

Women's Identity Construction and Identity from the Perspective of Gender Theory: Examination of Gender Discourse based on the Film Barbie

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Abstract. The Barbie film directed by Greta Govig became a new milestone in feminist cinema when it set a box office record in 2023. The film not only presents the portrayal of women in a patriarchal society, but also critiques gender stereotypes with humour, triggering a global feminist discussion. This paper focuses on the construction of women's identity and the representation of women's identity in the film Barbie from the perspective of gender theory and in four parts. The first part is the introductory section, mainly covering the research background and significance of this paper; The second part explores the female identity construction of Barbie from the aspects of appearance and social image; The third part explores the female identity of Barbie from the perspectives of male and female; The fourth part mainly combines and summarizes the previous content, and at the same time, combines social scholars' and film critics' interpretations of the film to deepen readers' understanding of the modern portrayal of women on screen.

Keywords: Film Barbie; Gender Theory; Female Identity Construction; Identity.

1. Introduction

On July 21, 2023, *Barbie*, a fantasy film produced by Warner Bros. Pictures and directed by Greta Gerwig, premiered in mainland China. Achieving remarkable success, it surpassed \$1 billion in global box office revenue within three weeks, marking Gerwig as the first female director to reach this milestone with *Barbie*. [1] The film delves into the transformation of its protagonist, Barbie, who, after undergoing physical and psychological changes, embarks on a journey to the real world with her boyfriend Ken to uncover the truth behind her alterations. This journey compels Barbie to face the stark realities of women's lives and societal status, prompting her to reflect on women's predicaments and identity. Moving away from Barbie's traditional portrayal as the epitome of perfection, the movie depicts her navigating the everyday challenges faced by real women. It humorously and vividly reimagines the traditional gender hierarchy, illuminating the construction of female identity in a patriarchal society and offering a fresh perspective on women's realities. While *barbie* may not delve as deeply into feminist themes as classics like *Thelma & Louise* and *The Hours*, it distinguishes itself through its engagement with contemporary issues. Since its release, *barbie* has sparked global discussions on feminism among viewers of all genders, ages, and nationalities, fostering a level of interaction and discourse previously unseen in feminist cinema.

This paper utilizes a gender theory lens to provide a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of Barbie's external appearance and social image in the movie. It aims to shed light on the methods of female identity formation and expression depicted in *Barbie*, highlighting its innovative approaches to female gender discourse while also addressing its limitations.

2. The Way Women's Identities are Constructed in the Film Barbie

2.1. History and Impact of Barbie Culture

Barbie, since her debut on 9 March 1959 by Ruth Handler, an American toy developer and designer, embodies a contentious duality. She presents a polished, autonomous woman, inspiring children to envision diverse futures. Yet, this icon is ensnared by dated gender norms, portraying a femininity

intertwined with beauty, love, and professional success—a vision deeply rooted in American culture. Such representation glosses over genuine female adversities, subtly steering children towards a constricted worldview. This worldview venerates a femininity sculpted by capitalist and patriarchal dictates, setting a prescriptive standard for female appearance and roles. The critique by American feminist Susan Faludi, citing a slogan from the 1970 women's strike for equality—"I am not a Barbie doll"—poignantly encapsulates the conflict between Barbie's marketed ideal and the feminist pursuit of authentic female representation. [2]

Therefore, while Barbie's cultural significance offers valuable insights into children's education, it simultaneously incites significant debate. The complexity of Barbie's influence underscores the imperative of nuanced discussions around her. The film *Barbie* ventures into these debates, seeking to unravel and address the intricate gender discourses woven into Barbie's legacy.

2.2. The Construction of Appearance: From Sophisticated Chic to the "Cellulite Crisis"

Gender temperaments, often viewed as immutable characteristics, lie at the heart of enduring gender stereotypes. These stereotypes ascribe nurturing qualities to women and leadership abilities to men, suggesting that individuals ought to adopt specific social roles based on these inherent traits. In this construct, femininity encompasses not just a part of female identity but also extends to external aspects like appearance, speech, and behavior. [3] In cinema, especially in narratives centered on women, directors frequently use visual elements—such as attire, body shape, and overall physical presentation—to convey characters' personalities and psychological states.

