

The Patriarchal and Sexist Norms Portrayed in “Barbie” Movie: The Sociological

Analysis of the Contrast between Barbieland and the Real World

Abstract

“You guys ever think about dying?” Who expected Barbie—the pretty, glamorous, and perfect blonde girl—to utter a depressive thought? But Barbie in the 2023 movie is not the Barbie everyone knows —she thinks about death, has cellulite and bad breath, and her feet are flat. She is no longer perfect but more humane. Moreover, the differences between the 2023 Barbie and the traditional Barbie are not limited to her appearance or attractiveness. For example, not only the Margot Robbie Barbie but also other Barbies are intelligent, have well-respected jobs, and participate in politics, which is yet to be achieved in the world we live in. In other words, the live-action *Barbie* is an integration of reality and fantasy which women experience and dream of.

This paper aims to reveal the gendered, sexist, and patriarchal norms and expectations that women face in the real world depicted in *Barbie*, a film directed by Greta Gerwig (2023). First, I will discuss the differences in social dynamics between Barbieland and the Real World by focusing on the corporate culture. Then, I will explore the factors that contribute to the high self-esteem observed in Barbies. Finally, I will discuss the impact of

sexualization on women by comparing Barbieland and the patriarchal real world. However, I recommend reading the summary of the plot below to better understand the discussion.

Note: This paper uses *Barbie* to refer to the 2023 movie and Barbie in singular and non-italic font to refer to Margot Robbie Barbie in the film. The Real World means the human world appears in *Barbie*, and the real world with no capitalization refers to the world we live in. However, I often use the Real World and the real world interchangeably as their social structure or patriarchal culture are almost identical.

Discussion

The Plot

Barbieland was a woman's dream world. Everything was pink. Barbies woke up with flawless skin and no fatigue every morning. All the Barbies were friends and having a party every night. Every day was fun and immaculate—until— Barbie started thinking about death. The moment the negative thought appeared in her mind, her body starts to exhibit imperfections, such as cellulite, bad breath, and flat feet (Barbies' toes are usually made lifted to wear high heels). To regain her perfect doll-like features by finding out the reason for those traumatizing changes, she decides to set off on a journey to the Real World, where real people live, to visit her owner and Mattel—the producer of Barbie dolls. However, completing the

mission in the Real World was not easy. Eventually, she manages to come back to Barbieland.

But another challenge was waiting for her to save Barbieland from Kens, who were indoctrinated into patriarchy in the Real World.

Social Dynamics in Barbieland and the Real World

One striking difference between Barbieland and the Real Word is the presence of women in decision-making places. The president is a woman, members of Congress are women, judges are women, doctors are women, and journalists are women. Barbies do not disrespect each other based on their social status or occupations. Everyone respects the way they are and appreciates each other's contribution to society. Therefore, Barbieland does not have an ingrained hierarchy.

On the other hand, in the Real World, men dominate the entire society. In Mattel's headquarters, white men occupy the top floor of the skyscraper to discuss business deals. Masculinity in the workplace is so robust that there is no woman in the meeting even when they talk about women's empowerment to promote Barbie dolls. Moreover, non-executives are not even allowed to enter the room even if they are men. Gerwig expresses ridicule for this corporate structure by including a comical and cartoon-like scene of male executives competing against each other to better appeal to their boss.

Furthermore, the audience can notice the inefficiency of the hierarchal institution which oppresses the lower and the younger from the way they cannot take any action without their boss's order. Those scenes in Mattel indicate that hierarchy is harmful not only because it excludes women but also because male domination creates a hostile environment that discourages cooperation among the members of the community, which torments and exhausts men as well.

Thus, I argue that the difference between the women-led community in Barbieland and the male-dominated society in the real world can be characterized by the existence of hierarchy. When men occupy the public sphere, everything turns into competition, which escalates in the workplace where they build their social status. For example, a study led by John List, a professor at the University of Chicago, found that men are 94% more willing than women to apply for a job that requires them to outperform their coworkers for a raise (Science Daily, 2011).

As this research data implies, men's intense competitiveness and individualism exacerbate the homosocial working culture which scorns and excludes women and men who fail to keep up with their level of greed for upward social mobility. Unlike workplaces in Barbieland where Barbies maintain harmonious relationships to collectively achieve their tasks, male employees in the real world tend to see each other as rivals.

Today, women account for only 10 % of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies while they account for nearly 50 % of the US labor force (Greenwood, 2024). Furthermore, only 28 % of the members of Congress are women (Blazina, 2024). What *Barbie* tells us is the necessity of women in higher positions and the fundamental change of the masculine hierarchy to achieve a more harmonious society like Barbieland.

Self-esteem: Barbies vs Real Women

One element that differentiates Barbies from women in the real world is their confidence. There are many Barbies with divergent appearances, body shapes, and jobs, but everyone accepts and embraces their differences. For example, Barbies frequently complement each other about their beauty or intelligence, and everyone responds with “I know.”

