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Introduction

In this analysis, I chose to explore the rich and complex representation of gender stereotypes and identities in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* movie. This film isn't just a colorful reimagining of a well-known doll but a bold confrontation of the rigid gender norms that define our society. By presenting a nuanced, often satirical look at femininity and masculinity, *Barbie* challenges deeply embedded assumptions and redefines what it means to inhabit these roles. As a woman, the film's portrayal of these complex, sometimes contradictory experiences resonated with me and countless others who have felt the weight of societal expectations. It validated a shared journey—a journey of identity, resilience, and an unrelenting desire for authenticity in a world that often seeks to box us in. Through this analysis, I hope to deepen our understanding of how media, especially a film as audacious as *Barbie*, shapes and reflects our evolving conceptions of gender.

Literature Review

The textbook *Gendered Lives* by Julia T. Wood and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz provides a critical framework for analyzing how media reinforces and challenges gender norms. The book explores key concepts, including:

- Gender Stereotypes: Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz explain that media frequently perpetuates traditional gender roles, often portraying men as dominant and

assertive while depicting women as nurturing and submissive. This framework helps understand how *Barbie* intentionally subverts these stereotypes, reversing roles within the fictional world of Barbieland.

- Identity Construction: The authors discuss how gender identity is constructed through interactions and media consumption. The *Psychology Today* article expands on this idea, analyzing the psychological impact of these societal expectations on both men and women. In *Barbie*, characters like Barbie and Ken grapple with their identities in a society that imposes specific roles. This allows viewers to relate their personal experiences with societal expectations of gender, recognizing the potential psychological effects of conforming to or challenging these norms.
- Impact of Media: *Gendered Lives* emphasizes the significant influence of media on public perceptions of gender, shaping our sense of what is possible or acceptable. The *Buzzfeed* article highlights the record-breaking box office success of *Barbie*, attributing it partly to the film being directed by a woman. This financial success can be interpreted as a reflection of a broader cultural shift toward valuing women's stories and perspectives. This shift connects to the "Impact of Media" concept, demonstrating how the positive reception of a female-driven narrative like *Barbie* shows the media's power to shape public perceptions and potentially drive change in societal attitudes toward gender.

The *Psychology Today* article offers valuable insights that can be integrated into the analysis of *Barbie*. It highlights the psychological implications of the film's portrayal of gender dynamics:

- Ken's "State of Lack": The article describes Ken's existence in Barbieland as a "psychological state of lack," where his worth is determined by Barbie's attention. This observation supports the analysis of the film's role reversal and its commentary on objectification. This adds psychological depth to the analysis of Ken's character and motivations, explaining his susceptibility to patriarchal ideals when introduced to them.
- Barbie's Beauty Standards and Self-Worth: The article also examines the psychological impact of Barbie's unrealistic beauty standards on girls and women. This reinforces the film's critique of societal beauty norms and their potential negative effects on women's self-esteem and authenticity. Barbie's journey of self-discovery and eventual rejection of the "perfect" ideal is underscored by the psychological insights provided in this article.

By integrating these sources, the analysis of *Barbie* can be strengthened. The film's impact on gender discourse can be more clearly explained, providing a comprehensive analysis of the psychological and societal factors that shape our understanding of gender.

Method

To systematically analyze how the *Barbie* movie addresses gender, a content analysis approach was employed, drawing on principles outlined in "Content Analysis Method and Examples" from Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. This approach involves identifying and quantifying key concepts and themes to uncover

patterns and meanings within the film's content. This analysis focused on several key elements of the *Barbie* movie to examine how it disrupts or reflects conventional gender norms:

- Critiquing Environment: Barbieland is depicted as a matriarchal society where women hold positions of power. This inversion is crucial in understanding how traditional gender roles can feel arbitrary when swapped, thus highlighting the absurdity of conventional stereotypes.
- Repetition: Barbie's struggle with identity and societal expectations recurs throughout the film. This struggle serves as a mirror to the pressures faced by many women who navigate society's conflicting standards, questioning who they're expected to be versus who they truly are.
- Aligning & Defying Literature Review: Unlike typical portrayals, *Barbie* subverts traditional gender roles—Ken plays a secondary role and embarks on his own quest for identity. This shift suggests that men, too, are boxed in by societal expectations, underscoring the theme of universal liberation from rigid roles.
- Standout Elements: Through humor and satire, the film critiques gender norms. This playful yet piercing approach allows the film to engage audiences of all ages and genders while tackling deeply rooted issues.
- Relationships: The complex dynamic between the Barbies and Kens reflects societal gender dynamics, with the girls initially seeming indifferent to the Kens' advances, echoing how women are often objectified or viewed as supporting characters in male narratives.

Coding for this analysis was conducted at the scene level, examining both dialogue and visual elements to categorize the film's portrayal of gender. Two primary types of content analysis, as described by the Columbia source, were employed:

- Conceptual Analysis: This analysis involved identifying and quantifying the presence of key concepts related to gender, such as "challenges to traditional femininity," "reinforcement of masculine stereotypes," and "depiction of non-conforming gender identities."
- Relational Analysis: This approach went a step further by exploring the relationships between these identified concepts, examining how different themes interact and contribute to the film's overall message about gender.

