
RESEARCH ARTICLE

She's Everything, He's just Ken: A Comprehensive Analysis of *Barbie* (2023)

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of *Barbie* (2023), the fantasy comedy film, from different viewpoints utilizing thematic analysis brushing upon several aspects like the narrative and theme, aesthetics of the film, representation of the female and male characters, body image and beauty standards, gender stereotypes in Barbie's opening scene, and the reception of the film in Arab countries. The findings of the article reveal that this film effectively challenges traditional gender stereotypes and promotes female empowerment through its themes. Additionally, as an international film, it reflects diverse cultural receptions and impacts as it not only shapes but also clashes with local cultures and raises debates about cultural differences and representations.

KEYWORDS

Barbie film, cinema, female empowerment, cultural reception, gender, representations, stereotypes

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1. Introduction

Barbie (2023), a fantasy comedy directed by Greta Gerwig, explores gender roles through the fantastical world of Barbieland. Margot Robbie portrays Barbie, who resides in this matriarchal society alongside Ken (played by Ryan Gosling). Women in Barbieland dominate professional fields like law, medicine, and engineering. Ken, on the other hand, fixates on gaining Barbie's affection, but her independence and preference for female companionship leave him unfulfilled.

A health crisis compels Barbie to visit the real world, the opposite patriarchal society. While Ken thrives in this new environment, Barbie grapples with an identity crisis as her idealized image clashes with reality. Upon returning to Barbieland, Ken, encouraged by his experience, rallies the other Kens to overthrow the matriarchy, temporarily subjugating the Barbies. However, the Barbies regain control by manipulating the Kens to fight against themselves. Barbies at last promises the Kens better treatment. Despite this victory, Barbie remains unsure of herself and her purpose. Seeking liberation from societal expectations, she ventures back to the real world, embracing a human identity free of burdens.

Barbie (2023) presents two contrasting social systems. Barbieland, a world dominated by women, thrives under a matriarchy with a distinct pink aesthetic. Females hold positions of power, while males occupy subordinate roles. The real world, in stark contrast, functions under a patriarchal structure. This film invites an analysis from different perspectives, which this article undertakes through a thematic lens. The analysis explores several key areas: the narrative and theme, aesthetics of the film, representation of the female and male characters, body image and beauty standards, gender stereotypes in Barbie's opening scene, and the reception of the film in Arab countries.

2. Literature Review

2.1 History of Barbie Films

Throughout history, there have been a lot of Barbie films that were subjects of debate and academic analysis. Thanks to the Barbie franchise which started as a doll back in 1959 (K, 2024, p. 1270), the business became widely recognized and had more relevance and consumer trust and as such, lots of films were produced. The Barbie films addressed children, especially girls and women and addressed different themes and topics because as a doll, "Barbie's versatility is a key characteristic she can play a variety of parts and identities from an astronaut to a nurse, a princess to a businesswoman." (K, 2024, p.1270)

This versatility in characters and identities conveys positive messages of female empowerment, independence and autonomy; thus, Barbie becomes more than just a toy. It becomes a role model (K, 2024, p. 1270) for youngsters to follow in style, clothing and also character. Barbie's popularity as a toy helped in the transition to the film making world. Barbie's debut in the digital realm started with *Barbie in the Nutcracker* (Hurley, 2001) as the first animated feature film. Barbie's animated films can be divided into five eras. The early era which started from 2001 to 2009 was inspired by classic fairy tales and literature, and Barbie often cast as a princess, fairy or magical heroine represented with traditional beauty and femininity. Films of this era include the following: *Barbie in the Nutcracker* (Hurley, 2001), *Barbie as Rapunzel* (Hurley, 2002), *Barbie of Swan Lake* (Hurley, 2003), *Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper* (Lau, 2004), *Barbie: Fairytopia* (Martishius, 2005), *Barbie and the Magic of Peegasus* (Richardson, 2005), *Barbie: Mermaidia (Fairytopia sequel)* (Lau, 2006), *Barbie in the 12 Dancing Princesses* (Richardson, 2006), *Barbie Fairytopia: Magic of the Rainbow* (Lau, 2007), *Barbie as the Island Princess* (Richardson, 2007), *Barbie Mariposa and Her Butterfly Fairy Friends* (Helten, 2008), *Barbie & the Diamond Castle* (Nichele, 2008), *Barbie in A Christmas Carol* (Helten, 2008), *Barbie Presents: Thumbelina* (Helten, 2009), and *Barbie and the Three Musketeers* (Lau, 2008).

