

Is She a Feminist Icon Now? Barbie 2023 Movie and a Critique of Postfeminism

Dikmen Yakali

Correspondence: Dikmen Yakali, Izmir Institute of Technology, Turkey.

Received: October 19, 2023

Accepted: December 6, 2023

Online Published: December 15, 2023

doi:10.11114/smc.v12i1.6478

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i1.6478>

Abstract

This study seeks to analyse Greta Gerwig's Barbie 2023 movie, exploring how it playfully interacts with academic criticisms by incorporating them into its narrative in a humorous way. This article intends to investigate how the movie serves as a critique of postfeminist media texts by highlighting how it affects women's psychological well-being, illustrating the ways in which it can be debilitating. The movie also highlights the unfulfilled psychological aspects of feminism, rendering it a feminist text in that regard. A thematic analysis of the movie prompts a discussion on how a character who has been a postfeminist icon transforms into a feminist narrative identity.

In the beginning of the film, Barbie resides within a paradisiacal realm characterized by unwavering agency and authority. She lives in Barbieland where "every day is a great day". This mirrors the way in which both girls and boys immerse themselves in their imaginative play, constructing their microcosms replete with agency and the role of the protagonist (Yakali Camoglu, 2020). However, as individuals mature into adulthood, the shift is palpable and the world they encounter demands a relinquishment of some of that power, leading them to transition from active agents to potentially objectified subjects in certain contexts. This is symbolised in Barbie's own transition from Barbieland (imagination of childhood) to the Real World (adulthood) in the end of the movie.

The movie engages in the critique that Barbie encounters, as her portrayal symbolizes the unrealistic standards imposed on women, portraying them as unattainable ideals. Although her initial intent -supposedly- is to empower girls by rescuing them from the confines of stereotypical maternal roles and introducing them to diverse occupations, her portrayal inadvertently immerses them in a realm where not only physical perfection but also success in careers and relationships is expected—a realm where limitless possibilities coexist with a profound burden. This postfeminist portrayal offers a vision of boundless potential achievable through belief in self, but concurrently fosters a burdensome mental strain and self-objectification among women, entangling them in a constant cycle of self-critique.

This predicament forms the crux of Barbie's critical error, leading her to relinquish her paradisiacal abode, Barbieland, and embrace the realm of real-world womanhood. By assuming the complex roles women navigate, Barbie forfeits her idyllic sanctuary and immerses herself in a world where the concept of "perfection" is inherently absent, as authenticity takes precedence over plastic constructs.

After identifying the existing literature on Barbie, the article proceeds to present the theoretical framework, which is postfeminism, and outlines the research methodology. The results of the thematic analysis reveal Barbie's active engagement in critiquing the postfeminist media culture in which she was a prominent figure. This pivotal process underscores Barbie's latest contribution to the realm of media studies, transforming from a text entrenched in postfeminist ideals to embodying a feminist narrative.

Keywords: Barbie, postfeminism, narrative identity, feminist media studies, Greta Gerwig

1. Existing Literature on Barbie

Within the context of second wave feminism, a prevailing discourse has emerged that draws attention to the dichotomous relationship between feminine identities perceived as 'bad' and feminist identities seen as 'good'. (Hollows, 2009, p. 9) Moreover, this discourse extends to encompass an oppositional dynamic between feminism itself and traditional notions of femininity, with feminists often viewed as conflicting with notions of femininity. Barbie, the iconic doll created by Ruth Handler of Mattel in 1959 has been a focal point of this conversation, frequently symbolizing the embodiment of 'bad' feminine identities. As a representative of the 'late capitalist construction of femininity', Barbie has been criticized for projecting an image rooted in consumerist values and traditional gender roles.

However, the evolution of the academic critique of Barbie has undergone significant changes in line with how scholars have come to view popular culture (Rogers, 1999).