The film *Barbie*, from its very opening scenes, showcases Barbie as the epitome of sophistication, fashion, and an idealized form of sexy femininity. To accentuate this depiction, the director ingeniously integrates a plethora of costume designs mirroring Barbie's toy clothing line, to present a multifaceted characterization that reflects significant cultural influences. The film's aesthetic, from the pink hues of its costumes to details like skirts, sequins, and bubble sleeves, projects these characteristics vividly. Furthermore, to perpetuate the traditional image of Barbie, the film incorporates distinctive movements, such as Barbie's exclusive use of high heels and her tiptoe stance even when barefoot. These meticulous details unveil the male-gaze-driven aesthetics behind Barbie's portrayal, tying the female image to conventionally feminine attributes and silhouettes, and promoting a narrow view of beauty centered on sex appeal and slender body shapes.

Yet, this portrayal starkly contrasts with the diversity of women's appearances in real life. Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator, challenges this ideal in the film with her statement, "Do you think Barbie's creator looks like Barbie? I'm a short old lady with two mastectomies. . . none of them look like Barbie." In a bold move to dismantle Barbie's one-dimensional and simplistic image, the character Gloria, reimagines Barbie to mirror real women's experiences, including physiological phenomena like bad breath, flat feet, cellulite, and skin imperfections, alongside emotional and psychological complexities such as depression and anxiety. This nuanced depiction extracts Barbie from her previously unattainable "dream world" and positions her within a more authentic and relatable narrative of womanhood.

Gloria's re-modelling of Barbie's appearance on the one hand breaks the audience's stereotypical notion of the traditional image of women, and guides the audience to discover the real physical and psychological experience of the female group; on the other hand, it also helps to alleviate the pressure on women to follow the traditional temperament and aesthetic standards, and to face up to the natural variations and diversities of women's bodies, and encourages them to be brave enough to show the outside world a real and diversified image of women. At the same time, the film also stresses the importance of transcending gender stereotypes. As Barbie once said to Ken, "These things that seem to you to have shaped you may not really determine who you are, but it may be the independent Barbie and Ken [who] get to decide who they really are", which is not only a call for women's liberation, but also a re-examination of men's established roles. By stepping out of the framework of gender stereotypes, the film encourages the audience to re-examine the social expectations of gender

temperament and to think about the meaning of personal existence and the possibility of development, thus promoting individual self-realisation and gender equality in society.

This innovative attempt of the *Barbie* film is a profound reflection on and critique of gender issues in contemporary society. It not only provides a new way of self-identification for the female community, but also provides an opportunity for all viewers to reflect on and challenge gender bias, contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and equal social environment. Through this comprehensive and realistic portrayal of women, the film demonstrates that diversity and complexity are common human traits rather than labels exclusive to one gender.

2.3. Construction of a Social Image: From Professional Woman to Male Subordinate

French feminist and existentialist writer Simone de Beauvoir once stated, "One is not born but becomes a woman", [4] highlighting that gender identity is shaped not solely by biology but also by socio-cultural influences. This perspective is crucial in understanding the impact of the persistent patriarchal system on gender roles, exemplified by traditional gendered divisions of labor, where men are seen as the breadwinners and women as caretakers. Despite equal opportunities in education and career being available to all genders, societal stereotypes often guide women toward roles associated with family and caregiving, which typically do not offer high income or status. [5] This bias is echoed in historical views, such as those of philosopher Immanuel Kant, who doubted women's suitability for scholarly work [6], and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed a woman's education should be aimed at pleasing and serving men. [7] These attitudes, juxtaposed with Beauvoir's theories, illustrate that the construction of gender identity transcends biological determinants, being deeply influenced by societal norms and expectations.

The film *barbie* initially presents an idealized vision of women's career possibilities, only to deconstruct this vision to underscore the complexities of women's identity formation. It depicts a utopia where women excel in various professions, from construction workers to Nobel Prize laureates. Yet, this portrayal is contrasted with the reality of only two women being shown as successful professionals, highlighting the illusory nature of such representations. Through the characters of Ruth Handler, Barbie's creator, and Gloria, a Mattel employee, the film explores the challenges faced by women in balancing career aspirations with societal expectations and family responsibilities. Their struggles reflect the broader societal pressures on women to conform to conflicting standards of appearance, behavior, and roles, contributing to gender inequality by forcing women into unfair choices between career and family life.

Moreover, the character of Will Ferrell, embodying the patriarchal corporate world, further exposes the nuanced sexism within the workplace. The film critiques the superficial support for women's careers in a male-dominated boardroom, revealing the subtle mechanisms that perpetuate gender inequality. It demonstrates how unspoken, ingrained biases within organizational cultures and structures sideline women's contributions and limit their opportunities for professional growth and fulfillment.

