

From Object to Subject: The Evolution of Female Consciousness as Reflected in Barbie's Sartorial Discourse

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Abstract. This study employs feminist theory as an analytical framework to systematically examine the interactive relationship between the intergenerational evolution of Barbie's image since its debut in 1959 and the development of feminist thought. Selecting three key samples—the traditional Barbie (1959-1980s), the "girl power" Barbie (1990s-2000s), and Greta Gerwig's 2023 live-action film—the research utilizes textual analysis and feminist critique to deeply analyze the ideological connotations of Barbie's body design, costume changes, and narrative representation from the perspectives of male gaze theory, commodity feminism, and gender performativity. The findings reveal that Barbie's image has undergone a transformation from patriarchal aesthetic ideal to feminist deconstruction. While Mattel's diversification efforts remain superficial, Gerwig's film achieves substantive critique by exposing the inherent contradictions of "marketable feminism." The study demonstrates that Barbie's sixty-year evolution essentially constitutes a condensed history of feminist resistance, reflecting profound tensions between empowerment discourse and institutional change.

Keywords: Feminism Film Analysis, Visual Semiotics, Gender studies

1. Introduction

Directed by Greta Gerwig, *Barbie* (2023) is a live-action fantasy comedy exploring self-identity. Barbie (Margot Robbie) lives in perfect Barbieland until a crisis forces her into the real world, with Ken (Ryan Gosling) tagging along. The film humorously critiques gender stereotypes while celebrating Barbie's cultural legacy. The film became a global phenomenon, earning \$1.4 billion, blending satire with nostalgia. It sparked discussions on feminism and patriarchy, redefining Barbie's relevance for modern audiences. The film employs "fashion as language" to semiotically express female consciousness awakening [1]. Applying Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory, Barbie's original pink-dress persona represents visual objectification, while her later work pants and flats disrupt this scopic regime. Simone de Beauvoir's statement "one is not born, but becomes a woman" visually materializes through Barbie's sartorial transformation from plastic perfection to human authenticity [2].

Barbie's three-stage wardrobe evolution—from doll costumes to transitional chaos to minimalist daily wear—demonstrates Judith Butler's "gender performativity": identity is constructed through

repetitive acts like daily dressing. With 64 costume changes, this "fashion narration" turns clothing into a more potent feminist manifesto than dialogue [3, 4].

While existing studies examine Barbie's cultural impact, few focus on how clothing specifically represents feminist consciousness. This paper adopts a feminist lens to analyze how Barbie's fashion evolution symbolizes her journey from a "passive object" to an "active subject," exploring the role of dress in female identity construction.

2. The evolution of costumes in Barbie: from male gaze to self-discovery

2.1. The opening: the construction and deconstruction of the "perfect" image

The film opens with a parody of 2001: A Space Odyssey, where infant Barbies shatter primitive dolls while adorned in 1950s-style retro dresses. This sequence satirizes the toy industry's so-called "evolutionary" narrative of female body standards. Immediately afterward, Barbie (played by Margot Robbie) appears in her iconic pink dress, high heels, and flawless makeup—a direct homage to the doll's hypersexualized legacy. This aesthetic aligns with Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, which asserts that women in visual media are often objectified for male pleasure. As mentioned in her book, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" [5]. Within such a framework, there is no place for feminine activity or female agency. All agents and sources of identity are male, while women are positioned solely as passive objects of desire. The male gaze limits the possibilities for the female spectator imagining herself as a woman with agency, and escaping identifying herself as a passive object. In other words, as she argues in her earlier essay, women's bodies are objects that give pleasure [6].

However, director Greta Gerwig subverts this traditional paradigm by framing Barbieland as a satirical matriarchy, thereby exposing the absurdity of rigid beauty norms. The film's early scenes present Barbieland with hyper-saturated pink hues and plastic textures, exaggerating these aesthetic choices to an uncomfortable degree in order to present it as a fake utopia. After Ken discovers "patriarchy," the film further mocks traditional male dominance through exaggerated elements, such as ridiculous cowboy outfits and an obsession with horses, highlighting its inherent absurdity.