The second era, from 2010 to 2014 blended fantasy with modernity as magical elements persisted but the settings featured contemporary locations and futuristic scenes. In this era, Barbie was represented as independent, intellectual and a leader of change. Films of this era include: *Barbie in a Mermaid Tale* (Wood, 2010), *Barbie: Princess Charm School* (Norton, 2011), *Barbie: A Fashion Fairytale* (Lau, 2010), *Barbie: A Fairy Secret* (Lau, 2011), *Barbie: Princess Charm School* (Norton, 2011), *Barbie: A Perfect Christmas* (Baldo, 2011), *Barbie in a Mermaid Tale 2* (Lau, 2011), *Barbie: The Princess and the Popstar* (Norton, 2012), *Barbie in the Pink Shoes* (Hurley, 2013), *Barbie: Mariposa and the Fairy Princess* (Lau, 2013), *Barbie and Her Sisters in a Pony Tale* (Kelly, 2013), *Barbie: The Pearl Princess* (Norton, 2014), and *Barbie and the Secret Door* (Lloyd, 2014). The third era in Barbie film franchise was from 2015 to 2020 and it shifted from the magical world to the real world. Barbie played different roles such as a modern, professional woman in a variety of careers and adventures. The representation of Barbie focused on showcasing diversity and heterogeneity in its identity. Examples of films from this era include *Barbie: Rock 'n Royals* (Goguen, 2015), *Barbie: Spy Squad* (Goguen, 2016), *Barbie: Dolphin Magic* (Helten, 2017), and *Barbie: Princess Adventure* (Helten, 2020).

The fourth era is from 2020 to 2022; this era marked the digitalization and inclusion with the use of online platforms like YouTube and vlogs. Films from this era featured broader range of body types, ethnicities and narratives that celebrate diversity. The themes discussed in this era focused on individuality, self-expression and identity and put great emphasis on teamwork and family relationships. Examples of films from this era include: *Barbie: Big City, Big Dreams* (Pleydell-Pearce, 2021); *Barbie Mermaid Power* (Myrick, 2022); *Barbie & Chelsea: The Lost Birthday* (Mackay, 2021). The last era marked the move from animated films to real-life cinematic experience with Greta Gerwig film *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023). This transition to live-action after over 40 animated films is an attempt from the producers to appeal for both younger and older audiences, bringing that nostalgic sense and bridging generational gaps.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach, using thematic analysis to explore the *Barbie (2023)* film. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail." (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) That's why, this approach is appropriate for examining the *Barbie (2023)* film from different themes.

3.1 Research Design

The research design is qualitative and interpretive: thus, the focus is on the analysis of *Barbie (2023)* as a cultural text that is open for interpretation and analysis. This design is well-suited for an in-depth exploration of the film's themes and their implications for gender and society.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data for this study is the *Barbie (2023)* film itself. So, the narrative of the film was decorticated and deciphered and scenes were selected for analysis based on relevance to the following pre-identified themes:

- **Narrative and theme:** analyzing the narrative of the film and understanding the reason behind choosing a certain narrative and how it is related to the themes of female empowerment, self-discovery and gender equality.
- **Aesthetics:** inspecting the visual elements in the film such as color palettes, costumes and setting designs.
- **Characters' representation:** studying characters and how they are represented in the film through scenes, dialogues and interactions illustrating gender dynamics.
- **Body image and beauty standards:** Delineating the beauty standards that the different Barbies in the film depict and show how they can affect viewers' self-image.
- **Opening scene:** interpreting the opening scene and how it challenges gender stereotypes and puts the viewers in a feminist context.

Moreover, secondary data include audience reactions and reviews, specifically from Arab countries; the data were sourced from social media and news articles to contextualize the film's reception in the Arab world.

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework:

1. **Familiarization with the Data:** The *Barbie* (2023) film was viewed multiple times to identify patterns and recurring elements relevant to the study's objectives.
2. **Generating Initial Codes:** Scenes and dialogues were coded for significant elements, such as visual symbolism, narrative devices, and representation of gender.
3. **Searching for Themes:** related codes were grouped into broader themes.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Themes were refined by revisiting the data to ensure coherence and idiosyncrasy.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** each theme was defined, named and analyzed.
6. **Producing the Report:** Findings were integrated into the analysis sections of this study, supported by examples from the film and audience reactions.