To ensure reliability, the coding process was reviewed and refined for consistency. To address validity concerns, the chosen categories were carefully evaluated for their ability to accurately represent the intended concepts.

Findings

The analysis shows that Barbie effectively challenges traditional gender stereotypes by envisioning a world where power dynamics are flipped. This subversion exposes the superficiality of preconceived gender norms and encourages viewers to examine their beliefs about masculinity and femininity. For many women, myself included, the film resonated as a validation of our experiences, capturing the relief, humor, and solidarity in seeing a powerful feminist message on screen.

1. Alan's Character: Alan, portrayed by Michael Cera, is an androgynous, nonconformist character who stands out as a feminist ally. Gendered lives defines androgyny as, "the blending of masculine and feminine traits" (Oraiz & Wood, 2017, p. 23). Alan doesn't fit into the strict gender binary of Barbie land, much like androgynous people don't conform to gender expectations in society. Additionally, Alan lends his full support towards the Barbies' escape of Ken's control and supports their quest for equality, demonstrating his commitment to feminist principles. His support of the Barbies while refusing the hyper-masculine traits of the Kens represents the importance of allies in feminist movements, reminding us that gender roles can be resisted by anyone.

2. Brainwashed Roles: When the Barbies are manipulated into stereotypical domestic roles, the film offers a biting commentary on how women are often constrained by societal expectations of catering to the needs of men in the form of maids, secretaries, masseuses, etc. This serves as a critique of patriarchy, spotlighting the demeaning aspects of being confined to roles society deems "appropriate" for women. Wood & Oraiz emphasize, "Not only does society assign roles, but it also assigns value to the roles. Western culture teaches women to accept the role of supporting, caring for, and responding to others" (2017, p. 46). We see this phenomenon highlighted in the scene where the former Supreme Court justice is happily serving the kens beers (*Barbie*, 2023, n.p.).

3. Ken's Mojo Dojo Casa House: Ken's exaggerated remodeling of Barbie's Dreamhouse into the "Mojo Dojo Casa House" humorously critiques essentialist masculinity by showcasing an idealized, hyper-masculine environment. Based on his

very limited time in the real world, he incorporates the use of over-the-top symbols like fur coats, horse memorabilia, and samurai hachimaki to convert Barbie land into a patriarchy (*Barbie*, 2023, n.p.). Ken's redesign magnifies stereotypical masculine traits like dominance, control, and self-assuredness. These exaggerated elements serve to parody how rigid views of masculinity are not only confining but can ultimately reinforce limitations that affect men's self-perception and relationships with others. This portrayal invites viewers to question such simplified gender norms by recognizing their impact on how men hastily define and identify with the concept of masculinity. *Gendered Lives* further contextualizes this point, noting, "Although particular images tend to dominate at any given time, alternative images are always in the mix and often serve as catalysts for changing how we understand manhood and masculinity" (Oraiz & Wood, 2017, p. 76).

4. Male-Centric Attitude: Initially, Barbieland's women treat Kens as accessories or secondary citizens, symbolizing how women are often objectified and devalued in a male-dominated society. Psychology today further illustrates, "The Kens of Barbieland are women. Ken #1 (Ryan Gosling) lives in a world where 'Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him' (a description eerily reminiscent of abusive relationships). Ken lives in a psychological state of lack, a 'life of blond fragility' where it 'doesn't seem to matter what I do/I'm always number two,' and where being second is tantamount to being nothing" (Ballon, 2023, n.p.). Though displayed in a satirical manner, this role reversal highlights the damaging effects of objectification, regardless of who is on the receiving end.

5. Struggles with Beauty Standards: Barbie, despite being a doll, experiences the societal pressures of conventional beauty standards. When she begins

to malfunction, she exhibits cellulite and flat feet, traits that send her on a journey to the Real World to find the girl playing with her and fix the "rip in the continuum". Weird Barbie explains that these imperfections will lead to Barbie becoming "mushy and sad and...complicated," reflecting the societal fear of women deviating from idealized beauty norms (*Barbie*, 2023, n.p.). This struggle is further emphasized during Barbie's encounter with Sasha, who criticizes Barbie for perpetuating harmful beauty standards. Sasha argues that Barbie "represents everything wrong with our culture: sexualized capitalism, unrealistic physical ideals," and accuses her of setting "the feminist movement back fifty years" by destroying "girls' innate sense of worth" (*Barbie*, 2023, n.p.). This confrontation serves as a wake-up call for Barbie, who initially believed she was empowering women. Psychology Today accentuates Sasha's point, "Barbie's impossible proportions advocate beauty standards (thinness above all) notorious for being internalized to the detriment of self-esteem and self-acceptance on the part of girls and women. Barbie's feet make it impossible to move freely, from an attack-er, or just to function. The first sign that there is a breach of boundaries between Barbieland and the Real World is that Barbie's feet get flat; when she wears heels in this condition, she comments, "I would never wear heels if my feet were shaped like this" (Ballon, 2023, n.p.). Barbie's journey thus becomes a poignant commentary on the damaging effects of these expectations, revealing how they limit women's freedom, authenticity, and self-worth. This awareness transforms Barbie's quest from merely "fixing" herself to challenging and redefining what it means to be a role model, ultimately encouraging a shift away from perfection and toward a more inclusive vision of empowerment.

