

Marketing and the Barbie Movie

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Mattel's Barbie doll has become a staple in the lives of American children, serving as a highly recognizable and familiar symbol throughout the sixty years that Barbie products have circulated in media and toy stores (Roberts, 2020). However, although Barbie dolls have been and continue to be wildly popular (Roberts, 2020), Barbie media, such as the animated Barbie movie series produced by Barbie Entertainment, has also found particular success amongst young girls (Pande, 2017).

However, despite the popularity of these movies, existing literature on these animated movies is surprisingly limited, with many of the Barbie movies released in the past decade being the most overlooked in studies (Jane, 2013), leaving a sizeable gap in research done into the recent marketing strategies for Barbie movies and digital media. This gap in research is especially relevant due to the popularity of this year's *Barbie* movie, directed by Greta Gerwig (Rubin, 2023). This most recent installment of Barbie digital media, a live-action movie starring renowned actress Margot Robbie as Barbie, was marked by an immense marketing effort with a budget of nearly \$150 million (Chance, 2023). Marketing materials ranged from traditional print features to promotional commodities in everyday household items and even certain fast foods (Dockterman, 2023).

Mattel's effort in heavily marketing the *Barbie* movie (Dockterman, 2023) indicates the relevance of bridging the current gap of research into previous promotional strategies for Barbie digital media. As such, this paper will delve into the spread, success, and influence of digital marketing efforts for the 2023 *Barbie* movie. How effective was *Barbie*'s marketing digital content and was it the primary motivator for viewers to watch the movie? If not, what were the other motivators? Did familiarity and previous knowledge of Barbie as a brand play a role?

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty-five participants (37 males and 85 females) were recruited from friends and family for a study. The majority of participants (88%) were aged between 19-29.

Materials and Procedure

An online survey was used to collect data from October 22nd, 2023 until October 24th, 2023. The survey contained 29 questions (see Appendix A) and was divided into 3 sections: marketing exposure, marketing impact, and participant perception. The first section, marketing exposure, assessed participants' exposure to the *Barbie* movie. An example question from this section was "How did you hear about the *Barbie* movie?". The next section examined the marketing impact on participants. An example question from this section was "How would you compare discussions about Barbie movies on social media to discussions with real-world friends and family?". The last section, participant perception, assessed the participants' beliefs and opinions on the *Barbie* movie. An example question is "From your knowledge, what themes and subject matter do you associate the most with the Barbie movie?". The majority of questions were answered via multiple choice and 5-point Likert scales that ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Results

Analysis revealed that 64.0% of participants had watched the *Barbie* movie and 36.0% had not. A series of independent t-tests were conducted to assess marketing exposure and influence among participants (see Table 1). Participants who have not watched *Barbie* had been non-significantly exposed to more promotional and marketing content than participants who have watched *Barbie* ($p = .218$). Participants who had watched the movie reported knowing

significantly more about the movie ($p = .001$) and being non-significantly more influenced to watch *Barbie* by digital marketing content ($p = .593$). Analysis revealed that there was a significant negative correlation between exposure to *Barbie* promotional content and the perceived influence of *Barbie* marketing and social media coverage ($r = -.32, p = .001$).

A one-way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate if how participants initially learned about the *Barbie* movie impacted how much participants knew about the movie. The independent variable, how participants learned of the *Barbie* movie was composed of three methods: word of mouth ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.12$), digital advertisements ($M = 3.35, SD = .99$), and official movie trailer ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.08$). The dependent variable was how much participants knew about the movie. The ANOVA was non-significant, $F(2, 117) = .19, p = .829$.

Two one-sample t-tests (see Table 2) were conducted to assess the participant's familiarity with Barbie as a brand and intellectual property by comparing responses to the midpoint neutral value of 3. Most participants were non-significantly familiar with Barbie as a brand ($p = .431$), and another significant test found the brand's image slightly important in participants' decision to watch the movie ($p = .002$). A chi-square test was conducted to assess whether those who have previously bought Barbie products or those who have not previously bought Barbie products were more likely to watch the *Barbie* movie. Participants who have not previously bought Barbie products were non-statistically more likely to watch *Barbie*, $\chi^2(1) = .24, p = .628$.