3.4 Rationale for Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and ability to uncover underlying meanings within complex texts. This method aligns with the study's interdisciplinary approach, bridging media studies, gender studies, and cultural analysis.

3.5 Limitations

While thematic analysis provides deep insights, it is inherently interpretive and subjective. Efforts were made to mitigate bias by cross-checking themes against multiple data sources, including secondary literature and audience feedback.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Narrative and Themes

Challenging stereotypes and sparking self-discovery, *Barbie* (2023) explores themes of female empowerment, agency, self-belief and determination. The narrative of the film is a linear structure because the film follows a straightforward chronological order. The film's exposition takes place in Barbieland, a perfect utopian matriarchal society where Barbies and Kens live. Barbies hold prominent roles in law, medicine, politics, and engineering while the Kens have no specific jobs. They just spend their days at the beach seeking the attention of Barbies especially stereotypical Barbie. However, Barbie's seemingly perfect world is disrupted by an existential crisis triggered by a seemingly out-of-place question about death at a festive gathering. Barbie interrupts the wild party and wonders aloud and says "Do you guys ever think about dying?" (Gerwig, 2023, 0:13:37). This moment, while initially disguised as a joke as Barbie disingenuously says "I'm just dying to dance" (Gerwig, 2023, 0:13: 52) sets her on a journey of self-discovery and a deeper questioning of societal norms.

The rising action in the film is when Barbie's seemingly perfect world crumbles as she encounters a series of bizarre problems and physical flaws. Disrupted and desperate, she follows the confusing instructions of another Barbie, venturing into the real world to find a cure. Ken, stowed away in her car, joins her on this unexpected adventure. Reality, however, is a far cry from Barbie's expectations. While Ken gleans inspiration from the real world's patriarchal structure, Barbie grapples with disappointment. Upon returning to Barbieland, she discovers a horrifying transformation - Ken has imposed a patriarchal system, leaving the Barbies subdued and brainwashed. The narrative reaches the crisis when she realizes the extent of Ken's control and the dire situation of her friends.

Barbie's journey reaches the climax when discouragement regarding the situation in Barbieland surrounds her. However, her friends, Gloria and Sasha, along with other Barbies, rally to her side. Together, they devise a plan to counter Ken's manipulation. The falling action is when the fightback unfolds as the Barbies unite, rescuing their fellow Barbies and delivering a powerful message of female empowerment, aiming to restore their former equality. The narrative culminates in a resolution where Barbie and Ken find common ground, establishing a society built on mutual respect and equality.

Barbie (2023) employs a linear narrative structure. The exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution all focus on Barbie's journey. This focus is further emphasized by the narrator who remains external to the story and relays the events from Barbie's perspective. This storytelling technique is known as focalization, a term coined by literary theorist Gerard Genette in 1980. According to Genette, focalization refers to the restriction imposed on the information provided by a narrator about his characters (Edmiston, 1989, p. 729). According to Genette there are three types of focalizations:

The first term [zero focalization] corresponds to what English-language criticism calls narrative with omniscient narrator and Pouillon 'vision from behind,' and which Todorov symbolizes by the formula Narrator > Character (where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly, says more than any of the characters knows). In the second term [internal focalization], Narrator = Character (the narrator says only what a given character knows); this is narrative with 'point of view' after Lubbock, or with 'restricted field' after Blin; Pouillon calls it 'vision with.' In the third term [external focalization], Narrator < Character (the narrator says less than the character knows); this is the 'objective' or 'behaviorist' narrative, what Pouillon calls 'vision from without' (Genette, 1980, p. 188-189).

Greta Gerwig utilizes a female narrator throughout the film. This narrator, existing outside the story itself, recounts events as they unfold on screen. The narrator in *Barbie (2023)* knows more than the character as such the type of focalization is zero focalization. Zero focalization implies that there is a separation between the narrator and the character. So, what is told and what is perceived is totally controlled by the female voice over and the zero focalization. This nuanced storytelling and control gives the female characters in the film agency and empowers them. Beyond simple narration, the narrator occasionally offers commentary that reinforces themes of equality and feminism. For instance: "Thanks to Barbie, all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved!" (Gerwig, 2023, 0:03:35). "She has her own money, her own house, her own career. Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything" (Gerwig, 2023, 0:03:10). "I have no difficulty holding both logic and feeling at the same time and it does not diminish my powers, it expands it" (Gerwig, 2023, 0:07:23). "Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him." (Gerwig, 2023, 0:08:00).