According to Brill (1995, p. 20), the depiction of Barbie and the associated imaginative play offer girls an avenue of emancipation, enabling them to transcend societal norms and broaden their understanding of femininity. This viewpoint proposes that by presenting various subject positions beyond the confines of wife and motherhood, Barbie actively reshapes how girls perceive and engage with femininity, shaping discourse surrounding the concept in novel ways.

Another perspective suggests that individuals engage in play in various ways alongside the doll. Reid-Wals and Mitchell (2000), argue that Barbie's influence is not a solitary factor contributing to certain societal issues like eating disorders; rather, it is part of a broader context. Barbie cannot be solely held accountable for these problems. It's plausible to consider Barbie as a potential role model for children, influencing them to some extent. However, this influence is not exhaustive, as the portrayal of unrealistic body proportions makes it unattainable for most.

Crucially, Barbie is not the sole influence shaping the societal concept of the "ideal" woman. A multitude of studies and theoretical viewpoints concentrate on the interplay between consumers and media, particularly products of popular culture. This interaction is not easily predictable; in fact, it has been observed that girls who play with Barbie can and frequently do participate in activities that question conventional norms (Reid-Wals and Mitchell, 2000; Brill, 1995). These studies emphasize the idea that Barbie's influence is not strictly prescriptive, and individuals can navigate their interactions with the doll in various, even resistant, ways (Rand, 1995).

Toffoletti (2007) presents a perspective wherein Barbie's identity can be viewed as either unified or fragmented. Rather than possessing a fixed identity, she is characterized as a transformer, perpetually oscillating between the image she portrays and the reality she points towards (p. 58). Barbie, as a woman figure, occupies a liminal space that challenges established categories and introduces a certain illusory quality that disrupts normative paradigms (Toffoletti, 2007, p. 58). This phenomenon offers an alternative form of subjectivity that diverges from conventional notions of identity. It neither adheres to the concept of identification nor aligns with processes of opposition. Toffoletti's interpretation of Barbie, drawing from Baudrillard's ideas, positions her as a harbinger of the posthuman, symbolizing a dynamic shift in identity and encapsulating a transformative plasticity that embodies inherent uncertainty (Toffoletti, 2007, p. 59). This is where the film is taking us as the next step in Barbie's life at the end.

In a similar line as Toffoletti, I have argued that Barbie has transformed into both a postfeminine icon and a postfeminist symbol in my previous work. This change is credited to her distinct capacity to navigate and reconcile historical concepts of femininity that often appear contradictory. She effectively bridges the gap between seemingly conflicting roles of being feminine and feminist, occupying an intermediary position. I have contended that this postfeminine identity of Barbie reflects a narrative identity that is constructed through dialogue, influenced by poststructuralist feminist and queer theories. Thus, I argued that hers is a dialogically constructed narrative identity. (Yakali Camoglu, 2020) This is also emphasized at the end of the Barbie 2023 movie.

The producers of Barbie are responsive to critical discussions about the doll and have introduced innovative product lines, like "Barbie Fashionista" and "M2M - Made to Move," to address concerns about Barbie's body standards and embrace diverse body images. However, academic studies are immediately released analysing the new Barbie lines. Saccone & Chouinard (2019) conducted a unique study using dolls to investigate how exaggerated features, such as those seen in Barbie and Ken dolls, can influence expectations and perceptions of weight. Webb, Ford and Meagan (2023) argued that Barbie Fashionista line caused a notable decrease in the levels of body appreciation of children, as compared to their counterparts who were presented with imagery portraying the Lego Friends play sets. (Webb, Ford and Meagan, 2023).

In sum, Barbie, encapsulating the tensions between traditional (emphasized) femininity and feminist identities has emerged as an intermediary force that negotiates and reconciles these opposing narratives. By highlighting the dialogical construction of Barbie's identity and exploring its subversive potential, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between femininity, feminism, and postfeminism in the context of Barbie's cultural influence.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study examines the 2023 Barbie Movie through the lens of postfeminism to illustrate how it offers a critique and, consequently, becomes a feminist narrative. The previous Barbie animated films and stories featured in Barbie magazines can be viewed as examples of postfeminist texts, aligning closely with several definitions of postfeminism. (Yakali Camoglu, 2011; 2020)

Postfeminism highlights the process of integrating and incorporating feminist discourse and concepts into media and popular culture products, signifying a transformation. (Lotz, 2001; Genz & Brabon, 2009). In Media Studies, postfeminism may be used to refer to the changes in theory and media representations after second-wave feminism.

