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Michaela Pfeisinger BEd

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Introduction

Ever since Barbie was introduced in 1959, the toy marketed to young girls has served as a noteworthy symbol of female representation within popular culture. Created by Ruth Handler to empower girls to be anything they wanted, Barbie, with her normatively perfect female form and use in make-believe play, has helped shape female identity. Over the years, the Barbie doll has been portrayed in over 200 professions, ranging from astronaut to surgeon, effectively mirroring shifts in women's roles in society. Through the "You Can Be Anything" campaign, Mattel, Barbie's parent company, sought to underscore Barbie's influence in inspiring girls to pursue their dreams, despite societal expectations and norms. It is estimated that by 2009, Mattel sold more than 1 billion Barbies worldwide. At this point, nine out of 10 American girls owned a Barbie (Pasley). In 2023, the brand is valued at approximately \$200 million and generated around \$1.5 billion in sales for Mattel (Tighe). What started as a children's toy has evolved into a cultural phenomenon that encompasses generations.

In contrast to the doll's inventors' initial progressive intentions, Barbie has become the target of substantial criticism on several fronts as the brand's popularity has grown. Scholars and cultural commentators have scrutinized her role in perpetuating unattainable beauty standards, promoting consumerism, and reinforcing heteronormativity, and middle-class values (Roger; Uncu; Wright *Athena to Barbie*; Borbaru). These critiques gained prominence with the rise of second-wave feminism positioning Barbie as a symbol of broader societal constraints imposed on women. As the brand continued to grow, feminist discourse also evolved. By the 1990s, feminist discourse began to shift towards what Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill term a "postfeminist sensibility," a framework that suggests a move away from systemic critiques of institutionalized sexism, unequal representation, and structural inequalities. Instead, postfeminist discourse emphasized personal choice, empowerment, and individualism, framing feminism as an already-achieved goal (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 1; Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture" 149). This shift towards a postfeminist sentiment was reflected in popular media, with cultural artifacts like *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* depicting women on their journey to "have it all," meaning a fulfilling career, family life, and personal aspirations without sacrifices in any area (McRobbie, "Post-feminism and popular culture" 262). Through intertwining female empowerment and personal liberation with consumerism, these stories construct a postfeminist narrative in

which autonomy and success are largely achieved through lifestyle choices, romantic fulfillment, and consumption, ultimately reinforcing neoliberal ideals while masking persistent structural inequalities (McRobbie, “Post-feminism and popular culture” 262).

This postfeminist reorientation in popular culture was not lost on Mattel, which strategically sought to position Barbie as a beautiful fashion doll rather than as more “choice”- and “empowerment”- driven narratives through a diversification of Barbie’s careers and appearances. With the release of the first Black and Hispanic dolls in 1980, Mattel began Barbie’s journey toward becoming a postfeminist icon. What followed were various iterations of the “We girls can do anything” campaigns, which promoted a sense of empowerment among young girls. Barbies with cancer, Barbies with disabilities, Barbies with Down Syndrome, and a range of dolls with different body types were included in the brand’s portfolio during the 2010s. These inclusivity efforts reflect Rosalind Gill’s postfeminist sensibility, as the brand repackages feminism as a marketable narrative of choice and self-optimization, suggesting a strategic pivot that the film both capitalizes on and deconstructs (Gill, “Postfeminist Media culture” 149). No matter your identity, disability, or body type, Mattel suggests that if Barbie can be anything, you can be anything. From diet scales to the most recent launch of an autistic Barbie, Barbie’s constant rebranding has created precisely the cultural contradictions that Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* both exploits and interrogates. The film’s main character, Stereotypical Barbie, perfectly embodies this neoliberal perfection, which the film systematically deconstructs. The following chapter traces this doll-film continuum, demonstrating how the film’s postfeminist critique emerges directly from the Barbie doll’s contested cultural history.

