures are designed to project an idealised form of femininity shaped by consumer desires and capitalist expectations (Toffoletti, 2007, p. 60).

Barbie embodies a paradox at the heart of modern identity formation—simultaneously empowering and restrictive, liberating yet confining. This duality challenges us to reconsider the narratives we embrace about empowerment and the complex roles that popular icons play in shaping our understanding of gender and identity. By engaging with Barbie's legacy, we confront not just a range of feminist concerns but also broader questions about the intersections of culture, consumption, and the transformation of social identities. It is crucial to continue

interrogating these icons to unravel their complexities and forge pathways for more inclusive and nuanced representations in media and popular culture.

This comprehensive examination of Barbie's multifaceted roles provides a foundation for understanding the intersection of consumer culture and feminist ideology. As this study will demonstrate, Barbie's transformation over the decades reflects broader societal shifts towards gender equality while simultaneously revealing persistent challenges in combating deeply ingrained stereotypes and consumer-driven identities. By weaving together historical perspectives, feminist theory, and modern cinematic representation, this study offers a balanced view of how Barbie has shaped and been shaped by the cultural narratives surrounding femininity, empowerment, and identity. In doing so, it will critically assess the impact of such a prominent cultural icon on individual and collective understandings of gender roles within the increasingly commercial landscape of global media. This exploration is pivotal for dissecting the layers of Barbie's iconography and discerning the broader implications of merging commercial success with feminist aspirations in contemporary society.

2. Historical context and creation of Barbie

As mentioned earlier, Ruth Handler's journey of creating Barbie began with observing her daughter, Barbara, playing with paper dolls. She noticed Barbara enjoyed giving them adult roles, sparking the idea of a doll that could project an adult persona. Despite scepticism from her husband Elliot, a co-founder of Mattel, and others who doubted the market viability of such a doll, Handler persisted. Her vision was to create a toy and inspire girls to imagine their futures beyond traditional roles. The name *Barbie* was inspired by her daughter, Barbara, marking a personal touch in the doll's inception. This story, detailed in *Barbie and Ruth* (2009) by Robin Gerber, not only highlights the initial resistance Handler faced but also her determination and foresight in envisioning a new era for girls' toys.

Barbie's launch in 1959 marked a turning point in the toy industry and cultural discourse. In *The fashion doll: From Béb  Jumeau to Barbie* (2004), Juliette Peers explores how Barbie evolved from a simple toy into a cultural icon, reflecting and shaping societal norms and values. The doll's changing roles, professions, and styles over the decades serve as a mirror to the shifting landscape of women's rights, career opportunities, and fashion trends. Each iteration of Barbie, from astronaut to president, expanded the imaginative possibilities for girls and sparked conversations about women's place in society and the workforce. In her various

avatars, Barbie challenges and reinforces these gender norms. She represents both a symbol of progressive female empowerment by showcasing the potential for women to adopt diverse and influential roles and a conduit of traditional stereotypes through her perpetuation of unrealistic beauty standards and consumerism.

Feminist concerns regarding Barbie often overlap with critiques of fashion, as both are seen to reinforce traditional gender roles. Bruzzi, as cited by Peers (2004), argues that fashion's emphasis on female dress can ultimately undermine women, rendering them subordinate to men, who maintain a stable and dominant cultural image (Bruzzi qtd. in Peers, 2004, pp. 99-100). Interestingly, the characteristics of the modern cinematic *femme fatale*—such as short skirts, high heels, and blonde hair—are also found in the design of the classic Barbie from 1977 onward. However, Bruzzi offers a different perspective by suggesting that these highly feminised traits, while seemingly reinforcing conventional norms, can also enable women to subvert traditional domestic roles and wield power in ways that challenge male dominance (Bruzzi qtd. in Peers, 2004, pp. 99-100).

