

The 2023 Barbie and Post-feminism: Narrative in Hollywood Movie Industry

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Abstract: *Barbie* has been a subject of both praise and criticism when it comes to feminism. After the release of the live-action film *Barbie* in 2023, the discussion of gender identity was triggered. This article analyzes the relationship between *Barbie* dolls and Hollywood movies focusing on post-modern women's self-identity through the body. *Barbie* is regarded as a cultural symbol of the male gaze body design that solidifies gender stereotypes. The 2023 *Barbie* encourages women to identify with themselves and their bodies, from which they can feel the strength and charm of women and understand the complexity and diversity of culture. First, this work will briefly discuss the effect of Barbie brand image in the introduction. Secondly, this article will do an analysis of the leading roles in the movie and connect them with the genderized dilemma that most modern females are facing. Then, the development of Barbie images, their inverse relationships with feminist ideologies, and the underlying consumerism ideas in the Mattel brand industry will be further discussed. Finally, the core logic behind the male gaze and patriarchy will be combined and presented.

Keywords: *Barbie*, Gender identity, Gaze, Post-feminism, Narrative

1. Introduction

After the live-action movie *Barbie* was released on July 21st, 2023, it won the single-day box office title in North America. Outside the film, *Barbie* has reached cooperation with many business brands, and *Barbie* powder is all over the world. The long-term acceptance and success of the *Barbie* doll suggests the physical characteristics of the doll are perceived as attractive [1].

Barbie, in full Barbara Millicent Roberts, is an 11-inch- (29-cm-) tall plastic doll with the figure of an adult woman that was introduced on March 9, 1959, by Mattel, Inc., a southern California toy company. There has been considerable discussion in both the scientific literature and general media concerning the appropriateness of the body shape and proportions of the Ken and *Barbie* dolls [2]. Ruth Handler, who cofounded Mattel with her husband, Elliot, spearheaded the introduction of the doll. *Barbie* doll ownership is very common among young girls in many different countries, with an estimated 59% ownership rate among U.S. 4- to 7-year-olds [3]. In the latest 2023 *Barbie* movie starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling, we can see some extremely interesting comprehension of this classical toy IP. Specifically, the feminism topic shown in the movie's narrative stood out. As a common discussion suggestion, the *Barbie* doll's overall image is regarded as unhealthy from the perspective of feminism. They are overly thin and superficial to their appearance; therefore, they

encourage females to be misled by the power of the male gaze and fall into the maze of unsuccessful self-identity.

This article focuses on post-modern women's self-identity through the body by analyzing the 2023 live-action *Barbie* movie. The introduction mainly leads to the theme of *Barbie* movies and post-modern women. The second part mainly introduces the plots and scenes involving feminism in the movie industry *Barbie*. The third part analyzes the body and identity of postmodern feminism, and the fourth part summarizes the relationship and future development of the Hollywood live-action film *Barbie* and postmodern feminist identity.

2. Analysis of Females in *Barbie*

The ideal world of *Barbie* is perfect, and the real world is full of flaws. *Barbie's* world was infused with the consciousness of death. Her self-awareness began to take shape. The film depicts the situation of women in the patriarchal society through a mother and daughter and the escape of Ken.

2.1. The Classical *Barbie*

The classical *Barbie* refers to the original *Barbie* doll introduced by the American toy company Mattel in 1959. Created by Ruth Handler, the *Barbie* doll quickly became an iconic toy and cultural phenomenon. The doll was named after Handler's daughter, Barbara.

The first *Barbie* doll wore a black and white zebra-striped swimsuit, had blonde hair in a ponytail, and came with accessories like sunglasses, high heels, and a towel. Over the years, *Barbie* has evolved to reflect changing fashion trends, cultural shifts, and social expectations. The doll has taken on various professions, hobbies, and styles, reflecting different aspects of women's roles in society. *Barbie's* image and design have been updated to be more diverse and inclusive, with dolls available in various skin tones, body shapes, and hairstyles to better represent a wider range of people. In a word, the classical *Barbie* represents not only a classic toy but also a cultural icon that has sparked conversations about body image, gender roles, and societal expectations over the decades.