Postfeminist media texts tend to focus on the different relationships women have with power. Postfeminism, influenced by diverse perspectives and individual stances, examines the suppression and dominance that exist by considering different facets of women's identities. In essence, it deconstructs constraints imposed by other disparities, such as class, ethnicity, age, and physical abilities (Lotz, 2001, p. 115). Postfeminist works frequently portray an array of feminist responses, which materialize through characters who confront oppressive systems of power and display diverse forms of opposition (p. 116). As Lotz (2001) suggests, a text becomes postfeminist when it portrays the challenges experienced by modern women who are influenced by feminism and their endeavours. This concept features inherent contradictions, illustrated through instances like a character engaging with feminist ideals while navigating romantic relationships and the pursuit of a partner. These narratives explore the conflicts arising from societal expectations conflicting with personal desires, ultimately revealing the complex process of negotiations and compromises. (Lotz, 2001, p. 116).

Gill (2007, p. 254) contends that the focus of critique should be on postfeminist media culture. This approach requires a shift away from reliance on a fixed and authentic form of feminism and instead calls for the utilization of postmodern and constructivist perspectives to analyse how gender is portrayed in contemporary media, comparing it to earlier times. According to Gill (2007), twenty-first-century media consistently highlights specific themes and structures when representing gender. These encompass the embodiment of femininity, a shift from objectification to subjectification, an emphasis on self-monitoring, discipline, and control, individualism, the significance of choice, a paradigm of reinvention, the interplay between feminist and anti-feminist ideas, the sexualization of culture, consumerism, and the commodification of differences. These themes coexist with persistent discrimination and inequalities related to ethnicity, class, gender, age, disability, and gender in Western societies (Gill, 2007, p. 255). Undoubtedly, Gill's proposition underscores an ideological perspective. It suggests that postfeminism is not a passive or neutral position but an active and deliberate ideology that shapes how both individuals and society comprehend and engage with matters concerning gender and feminism.

In her more recent work, Gill contends that an often-overlooked postfeminist perspective permeates modern culture, and furthermore, it is progressively functioning within the realm of emotions and individual subjectivity. Consequently, it can be seen as having an affective and psychological dimension as well (Gill, 2017, p. 609). She further argues that within postfeminist culture, there is a growing emphasis on promoting happiness and a positive mindset, while systematically discouraging other emotions like anger and insecurity (p. 610). Barbie movie shows that a combined influence of emotions, culture, and psychology within postfeminist media culture exerts a significant controlling influence on women in today's society.

Gill (2017, p. 611) asserts that feminism is now "popular", "cool" and achieved a "new visibility". It is clearly "having a moment". The self that is shaped by a postfeminist outlook demands continuous self-awareness and introspection. It asks questions like: What type of friend, mother, or lover are you? How effective is your communication? Are you introverted or inclined towards sexual exploration? What is your level of happiness? Do you feel at ease with yourself? (Gill, 2017, p. 618) Media messages aimed at women now focus not only on the individual but also on psychological aspects such as self-esteem, body positivity, and confidence. In the end of her work Gill says that postfeminism, much like neoliberal capitalism in a broader context, possesses a unique 'structure of feeling' (as described by Williams in 2001 [1961]) or 'mood economy' (as articulated by Silva in 2013). She contends that future dialogues should not only explore its cultural expressions but also delve into the emotional and psychological dimensions of postfeminism. This article argues that Barbie movie occupies this territory and, by delving into the emotional and psychological facets through its characters' existential crises, depressions, and even inclinations toward suicide, it examines these dimensions in depth.