As Barbie evolved, so did her role in feminist debates. Initially celebrated for offering girls visions of career independence and personal freedom, Barbie later faced criticism from feminist circles. Critics argued that her unrealistically perfect physique and emphasis on beauty set unattainable standards for young girls, all of which had a potential impact on their self-esteem and body image. The debate intensified with Barbie's diverse incarnations. In response to widespread critiques regarding Barbie's reinforcement of narrow beauty standards, Mattel expanded its product line to include dolls with diverse professions, body types, and cultural backgrounds. This initiative was part of an effort to offer a more inclusive vision of beauty and potential, addressing long-standing concerns about Barbie's influence on gender roles and identity (Gerber, 2009, p. 247).

This ongoing evolution underscores Barbie's complex place within feminist discourse. On the one hand, she continues to inspire with representations of female empowerment and ambition. Conversely, the discussions around her impact on body image and societal expectations persist, reflecting broader societal debates about femininity, representation, and identity. Barbie's journey from a simple doll to a cultural touchstone illustrates the shifting sands of gender discourse, highlighting both progress and ongoing challenges in the representation of women in media and toys.

From creation to cultural critique, this narrative arc underscores Barbie's multifaceted role in reflecting and shaping societal norms and feminist thought, marking her as a figure of continuous interest and debate in the study of gender and culture.

3. Barbie's cultural and feminist implications

As a cultural icon, Barbie has significantly influenced gender identity and body image perceptions. Drawing from Wright's *Athena to Barbie* and Roger's *Barbie culture*, this section will explore how Barbie's physical appearance and roles offer positive and negative templates for gender identity. The doll's unrealistically proportioned body has been a point of contention, critiqued for promoting unattainable beauty standards that affect young girls' body image and self-esteem. Conversely, Barbie's myriad careers challenge traditional gender roles, presenting an empowering vision of female potential. This duality reflects broader societal debates about the impact of popular culture on individual identity formation and the internalisation of gender norms.

Barbie plays a dual role in the representation of femininity. On the one hand, she reinforces gender norms, exemplified by her friend Midge, who has a removable baby bump, reflecting societal pressures for women to maintain idealised post-pregnancy bodies. On the other hand, Barbie's artificiality exposes the commodification of femininity, showing how market forces and societal expectations shape womanhood. Despite this, Barbie has been appropriated by artists and performers to subvert traditional gender norms, making her both an exemplar of idealised femininity and a critic of commodified gender roles. She is a tool for reinforcing and questioning gender constructs (Wright, 2021, p. 131).

Barbie's role in feminist discourse is multifaceted. While some critics argue that she reinforces patriarchal standards of beauty and femininity, others view her as a figure of empowerment. Naomi Wolf argues how beauty is used as a form of power against women. She warns that beauty myths serve as a distraction and a form of social control, keeping women focused on pursuing unattainable beauty standards rather than seeking power and equality (Wolf, 2002, pp. 9-19).

Barbie has long been a focal point for feminist critique, serving as both a symbol of societal expectations and a site for contesting the complexities of female empowerment. This section critically examines the evolution of Barbie's representation in media and toys, exploring how specific editions—such as career-oriented or more diverse dolls—have been designed in

direct response to feminist critiques. By analysing these shifts, the section will highlight the ongoing dialogue between the Barbie brand and evolving feminist perspectives, demonstrating how changes in her portrayal reflect broader shifts in feminist thought and cultural attitudes toward gender roles.

The broader cultural and societal implications of Barbie's existence extend beyond her direct impact on individuals. Barbie can be seen as both a product and a reflection of her times, with her evolution mirroring the progress of feminist trends and changing societal norms regarding women's roles. I will explore here how Barbie has influenced and been influenced by feminist trends, considering the doll as a cultural barometer for shifts in the public discourse on gender equality. I also examine the role of consumer culture in shaping and disseminating feminist ideals, with Barbie at the intersection of commercial interests and social advocacy.

In recent years, Barbie's continued relevance and adaptation in evolving gender discourses underscore her complex legacy. This section looks at contemporary critiques and interpretations of Barbie, considering how new generations perceive and engage with the doll. It will focus on Mattel's efforts to address criticisms by diversifying Barbie's image, including introducing dolls with different body types, abilities, and backgrounds. The reception of these changes by the public and feminist scholars alike offers insight into the ongoing challenges and opportunities for representing femininity and empowerment in popular culture.