Additional Findings of Note

Although not a primary purpose of this research the following may be of interest to understand how *Barbie*'s marketing influences a viewer's overall perspective of Barbie as a brand. Participants were asked whether or not coverage of the *Barbie* movie had changed or

reinforced any prior beliefs or opinions about Barbie, and, if so how. The responses were collected through a text box in which participants could type any phrase, word, or sentence of their choice. 62.4% of participants did not have a response to the question, 14.4% of participants stated “no”, and 1.6% of participants stated “yes”.

Discussion

One limitation of this survey is that many of the survey’s questions centered around digital content and media, which may not be a familiar topic amongst all of the targeted demographics. Having so many questions about a specific form of media can inhibit some participants’ comfort and ability to answer all of the questions, which can, in turn, impact uniform data collection. An additional limitation was in the circulation of the survey. Since the survey was circulated by the researchers amongst friends and family, the findings may be difficult to generalize, since friends may be in a similar age group, leaving other age groups underrepresented. Moving forward, it is important to generalize questions enough for all demographics to be able to answer them and to circulate the survey evenly amongst these demographics.

Tests have indicated that participants, regardless of their exposure to marketing content and the perceived influence of marketing content, were equally likely to watch the *Barbie* movie. A significant test indicated that there was a negative correlation between exposure to *Barbie* marketing and promotional content and perceived influence of marketing content. This may imply that viewers more heavily exposed to marketing content were likely to be less influenced by it. Additionally, participants who had heard about the movie through either word of mouth, digital advertisements, or movie trailers were likely to have equal knowledge about the movie; marketing content did not provide participants with more knowledge about *Barbie*. As results

have shown, *Barbie*'s marketing content was not likely the primary motivator for watching the film, nor did it increase awareness amongst participants.

Participants were not significantly familiar with Barbie as a brand and were equally likely to watch the *Barbie* movie regardless of whether or not they had previously purchased Barbie products. However, in a different and significant test, it was found that participants found the brand image to be slightly important in their decision to watch the movie. The likelihood of watching *Barbie* was not contingent on the consumption of Barbie materials and viewership of marketing content, but more so on Barbie's image as a brand.

It is possible that participants were primarily motivated to watch the movie not by marketing materials, but more so by Barbie's popularity within the public consciousness, as implied by previous significant results. It is likely that viewers were most motivated to watch the film by Barbie's brand reputation and image, which they had been previously aware of without the influence of marketing or promotional materials. This leads to the question: What role does marketing play when advertising digital media produced by such highly beloved and renowned brands? It is possible that these marketing efforts can be geared more towards brand partnerships and collaborations than towards raising awareness about the film.

Further research can be done along this line of study to ascertain whether or not large brands like Barbie's reputation and image exceed their marketing and promotional efforts in motivating viewers to consume their newest digital media. If a brand's reputation and status are enough to motivate viewers, what does this mean for marketing efforts, and what expectations should be placed on their success moving forward?

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Appendix A

Survey: *Tirebiter, Group 1 Barbie Survey*

1. Have you seen the Barbie movie?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. How did you hear about the Barbie movie?
 - a. Word of mouth
 - b. Digital advertisements (social media, news outlets, etc)
 - c. Movie trailer
 - d. Physical advertisements (billboards, posters, etc)
 - e. Promotional items (Barbie branded products)
 - f. Other
3. Have any of your friends or family recommended the Barbie movie to you?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. You have been exposed to marketing or promotional materials prior to watching the movie.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree

5. On which of the following digital platforms have you seen advertisements for the Barbie movie? (please select all that apply)
- a. Twitter
 - b. Facebook
 - c. Instagram
 - d. TikTok
 - e. YouTube
 - f. News outlets
 - g. Snapchat
 - h. Tumblr
 - i. Other
 - j. I have not seen any digital advertisements for the Barbie movie
6. In general terms, how much would you say you know about the Barbie movie?
- a. Nothing at all
 - b. Very little
 - c. A moderate amount
 - d. A fair amount
 - e. A great deal
7. In your experience, which aspects of the Barbie movie are most frequently praised or criticized in your social circle?: Character images and body proportions
- a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Occasionally