Considering the conceptual frameworks discussed earlier, a thematic analysis of the Barbie Movie reveals its evolution into a feminist narrative. It delves into and critiques how the postfeminist culture, of which Barbie was a part, has psychologically disturbed and emotionally overwhelmed women, affecting them both physically and mentally. The narrative identity of Barbie, constructed through dialogue, has undergone another shift, now embracing an overtly "feminist" stance.

3. Method

The methodology employed in this study is thematic analysis, a process that involves identifying and examining recurring themes or central ideas present throughout the film. Its aim is to unveil the deeper meanings, messages, and ideologies conveyed by the movie beyond its surface plot.

This analysis involved identifying recurring elements, ideas, motifs, or symbols related to various aspects such as characters, settings, plot developments, and dialogues. Once identified as potential themes, they were grouped into broader thematic categories. For instance, the film consistently delved into themes of patriarchy, feminism, and existential crises in diverse forms, intersecting with other explored themes.

The examination of character arcs predominantly centred on gender identities, employing a sociological or cultural studies perspective rather than one rooted in literary or cinematic scholarship. The characters undeniably underwent evolution and transformation in response to these themes. This examination of their changes was primarily conducted

through a thematic lens, largely from a sociological perspective, aiming to uncover their links to broader cultural or societal themes. This analysis illuminated how the film engages with and comments on significant societal issues.

The discussion part presents the analysis and interpretation of the film's thematic communication within the context of the previously examined theoretical frameworks.

4. Discussion: The Main Themes of Barbie (2023)

Feminism Achieved?

Critics have long scrutinized Barbie's pink-dominated universe for potentially fueling a feminist backlash. Paradoxically, within the confines of Barbieland in the movie, the various Barbie dolls firmly believe that they have diligently strived to attain feminism, viewing the world they've constructed as a realized feminist utopia.

Narrator voice explains this in the very beginning of the movie:

“Barbie changed everything. Then, she changed it all again. All of these women are Barbie, and Barbie is all of these women. She might have started out as just a lady in a bathing suit, but she became so much more. She has her own money, her own house, her own car, her own career. Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything. And this has been reflected back onto the little girls of today in the Real World. Girls can grow into women, who can achieve everything and anything they set their mind to.” (00:03:40)

This is represented as aligning with the original vision of Ruth Handler, the creator of Barbie, and resonates with academic arguments in favour of Barbie and Barbie play. Nevertheless, a critical self-examination of their own standpoint commences right at the beginning, accompanied by a sarcastic tone from the Narrator. She remarks:

“Thanks to Barbie all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved. At least that's what the Barbies think. After all, they're living in Barbie Land. Who am I to burst their bubble?” (00:03:49)

Then we are introduced to the Barbieland where everyday is a “great day”. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that this world is a matriarchy functioning much like the patriarchal systems it ostensibly challenges. The Kens, who hold no sway or influence, are conspicuously absent from all aspects of this society. Consequently, it becomes apparent that what is perceived as feminism in this context is a misunderstanding, as the systemic structure remains fundamentally unaltered. Hierarchies, normative expectations, disciplinary measures, controlled environments, outcasts, and high standards persist, rendering this supposed feminist paradise fundamentally identical to the preexisting system.

As Barbie departs for the Real World, numerous Barbies convey their sentiments with an air of unwavering confidence:

“-And you'll get to see all the good work we've done to fix the world.

-You'll be such a hero to them.

-All those grateful, powerful women who owe their wonderful lives to Barbie.

-I'll bet every woman will say thank you and give you a really big hug.” 00:25:24,959

So, the stereotypical Barbie sets off on her journey with a self-assured demeanour, only to discover in the real world that her presence has not led to any real accomplishments but has instead heightened the burden on women, thanks to her unrealistic ideals and unattainable standards, ultimately delivering false promises of transformation. Women find themselves inundated by these unattainable expectations.