3.1. Consumerism and the feminist brand

Barbie's integration into consumer culture raises significant critiques, especially from a feminist perspective. The discussion around Barbie often centres on her as a product of mass consumerism, embodying and promoting materialistic values:

Barbie may indeed inhabit some indefinable space between reality and fantasy. Overall, though, Ann duCille (1996) seems right in counting Mattel among the world's "leading fantasy manufacturers." In the end the fantasies it manufactures are not only about the satisfactions of a consumerist lifestyle, the ease of upward social mobility in postindustrial class structures, and the sustainability of a lean, youthful body. The fantasies Mattel markets are also about independence grandiose enough to allow for ignoring, even dismissing, people who are "different" from ourselves—people of the other sex, people in other age groups, people of other races and social classes, people with other sexual identities, and people "over there" who do the unrewarding work of making the stuff that feeds such risky fantasies. All the while, as Victoria de Grazia (1996) points out, we continue thinking about consumption in individualistic, choice-

centered ways while looking past all the ways “ruling institutions define practices and standards of consumption.” (Rogers, 1999, pp. 110-111).

Critics like duCille and de Grazia argue that, while Barbie might offer diverse representations of female roles, the underlying drive is to sell young girls an idealised, often unattainable lifestyle. This commercial aspect can detract from the empowerment message, as the focus on purchasing the latest Barbie version or accessory underscores consumerist tendencies over substantive feminist values. The critique is not just about the doll itself but the broader implications of engaging young minds with consumer culture from an early age, potentially prioritising material success and physical appearance.

Consequently, the use of Barbie, a quintessential consumer product, for feminist advocacy seems to embody a paradox. On the one hand, Barbie has been hailed for breaking gender stereotypes by portraying women in diverse and empowered roles, from astronauts to presidents, which can inspire young girls to aspire beyond traditional confines. However, leveraging a product deeply embedded in capitalist consumer culture to promote feminist ideals raises questions about the authenticity and effectiveness of such advocacy. The paradox lies in attempting to dismantle systemic gender norms and inequalities through a medium that inherently benefits from these same structures—selling empowerment through consumerism.

Reconciling Barbie’s commercial nature with feminist messaging is a complex challenge. Some critics, such as M.G. Lord (1994/2004) and Erica Rand (1995), argue that Barbie can be used for feminist education and empowerment. By engaging critically with the doll’s representations, they suggest that Barbie’s evolving narratives can provoke discussions on gender roles, femininity, and identity, even within a consumerist framework. This approach involves leveraging Barbie as a starting point for discussing gender roles, body image, and career aspirations, acknowledging the criticisms and recognising the potential for positive impact. The idea is to use Barbie’s widespread appeal to normalise feminist concepts and introduce them to a broad audience, even if it necessitates navigating the inherent contradictions within a consumerist context.

However, the challenge remains, and it consists of effectively employing consumer products like Barbie for feminist advocacy without reinforcing the very consumerist and capitalist structures that feminism often critiques. This may involve a more nuanced approach to consumerism, where products are designed and marketed to support and reflect feminist values without exploitation. It also calls for a critical consumer base that engages with products

in informed ways, recognising the potential for empowerment while remaining vigilant about the implications of their consumer choices. The future of feminist advocacy in consumer culture lies in balancing utilising the platforms and reach provided by products like Barbie and maintaining the integrity and transformative goals of feminist movements.

4. Narrative exploration and feminist undertones in *Barbie*

In July 2023, the release of the movie *Barbie* marked a significant moment in contemporary cinema, captivating audiences worldwide and igniting discussions across various cultural spheres. Directed by acclaimed feminist activist Greta Gerwig and starring Margot Robbie, the film's unprecedented success at the box office surpassed all expectations, grossing over a billion and a half dollars globally within just five months of its release (Nowakowski, 2023). As the highest-grossing film in the extensive history of Warner Brothers (Lang, 2023), *Barbie* transcended the realms of mere entertainment, emerging as a cultural phenomenon with far-reaching implications. This extraordinary commercial success not only propelled the movie into the spotlight but also revitalised the Barbie brand, reaffirming Barbie's relevance and enduring popularity in the cultural landscape. At the same time, it is essential to scrutinise how this commercial triumph may also perpetuate traditional beauty standards and consumerist behaviours.