Clearly, the main character of the movie, starring Margot Robbie, the classical *Barbie*, is firstly intriguing in the perspective of appearance. She wears pink, used to live a perfect life in her utopia, and finally comes up with the ideas associated with death, which eventually leads to the existential skepticism of her inner world. From my perspective, she's yet to be regarded as a complete and realistic "female". She's non-humanly optimistic and absurdly emotionally stable. And if the story stops here, this movie will end up as an excellent narrative of existentialism and the doubt-casting on the essence of enlightenment. It would apparently be a waste if the scriptwriter chose to do this, and it wouldn't fit into the common style of Hollywood movies. After adventuring in the real world, her previously formed opinions are nearly all crushed. And at the end of the movie, we can see that she decided to become a true human, a true "female", giving up the perfect utopian life. In my opinion is her core story is more like a discussion on enlightenment and anti-utopia topics.

2.2. Analysis of the Leading Role of the 2023 *Barbie* Movie

The *Barbie* movie, released in 2023, is Hollywood's first big-budget movie with a female theme. *Barbie* has had a presence in the entertainment industry beyond just toys, including movies, TV shows, and other media. There have been several *Barbie* movies released as direct-to-video animated films.

The mother, Gloria, and the daughter, Sarah, show some typical developments that are also common in the real-world mother-daughter relationship. In the film, they used to be close and physically intimate when Sarah was a little girl. But after Sarah became a teenager, she started to intentionally reject her relationship with Gloria. She didn't want Gloria to touch her hair and hug her, and she also communicated with the mother. She also reached the timing of resisting her feminine

identity—she dressed up unisexually and talked straight, typically masculine in traditional gender values. This shows that she's extremely afraid of her female identity and produces some self-hatred, which is common in young females. But at the end of the movie, with the help of *Barbie* and her mother-daughter relationship repaired, she starts to dress less confined, showing some pinkness as her acceptance of her female nature. Because of her acceptance of her mother, a mature image of a female who has already overcome the obstacles of self-identity progress.

Ken is an extremely intriguing character. Originally in the utopian *Barbie* world, it seems to be a total inverse of the real world—women hold power and take part in all the important social roles related to academia, politics, and even sports. The Kens, the males, are shown to be jobless, handsome, and needy. After all, the *Barbie* was first designed. The Kens are only a derivative of the main products. This situation is nearly the same as real-world traditional thoughts: in the Western Christian ideology, women are created after the birth of men—like in the holy bible, Eva is made out of Adam's rib bone. The scriptwriter is trying to show that the logic of the seemingly more powerful ones is always toxic and possible in any binary situation. This is what post-modern feminism is trying to express.

The film not only shows the diversity and tolerance of women's bodies but also focuses on *Barbie's* spiritual growth journey, showing how she has finally changed from an innocent and simple-minded assembly line doll to a human being who will shed tears because of beautiful things, with flesh and blood and self-awareness. On this level, *Barbie* really reconstructs the meaning of *Barbie*, making the feminism it reveals more abundant and sincere.

2.3. Reflections on *Barbie* and Feminism

Barbie's daily life in the utopia is also obviously consumerism: they do sunshine baths, get their nails done and throw parties in their luxurious houses. Those activities are embedded with strong high-class image, which means their life is typically upper-class. Why did Mettel design the *Barbie* as affluent and luxurious but not middle or lower-class? The reason is obvious: the capital is casting brainwashing on the public to plant the ideology of “you can be whoever you want if you pay” and “being rich is ideal and worthy”, leading the middle-class or low-class public to think so. In that case, with much more willingness to purchase and more demand, the capital will naturally gain more benefits.

That leads to another issue: why do they require the female but not the male to be so exquisite? *Barbie* is clearly shaped into having a body of female. The image of *Barbie* dolls is the result of male's alienation towards women. According to Britannica, alienation is the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work, or self. The common situations include powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, self-estrangement, and social isolation. The alienation of women is the replica of three of these five situations: powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement. First, *Barbie* is making those “improvements” in appearance not under their own control because the patriarchal society requires her to do so externally and even institutionally—what males prefer becomes what she wants to look like. Second, repeating behaviors in order to be attractive leads to the ignoring of the original intentions behind them. *Barbie* does cleaning, make-up, and exercises every day repeatedly and regularly, but the idea of questioning why she does so never emerges. That's a typical sign of meaninglessness.