Therefore, the film's narrative is crafted with a postfeminist standpoint, delving into the complexities of feminism, beauty standards, a critical examination of neoliberal consumerist culture, and the role of women within a seemingly abundant yet complex world of opportunities. It not only acknowledges these aspects but also subjects them to critical examination and critique. By subverting the narrative upside down where Kens are in the position of women in the real patriarchal system, the narrative makes the real picture clear. The oppression of women becomes evident only when the roles are reversed.

5. Agency, Empowerment and Choice

The concepts of agency, empowerment, and choice have been subjects of discussion within the historical context of feminism. These concepts have evolved into contested themes within postfeminist media representations, often intertwined with neo-liberal ideology, a topic extensively debated in media and cultural studies (Gill and Donaghue, 2013). Repeatedly throughout the movie, these themes emerge, prompting viewers to contemplate subjects extensively discussed by feminists, such as the extent of agency women possess in their lives, questioning whether their choices are genuinely their own or predetermined. The film suggests a disconcerting notion: are women akin to dolls or puppets, seemingly making choices but confined to a limited range of pre-established roles and subjectivities? How much empowerment have they truly experienced?

The movie openly reflects these ideas through the character of Weird Barbie. Barbieland is depicted as a Matrix by

Weird Barbie, awakening Barbie to the realization that her actions have not been driven by free will, but rather, she has been a pawn in a larger cultural game. When Weird Barbie tells her she must "find the girl who's playing with her," Barbie is taken aback and asks, "Playing with me?" To this, Weird Barbie responds, "We're all being played with, babe." (00:21:36) This statement alludes to the idea that our actions are influenced and constrained by the culture we exist in, akin to a controlling Matrix.

The concept of entanglement becomes evident when Weird Barbie remarks, "the two of you are becoming inextricably intertwined." (00:22:09) She conveys that Barbie's image and all similar representations of "perfect" women within postfeminist media culture and the lives of real women have become intertwined and entangled leading to a troubling situation. As women strive to emulate Barbie and the standards she represents, they increasingly find themselves overwhelmed.

Like Neo's choice of pills in the movie "The Matrix" (1999), Barbie is presented with two types of shoes: high-heeled ones and comfortable branded slippers. Weird Barbie presents her with a choice: "You can go back to your regular life and forget any of this ever happened, or you can know the truth about the universe." (00:22:25) Barbie swiftly opts for the high heels, choosing to return to her "normal" life in Barbieland. However, Weird Barbie interjects, "No! You're doing this one! I just gave you a choice so you could feel some sense of control." Barbie inquires if there's no other option, to which Weird Barbie responds, "No! You have to fix the rip yourself. Don't blame me, blame Mattel. They make the rules." (00:23:07)

This exchange underscores the illusion of choice in the Real World, offering a critique of postfeminist media culture where individuals believe they possess choices and free will to choose from but are often presented with predetermined options, reflecting the influence of actors within the neoliberal economy, symbolized by Mattel in the movie. This reference to Mattel in the movie, further highlights the idea that these seemingly free choices are influenced or limited by larger economic and societal forces. The choice between high heels and a branded pair of slippers serves as a reminder of how the representation of women in postfeminist media -including Barbie- often prioritizes individual success and empowerment through consumerism or personal choices. This emphasis tends to overlook systemic issues and broader societal structures that perpetuate gender inequalities.

6. Existential Crisis and its Embodiments

"You guys ever think about dying?" (00:13:36)

The movie prominently explores the theme of "existential crisis," a theme that affects each of its main characters. These crises are intricately tied to the dialogically constructed narrative identity of Barbie (Yakali Camoglu, 2020). When women in the real world experience an existential crisis, it has a direct impact on Barbie in the movie. As she is merely an embodiment, the crisis and its associated symptoms manifest on her body and within the material world of her perfect existence, causing her idealized world to fracture.