This section explores the multifaceted nature of the motion picture *Barbie* as a cultural artefact, investigating its role as a vehicle for feminist messaging and a powerhouse marketing tool for Mattel, the multinational corporation behind the iconic Barbie doll. At the heart of the film lies a narrative that challenges patriarchal norms and reimagines traditional gender roles, positioning Barbie as a symbol of feminist empowerment in an imperfect world. However, amidst its feminist messaging, the film also operates within the consumerist world, exploiting Barbie's global brand recognition to drive sales and perpetuate consumer culture.

I would like to argue that the *Barbie* film functions as a multifaceted cultural symbol, simultaneously acting as feminist messaging, a commercial powerhouse, and a platform where representations of beauty and the body are contested and reinforced. By analysing the film's storyline, financial success, and role in shaping body image perceptions, the article explores the complexities of Barbie's cultural influence in an era of gender re-evaluation. This examination sheds light on the intricate relationship between feminist ideals, consumerism, and societal views on beauty and identity portrayed in the motion picture *Barbie*.

The film presents a narrative deeply rooted in feminist themes, reflecting director Greta Gerwig's dedication to challenging patriarchal norms. Known for her previous work promoting gender equality and female empowerment (Tasnim, 2023), Gerwig brings her distinct perspective to the Barbie universe. The plot juxtaposes the idyllic feminist society of Barbieland with the patriarchal real world, providing a platform to explore feminist ideals within a contemporary context. Barbie, portrayed by Margot Robbie, becomes a vehicle for these ideals as she navigates challenges in Barbieland and the real world, confronting traditional gender roles and sexism at every turn.

Specific scenes and dialogue highlight Barbie's resilience and determination to challenge patriarchal norms. For instance, in a pivotal scene, Barbie confronts the CEO of Mattel, a powerful male executive whose dismissive attitude embodies the corporate patriarchy she aims to defy, and who belittles her ambitions, asserting her right to pursue her dreams irrespective of gender expectations. Additionally, the film features moments of solidarity and sisterhood among female characters, emphasising the importance of female empowerment and collective action in overcoming systemic barriers.

While the movie presents itself as a champion of feminist ideals, it is not immune to criticism. Some view the film's feminist messaging as superficial or even as a form of propaganda aimed at commercial gain. Critics argue that the movie's portrayal of feminism may be diluted or simplified to appeal to a broader audience, potentially undermining the depth and complexity of feminist struggles.

Moreover, there are concerns that the film's feminist messaging could be commodified, reducing feminist ideals to mere marketing ploys. By aligning Barbie with feminist values, the movie may inadvertently reinforce consumerist narratives prioritising profit over genuine social change. Critics caution against the co-optation of feminist agendas for commercial purposes, urging a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of feminist struggles in media representations.

While *Barbie* presents a narrative steeped in feminist themes and ideals, its portrayal of feminism is hardly flawless. While celebrating Barbie as a symbol of female empowerment, it is essential to critically engage with the film's feminist messaging and consider the implications of its commercialised approach. By acknowledging the complexities and critiques surrounding Barbie's representation, viewers can better understand the multifaceted role of this movie in contemporary feminist discourse.

The movie is an obvious strategic marketing tool for Mattel, the multinational corporation behind the iconic Barbie doll. The motion picture effectively promotes the brand

and drives sales of Barbie dolls and merchandise by featuring Barbie as the central character. The film's portrayal of Barbie as a strong, independent woman resonates with audiences, reinforcing Barbie's image as a symbol of empowerment and aspiration.

Furthermore, Mattel capitalises on the movie's release to launch new Barbie doll collections inspired by characters and themes from the film. These tie-in products capitalise on the movie's popularity, enticing consumers to engage with the Barbie brand beyond the movie theatre. From limited-edition dolls featuring iconic outfits from the film to themed playsets and accessories, Mattel leverages Barbie as a catalyst for generating consumer interest and driving sales.