The film is full of inspiring dialogues and messages that encourage self-belief, determination and the idea that females can achieve anything that they set their minds to. Notwithstanding, empowerment in the film comes also from within the narrative as there is a sense of communality and support between the characters especially when they cheer and uplift each other. Those qualities and behaviors displayed by Barbie and her friends serve as a positive role model for young viewers.

4.2 Aesthetics

Relatively important, the film maker intends on representing and displaying Barbieland using the color pink. The use of colors in films enhances storytelling, conveys emotions and creates memorable visual experiences. (Jin, 2024, p. 163). In *Barbie (2023)* the exaggerated colors that appear consistently throughout the film are all shades of pink. According to Koller pink "is, unsurprisingly, connected with femininity and its stereotypical features, such as softness and delicacy, with childhood and innocence as well as with vanity and artificiality" (Koller, 2008). As a matter of fact, although there are males and females in Barbieland, the predominant color worn by males and females is pink. This foregrounds females and puts them in a power position with regard to males even at the aesthetic side by the film maker. Colors have an impact on people. According to a study conducted by Schauss in 1979 on inmates in prison cells, when inmates are placed in cells that were painted in bright pink color, they become less aggressive (Schauss, 1979, p. 219). The use of the color pink domesticates the males in Barbieland, puts the viewers in the Barbie mood and also prepares them for a space where the power dynamics of the real world are playfully challenged. A space where femininity is ruling over, and masculinity is just an ornament for the female gaze. Henri Lefebvre in his book *the production of space* argues that 'in addition to being a means of production [space] it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Space is a social product and power operates through the production and influences how individuals experience and navigate the world. Space is a vile terrain, shaped by political, economic and social forces.

Space is a social product and power operates through its production and influences how individuals experience and navigate the world. Space is a vile terrain, shaped by political, economic and social forces. It is stated that "it takes movement from one space to another for this private self to unfold is a testament to the political nature of the mapping of space, the ways in which the division of space is saturated with power differentials." (Ben Amara, 2024, p. 274) As such, in *Barbie (2023)* the personal identity of the characters develops and reveals itself through movement across Barbieland and the real world; so, space isn't just a physical area. It is rather political and reinforces power dynamics. In this context, spaces of Barbieland and the real world are organized, divided and given meaning by society and this division can be based on various factors like gender, class, race and authority. Byrnes (2024) also talks about the division of the two worlds as she states that '*Barbie's* (Greta Gerwig 2023) dual worlds are divided along lines of gender as well as measure.' In addition to gender, Byrnes (2024) mentioned measure and she further explains this

new term by emphasizing that Barbieland is characterized by openness and expansiveness, whereas the Real world is associated with depth and complexity. (Byrnes, 2024, p. 1) In Brief, Barbieland prioritizes surface-level appearances, transparency, and collective empowerment, while the Real world emphasizes hidden meanings, hierarchy, and male-dominated interpretation. Ken's identity is largely influenced by the real world because of the power differentials that exist within this space; the power relations embedded in this new space shape Ken's identity and help him redefine who he is and how he expresses himself.

In Barbieland, space is meticulously and aesthetically constructed to amplify female power. Everywhere we look, from the cotton-candy houses with matching interiors, to the playground that has pink water slides, a pink Ferris wheel and a pink "white house", the environment is saturated with pink. Even male characters including the traditionally masculine Ken, puts on pink attire, visually reinforcing the film's message of blurring the line between masculinity and femininity. In short, this pervasive use of pink isn't just about aesthetics; it signifies the dominance of femininity within Barbieland, challenging traditional notions of masculinity without diminishing it altogether. According to Karen Orr Vered and Christèle Maizonniaux:

The Barbie movies offer young girls complex gender narratives that reflect an awareness of, and arguably an engagement with, recent feminist discourse and gender politics, while at the same time avoiding any direct critique of patriarchy or male privilege. The adaptation of classics allows a set of contradictions about gender and femininity to co-exist alongside a post-feminist politics that promotes girl power within a heteronormative performance of femininity. (Vered & Maizonniaux, 2017, p. 3).