The director shatters Barbie's illusion of the working woman through Gloria's words and the comments of the male executives, and in the middle of the film, completely subverts this "working woman's utopia". Ken's return to Barbie from the real world transforms Barbie's world into a patriarchal, male-dominated society, symbolically demonstrating Barbie's transformation from a career woman into a male subordinate. In this world, Barbie has to satisfy Ken's various needs, from providing beer and snacks to offering Massage services; and all the material possessions belong to Ken, Barbie no longer has the right to use and dominate them, Barbie has thus fallen from the Barbie world, where "a woman can be anything she wants to be," to a patriarchal society where women have been completely marginalised. This transformation not only demonstrates the poisoning of women by social expectations and prejudices, but also provides a deep understanding of how gender identities are shaped and reshaped in different socio-cultural contexts, as well as the deep-rootedness of gender inequality and patriarchy in the real world, which requires us to fundamentally re-examine the

expectations and prejudices of society towards women if we are to challenge and change the status quo.

3. Women's Ways of Identity in the Film Barbie

3.1. Women's Dialogue with Men: Breaking the Deadlock between the Sexes

In 1993, Gloria Marie Steinem, an American feminist, journalist, and socio-political activist, published a profoundly ironic article entitled *What If Freud Were Phyllis*. [8] By reimagining the legendary life of Austrian psychologist Sigmund Freud and adopting a female perspective, the article cleverly transforms Freud's theory of women's "penis envy complex" into men's "clitoris worship complex". The article not only exposes the absurdity of the gender structure, but also, in a funny way, prompts people to re-examine gender prejudices and stereotypes, creating a new approach to feminism. The film *barbie* seems to have taken a similar creative intent as *What If Freud Were Phyllis*, exploring gender issues by constructing a fictional world that is the complete opposite of the real patriarchal society.

In the fantastical world of Barbie, women enjoy unrestrained freedom in their career paths and personal achievements, embodying roles as varied as president, astronaut, or Supreme Court Justice. This utopia showcases women's financial independence and autonomy, with every woman possessing her own home, luxury car, and the means to fulfill her desires without reliance on anyone. In stark contrast, men in this world, epitomized by Ken, occupy a subordinate position, their existence and value seemingly contingent on women's acknowledgment and favor.

By presenting this inverted reality, *barbie* engages the audience in a critical examination of traditional gender roles, challenging the normative beliefs that underpin societal views on masculinity and femininity. The film goes beyond mere satire, aiming to foster dialogue and reconsideration of gender relations. It reflects the complexities of real-world gender issues while underscoring that gender equality requires collaborative efforts across society. The evolving relationship between Barbie and Ken, from indifference to conflict and eventual reconciliation, not only illustrates the potential dynamics within gender interactions but also emphasizes the necessity of equality-based dialogue and mutual respect.

The story of Barbie and Ken reflects gender issues in the real world, reminding the audience that gender equality is not solely a women's issue but also one that men and society as a whole need to collectively address and engage in. The process of their transition from ignoring to antagonizing each other, and then reconciling not only depicts the various dynamics that can occur in a gender relationship, but also highlights the importance of dialogue based on equality and respect. This presentation reveals the central point that the health and progress of gender relations depend on equal participation and mutual respect on both sides, and that only through open and honest dialogue can the impasse of the longstanding gender structure be broken, allowing men and women to break free from the confines of gender roles, and that gender relations have the opportunity to advance towards true health and harmony.

3.2. Women's Dialogue with Women: In Search of a Feminist Way Forward

In the 1960s, the American media sought to project an idealized image of the housewife, which was extensively publicized on television, radio, and in print media, becoming a societal expectation. During this cultural era, young women subconsciously modeled their lives after this typical housewife image. Betty Friedan, an American feminist writer and social activist, responded to this phenomenon by publishing *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. [9] In her book, Friedan sharply criticized the media for promoting the housewife image as a form of "brainwashing," misleading women into aspiring solely for housewifery. She urged women to reject this socially imposed ideal, arguing it was out of touch with women's real life experiences and encouraged them to challenge traditional gender roles

and advocate for equal rights. Consequently, *The Feminine Mystique* became a landmark work in liberal feminism, significantly impacting the social structure of the United States and beyond.