The success of *Barbie* has far-reaching implications for consumer culture. It employs nostalgia and brand recognition to engage audiences and drive consumption. The film taps into Barbie's collective memories and experiences, resonating with audiences who grew up with the iconic doll and introducing her to new generations of fans (McClintock, 2023; Debruge, 2023). This nostalgia factor fuels consumer interest and cultivates a sense of emotional connection with the Barbie brand, motivating consumers to purchase Barbie dolls and merchandise.

Moreover, the movie capitalises on Barbie's status as a cultural icon, using her brand recognition to penetrate new markets and demographics. The movie's appeal extends beyond traditional Barbie enthusiasts, attracting audiences of all ages and backgrounds drawn to its empowerment and self-discovery themes. This broad appeal expands Barbie's reach in the consumer market, positioning her as a timeless symbol of female empowerment and aspiration.

Consequently, the film is a powerful marketing tool for Mattel, revitalising the Barbie brand and driving sales of Barbie dolls and merchandise. Its unprecedented commercial success underscores Barbie's enduring popularity and cultural relevance, reaffirming her status as a cultural icon. Moreover, the movie's impact extends beyond entertainment, shaping consumer culture and leveraging nostalgia and brand recognition to engage audiences and drive consumption. Therefore, *Barbie* represents a milestone in the evolution of the Barbie brand, solidifying Barbie's place in the cultural zeitgeist for generations to come.

5. Commercial strategies and societal impact of *Barbie*

Barbie presents an opportunity to explore the longstanding critiques of the doll as an icon that promotes unrealistic beauty standards. While the film acknowledges Barbie's iconic physical appearance, it also attempts to address these critiques by introducing diverse

representations of beauty and body types. Throughout the movie, Barbie encounters characters with varying body shapes and sizes, challenging the notion that beauty is synonymous with a specific physique.

However, despite these efforts, the film falls short of comprehensively tackling the complexities of body image representation. Critics such as Jennifer B. Webb and Trinna S. Frever have argued that Barbie's portrayal, while more diverse in recent years, continues to adhere to conventional beauty standards. Webb's research suggests that the unrealistic body image perpetuated by Barbie contributes to harmful comparisons among young girls, potentially reinforcing narrow definitions of beauty (Webb et al., 2023). Similarly, Frever criticises Barbie for promoting "highly gendered concepts of beauty and fragility," which, she argues, serve as consumer currency limiting female self-perception (Frever, 2009, p. 139).

The film's portrayal of Barbie navigates a delicate balance between empowerment and objectification. On the one hand, Barbie is depicted as a confident and independent woman who challenges traditional gender roles and pursues her dreams unabashedly. Her resilience in the face of adversity and her unwavering self-assurance empower viewers, especially young girls, to embrace their individuality and pursue their ambitions.

However, the film's visual and narrative choices may also perpetuate objectification, mainly by focusing on Barbie's physical appearance and love of fashion. While Barbie's confidence and agency are celebrated, they are often portrayed in tandem with her outward beauty and glamorous lifestyle. This emphasis on external attributes may inadvertently reinforce the notion that a woman's value is contingent upon her appearance, potentially undermining the film's message of empowerment.

As discussed above, *Barbie* serves as a reflection of contemporary societal attitudes towards beauty, body image, and self-identity. The film's attempt to diversify representations of beauty and challenge traditional beauty norms reflects a growing awareness of the need for inclusivity and representation in media and popular culture. *Barbie* (2023) the film addresses the complexity of beauty and identity by featuring characters with diverse backgrounds and body types, encouraging viewers to embrace diversity and celebrate individuality. For example, President Barbie, portrayed by Issa Rae, challenges the traditional Barbie stereotype by showcasing Black female leadership. At the same time, Doctor Barbie, played by Hari Nef, introduces transgender representation, breaking away from conventional gender norms. Additionally, the inclusion of Plus-Size Barbie reflects a move toward body positivity by offering a more comprehensive range of body types, further promoting the acceptance of

diverse forms of beauty. Despite its aesthetic appeal, nevertheless, *Barbie* (2023) risks reinforcing harmful beauty standards, echoing Naomi Wolf's portrayal of beauty as a societal expectation rather than an individual choice. While the film includes diverse characters like President Barbie and Doctor Barbie, the emphasis on physical perfection remains prominent. For example, the Barbies are still portrayed with flawless skin, perfect hair, and idealised body proportions, which align with conventional beauty norms. Even in moments when Stereotypical Barbie confronts flaws like cellulite, the narrative quickly shifts back to reinforcing her traditionally attractive appearance, perpetuating the idea that beauty is a societal demand rather than a personal choice. The film's emphasis on physical perfection mirrors the societal pressure highlighted in *The beauty myth. How images of beauty are used against women* (1991), where beauty becomes a requisite for women's value, is subtly conveyed through Barbie's flawless depiction.