While Barbie films often celebrate female empowerment, *Barbie (2023)* goes a step further by implicitly critiquing the idea of male dominance. Michel Foucault, the prominent philosopher, argued that "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). We see this concept play out within Barbieland, a world ruled by women. When Ken, a traditionally masculine character, attempts to adopt a more dominant role after experiencing the real world, his actions are challenged by Barbie and her friends. This internal conflict underscores the limitations of traditional gender roles and paves the way for a more balanced dynamic between Barbie and Ken. Ultimately, the film suggests a future where both men and women can coexist peacefully, not through dominance but through mutual respect and equality.

4.3 Representation of the female and male characters

Barbie (2023) presents a unique opportunity to explore the evolving representation of gender roles in popular culture. It is argued that "culture includes language, ideas, norms, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies, and basically culture is a combination of how people think, act and what they own." (Rajendiran, 2024) Films, like *Barbie (2023)*, function as cultural texts, open to interpretation and analysis as they reflect the ideologies and values of the culture that produces them. This analysis delves into how *Barbie (2023)* represents male and female characters. Representation, as Stuart Hall suggests, is 'the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning'. (Hall, 1997, p. 61). By examining the portrayal of gender in *Barbie (2023)*, we can gain valuable insights into the messages it conveys about gender equality and female empowerment in today's society. Stuart Hall explains that

Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. (Hall, 1997, p. 17).

Representation in film, like language, shapes and reflects meaning. In *Barbie (2023)*, the contrasting portrayals of the two main characters exemplify this concept. Barbie embodies a strong, independent spirit. The film's heroine and protagonist, she undergoes a transformative journey that not only empowers her but uplifts all Barbies. Her experiences in the real world add complexity to her character as she grapples with self-discovery and societal expectations. Meanwhile, Ken's portrayal presents an interesting counterpart to Barbie's, raising questions about the film's subversion of traditional gender roles.

Within Barbieland, women are portrayed as independent and in charge. They hold prominent and prestigious positions – doctors, lawyers, judges, writers, diplomats, physicists, journalists. There is even a president Barbie; construction work isn't off-limits either. Conversely, men are solely represented by Kens, each identified by a number, with their living situation shrouded in mystery. The film focuses on a "stereotypical Ken" with blond hair, blue eyes, and striking good looks, mirroring the stereotypical Barbie. He constantly seeks her attention and becomes jealous of any Ken who receives it. This portrayal emphasizes the film's exploration of

gender roles and societal expectations. By contrasting the empowered Barbies with the one-dimensional Kens, the film invites viewers to question these norms.

The representation of the Kens in *Barbie (2023)* is subordinate, dependent, and ignored. The Kens are purely decorative and their role in the film is to make Barbie's life perfect. As a doll, Ken has had over 40 jobs or rolls, including country western singer, surgeon, hamburger chef, and astronaut. (Pierce-Bohen, 2023). Nevertheless, the film further emphasizes gender disparity by leaving Ken's job ambiguous. "Beach" is the only description offered, implying their primary function is to admire Barbie. Stereotypical Ken, especially, lacks a defined role or purpose outside of her orbit. This fuels his existential crisis and motivates him to join Barbie in the real world. The fist shock experienced by stereotypical Ken upon his visit is when he asks a woman for the time, and she not only stops but is kind. This encounter exposes him to a world where men hold power and receive respect, a stark contrast to his reality. This encounter with the real world makes Ken vulnerable to the idea of patriarchy and masculinity. To quench his thirst, reading becomes Ken's gateway to understanding this new system. He ultimately champions the adoption of patriarchy in Barbieland, leading the Kens to overthrow the matriarchal society. However, this victory comes at a cost. The Kens transform into sexist figures, exhibiting toxic masculinity towards the Barbies.

Allen stands out as a distinct character due to his independence and detachment from traditional gender roles. While Barbie and Ken grapple with their identities, seeking autonomy and self-determination, Allen exhibits a fixed and unwavering sense of self. He remains unaffected by the power struggles, ideologies, and clashing perspectives within Barbieland. Despite this distinct character, Allen ultimately collaborates with Barbie to restore the previous societal structure. This choice stems from his disapproval of the Kens' sexist and hyper-masculine behavior towards the Barbies. In essence, Allen serves as the resolution to the story's conflict through his decisive action.