This level of confidence is not easy to obtain and exhibit for women under patriarchy because women have always been taught to be subordinate, modest, and “polite”. Women still feel discouraged from presenting themselves with confidence, especially in the workplace because many men consider those powerful women as a threat to their masculinity and an invasion of their male community. For example, if a female employee speaks up in a meeting to give some ideas for their project, she will be called arrogant, bossy, or rude. On

the contrary, if a man did the same thing on the same occasion, he would be called passionate, smart, and brave.

However, a study shows that men might not be self-aware of their oppression of women at work. Research by Kirby Nielsen, assistant professor of economics at California Institute of Technology, and William H. Hurt shows that male employers often point out female workers' lack of confidence when evaluating their job performance (California Institute of Technology, 2024). This finding implies that men expect women to perform proactively and confidently like men as workers while subconsciously or internally expecting them to act "feminine." This double standard imposed on women in the workplace undermines women's self-esteem because it switches the cause of women's lower confidence from social expectations to self-responsibility.

Furthermore, the reason why Barbies are more confident than women in the real world is found in the structure of Barbieland where female friendship is the basis. In the previous section, I pointed out the animosity derived from extreme rivalry among men in the male-exclusive arena. This contrast between female relationships and male relationships can be observed in the film from the way Barbies hold no rivalry or hatred among them while Kens—mostly Ryan Gosling Ken and Simu Liu Ken— constantly quarrel with each other over Margot Robbie Barbie. The Barbies' relationship is amicable and based on mutual

respect and trust; hence everyone is friends with each other. For instance, they can complement each other about how beautiful they are without having hidden intentions or strings attached. They do not trigger each other's insecurity to show off their superiority over one another. They have a home party with all the Barbies, including the doctors, construction workers, and the president. I assume this kind of positive affirmation and supportive attitude unique to female relationships enhance each Barbie's self-esteem.

Heteronormativity and Sexualization

People who watched Barbie would have been surprised to know that Barbie did not want to be Ken's romantic partner. Ken is desperate to be liked by Barbie throughout the film, but she chooses not to be with him. This narrative is powerful because it rejects the heteronormativity that film directors have conventionally been adapting to their work. *Barbie* gives a reality check of the myth of the classic romantic story which has been brainwashing girls into idealizing heterosexual romance and being dependent on men for their self-worth. In Kendom (formerly Barbieland), where Barbies lose their jobs to become reliant on Kens, their self-esteem shows a decline. As a result, they start exhibiting anxious thoughts and worrying if they are good enough for Kens. As observed in Barbies after the colonialism by Kens, delegating the measurement of one's self-worth to another results in

instability in their self-esteem and subsequently their mental health. Therefore, the truth is, heterosexual relationships are often detrimental for women, and Barbies in Kendom are the consequence of acting for male satisfaction, which is the reality movies do not usually show.

I speculate that this traditional narrative has discouraged women from questioning or fighting with gender norms and hence significantly contributed to the maintenance of heteronormativity and patriarchy. Therefore, *Barbie* effectively promotes women's independence and autonomy in romantic relationships by depicting Barbie as a determined woman who can say "no" to Ken when she does not agree with or even like his actions.

Barbie experiences misogyny and sexism for the first time when she enters the Real World. Men in the Real World catcall her and publicly comment on her body just because she is wearing a "sexy" body suit. She feels unsafe and humiliated for the first time just because she is a woman. In Barbieland, Barbies wear whatever they want and people—including Kens—do not say anything nor sexually harass them. However, after patriarchy is introduced in Barbieland by Ken who learned about it in the Real World, Kens start making Barbies dress for the male gaze to visually entertain them. The fact that sexualization appeared in Barbieland only after Ken brought patriarchy from the Real World convinces the audience that patriarchy exists not only in families and workplaces but also in individual men's attitudes toward or treatment of women.

Men often sexually objectify women when they are just existing. Moreover, people in the Real World infantilize Barbie based on the misconception that pretty women are dumb and, their only personality is being attractive. Again, Gerwig does a good job in refuting the stereotype by making Barbies intelligent and eloquent characters and then depriving those traits after Kens' patriarchal colonization of Barbieland. For instance, in the aftermath of the foundation of Kendom, Barbies become jobless to devote themselves to pleasing Kens by pretending to be dumb women who need to be taken care of. This way, Kens consume Barbies as a tool to satisfy their ego and sense of superiority.

Witnessing Barbie experiencing sexualization in the Real World and Kendom offers the audience a moment to reflect on our society where it is so normalized. Being exposed to an environment that sexually objectifies women inevitably limits their self-expression, confidence, and autonomy. *Barbie's* other contribution to feminism is that it identifies the whereabouts of the responsibility for the normalized sexualization in our society by projecting the real-life experiences of women to Barbies.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed patriarchy, sexism, and social expectations for women appeared in *Barbie* by focusing on three major factors: social structures founded on patriarchy, socially

influenced self-esteem of Barbies and women in the real world, and the responsibility of patriarchy for heteronormativity and sexualization of women. After the movie was released, many men posted “criticism” for the film on social media saying it was too political and discriminatory against them. I suppose this was the purpose of *Barbie*— to offend men who have willingly or subconsciously been benefitting from patriarchy. Therefore, Barbie succeeded in raising awareness of women’s oppression and exclusion from society and left an important message to call for their improvement.

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