Moreover, the movie's portrayal of Barbie's journey towards self-discovery and empowerment resonates with broader societal shifts towards promoting self-confidence and authenticity. In an age where social media and celebrity culture often perpetuate unattainable beauty standards, this film offers a counter-narrative that celebrates inner strength and resilience over external appearance. For instance, Barbie's realisation that her worth is not tied to her perfect looks but rather to her individuality becomes apparent when she abandons the idealised world of Barbieland to explore her true self. This is further emphasised by Gloria's (America Ferrera) powerful monologue about women's unrealistic pressures, highlighting the importance of embracing one's true self rather than conforming to societal expectations.

However, the film's impact on societal attitudes towards beauty and body image remains controversial. While it may challenge some traditional beauty norms, it also perpetuates others, highlighting contemporary culture's ongoing complexities and contradictions. As such, *Barbie* reflects the ongoing dialogue surrounding beauty, body image, and self-identity in today's society, prompting viewers to critically engage with these issues and consider the broader implications of media representations.

The motion picture compels the Girl Power movement (Shepherd, 2024, pp. 76-88), a feminist trend that emerged in the 1990s, promoting female empowerment, independence, and confidence. It celebrates women's ability to define their identity and success, often challenging traditional gender norms. In *Barbie*, these themes are evident as Barbie is portrayed as a symbol of strength, resilience, and agency. For example, in Barbieland, women hold all leadership roles, such as President Barbie and Doctor Barbie, embodying the principles of the Girl Power

movement by challenging patriarchal norms and asserting female dominance in all spheres. Moreover, Barbie's journey in the real world reflects the movement's message of self-empowerment as she confronts societal pressures and embraces her individuality, promoting the idea that women can define their paths.

The movie depicts Barbie as a multifaceted character who defies societal expectations and pursues her dreams with unwavering determination. Barbie's journey in the film is marked by moments of triumph and adversity, emphasising her resilience in the face of challenges. She is depicted as a confident and independent woman who refuses to be constrained by traditional gender roles, consistently challenging the status quo. For instance, when Barbie enters the real world and is confronted with sexism, such as being objectified by men and dismissed in a male-dominated corporate environment, she experiences moments of doubt and insecurity. However, she perseveres, eventually realising her worth is not tied to societal expectations. In a pivotal scene, Barbie leaves behind her idealised, superficial identity in Barbieland to embrace the complexity of real life, symbolising her personal growth and determination to define her path. This portrayal reinforces the message of female empowerment and the importance of defying societal expectations. The film promotes self-confidence and individuality as central tenets of the Girl Power movement. Barbie's unwavering self-assurance and belief in herself inspire viewers to embrace their unique qualities and pursue their aspirations with courage and conviction. Through Barbie's character, the film encourages audiences, especially young girls, to recognise their worth and potential, fostering a sense of empowerment and agency.

The movie celebrates female friendship and solidarity as critical components of the Girl Power movement. Throughout the film, Barbie forms meaningful connections with other female characters, underscoring the themes of female solidarity and empowerment. Her bond with Gloria is pivotal, as Gloria helps Barbie understand the complexities of the real world and offers support during Barbie's moments of doubt. In Barbieland, Barbie's interactions with President Barbie and Doctor Barbie highlight a community of strong women who uplift and support each other, reinforcing the film's message that empowerment is not just individual but collective. Together, they navigate challenges and obstacles, demonstrating the power of unity and collaboration in overcoming adversity. The film emphasises the importance of lifting each other and standing together in solidarity, reinforcing the principles of sisterhood and collective empowerment. This is exemplified in the scene where Gloria delivers a powerful speech about women's pressures, re-energising the Barbies, whom the Kens' patriarchy had subdued. The moment sparks a collective effort to reclaim Barbieland, showing how mutual support and unity

are crucial to overcoming challenges and achieving empowerment. Through these relationships, the film highlights the strength of sisterhood in confronting societal obstacles.