- d. Often
 - e. Very Often
8. In your experience, which aspects of the Barbie movie are most frequently praised or criticized in your social circle?: Themes of female empowerment
- a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Occasionally
 - d. Often
 - e. Very Often
9. In your experience, which aspects of the Barbie movie are most frequently praised or criticized in your social circle?: Educational value for children
- a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Occasionally
 - d. Often
 - e. Very Often
10. In your experience, which aspects of the Barbie movie are most frequently praised or criticized in your social circle?: Depiction of characters' professions and societal roles
- a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Occasionally
 - d. Often
 - e. Very Often

11. In what ways did you engage with the Barbie movie on social media before or after watching it?: Liked or shared posts

- a. Not at all
- b. Occasionally
- c. Moderate Participation
- d. Frequent Participation
- e. Active Participation

12. In what ways did you engage with the Barbie movie on social media before or after watching it?: Read reviews or comments

- a. Not at all
- b. Occasionally
- c. Moderate Participation
- d. Frequent Participation
- e. Active Participation

13. In what ways did you engage with the Barbie movie on social media before or after watching it?: Participates in challenges

- a. Not at all
- b. Occasionally
- c. Moderate Participation
- d. Frequent Participation
- e. Active Participation

14. In what ways did you engage with the Barbie movie on social media before or after watching it?: Use hashtags

- a. Not at all
 - b. Occasionally
 - c. Moderate Participation
 - d. Frequent Participation
 - e. Active Participation
15. In what ways did you engage with the Barbie movie on social media before or after watching it?: Others (textbox)
- a. Not at all
 - b. Occasionally
 - c. Moderate Participation
 - d. Frequent Participation
 - e. Active Participation
16. Do you think the marketing and promotional campaign influences your perception of the Barbie movie? How and why? (textbox)
17. Has a group viewing or discussion ever changed your opinion about the Barbie movie?
- a. Yes, more positive
 - b. Yes, more negative
 - c. No change
18. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about media coverage (reviews, online discussions, articles, news) and the Barbie movie?: It influenced my decision to watch or not watch the Barbie movie.
- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree

- c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
19. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about media coverage (reviews, online discussions, articles, news) and the Barbie movie?: It shaped my expectations about the Barbie movie.
- a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
20. Which members of your social circle (e.g., close friends, colleagues, distant relatives, well-known critics) do you believe have the greatest influence on your perceptions of the Barbie movie?: Close friends
- a. Don't change my mind at all
 - b. Influence me a little bit
 - c. Kind of influence me
 - d. Influence me quite a bit
 - e. Totally shape my opinion
21. Which members of your social circle (e.g., close friends, colleagues, distant relatives, well-known critics) do you believe have the greatest influence on your perceptions of the Barbie movie?: Colleagues
- a. Don't change my mind at all

- b. Influence me a little bit
 - c. Kind of influence me
 - d. Influence me quite a bit
 - e. Totally shape my opinion
22. Which members of your social circle (e.g., close friends, colleagues, distant relatives, well-known critics) do you believe have the greatest influence on your perceptions of the Barbie movie?: Distant relatives
- a. Don't change my mind at all
 - b. Influence me a little bit
 - c. Kind of influence me
 - d. Influence me quite a bit
 - e. Totally shape my opinion
23. Which members of your social circle (e.g., close friends, colleagues, distant relatives, well-known critics) do you believe have the greatest influence on your perceptions of the Barbie movie?: Close friends
- a. Don't change my mind at all
 - b. Influence me a little bit
 - c. Kind of influence me
 - d. Influence me quite a bit
 - e. Totally shape my opinion
24. Which members of your social circle (e.g., close friends, colleagues, distant relatives, well-known critics) do you believe have the greatest influence on your perceptions of the Barbie movie?: Well-known critics

- a. Don't change my mind at all
 - b. Influence me a little bit
 - c. Kind of influence me
 - d. Influence me quite a bit
 - e. Totally shape my opinion
25. If you had initial thoughts about the Barbie movie based on social media, were those thoughts:
- a. Mostly Positive
 - b. Mostly Neutral
 - c. Mostly Negative
 - d. Didn't have any preconceived notions
26. After watching the movie (if applicable), how much do your opinions align with the majority of the media coverage (reviews, online discussions, articles, news) you encountered?
- a. Do not align at all
 - b. Rarely align
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Slightly align
 - e. Completely align
27. How would you compare discussions about Barbie movies on social media to discussions with real-world friends and family?
- a. Social media is more positive
 - b. Social media is more negative