6. Nurturing Attitude Towards Ken: Even after Ken performs a hostile takeover on her private residence and city, brainwashes her friends, and even throws her clothes out the window. Barbie still reacts with sadness and disappointment instead of anger. Despite Ken's demeaning and disrespectful attitude, Barbie's understanding, nurturing response reflects society's expectation that women should prioritize harmony, even at their own expense. Wood and Oraiz connect Barbie's struggles to women in the workforce stating, "In institutional life, the stereotype of woman as mother has both figurative and literal forms. The figurative version of this stereotype is expressed when others expect women employees to take care of everyone—to smile, exchange pleasantries, prepare coffee and snacks, and listen to and help others. In fact, when women decline to help and support others, their careers suffer, whereas men who decline suffer no negative consequences" (2017, p. 196). This cinematic and real world dynamic not only limits women's ability to assert their boundaries but also perpetuates the stereotype that they are responsible for others' feelings and actions, reinforcing a cycle where empathy is valued over self-respect. Barbie's struggle, then, becomes a critique of how these expectations diminish women's autonomy, subtly questioning the cost of a 'nurturing' role that often demands silence and self-sacrifice.

7. Directed and Produced by Women: Directed by Greta Gerwig and produced by a female-led team, *Barbie* exemplifies the power of female representation. Its success signals a broader cultural shift toward valuing women's stories and perspectives. According to Buzzfeed, "Barbie grossed over \$162 million its first weekend, which is currently the biggest domestic opening weekend for a movie released in 2023 and the biggest opening for a female director ever" (Garafano, 2023,

n.p.). This shift is also evident in the increasing awareness of the need for more equitable representation of women in media, as evidenced by organizations like the Geena Davis Institute, which advocates for gender equity in media representations (Oraiz & Wood, 2017, p. 222). By placing women at the helm, "*Barbie*" challenges the traditionally male-dominated film industry and provides a platform for women's voices and experiences. This is particularly important in a film that deals so directly with themes of gender and identity.

Discussion

The findings of this analysis highlight *Barbie*'s potential to shift societal perceptions of gender. By presenting a world where traditional roles are reversed, the film encourages viewers to reconsider the limitations imposed by gender stereotypes. This playful subversion of expectations can inspire a broader acceptance of diverse gender identities and contribute to a more inclusive society. *Barbie*'s journey resonated deeply with my own struggles with identity. The film's depiction of Barbie's realization that her perceived perfection was actually a cage, limiting both herself and those who looked up to her, mirrored my own experiences with societal pressures to conform. Seeing this struggle play out on screen was not just entertaining; it was validating and strangely liberating. It's a feeling I've heard echoed by countless women who, like me, saw in *Barbie* a reflection of their own internal conflicts. The film's impact goes beyond personal resonance. *Barbie* has ignited vital conversations about gender roles, expectations, and the very concept of gender itself. It has sparked dialogue between generations, with parents using the film as a tool to discuss these complex topics with

their children. This is a testament to the power of media to not only reflect but also shape cultural understanding. The film's success, as noted in the *Buzzfeed* article, demonstrates a hunger for this type of representation. The fact that *Barbie*, a film directed by a woman and centered on a female protagonist grappling with complex themes of identity and societal expectations, has achieved such commercial success indicates a potential turning point in the cultural landscape. It suggests an increasing appetite for narratives that challenge the status quo and offer more nuanced representations of gender. The *Psychology Today* article further emphasizes the significance of *Barbie*'s exploration of the psychological effects of gender roles. Ken's "state of lack" and Barbie's struggle with unrealistic beauty standards provide powerful examples of how deeply ingrained societal expectations can impact individuals' well-being and sense of self. By bringing these issues to light, *Barbie* encourages a more critical examination of the messages we internalize about gender and the potential harm they can cause.

Conclusion

This analysis of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, drawing on the insights of *Gendered Lives* and incorporating perspectives from *Buzzfeed* and *Psychology Today*, reveals the profound impact of media on our understanding of gender. The film's significance lies not only in its overt feminist message but also in its ability to connect with audiences on a personal level, sparking reflection and conversation about deeply ingrained gender norms. The purpose of this analysis was to examine how *Barbie* challenges conventional gender representations and explores the complex interplay between societal expectations and individual identity. The film serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of

representation, self-acceptance, and the courage to question and redefine our identities. *Barbie's* resonance, both critically and personally, underscores the need for continued dialogue and increased female influence in media surrounding gender. This film has the potential to be more than just a fleeting cultural phenomenon. It could be a catalyst for lasting change, inspiring us to envision and create a world where gender is not a constraint but a source of liberation and self-expression.

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