Barbie critiques gender stereotypes and expectations, challenging traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. Barbie refuses to conform to narrow gender norms, confidently embracing her interests, passions, and ambitions without apology. Throughout the film, she challenges traditional expectations of femininity, particularly in a scene where she rejects returning to her old, perfect life in Barbieland. Instead, Barbie chooses to explore her individuality in the real world, even though it means confronting discomfort and uncertainty. This decision symbolises her refusal to be confined by societal expectations, as she defines herself on her terms and pursues personal growth beyond traditional roles. The film encourages viewers to question societal expectations and adopt a more inclusive and expansive understanding of gender identity and expression. Challenging gender stereotypes, the movie promotes empowerment that transcends traditional gender roles.

Ultimately, the movie serves as a source of inspiration and empowerment for future generations of girls, reinforcing the principles of the Girl Power movement. Barbie's portrayal as a strong, independent, and empowered woman resonates with audiences of all ages, inspiring them to embrace their strength and potential. By celebrating Barbie as a symbol of female empowerment, the film encourages girls to believe in themselves and pursue their dreams with confidence and determination.

Consequently, the film *Barbie* exemplifies and reinforces the principles of the Girl Power movement, celebrating female empowerment, promoting self-confidence and individuality, and challenging traditional gender norms. *Barbie* emerges as a complex cultural artefact that transcends conventional boundaries, shaping contemporary feminist discourse, marketing strategies, and artistic conversations about beauty and the body.

The movie's portrayal of Barbie as a feminist icon challenges traditional gender norms. It promotes empowerment while simultaneously serving as a strategic marketing tool for Mattel, revitalising the Barbie brand and driving merchandise sales. However, it is crucial to critically engage with the film's message and representation of beauty and the body. While it attempts to address longstanding critiques of Barbie as an icon that promotes unrealistic beauty standards, it may still perpetuate objectification and narrow definitions of beauty.

The film reflects and influences contemporary societal attitudes towards beauty, body image, and self-identity. By featuring diverse representations of beauty and celebrating individuality, it encourages viewers to challenge traditional beauty norms. At the same time, its

impact on consumer culture and the commodification of feminist ideals cannot be overlooked. While Barbie makes strides in addressing critiques of promoting unrealistic beauty standards by introducing diverse body types and representations, it straddles the line between empowerment and commercialisation. This move towards inclusivity marks a progressive shift, reflecting broader societal trends toward greater acceptance of diversity in the media.

However, despite these advancements, the movie does not entirely escape the confines of traditional beauty norms. The emphasis on Barbie's appearance and iconic status as a fashion symbol continues to promote a narrow definition of beauty, potentially reinforcing unrealistic ideals, particularly among younger audiences. For instance, despite introducing more diverse Barbies, the film's central character, played by Margot Robbie, still embodies the conventional standard of beauty: slim, blonde, and flawless. Additionally, the scene where Barbie feels distressed over developing cellulite highlights how deviations from physical perfection are portrayed as undesirable, subtly reinforcing unattainable beauty standards. This highlights a critical paradox where the film challenges and reinforces societal norms, embodying Barbie's dual roles as both a feminist icon and a commercial product.

Moreover, while the film celebrates female empowerment and resilience themes, these are juxtaposed against the backdrop of Barbie's commercial appeal. Mattel's strategic use of the movie as a marketing tool underscores a complex interplay between promoting feminist values and exploiting these same values for commercial gain. This duality raises essential questions about the role of consumer products in feminist discourse and whether true empowerment can be achieved through commodified channels.

The film's portrayal of Barbie navigates this delicate balance between empowerment and objectification. On the one hand, Barbie is depicted as a confident and independent woman who breaks traditional gender roles; on the other, the emphasis on her physical beauty and fashion undermines the message of empowerment by suggesting that a woman's value is still heavily tied to her appearance.