This reframing of feminist discourse also sparked a critical question: Does postfeminist rhetoric in popular culture obscure ongoing systemic inequalities? In my thesis, I argue that at this juncture, Greta Gerwig’s 2023 film *Barbie* emerges and offers a timely and nuanced critique of a postfeminist sensibility in popular media. While the movie embraces empowerment, individualism, and consumer culture, it simultaneously interrogates how they intersect with enduring gender inequalities. In my thesis, I analyze *Barbie* as a cultural text that critiques key aspects of postfeminism, including aestheticized empowerment, gender essentialism and its dynamics, the supposed lack of structural inequality, and the idea that

feminism is obsolete because all feminist goals have already been achieved. My thesis argues that by positioning the protagonist, Stereotypical Barbie, the idealized figure of femininity and empowerment, within this critique, the film challenges the postfeminist notion that gender equality has been fully realized, and the assumption that feminism is obsolete.

Similar to the Barbie doll, Greta Gerwig's film *Barbie* sparked a broader societal conversation. It has been both praised as a feminist masterpiece and criticized as pseudo-feminist capitalist propaganda. Notably, newspaper reviews, exemplified by critiques in *The Guardian*, comment shortly after its debut that the movie "Barbie is a riotously entertaining candy-colored feminist fable that manages simultaneously to celebrate, satirize and deconstruct its happy-plastic subject" (Kermode). The *RollingStone* shares the same sentiment, stating that "[t]he fourth-wave-feminism call is coming from inside the Dreamhouse!" (Fear). In contrast, other critics have denounced the film as a "giant two-hour commercial for a product" (Bradshaw), "deeply anti-man" (Vine), and as promoting "bimbo [derogatory term for hyperfeminine; often equated with lack of intelligence] feminism" (Rosenblatt and Tolentino). Amid this dichotomous reception, Mattel's executive producer, Robbie Brenner, seeks to find a middle ground, stating in a Time interview that Barbie is not inherently a feminist film, despite its engagement with various feminist issues (Dockterman). The extensive and polarized reactions to Greta Gerwig's work, combined with its substantial \$1.4 billion box-office success (Mzimba), underscore the enduring relevance of Barbie as a cultural phenomenon in modern society.

Despite the discourse in print media, how big a phenomenon the Barbie doll and its brand still are was evident upon the online release of the first movie trailer. Barbie-related content dominated social media for months. The hashtag *#BarbieTheMovie* accumulated more than 330 million posts on TikTok, while *#Barbiecore* has racked up approximately 365 million views on over 170 million posts on the platform by June 2023 (Lang). Arguably, an intricate marketing strategy, centered on short-form social media and lucrative collaborations with fashion and beauty brands, significantly contributed to the heightened enthusiasm surrounding Barbie. In addition, the tagline "If you love Barbie, if you hate Barbie, this movie is for you" acknowledges the polarized perspectives on the doll and resonates with many people (Rubin).

Barbie has long been a pervasive figure in popular culture, sparking significant academic interest in its influence on female identity (Rogers; Wright *Athena to Barbie*; Uncu), body image (Dittmar, Halliwell, and Ive; Webb, Ford, and Pardo; Nesbitt et al.), and consumerism (Rogers). However, only recently has there been research examining how the 2023 film, directed by Greta Gerwig, engages with postfeminist ideas of empowerment, choice, consumerism, individualism, and gender essentialism in contemporary media culture. The academic reception of the movie's feminist themes has been as varied as the journalistic commentary on the subject (Olivo, Marques, Manning). While some studies, such as those by Natalie Wilner and Craigan Usher, focus on the psychological effects of the film on school-age audiences, others, including Alina Preda, Alicia Byrnes, Janice Loreck, Nonie May, Dikmen Yakali, and Nóra Máthé, explore its representation of femininity, masculinity, beauty standards, and feminist discourse. These differing perspectives highlight the complexity of the film's engagement with gender and societal norms, as well as its possible impact on the audience.

As the movie's postfeminist critique on gender has not yet been analyzed in depth, this thesis aims to address this gap by conducting a comprehensive examination of the question: **How does the 2023 Barbie movie, directed by Greta Gerwig, challenge or invert postfeminist ideas about gender?** Hence, this thesis hypothesizes that the Barbie movie critiques key postfeminist discourses on gender in popular media by exposing their reliance on aestheticized empowerment, consumerism, and oversimplified notions of individual choice while advocating for a more structural approach to gender equality.