Examining Gill's arguments about why postfeminism remains a relevant category, we observe that pressures related to appearance persist, accompanied by heightened scrutiny of women's bodies. Women continue to engage in constant self-monitoring and self-optimization, adhering to what Gill terms the "confidence cult." Postfeminist culture places increasing emphasis on 'positive psychology' and 'positive mental attitude.' Gill also points out that women are made to feel compelled to maintain a positive outlook, despite profound everyday cultural inequalities. Emotions need to be regulated, and feelings of vulnerability and anger are viewed as undesirable (Gill, 2017, pp. 616-619) These aspects, which tend to overwhelm ordinary women, are critiqued in the movie.

Barbie's development of flat feet and cellulite symbolizes her connection to real-life issues that women face, issues partly influenced by her and other representations of the perfect body prevalent in culture. The depiction of flat feet, along with the scene where Barbies and Kens react with nausea upon seeing her flat feet, serves as a metaphor for how completely natural phenomena, often stigmatized by cultural discourses on bodies, are deemed disgusting. This extends to societal attitudes toward aspects such as body hair or menstruation, where the culture's perception starkly contrasts with the natural reality. In this context, Barbie gains insight into the constant sense of awkwardness that real women often experience.

However, Barbie goes through her real crisis when she encounters Sasha and her friends. They immediately call her a "bimbo" and when she defends herself by saying that "Barbie is a doctor and a lawyer and a senator and a Nobel Prize winner." 00:39:53 and expects a hug, the girls reveal the fact that they have not played with a Barbie since they were five and even then "it was horrible" 00:40:20. There is almost rage and a hint of revenge in Sasha's voice. She says:

You've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented. You represent everything wrong with our culture. Sexualized capitalism, unrealistic physical ideals... (00:40:33)

In this way, Sasha encapsulates all the feminist criticisms that Mattel has encountered through Barbie. Barbie tries to defend herself saying that they are describing something stereotypical, and that Barbie is so much more than that.

(00:40:41) But Sasha tells her to look at herself and goes on: "You set the feminist movement back 50 years. You destroy girls' innate sense of worth and you are killing the planet with your glorification of rampant consumerism." 00:41:01 Barbie becomes sad and tells Sasha that she is supposed to help the girls to be "happy and powerful" to which Sasha answers: "Oh, I am powerful" and calls her fascist! (00:41:09)

What Sasha implies to Barbie takes on a more intricate form in Gloria's speech, which stands out as one of the most enigmatic monologues in cinematic history. Gloria, who is Sasha's mother, holds a position at Mattel closely linked with the board of directors and the CEO. Despite being a mother to a teenager, Gloria grapples with depression and an overwhelming sense of isolation, feeling as though she's lost control of her life. Notably, she's the creator of dolls such as "Irrepressible Thoughts of Death Barbie," "Full Body Cellulite Barbie," and "Crippling Shame Barbie" (00:35:43). These dolls serve as mirrors reflecting how representations in postfeminist media culture profoundly affect ordinary women in disturbingly diverse ways.

As Barbie grapples with her existential crises upon her return to Barbieland and the distressing revelation of Kens assuming power, she sinks into a state of depression. It's during this poignant moment that Gloria intervenes, coming to the aid of the Barbies, her words tinged with anguish as she offers her support:

You are so beautiful and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like we have to always be extraordinary. But somehow, we're always doing it wrong. You have to be thin but not too thin, and you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin. You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss but you can't be mean. You have to lead, but you can't squash other people's ideas. You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time. You have to be a career woman but also always be looking out for other people. You have to answer for men's bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you're accused of complaining. You're supposed to stay pretty for men but not so pretty that you tempt them too much or that you threaten other women because you're supposed to be a part of the sisterhood but always stand out. And always be grateful. But never forget that the system is rigged, so find a way to acknowledge that but also always be grateful. You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line. It's too hard, it's too contradictory, and nobody gives you a medal or says thank you. And it turns out, in fact, that not only are you doing everything wrong but also everything is your fault. I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing a woman... then I don't even know. (01:13:57)

Gloria's speech delves into the challenges encountered by women in a postfeminist era, where they are encouraged to pursue careers and leadership roles - as advocated by feminists - while simultaneously grappling with unrealistic standards of femininity. As Lotz (2001) proposes, as a postfeminist narrative, it illustrates the trials faced by contemporary women influenced by feminism and their aspirations. This concept embodies inherent contradictions, spotlighting the paradox where feminism, while striving to empower women, also imposes its own burdens, leaving many women grappling with happiness in this intricate societal terrain.