Barbie represents a significant cultural artefact that mirrors contemporary societal attitudes towards beauty, body image, and gender identity. It serves as a platform for both critiquing and reinforcing societal norms, offering an opportunity to reflect on the complex dynamics of feminist representation in popular media. As we continue to engage with Barbie's evolving image, it is crucial to analyse how these representations are constructed critically and are shaped by the shifting landscapes of gender discourse and consumer culture.

As a result, *Barbie* the movie underscores the importance of critically engaging with popular media to understand its multifaceted impacts on society and individual perceptions of gender, identity, and consumerism. By interrogating the film's portrayal of feminist ideals, marketing strategies, and cultural reflections, we gain insight into the complexities of navigating feminism in a consumer-driven landscape.

6. Conclusions

Drawing from a range of feminist critique, historical context, cultural implications, and the overarching theme of consumerism, this study has navigated Barbie's complex legacy in the context of contemporary gender re-evaluation. Through the lens of the recent cinematic portrayal and historical analysis, I have explored Barbie's dual identity as both a feminist icon and a commercial entity, a duality that reflects broader societal tensions around gender norms, feminism, and consumer culture.

Since her debut in 1959, Barbie has been a pivotal figure in cultural discussions about femininity and empowerment. Created in an era marked by restrictive gender norms, Barbie initially embodied an idealised version of female life that aligned with consumerist ideals. As societal attitudes evolved, so did Barbie, adapting to illustrate characteristics of independence and a wide array of careers that challenged traditional gender roles. Nevertheless, despite these progressive changes, Barbie has also been critiqued for reinforcing unrealistic standards of beauty and femininity, showcasing the persistent tension between her role as a tool for empowerment and an agent of established consumerist and patriarchal values.

The recent *Barbie* film further complicates this narrative, offering a meta-textual critique of the doll's legacy and its impact on gender identity and consumer behaviour. The film cleverly navigates the celebration of feminist themes while engaging with the complexities of representation, identity, and consumer culture. Its commercial success highlights the potent interplay between feminism and consumerism, suggesting a society increasingly comfortable with, yet critically aware of, the commodification of feminist ideals. By turning a reflective mirror towards its audience and the creators of Barbie herself, the movie prompts a nuanced discussion on how feminist ideals are both propagated and consumed within the mainstream media.

Critically, Barbie serves as a canvas onto which society projects its anxieties, ideals, and aspirations. As a feminist icon, she offers the potential to inspire and empower, promoting

female agency and challenging traditional gender roles. However, as a product deeply embedded within consumer culture, Barbie also embodies the contradictions of a society that simultaneously valorises consumerism and material success. This complex interplay was highlighted in various documents, and critiques analysed throughout this study, from feminist scholarly work to commercial analyses, noting Barbie's significant but often contradictory impact on society.

Engagement with Barbie also involves grappling with the critiques from various feminist perspectives, which have argued that, while Barbie represents a form of gendered empowerment, she also perpetuates narrow definitions of beauty and femininity. This critique aligns with the broader discussions in feminist theory about the commercialisation of feminist icons and the risk of diluting potent feminist messages through their transformation into mass consumer products. Therefore, the discussions surrounding Barbie—her body, career, and societal role—reflect more profound societal debates about our values and visions for future generations.

Audiences must continue to engage critically with Barbie, recognising her as more than just a doll. She is a cultural icon that offers a unique lens through which to view the intersections of gender, culture, and commerce. By examining Barbie's evolving societal role, we gain insights into the complexities of navigating feminist themes in a consumer-driven landscape. Such engagement is vital as it helps us understand and articulate the ongoing challenges and possibilities within feminist discourse and consumer culture.

In conclusion, the *Barbie* film reflects societal struggles around femininity, success, and empowerment. It emphasises the need for critical engagement with popular culture and consumer products as tools for rethinking gender identities and feminist ideals in the twenty-first century. As Barbie continues to evolve, so will the conversations around her, reflecting the dynamic landscape of gender discourse and offering ongoing opportunities for critique, understanding, and empowerment.

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