- c. They are roughly the same
 - d. Don't have enough experience to judge
28. Which sources of media coverage do you trust the most when forming opinions about movies?
- a. News websites
 - b. Print magazines or newspapers
 - c. Online review platforms (e.g., Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb)
 - d. Television or radio
 - e. Social media platforms (e.g., Tiktok, Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc)
 - f. None of the above
29. Has the media coverage about the Barbie movie changed or reinforced any of your prior beliefs or opinions about Barbie? If so, How? (textbox)
30. From your knowledge, what themes and subject matter do you associate the most with the Barbie movie?
- a. Feminism/ Misogyny
 - b. Mattel products/ Toys (particularly Barbie products)
 - c. Aging
 - d. Mental health
 - e. Fashion
 - f. Life and death
 - g. Other (textbox)
31. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Barbie movie?: The characters in the Barbie movie represent different gender identities or sexual orientation

- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
32. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Barbie movie?: My gender identity affects how I perceive the Barbie movie.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
33. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Barbie movie?: The Barbie movie portrayed female characters as strong and empowered.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
34. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Barbie movie?: It's important for the Barbie movie to include characters from diverse backgrounds.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree

- c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
35. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Barbie movie?: The Barbie movie effectively addressed female stereotypes.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
36. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the Barbie movie?: The positive messages in the Barbie movie are clear.
- a. Strongly Disagree
 - b. Disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Agree
 - e. Strongly Agree
37. Have you ever purchased Barbie merchandise (dolls, clothing, accessories, etc.)?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
38. How familiar are you with the Barbie brand and its intellectual property (IP)? (e.g., Barbie dolls, Barbie merchandise, Barbie's image)?
- a. Not familiar at all

- b. Not very familiar
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat familiar
 - e. Very familiar
39. How positively do you perceive the Barbie brand and its IP?
- a. Very negative
 - b. Slightly negative
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Slightly positive
 - e. Very positive
40. Do you believe that Barbie's brand image has changed over time?
- a. The brand has changed positively
 - b. The brand has changed negatively
 - c. There's no change in the brand image
 - d. Do not have an opinion
41. How important is Barbie's brand image in your decision to watch the Barbie movie?
- a. Not important at all
 - b. Slightly important
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Very important
 - e. Extremely important
42. The presence of well-known characters or storylines from Barbie dolls makes people more interested in watching the Barbie movie.

- a. Strongly disagree
 - b. Slightly disagree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Slightly agree
 - e. Strongly agree
43. What age are you?
- a. <18
 - b. 19-29
 - c. 30-39
 - d. 40-49
 - e. 50+
44. What is your gender?
- a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non Binary
 - d. Prefer not to say
45. What is your sexual orientation?
- a. Heterosexual or Straight
 - b. Homosexual
 - c. Bisexual
 - d. Pansexual
 - e. Asexual
 - f. Other (textbox)

g. Prefer not to say

46. Which of the following people sent you this survey?

- a. Ruozhu Zhao
- b. Gabriela Petrone
- c. Yulin Cao
- d. Sinong Zhou
- e. Raka Bhattacharyya
- f. Xiaotong Zhang

Appendix B

Table 1

Variable	Have Watched <i>Barbie</i>	Have Not Watched <i>Barbie</i>	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value
<i>Barbie</i> Marketing Exposure	1.69 (.89)	1.89 (.83)	-1.52	.131
Knowledge about <i>Barbie</i>	3.76 (.8)	2.42 (.87)	8.62	.001
Influenced by <i>Barbie</i> Marketing	3.39 (1.16)	3.28 (1.03)	.54	.593

Appendix C

Table 2

Variable	Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value
Familiarity with Brand	3.1 (1.15)	.79	.431
Importance of <i>Barbie's</i> Image	2.71 (1.0)	-3.2	.002