7. In Search for a New Identity

The film transforms into a feminist narrative by acknowledging the immense stress and mental strain placed on women, notably by uttering the phrase "you can be anything." In a society where makeover ideals prevail, and there is constant scrutiny of women's bodies, identities, femininity, motherhood, and the demands of being a superwoman, the 2023 Barbie movie highlights the psychological burden imposed by Barbie and similar cultural elements on women. This weight is alleviated by reintroducing an everyday, ordinary Barbie who opts for comfort, symbolized by her choice of slippers with a brand name implying comfort. This choice once again connects Barbie to consumer culture. In this narrative, however, Barbie embraces being a "regular" woman with flat feet.

Before going into the Real World where she aspires to be an ordinary woman, Barbie has a heart-to-heart conversation with Ruth, her creator.

Barbie says: "I don't think I have a conclusion." Ruth answers: "That was always the intention. I created you so you wouldn't have an ending." However, Barbie says that she doesn't feel like "Barbie" anymore. This highlights Barbie's transformative nature as she has departed from her original essence in terms of her identity. As posited by Toffoletti (2007), Barbie embodies a dynamic shift in identity, representing a transformative plasticity that encapsulates inherent uncertainty. Building upon my previous study (Yakali, 2020), wherein I proposed Barbie's dialogically constructed fluid narrative identity, it's evident she stands poised for yet another transformation, influenced by Greta Gerwig's response to feminist critique. Greta Gerwig and her co-author Noah Baumbach convey this impending evolution through Ruth's words as she says: "You understand that humans have only one ending. Ideas live forever, humans not so much. Being human can be uncomfortable. Humans invent constructs like patriarchy and Barbie to cope with this discomfort." This

brings Barbie to communicate her latest message to the women who have grown up playing with her and to the young girls who will be shaping their world alongside her:

"I want to be a part of those who create meaning, not the one created. I want to imagine, not be the idea."

According to Gerwig, true empowerment for women lies beyond being represented, played with, or embodying the "ideal" dictated by specific ideologies, trends, or the fashion industry. When confined to predefined roles, women are constrained. Instead, Gerwig advocates for women to forge their own meanings and identities, recognizing the entrapment within societal norms. The narrative stands independently, encompassing all criticisms and the diverse reinterpretations of Barbie. This realization prompts the need for young individuals to awaken and craft their unique "everyday Barbie," liberated from overwhelming expectations. It urges them to redefine their identities, seeking empowerment without the weight of striving for an unattainable "perfection."

The character Ruth in the movie underscores that Barbie's identity was never rigid or immutable; as a narrative, she remained receptive to the impact of evolving times, cultures, and individuals. Her identity has consistently been fluid and constructed through dialogue, as previously asserted (Yakali Camoglu, 2020). Barbie's extensive history embodies diverse subjectivities entrenched in our cultural framework, illustrating how these representations mold our perceptions and choices. Barbie's portrayal encompassed a diverse array of women, providing children with a broad spectrum of subjectivities within this Matrix. The movie introduces yet another narrative identity, an additional subjectivity—an everyday Barbie infused with feminist ideals, poised to empower women to craft their own meanings.

8. Conclusion

In the Real World, power lies in "creating meanings", producing subjectivities and their representations. Greta Gerwig makes Barbie aspire to create meaning and be a "subject" rather than an imagined object or an objectified subjectivity. By openly critiquing patriarchy and the prevailing world order marked by inequality, Barbie 2023 movie emerges as a feminist narrative. It further deconstructs the postfeminist media culture in which Barbie has played a role, examining it from multiple perspectives, particularly emphasizing the emotional and psychological burdens it imposes on individuals.