When Barbie laments, "It's too hard to be a woman," the old woman replies, "I know, but we have to keep doing it," using dry humor to reveal ongoing struggles of womanhood. Additionally, the use of overly cheerful tunes (e.g., Pink) satirizes the "eternal happiness" trope. These satirical ways and details reflect the director's superb narrative skills and social insight.

2.2. Barbieland daily: "revealing" clothing in a feminist utopia

In Barbieland, characters wear skimpy outfits (e.g., crop tops, mini skirts) without sexualization—a rejection of the male gaze. For example, at the beginning, Margot Robbie's stereotypical Barbie wears her iconic pink dreamhouse ensemble, but the costume deliberately features plastic-like textures (e.g., glossy fabric, stiff folds), highlighting her artificiality as an objectified "perfect doll." This critiques the male gaze's reduction of women to ornamental figures. Here, "exposure" signifies autonomy, not objectification, echoing feminist debates on clothing as empowerment vs. oppression (e.g., SlutWalk protests: Its core message is, "No matter what a woman wears, it should never excuse harassment or assault"). Yet, Margot Robbie's portrayal of the classic Barbie (1959 original design)—a fluorescent pink sheath dress, golden blonde waves, and high heels—meticulously replicates the doll's "plastic" aesthetic, symbolizing the "feminine ideal" constructed by consumerism, which hints

at contradictions: even in this utopia, Barbie's body remains unnaturally "plastic," questioning true agency under capitalism.

2.3. The real world: clothing vs. women's lived experiences

When Barbie enters the real world, her pink sequin dress contrasts sharply with mundane female attire (e.g., Sasha's hoodie). This visual clash critiques how pop culture reduces women to "one-dimensional stereotypes" (Berger, 'Ways of Seeing'), while real women navigate dress codes tied to respectability politics, particularly in professional and social contexts. These dress codes are not merely aesthetic guidelines but reflect a deeper patriarchal control and discipline over female bodies. At their core, these norms enforce a rigid binary of "modesty" versus "promiscuity," thereby reinforcing gendered power structures.

One key manifestation of this dynamic is the societal linkage between women's worth and their appearance. Women are often expected to dress attractively, but simultaneously warned not to appear "too sexy." This contradictory expectation places women in a double bind, where their bodies are simultaneously objectified as sources of male desire or evaluated as marital commodities. Consequently, women are burdened with the impossible task of balancing "appealing to men" with "preserving chastity."

Examples from real-life institutions further illustrate this control: Japanese schools requires girls to wear skirts even in winter; Chinese universities ban "dyed hair or short skirts"—both examples that frame women's bodies as public property subject to be regulated. These restrictions turns clothing as a Measure of Virtue: revealing outfits equals "shameless," while conservative attire equals "virtuous." This stigmatization shifts the blame from the perpetrator to the women's supposed "provocation," a tactic rooted deeply in patriarchal logic.

A 2018 study published in the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* found that jurors were more likely to believe a rape victim in a short skirt had consented, underscoring the dangerous implications of these double standards. Dress codes reflect these biases starkly: men can go shirtless without consequence, while women face moral outrage for doing the same. Men wear shorts freely, yet women's shorts are often labeled inappropriate. Male bodies are seen as the neutral default, while female bodies are perceived as needing regulation—this imbalance reveals the underlying structure of male dominance in society.

The issue even extends into the economics of clothing. For example, the pink tax refers to the higher prices women often pay for products similar to those marketed to men. This pricing disparity is not incidental but is rooted in gendered semiotics. The color pink, once neutral, has undergone semiotic re-encoding and is now associated with femininity. This social categorization enables symbolic consumption, where consumer choices both reflect and reinforce gender identities. Consumption thus becomes a socio-semiotic act of identity formation, drawing boundaries between personal expression and group belonging [7].