Lastly, *Barbie* is suffering from self-estrangement. She couldn't accept the unexpected change on her body shape, and her body is born to be gazed at and firstly attractive but not to function as part of her life system. The most important function of her body is not to guarantee and continue her living but to be “beautiful” under the twisted sense of beauty: she could be willing to suffer from malnutrition in order to be slim, and she would like to make her foot painful in high heel shoes to stay

fashionable. Moreover, she's willing to attach poisonous chemicals on her nails to make herself "pretty". Those behaviors are under the conditions of the intentional disorder of physical health.

3. The Body and Identity of Post-Feminism

Barbie has been a subject of both praise and criticism when it comes to feminism, and its impact on discussions around gender roles, body image, and representation has been significant. Post-feminism is a theoretical framework that critiques and deconstructs traditional gender norms, power structures, and cultural representations. *Barbie*, on the other hand, is a popular fashion doll that has faced both praise and criticism for its portrayal of femininity and body image.

3.1. Post-feminism and *Barbie*

Post-feminism as a popular cultural form and sensibility appeared in the West in the 1980s and has grown in prevalence since the 1990s [4]. Post-feminism aims to deconstruct rigid gender norms and challenge the binary understanding of gender. *Barbie* initially faced criticism from feminists for perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards and promoting traditional gender roles.

Barbie's original design with her unrealistic body proportions raised concerns about body image issues, as some argued that her skinny waist, large bust, and long legs could contribute to negative body image perceptions in young girls. In recent years, *Barbie* dolls with different body types, skin tones, hair textures, and abilities have been introduced to better show the diversity of the real world. *Barbie's* image also evolved to include various careers and roles, from astronauts to doctors to engineers. These additions were praised by some feminists for encouraging young girls to aspire to a wide range of professions beyond traditional gender roles. Critics argue that while *Barbie* has diversified in terms of careers and appearances, the underlying emphasis on appearance and fashion still remains a central aspect of the brand. This, they argue, can undermine efforts to promote broader definitions of success and empowerment for girls.

Some feminists and activists have embraced *Barbie* as a tool for empowerment. They argue that young girls can engage in imaginative play with *Barbie* dolls to create their own narratives and challenge traditional stereotypes. This perspective highlights the idea that girls can use *Barbie* as a platform for their own self-expression and creativity. Post-feminism often engages with the concept of consumer culture and its impact on identity. *Barbie* dolls are products of consumerism and have been associated with materialism and the promotion of certain ideals. Postmodernist feminists might analyze how *Barbie's* branding and marketing influence the construction of feminine identity and self-worth.

In summary, *Barbie's* relationship with feminism is complex and multifaceted. The *Barbie* movies offer young girls complex gender narratives that reflect an awareness of, and arguably an engagement with, recent feminist discourse and gender politics while at the same time avoiding any direct critique of patriarchy or male privilege [5]. While the doll has faced criticism for promoting unrealistic beauty standards and gender stereotypes, it has also evolved to reflect more diverse representations and career aspirations. Ultimately, opinions on *Barbie's* impact on feminism vary, with some viewing it as a positive force for empowerment and others maintaining that its focus on appearance and consumerism still presents challenges for achieving gender equality.

3.2. Body Gaze and Female Self-identity

Body-biased gaze has long been recognized as an important feature of sexual objectification [6]. *Barbie* movies broke the stereotype of women's body gaze, completely deconstructed the gender issues in real society, and finally completed the reorganization, telling all the audience that you are

yourself and don't have to cater to and change because of anything, highlighting the power of women's struggle.