By analyzing dialogue, visual storytelling, plotlines, and character development, it can be argued that *Barbie* critiques a postfeminist sentiment of aestheticized perfection and empowerment, consumerist ideals, and the postfeminist myth of already-achieved gender equality, which the Barbie doll itself historically embodied. Moreover, by exaggerating the dynamics and performances of gender, the movie highlights persisting structural inequalities in patriarchal systems. The proposed effects of these themes within the movie are multifaceted. At a meta-level, it can be stated that challenging postfeminist ideas about gender recenters feminist discourse in popular media. To be more specific, the movie prompts

viewers to question whether personal empowerment can exist without dismantling structural patriarchy, gender essentialism, and capitalist neoliberal individualism.

By critiquing postfeminist ideas about gender and power dynamics and recentering feminist discourse on persistent structural inequalities, *Barbie* moves beyond the doll's historical role as a symbol of normative female beauty to challenge postfeminist ideals. Through the character of Stereotypical Barbie, with her eternally arched feet and flawless Dreamhouse, the movie critically recasts the doll's unattainable beauty standards and promotion of consumerism as neoliberal fulfillment. In doing so, the film reimagines Barbie as a dynamic cultural figure that embodies a more differentiated feminist ideology that moves beyond the postfeminist sentiment that women can "have it all." Rather than aligning with aestheticized empowerment or oversimplified notions of individual choice, *Barbie* invites viewers to critically reflect on the systemic barriers that shape gender roles and inequality, suggesting that true empowerment must address these broader structures.

Barbie's history as a cultural phenomenon

To understand how the 2023 *Barbie* film engages with and critiques postfeminist gender ideals, it is essential to first examine the cultural legacy embodied by the character Barbie. The doll is not merely a fictional figure, but a globally recognized symbol shaped by decades of cultural discourse surrounding femininity, beauty standards, consumerism, and empowerment. The film's narrative, humor, and ideological positioning are deeply embedded in the contradictions that have long surrounded the Barbie brand. These contradictions cannot be fully appreciated without contextualizing the doll's historical development. By tracing the evolution of Barbie as a cultural product and exploring how she has been celebrated, criticized, and rebranded over time, one can gain critical insight into the intertextual and, at times, self-referential strategies the film employs. This background allows for a deeper understanding of how the film navigates the tensions of postfeminist discourse. For this reason, the following chapter will focus on Barbie's history as a cultural phenomenon, beginning with the doll's origins and culminating in an overview of the 2023 film.

The doll and its history

Inspired by an adult-like German fashion doll called Bild Lilli, Ruth Handler, the co-founder of Mattel Inc., created the American doll Barbara Millicent Roberts, worldwide known as Barbie, which made her debut on the American International Toy Fair in New York in 1959 (Wright, "From Golden Lassos to Dreamhouses" 49). Unlike traditional baby dolls that encouraged children to rehearse domestic roles, Barbie succeeded only a few adult female characters deviating from this norm, most notably DC Comics' Wonder Woman, who, apart from Barbie, progressively portrayed female agency in America by modeling an adventurous identity beyond the domestic sphere. Barbie, just like Wonder Woman, revolutionized girls' imaginative play by allowing young children to use their imagination beyond the private and venture into more professional domains. This is significant since Barbie appears within the midst of the reestablishment of gender roles after their temporary subversion during World War II. After men returned from the front lines, patriarchal norms such as the division of labor into private and public were reestablished. Ultimately, women had no choice but to resume their caregiving, child-rearing, and housekeeping duties (Wright, "From Golden Lassos to Dreamhouses" 15). Female identity became realigned with domesticity, and women had no legitimate agency outside of the private sphere. Simultaneously, second-wave feminism started to gain momentum with the rise in popularity of works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Amid this ideological contestation over what normative womanhood is, Handler created a toy that served as a subversive counterpoint to 1950s domesticity, since Barbie was an unmarried professional woman. Thus, Barbie became one of the first popular culture characters that authorized girls to envision womanhood beyond marriage and motherhood.