Ultimately, patriarchal dress codes function as mechanisms to uphold gendered power hierarchies. By controlling women's appearance, society reinforces broader systems of male authority and female subordination—both culturally and institutionally.

2.4. Post-awakening: costume as a metaphor for identity

After her existential crisis, Barbie swaps glitter for a simple white tank top and jeans—a "visual metaphor for shedding performative femininity." This mirrors Judith Butler's "gender performativity theory": Gender performativity theory argues that gender is not an innate essence but rather is

constructed through repeated social acts, language, and norms. Gender identity is not fixed but continuously produced and reinforced in daily practices. Gender is not about "who I am" (being) but "what I do" (doing). It is maintained through repetitive acts like dressing, speaking, and gestures. For example, drag queens' exaggerated femininity reveals gender as "an imitation of an imitation. As Judith Butler said: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" [8]. Butler emphasizes that the key is in the repetitiveness of the gendered acts. This way of constructing gender brings us to Butler's belief that gender identity cannot exist prior to gendered acts, because gendered acts and gender identity exist at the same time. Since gender identity is continuously formed by gendered acts, we should not view gender as a stable identity [9]. The finale, where she chooses flat shoes over heels, symbolizes rejecting patriarchal dictates to "walk her own path."

2.5. Sartorial resistance of marginalized identities

Weird Barbie: "Mismatched Patchwork" pieced together from fragments of other Barbies' clothes, symbolizing reconstructed identity after marginalization. Neon scribbles and chopped hair directly defy "Barbie perfection." She embodies the "broken toy," transforming scars into strength.

Allan: "Dated Retro Style." He wears striped sweaters and khakis that clash in muted tones, avoiding neon colors for beige and gray. He doesn't have the "KEN" logo, rejecting commodified identity. Also, the metaphor represents a quiet protest against toxic masculinity.

3. The generational evolution of Barbie: from male gaze to feminist icon

3.1. 1959-1980s: the birth of the "perfect" woman

When Barbie debuted in 1959, the post-WWII economic boom expanded the middle class and fueled growth in the children's toy market. The influence of rigid gender roles and society encouraging women to return to the family led to Barbie's creation. Her hourglass figure, flawless makeup, and glamorous outfits reflected postwar America's "idealized femininity." Feminist critics argue this design catered to the "male gaze," presenting women as objects of desire rather than individuals. Early Barbie careers (e.g., nurse, flight attendant) also reinforced traditional gender roles.

However, during that period, the discriminatory workplace policies strongly restricted women's employment. In the 1960s, U.S. firms had women comprising less than 3% of attorneys, mostly confined to family law/clerical work. Obviously, Barbie's premise is merely about "dressing up and pretending," not about encouraging women to pursue career freedom. It is based on the sociocultural context: Postwar consumerism promoted domestic femininity as an ideal. Moreover, it advocates unrealistic body standards: At a scaled human height of 1.75m, Barbie's 51cm waist perpetuated unattainable beauty norms. Barbie's long-criticized "unrealistic body proportions" (e.g., waist-to-hip ratio, leg length) reveal the violent norms embedded in gender performativity—defining which bodies are "acceptable" while marginalizing non-conforming ones (e.g., fat, disabled, or non-white traits). It is essentially an exclusion of diverse bodies.

3.2. 1990s-2000s: the "girl power" facade

The 1990s and early 2000s witnessed the rise of the so-called "Girl Power" movement, popularized by figures like the Spice Girls. While the group's slogan championed female solidarity, the members

embodied ideals shaped by the male gaze. Despite selling over 80 million albums, much of the Spice Girl's commercial success came from merchandise such as dolls and makeup kits, which reinforced conventional gender stereotypes rather subverting them.