The issue of the other is a problem that exists between beings rather than the intersubjectivity of epistemology. Therefore, we introduce the model of "self-other". In terms of gender issues, men occupy the original narrative space and construct their "legitimacy" through a certain power structure to form the "self". Therefore, under the solidification of social narrative, women are constructed as the "other". And the objectified narrative of the 'other', like a certain 'discourse', guides a large number of social practices and concepts of male-female interaction patterns. So, if women want to escape this' fixation 'in order to achieve autonomy and freedom - in short, the essence of patriarchy is' ignoring the subjectivity of women'.

"Body gaze" typically refers to the way bodies, particularly women's bodies, are looked at and perceived in society. Body gaze is the preferential visual attention toward body parts (compared to the face), often characterized as undesirable, a possible precursor to social deviance (e.g., sexual harassment or assault), and typically observed in men toward women [7]. In the context of *Barbie* dolls, the term might be used to discuss how *Barbie*'s body shape and proportions have been criticized for promoting unrealistic beauty standards. *Barbie* dolls have traditionally been criticized for having exaggerated proportions that do not reflect the diversity of real women's bodies. The dolls often have very slim waists, long legs, and other features that are considered unrealistic for the average person.

This kind of body representation can have various effects on individuals, including shaping their perceptions of beauty, self-esteem, and body image. Critics argue that *Barbie* dolls contribute to a culture that places excessive emphasis on a narrow definition of physical attractiveness, potentially leading to negative self-perception and body dissatisfaction among those who don't fit the doll's mold.

Feminine self-identity in the context of *Barbie* dolls could refer to the challenges and controversies that have surrounded *Barbie* over the years. These challenges can range from the doll's physical design to broader issues related to gender roles and societal norms. *Barbie* is no ordinary toy. She mimics the female form. She stands for women within the games of make-believe in which children involve her. She functions as a tool for self-imagining [8]. One notable criticism of *Barbie* dolls is that their unrealistic body proportions could influence body dissatisfaction and contribute to body image issues, particularly among young children who may internalize these standards. Additionally, there have been discussions about the kinds of roles *Barbie* is often portrayed in. For a long time, many *Barbie* dolls were marketed with themes like fashion, beauty, and domesticity, which some critics argue could limit the imagination and aspirations of young girls by reinforcing traditional gender roles.

In recent years, Mattel, the company that produces *Barbie*, has taken steps to address some of these concerns. They have introduced more diverse body types, skin tones, and career-oriented dolls to better reflect the real world and provide a wider range of role models for children. If you could provide more specific information about what you're looking for regarding *Barbie*'s body gaze and physical struggle, I'd be happy to provide a more detailed response.

It seems like you're referring to the intersection between *Barbie* and the Hollywood film industry. *Barbie* is a fashion doll character introduced by the American toy company Mattel in 1959. The doll has become an iconic figure in popular culture, representing various roles and careers, as well as different fashion styles.

4. Conclusion

The *Barbie* doll has been a loved and troubling presence since her debut, with her body shape repeatedly drawing criticism and alternately serving as a point of departure for activist media interventions [9]. This article analyzes the relationship between *Barbie* dolls and Hollywood movies. The paper focuses on the female images in the movie and the origin of the dolls relating to post-

feminism. In my opinion, feminism must eliminate every element of capitalism and consumerism so that females can ultimately receive freedom. *Barbie* is regarded as a cultural symbol of male gaze body design that solidifies gender stereotypes, reflects conservative family values, and caters to male gaze aesthetics. The film *Barbie* in 2023 encourages women to identify with themselves and their bodies, from which they can not only feel the strength and charm of women but also understand the complexity and diversity of culture.

Even though the movie is extraordinary in its bold plots and humorous narratives, the real situation is ironic. After all, it was born in Hollywood, an industry built on capital and consumerism. With the increasing disposable income and growing millennial segment, the study of the *Barbie* doll indicates an early acceptance of global cultural norms that, in turn, foster transnational consumer socialization [10]. It is produced ultimately to earn. The anti-consumerism core is conveyed unsuccessfully to the public: the related products from many brands are sold in heat, and you even must hire somebody to queue to purchase the products. There is mounting evidence to suggest that the structure of childhood is eroding, and children are suffering from severe physical, emotional, and social deficits directly related to consumerism [11]. This reversely produced a rush of consumerism and the worship of an unhealthy beauty system.

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