The film *Barbie* also seems to have shades of this period of the 1960s American historical scene in its plotting. In the middle and late stages of the film, Ken transforms Barbie's world into a patriarchal society and systematically brainwashes the women in Barbie's world, making them indifferent to major international and domestic events, scientific and technological developments, and dedicated only to serving men. In the face of such changes, Barbie develops a questioning of her personal values and the meaning of life. It is at this point that Gloria assumes a Betty Friedan-like role, helping Barbie to identify and rebel against the false veil of patriarchal society through an in-depth dialogue with her, encouraging her to continue to persevere in her self-exploration and to take back control of her life, thus achieving a new birth of female identity. This dialogue between Gloria and Barbie, on the one hand, reveals the false standards of women's worth in a patriarchal society, and on the other hand, it takes the audience back to the revolutionary spirit of the feminist movement in the 20th century, and encourages modern women to also be able to recognise and challenge traditional gender roles, and to explore and realise their own worth and potential.

Having successfully saved Barbie's world and reconciled herself with the male community, Barbie realises that she is unsure of where she really belongs, and is faced with a final choice: to remain in the "female utopia" of Barbie world and enjoy the "female privileges" that are not available in the real world? Or to go out of the Barbie world and become a woman. Or to go out of the Barbie world and become a real human being to experience the real life of women? At the moment when Barbie is torn between the two, Ruth Handler, the "Mother of Barbie", comes out from the crowd and starts a conversation with Barbie about self belonging. Barbie seems to be reenacting Nala in the classic play *A Doll's House*. In the face of the conflict between patriarchal society and women's emancipation, how to understand her own female identity and how to find a way out for the future of women's groups have become the key questions that Barbie needs to respond to.

Faced with this dilemma, Barbie chose to "run away" with the same determination as Nala. She says to her creator, Ruth Handler, "I want to be the one who creates meaning, not the one who is created" and asks Ruth Handler, "Will you allow me to be human?". Ruth Handler laughed, "You don't need my permission. . . I can't control you any more than I can control my daughter. . . I will always expect from you what I expect from her. As a mother, I stand still so that when my daughters look back they can see how far they have come." Ruth Handler's reply symbolises, on the one hand, a mother's care for her daughters, helping them to know and recognise their own female identity; on the other hand, it also symbolises the guidance given to the contemporary women's groups by the female forefathers who led the feminist movement, encouraging them to go even further on the road of defending the rights and interests of the women's groups and promoting the cause of gender equality.

4. Conclusion

Due to their special subject matter, women's films are relatively less directly influenced by patriarchy and belong to a unique cultural field. Therefore, it is crucial to study the methods of female identity construction and female self-identification within this cultural field. Through an in-depth exploration of the ways in which female consciousness is expressed in the *Barbie* film, this paper reveals the innovativeness that the film demonstrates in shaping female identity and promoting identity and exploring its limitations, and shows readers that the topic of gender goes far beyond the individual level; it is a profound socio-cultural topic that involves multiple dimensions such as gender structure, social expectations, and identity. Therefore, if people can deeply understand and discuss gender issues, women will have the opportunity to break the traditional gender stereotypes and reconstruct their own gender identity, opening up new possibilities for gender reconciliation and equality. At the same time, men can also re-examine and explore new modes of interaction with women in this process, which may lead to a new situation of gender reconciliation and equality.

However, despite its ambition to address gender equality, *barbie* exhibits limitations in its depth of gender discourse and promotion of gender liberation. Current critical reviews by sociologists and film critics reveal several key flaws: Firstly, the film's portrayal of matriarchy versus patriarchy does not truly encapsulate gender equality but rather mirrors a form of gender despotism rooted in a dominator-dominated binary. Secondly, it fails to transcend traditional gender dynamics, merely substituting male dominance with female dominance, possibly reinforcing conventional gender roles among viewers. Lastly, while featuring characters like "Alternative Barbie" and "Ellen" who challenge normative gender roles, the film misses the chance to thoroughly explore gender diversity and the complexities of gender identities.

In conclusion, while *barbie* makes strides in promoting gender equality, its limitations highlight the necessity for a more nuanced, comprehensive approach to gender portrayal in films and cultural works. The intricacy of gender issues demands that creators adopt a more refined perspective in depicting gender relations and engaging in the discourse on gender equality, thereby enriching the cultural dialogue on this pivotal topic.

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- [11] The same as what is mentioned above.
- [12] The same as what is mentioned above.