The double representation of the male and female characters in *Barbie (2023)* conveys the existence of two contrasting portrayals, and two complex themes of matriarchy and patriarchy. On the one hand, Barbieland is characterized by a high representation of women in powerful positions. They are independent, strong, and capable, and their society functions without relying solely on men. The film's portrayal of Barbies lacking genitals reinforces their asexual and unemotional figures and breaks the stereotypical connection between sexual desires and emotional weakness. Men in Barbieland are devalued, and Ken's visit to the real world is seen as a chance to find balance and restore value to Kens. However, the real world presents an extreme opposite. Men hold most positions of power, while women, though more visible in public spaces, often face subordination and societal expectations that reinforce male dominance.

4.4 Body Image and Beauty Standards

For many children, Barbie dolls were a staple of playtime. Hours were spent styling their hair and arranging their clothes. These dolls presented a very specific ideal: a slim, tall figure with fair skin, blonde hair, and a perfect face. Heavily advertised on children's television channels, this image of Barbie instilled a particular body image in young minds, may potentially influence their self-perception later in life. Kholmogorova et al. support this idea and argue that

When urging parents to purchase a Barbie doll, advertisers stress its 'style, glamour and rare beauty ... The Barbie figure incorporates the image of a successful and beautiful woman, with a stunning figure and great taste, and your daughter will aim for that style in her life (Kholmogorova et al., 2018, p. 88).

The unrealistic body image presented by Barbie dolls can have a significant impact on how children develop their concept of beauty. These dolls promote an idealized standard of thinness with distorted proportions, even for young children. As Shalygina and Kholmogorova (2014) point out, 'The promotion of so-called fashion dolls is an important factor in this trend. It reinforces standards of an unnaturally thin body shape with distorted proportions even at preschool age' (Kholmogorova et al., 2018, p. 88).

In response to criticism, Mattel has introduced dolls with more diverse body shapes, sizes, and ethnicities, while still maintaining the classic Barbie look. Similarly, the film *Barbie (2023)* features characters with a wider range of body types, skin tones, and hair textures. However, the central character remains the stereotypical Barbie with an idealized figure. Despite its PG-13 rating due to suggestive humor and language (West-Rosenthal, 2023), the film's connection to the iconic doll attracts younger viewers. This exposes them to the film's representations and appearances, which encompass facial features, body types, clothing, hairstyles, and other physical characteristics. Representation and appearance are crucial topics in media analysis, especially regarding films. In *Barbie (2023)*, these portrayals raise questions about the diversity of beauty standards presented. Kholmogorova et al argue that

Standards of appearance can be considered one of the important aspects of the social development situation; they are adopted by a child through the mechanism of

internalization and serve as an internal tool for regulating the attitude towards their own appearance and the appearance of other people. When unrealistic, unhealthy standards become this internal tool in the form of a system of perceptions about beauty, they induce a high level of dissatisfaction with the person's own appearance and a highly critical attitude toward others. This, in turn, leads to negative consequences for mental health in the form of depression and anxiety symptoms, eating disorders, problems in relationships with other people and low levels of social support. (Kholmogorova et al., 2018, p. 88).

Playing with dolls or watching films featuring human-like characters shapes our perceptions of beauty, both for ourselves and others. This is due to a process called internalization, where we absorb cultural messages and relate them to ourselves. *Barbie (2023)* is filled with unrealistic and potentially misleading beauty standards. This can negatively influence viewers, especially children, who are in a crucial stage of social development. According to Lev Vygotsky, a key figure in developmental psychology, "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). This means children learn and develop through their social interactions and the cultural context they inhabit. In this context, the unrealistic beauty standards presented in *Barbie (2023)* – similar to those found in the Barbie doll itself – become a form of social and cultural model for appearance. These models can significantly impact how children develop their own perceptions of beauty. What supports Vygotsky's idea is Albert Bandura's social learning theory. He argues that:

Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (Bandura, 1977, p. 22).

Social learning theory, as proposed by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the role of observation and modeling in acquiring new behaviors and skills. Children learn by watching and imitating the behavior of others in their environment. Films like *Barbie (2023)* present a range of appearances and behaviors that young viewers can be exposed to. These appearances and behaviors, which merely are just representations of realities, may be adopted by young viewers as the only standards of beauty. Young viewers, as a result, might not be able to develop critical thinking towards the content they are exposed to, and may adopt this reality as the only absolute existing reality, which might be limited to such a young generation.