Hence, despite recently embodying an icon of postfemininity, Barbie's dialogically constructed narrative identity has undergone another transformation. Responding to the criticisms directed at her, within Greta Gerwig's creative vision, she now evolves into a "feminist" symbol, shedding the emphasized femininity that has been subject to critique. Instead, she transforms into an "ordinary" woman, empowered to construct her own meanings, liberating herself from the weight of guilt and the mental burdens imposed by this postfeminist, neoliberal, consumerist culture.

Indeed, further research is essential to gauge the reception of Barbie's recent transformations across diverse segments of society, considering various gender identities' perspectives. It's crucial to ascertain whether this evolving feminist portrayal of Barbie has fostered opportunities for redefining female identities. This investigation can illuminate the impact and resonance of Barbie's new imaginings in shaping perceptions and empowering varied gender identities.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable

Authors contributions

Dikmen Yakali is the sole author of this article.

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Not applicable

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Banet-Weiser, S. (18-20 June 2015). Whom are we empowering? Popular feminism and the work of empowerment. *Console-ing passions*. Dublin.
- Brill, A. (1995). 'Barbie, My Liberator'. In F. Howe, *Re-visioning Feminism Around the World*. New York: Feminist Press.
- Genz, S. (2009.). *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*. New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230234413>
- Genz, S., & Brabon, B. A. (2009). *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gerwig, G., & Baumbach, N. (Writers), & Gerwig, G. (Director). (2023). *Barbie* [Motion Picture].
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), pp. 147-166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>
- Gill, R. (2017). The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 595-771. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417733003>
- Gill, R., & Donaghue, N. (2013). As if Postfeminism Had Come True: The Turn to Agency in Cultural Studies of 'Sexualisation'. In S. Madhok , A. Phillips , & K. Wilson, *Gender, Agency, and Coercion. Thinking Gender in Transnational Times* (pp. 240-258). London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137295613_14
- Hollows, J. (2009). *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Lotz, A. (2001). Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attitudes. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1(1), 105-121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770120042891>
- Rakow , L. F., & Rakow, C. S. (1999). Educating Barbie. In S. R. Mazzarella, & N. O. Pecora, *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity* (pp. 11-20). New Yor: Peter Lang.
- Rand, E. (1995). *Barbie's Queer Accessories*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822399247>
- Reid-Walsh, J., & Mitchell, C. (2000). Just a Doll?": "Liberating" Accounts of Barbie-Play. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 22(2), 175-190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1071441000220205>
- Rogers, M. F. (1999). *Barbie Culture*. London: Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446218228>
- Silva, J. (2013). *Coming Up Short*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199931460.001.0001>
- Toffoletti, K. (2007). *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755696284>
- Wachowski, L., Wachowski, L. (Writers), Wachowski, L., & Wachowski, L. (Directors). (1999). *The Matrix* [Motion Picture].
- Williams, R. (2001 [1961]). *The Long Revolution*. Peterborough, CA: Broadview Press.
- Yakali Camoglu, D. (2011). Barbie ve Uc Silahsorler'i Okumak: Ataerkil Soylem, Postfeminizm ve Cocuklar. *Iletisim Calismalari Dergisi, Medya-Siddet-Cocuk Ozel Sayisi*, pp. 50-71.
- Yakali Camoglu, D. (2018). Characters from a Different Story: Media, Narratives of Love and Construction of Gender Identities in Children's Worlds. In *Fluid Gender, Fluid Love* (pp. 77-92). London: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004380233_006
- Yakali Camoglu, D. ([2011] 2020). Barbie: Is She a Postfeminine Icon Now. In A. Cereda, & J. Ross, *Masculinity/Femininity: Re-framing a Fragmented Debate* (pp. 97-108). London: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848880948_012