Barbie was cutting the ties between woman, marriage, and motherhood, ever so popular in the 60s, at least in children's make-believe play. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, Mattel marketed Barbie with hundreds of professional positions and identities, which further advanced women's liberation by highlighting women's desire to pursue professional activities and be part of the public and political sphere (Wright, "From Golden Lassos to Dreamhouses" 23-24). Arguably, Barbie, a professional, unmarried woman with no children, disrupts this postwar reprisal of a male world "by providing a powerful counter force to the masculine coding of public, professional work" (Wright, "From Golden Lassos to Dreamhouses" 17).

Handler at least tried to transcend the feminine order without directly challenging the male world. She created a character that works in traditionally male locations, has a steady companion without ever marrying him, and never bears children. In mid-century America, Barbie became a progressive vision of womanhood by exemplifying women's call for independence from marriage and family (Wright, "From Golden Lassos to Dreamhouses" 24). Barbie authorized children to imagine identities and roles that locate women outside of the private sphere. One of the most famous examples is Astronaut Barbie, released in 1965, which imagined women in space 18 years before Sally Ride's trip as the first American woman in space (Tamkin).

Barbie also adopted progressive political stances by introducing a Black doll in a swimsuit, Christie, in the same year that the U.S. Fair Housing Act of 1968 was enacted to fight racial discrimination (Wright, "From Golden Lassos to Dreamhouses" 27). At this point, one can say, "Barbie is a second-wave feminist's dream" (Wright, "From Golden Lassos to Dreamhouses" 27). To not let the defiance from female norms become mistaken with masculinity, Mattel feminized Barbie's entire world. Pink cars, pink clothes, and a pink Dreamhouse, originally without a kitchen, helped Barbie tie femininity and female power together (Wright, "From Golden Lassos to Dreamhouses" 26). In short, in opposition to young girls rehearsing their future role as mothers through doll play, playing with Barbie means preparation for a future as an unattached, fun, fearless professional female. Emphasizing this argument, the first Barbie TV commercial song in 1959 said "Someday I'm gonna be exactly like you" ("1959 First Ever Barbie Commercial" 00:38). The doll's initial popularity was also represented in its sales figures, which steadily increased to approximately \$500 million by 1968 (Pasley).

However, by the 1970s, the once-radical image of Barbie as an independent, professional woman had begun to evolve into a more ambivalent representation of femininity (Pasley). This transformation was evident as early as 1963 with the release of the Slumber Party Barbie, which included a scale set at 110 pounds (approximately 50 kg) and a diet book containing a single directive: "Don't eat!" ("Slumber Party"). Such features reflected a broader cultural trend away from curvier female bodies toward the promotion of a slender, childlike physique, epitomized by British supermodel Twiggy. Although Barbie continued to be marked as a figure of aspiration with a diverse set of careers and ambitions, she increasingly faced criticism for

reinforcing unattainable beauty standards through her idealized appearance (Dittmar et al. 283; Nesbitt et al. 1). Additionally, the extensive range of purchasable outfits and accessories contributed to concerns about the doll's role in promoting hyper-consumerism and materialistic values (Siswanti 39). Despite the growing criticism, Mattel continued to expand its Barbie product line, strategically positioning the brand as more inclusive and reflective of social progress. Building on the earlier introduction of Christie, Barbie's Black friend, the company took a further step toward racial representation by releasing the first Black and Hispanic Barbie dolls in the 1980s (Tamkin). In 1985, Barbie entered male-dominated corporate America with her day-to-night pink power suit. The Barbie Presidential Candidate has been running for the job as the leader of the free world in almost every election since its introduction to the toy market in 1992 (Halzack). Ironically, in the same year Barbie ran for president for the first time, Teen Talk Barbie mechanically pronounced, "Math class is tough!" which again led to increased criticism (Tamkin). Since Share-a-Simile Becky, the first Barbie doll in a wheelchair, came on the market in 1997, Mattel has introduced additional lines of dolls with disabilities, including prosthetic limbs, hearing aids, Down Syndrome (Kim), and, most recently, its first autistic Barbie. Even as Mattel diversified its brand, first towards civil rights, feminism, and inclusion, the original idea of beauty remained largely consistent. Since Barbie's birthday in 1959, Western ideals, Hollywood, and women's magazines have strengthened thinness as a signifier of beauty. Only in 2015, after 57 years of criticism of Barbie's unrealistic body, did Mattel jump on the social media bandwagon of #bodypositivity and introduce three new body types: tall, petite, and curvy (Mattel, "Barbie Diversity and Evolution").