4.5 Gender Stereotypes in Barbie's Opening Scene

In *Barbie (2023)*, the story challenges traditional gender stereotypes, Santoniccolo et al. define gender stereotypes as an extremely simplified concept of attitudes and behaviors considered normal and appropriate for men and women in a specific culture [26]. They usually span several different areas of people's characteristics, such as physical appearance, personality traits, behaviors, social roles and occupations. (Santoniccolo et al., 2023, p. 2).

Barbie (2023) cleverly challenges gender stereotypes from its very first scene. We see a group of young girls playing in a seemingly idyllic setting. However, a closer look reveals a scene brimming with stereotypical expectations. The girls, in a prehistoric setting situated in caves surrounded by rocks, silently engage in repetitive caretaking routines, meticulously feeding, combing, and dressing identical, pink baby dolls. Their bored expressions and robotic movements subtly convey a sense of dissatisfaction with these limited playthings. This opening scene effectively depicts the narrow range of activities traditionally associated with girls and toys, setting the stage for Barbie's own journey of self-discovery and empowerment. The narrator comments on this scene:

Since the beginning of time, since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls, but the dolls were always and forever baby dolls. The girls who play with them could only ever play at being mothers which can be fun, at least for a while, anyway. Ask your mother, this continued until... (Gerwig, 2023, 0:01:09).

After the narrator's pause, a gigantic Barbie standing like a monolith big and tall descends from the previously clear sky. The little girls, captivated, approach her, their tiny hands reaching out to touch her legs as if seeking strength. Barbie transforms, no longer just a doll, she becomes a beacon of hope, urging the girls to explore their identities beyond societal gender expectations and limitations. Inspired, the girls begin to smash their dolls, a symbolic act of defiance against traditional gender roles. This newfound awareness opens their eyes to the vast possibilities that lie ahead. As their world transforms, the dingy setting bursts into vibrant color, reflecting the girls' blossoming dreams. The narrator then continues saying:

...Yes Barbie changed everything, then she changed it all again, and Barbie is all of these women. She might have started out as 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. 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 Barbieland. Who am I to burst their bubble? And here is one of those Barbies now, living her best day every day (Gerwig, 2023, 0:02:52).

The narrator emphasizes the impact Barbie has on the girls' lives. Before Barbie, girls were living a prehistoric and traditional life; they occupied stereotypical motherhood roles. While Barbie's proportions are often criticized, she has undeniably influenced girls with messages of independence, equality, and feminism. Barbie embodies aspirations for some girls, showcasing possibilities beyond traditional expectations. However, Barbie brings this image by challenging and misbalancing real world gender stereotypes and leaves the target audience, which is children in this context, with difficulties for analysis or criticism. Children's exposure to such media might be highly influential. They teach children at a very young age gender roles and power dynamics between males and females. Karen Orr Vered & Christèle Maizonniaux state that

These pink post-feminist texts demonstrate for the child audience ways of being female and feminine through the character roles that Barbie plays while the narratives model particular gender and power dynamics. Although active and agentive female characters pursue adventures in the company of female companions, their hyperfeminine bodily appearance, costuming, and character voicing reassures viewers that there is no disruption to the status quo—they are not too masculine for heterosexual romance. At the same time, these independent female characters remain outside of any sexual economy, and evade the criticism of over-sexualized children's culture because the homosocial girl power narratives fix Barbie and her companions in a liminal state that seems to refuse classification' (Vered & Maizonniaux, 2017, p. 2).

Barbie's portrayal in Barbieland is a complex one. On the one hand, it presents powerful female role models in positions traditionally held by men. This can inspire young viewers to dream big and reach for those same positions. Yet, the film simultaneously employs stereotypical elements. The Barbies' hyper-feminine appearance, clothing, makeup, and even voices might comfort viewers with a sense of normalcy. This could be interpreted as a way to reassure the audience that traditional gender roles remain intact, despite the characters' professional achievements. This duality creates a space where the Barbies challenge traditional gender roles while still adhering to some feminine stereotypes, as such this puts viewers in a state of ambivalence and gender role confusion.