Television narratives such as *Sex and the City* appeared to depict four independent career women in control of their sexuality. Yet beneath the surface, the show often equated female empowerment with luxury consumption, symbolized by items like Hermès bags, suggesting that success and liberation could be attained through wealth and appearance. This reflects a broader trend in late-20th-century pop culture, where "empowerment" was frequently reduced to consumerism.

During the third-wave feminism era, Barbie attempted to rebrand herself in line with this empowerment narrative by adopting professional roles such as CEO and astronaut. However, these role often failed to escape the constraints of her hyper-feminized image. Her unrealistic body proportions, equivalent in real life to a height of 5'9" and a waist of just 16" inches, continued to attract criticism. This contradiction gave rise to accusations of promoting "pink-washed feminism,"

The term "pink-washing" had its debut in 2002, following revelations that a major business promoting pink ribbon products for breast cancer awareness was simultaneously selling carcinogenic products. Since then, the word expanded its meaning to brands who promise support to women and the LGBTQ+ community while acting controversially towards them or not maintaining their promises. Pink washing could bring a lot of risks, such as the undermining of the credibility of brands and building a negative reputation for the firm [10]

Scholars like Banet-Weiser have termed this phenomenon "commodity feminism"—the practice of using feminist imagery to sell products without challenging beauty standards. Barbie's professional roles (e.g., astronaut, scientist) are reduced to costume play, where empowerment is equated with purchasing more commodities (outfits, accessories, dream houses).

3.3. 2010s: body diversity and limited progress

In 2016, facing criticism, Mattel released new Barbie body types—curvy, tall, petite. This was seen as a step forward. However, critics noted that these new dolls still followed narrow beauty norms: light skin, straight hair, and able-bodied forms. This shows the limits of liberal feminism—a type of feminism that focuses on individual choice and representation over systemic change. Adding different body types is good, but it does not change the system that still values one type of beauty more than others. Barbie's "diversity" efforts were more symbolic than transformative, showing progress, but only on the surface.

3.4. 2023: Greta Gerwig's subversive take

The 2023 Barbie movie, directed by Greta Gerwig, took a bold step in exploring and questioning Barbie's legacy. This film uses humor, music, and strong visuals to deconstruct gender roles and reveal the hidden pressures women face. Key scenes are:

- (1) In the musical number "I'm just Ken," Ken tries on many different outfits, showing how boys also suffer under "toxic masculinity."
- (2) In the "Flat feet ending" scene, Barbie chooses to give up her high heels as a patriarchy symbol, symbolizing a rejection of "painful beauty standards."
- (3) Her final outfit "Ordinary clothes" mirrors real women's "authentic self-expression."

4. Conclusion

Barbie's generational transformation from a male-gazed fashion doll to a symbol of feminist deconstruction demonstrates both the progress and limitations of women's representation in popular culture. Over six decades, her image has mirrored shifting feminist discourses—from second-wave critiques of patriarchal beauty standards to third-wave "girl power" commodification and finally to contemporary intersectional examinations of gender performativity.

While Mattel's attempts at diversification (e.g., curvy Barbies) represent surface-level progress, Greta Gerwig's 2023 film exposes how deeply entrenched these issues remain by literally having Barbie step off her pedestal and into flat shoes. The movie's genius lies in using Barbie's hyperfeminine aesthetic against itself, transforming pink from a color of compliance into one of rebellion.

However, true liberation requires moving beyond market-friendly feminism. As the film's Gloria observes, women must simultaneously embody impossible contradictions—a tension Barbie's plastic form physically manifests. The franchise's future challenge will be avoiding what feminist scholars call "empowerment lite"—the illusion of progress while maintaining profitable stereotypes.

Ultimately, Barbie's journey reflects our collective struggle: the difficult but necessary work of dismantling systemic sexism while reclaiming femininity on one's own terms. Her story suggests that real change comes not from perfect dolls but from embracing the messy, complex reality of womanhood. It can be expected that the future research will focus on women's regaining their subjectivity and the gradual expansion of topic rights.

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