In the late 2010s and early 2020s, Mattel increasingly sought to rebrand Barbie as a progressive and socially conscious figure in response to evolving cultural conversations around gender, race, body politics, and representation. With the rise of social media activism and fourth-wave feminism, issues such as intersectionality, inclusivity, and empowerment gained urgency, prompting Mattel to expand its product lines to include dolls with a wider variety of skin tones, facial features, hair textures, and body shapes. Campaigns like "The Barbie Dream Gap Project" (Mattel, "The Dream Gap Project")—launched in 2018 to raise awareness about how gender stereotypes limit girls' self-perception—further positioned Barbie as a brand committed to female empowerment. In marketing and branding, Barbie was increasingly

portrayed not only as a career woman or fashion icon but also as a role model and activist. These efforts reflect a strategic turn toward what Rosalind Gill terms the "postfeminist sensibility," whereby feminism is repackaged into individualistic, marketable narratives of choice, self-expression, and self-optimization (Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture" 149). This cultural repositioning of Barbie, which started as a fashion doll that allowed young children to imagine themselves beyond motherhood, became over the years a cultural discussion side for female beauty, inclusivity, and empowerment, and set the stage for the release of Greta Gerwig's 2023 *Barbie* film, which both capitalizes on and critically interrogates the brand's legacy. The film emerges at a moment of heightened cultural self-awareness, engaging with decades of feminist critique while using irony, satire, and intertextuality to reflect on Barbie's contradictory position as both a product of consumer capitalism and a vessel for feminist ideals.

The movie

Barbie presents a narrative in which the main protagonist, Stereotypical Barbie (referred to in the following text only as Barbie), begins experiencing an existential crisis that leads her and her companion Ken on a journey from the perfect, matriarchal Barbie Land to the patriarchal Real World, prompting a crisis of identity and power in both realms. At the beginning of the movie, Barbie, played by Margot Robbie, lives a carefree and idealized life in Barbie Land, a place where women hold all positions of power and perfection reigns. The central conflict is introduced when Barbie begins to experience symptoms of existential anxiety, including thoughts of death and physical changes in her body, such as flat feet and cellulite. This deviation from the standard of perfection in Barbie Land leads Barbie to seek answers from Weird Barbie, an outcast figure, who informs her that her distress is linked to a disruption in the connection between Barbie Land and the Real World. In an effort to restore balance, Barbie, accompanied by her aspiring boyfriend Ken, travels to the Real World on a mission to find the girl whose emotions are connected to hers. However, rather than finding admiration, the duo encounters a series of complications when they arrive in the Real World. Barbie is confronted with sexism, objectification, and the realization that women in the Real World do not see her as a feminist icon. At the same time, Ken becomes inspired by the patriarchal norms that dominate society. Upon Barbie's return to Barbie Land, she discovers that Ken has

installed a patriarchal regime he calls the Kendom and has overturned Barbie's original social order.

The climax of the narrative occurs when Barbie, disillusioned and overwhelmed by her loss of purpose, is inspired by Gloria, a Real World woman whose reflections on the contradictions of contemporary womanhood reframe Barbie's understanding of empowerment. Together with Gloria and Gloria's teenage daughter, Sasha, Barbie devises a plan to subvert the new patriarchal rule in former Barbie Land by exploiting the Kens' egos and inciting conflict among them. Following the successful reinstatement of the Barbies' governance, the Kens begin to question their adopted identity structures. In the resolution, Barbie chooses to leave Barbie Land to explore life as a human being in the Real World, seeking purpose beyond perfection or empowerment.