4.6 Reception of the Film in Arab Countries

In North Africa and Middle east, only two countries Morocco and Tunisia shared in the premiere of the film; and Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt and Qatar delayed the release until mid-August due to censors and concerns over the film's content. (Brown, 2023). While in other countries like Kuwait, Oman and Algeria, *Barbie (2023)* was banned or removed from theatre after it premiered. In Lebanon, the film was screened after an initial ban (Brown, 2023). The Lebanese minister of Culture claims that the film 'promotes homosexuality and transsexuality... supports rejecting a father's guardianship, undermines and ridicules the role of the mother, and questions the necessity of marriage and having a family.' (Zouiten, 2023). As such, the reasons why the film was banned are that it does not comply with the beliefs and culture of the host countries or the film promotes homosexuality and is unsuitable for children. (Zouiten, 2023).

In Morocco, the reception of the film was totally different; as a Moroccan citizen, when I heard about this new film, I got curious and I decided to buy a ticket and go watch it. To my surprise, in the cinema there were queues of males and females wearing pink and waiting to see the film. Some of the fans were even taking pictures with the posters of Barbie and Ken. This practice reflects a form of fan engagement and immersion in the cinematic experience which blurs the line between the fictional world and their own lives. The ubiquitous marketing of the film urged fans to show allegiance and demonstrate social relatedness by wearing pink clothes. Henrique et al argues that when it comes to fans of media products, they are loyal to what they consume (C13). Fans' loyalty to the products, brands, or subjects they consume can be associated with, for example, a political and ideological inclination, a family tradition, geographic proximity, or the use of clothing (Kelly, 2018). (Henrique et al., 2022, p. 6)

The loyalty of fans to media products reflects a deeper engagement with the media and it can be influenced by personal beliefs, family traditions, geographic factors and also the use of clothing. This substantiates the success of the film In Morocco; likewise,

there was even a social media controversy over the language in which the film was dubbed. A user in social media post wrote 'In Morocco, Darija is the official language, and Arabic and English are also widely spoken. Why are movie theaters making us see English-language films with French dubbing or with French subtitles?' (The Media Line, 2023). Another Moroccan moviegoer who was frustrated by the French dubbing of *Oppenheimer (2023)* captured the audience's dissatisfaction in a viral video. (Donyte, 2023.) The video displayed the message "We don't want French, give us our money back," highlighting their preference for the original English version. Faced with this pressure, the cinema staff ultimately relented and screened the film in English. The fan's victorious response, "Power to the people," reflected the collective triumph of the audience. This incident, which arose during screenings of both *Oppenheimer (2023)* and *Barbie (2023)* goes beyond a mere chaos. It draws the attention to the popularity of the films in Morocco and signifies the French colonial ramifications on Moroccan cinema potentially extending to other fields.

5. Conclusion

Barbie (2023) is one of the Hollywood films that are produced for international audiences to spark debates about power dynamics inherent in cultural exchange. That is to say, thanks to the Barbie franchise, the film gained popularity all around the world. The film is also rampant with unequal power structures that favor the American culture and emphasize its dominance and homogenization. This entails that *Barbie (2023)* might influence other cultures in subtle ways as it promotes a homogenized global culture eradicating local cultures and identities. Moreover, the film raises questions about how cultures are represented and how these portrayals might be biased. This article is a comprehensive analysis of the film from different perspectives, touching upon a plethora of themes to demonstrate how it challenges traditional gender stereotypes and promotes female empowerment. The themes discussed are: the narrative and theme, aesthetics of the film, representation of the female and male characters, body image and beauty standards, gender stereotypes in Barbie's opening scene, and last but not least, the reception of the film in Arab countries.

Concerning narrative and theme, the narration in the film emphasizes feminist messages that inspire self-belief and determination; additionally, aesthetics in *Barbie (2023)* visually foregrounds femininity and challenge real world dynamics where space is produced to mirror the assertion of female dominance. The representations of males and females and the gender stereotypes in the film destabilize the position of women in society and invite viewers to engage in critical discussions about gender identity and societal expectations. The desperate reception of the film in Arab countries indicates the clash of cultures and how host cultures shape how the film is understood. The success of *Barbie (2023)* in Moroccan cinema sparked debates about cultural exchange and representation leading to discussions about the film's dubbing and its potential impact on local audiences. Since the Motion Picture Association rated the film +13 suggesting only teens and adults can watch it, more studies should take part regarding the reception of the film among teenagers and children.

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