Postfeminist discourse

Popular media serves as a crucial site for the articulation and contestation of postfeminist ideas. Feminist scholars such as Jess Butler date the beginning of postfeminism's popularity in the United States to the mid-1980s and argue that it remains evident in popular culture in the 2010s (Jess Butler 35). Tasker and Negra point out that movies, TV shows, and advertisements of the early 2000s blend feminist rhetoric with postfeminist themes, creating narratives that simultaneously critique and perpetuate gender norms (Tasker and Negra 2). In 2020, scholar Chrysavgi Papagianni argues in his text that postfeminism has only become central within feminist cultural, neoliberal, and popular culture in the last two decades and that its stance for or against feminism is of a complex and ambiguous nature (Papagianni 1). To elaborate, postfeminism is often described as contradictory since it is simultaneously feminist and anti-feminist, liberating and repressive (Genz and Brabon 9). The *Barbie* movie exemplifies this duality, using satire and irony to expose the contradictions within postfeminist discourse. By juxtaposing Barbie Land's utopian ideals with the patriarchal realities of the Real World, the film engages in a layered critique of postfeminist notions of empowerment, femininity, and consumerism.

This chapter provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing *Barbie* through the lens of postfeminist discourse. It explores how postfeminism conceptualizes gender, empowerment,

and consumerism, focusing on the inherent tensions and contradictions. The framework facilitates a critical examination of the film's narrative, visuals, and character development, highlighting its engagement with and critique of postfeminist ideas. However, it must be stated that, as there is no single, homogeneous, unified feminism, there is also no single postfeminism, as both are complex, socially constructed concepts.

To use the term postfeminism analytically, the criteria for what makes a text or cultural product postfeminist need to be specified. The term postfeminism is often used in various and contradictory ways to signal a theoretical shift following second-wave feminism (Papagianni 1). Also, the term was defined by feminist scholars regarding an epistemological or political position in the wake of feminism's encounter with difference (Brooks 4) or as a backlash against feminism (Faludi, *Preface* X). Therefore, postfeminism can be viewed as a contested and multifaceted concept, often characterized as both a reaction to and continuation of feminist thought. In contrast to these positions, scholar Rosalind Gill offers an alternative interpretation. She argues that postfeminism should not be understood as a rejection of feminism, a historical shift, or an epistemological perspective, but rather as a cultural sensibility that rearticulates feminist ideas within a neoliberal framework (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 148). From this perspective, postfeminist media culture becomes the central object of inquiry – an area in which contemporary articulations of gender are negotiated and rearticulated, often in ways shaped by postmodern and constructionist dynamics and embedded within a neoliberal framework (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 148). This sensibility often emphasizes individualism, choice, and empowerment while downplaying or ignoring structural inequalities (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 149). Tasker and Negra (3) further describe postfeminism as a discourse that commodifies feminist achievements, framing them within consumer culture and traditional notions of femininity. Postfeminism often merges feminist language with consumerist ideals, promoting a form of empowerment that is deeply intertwined with aestheticized self-presentation and personal success (Tasker and Negra 4). As Gill's theoretical framework specifically foregrounds articulations and negotiations of gender in postfeminist media culture, it will be used to analyze the *Barbie* movie.

Reading postfeminism as a sensibility emphasizes the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within a postfeminist discourse (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 149). According to Gill ("Postfeminist media culture" 149 -150), a postfeminist discourse can be identified through a relatively stable set of features which include:

- the notion that femininity is a bodily property
- the shift from objectification to subjectification
- choice and empowerment
- a focus upon individualism
- the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline
- the dominance of a makeover paradigm
- a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference
- a marked sexualization of culture
- an emphasis upon consumerism
- irony and knowingness
- constructions of feminism

The following sections provide a detailed examination of each key feature of postfeminist sensibility as outlined by Gill. Additionally, dedicated analyses of postfeminists' white, heterosexual, middle-class ideal and the concept of patriarchy will help unpack *Barbie's* subversion of postfeminist individualism and offer insights into the negotiation of gender and structural power dynamics.

Femininity as a bodily property

In opposition to other feminist theories that understand femininity as a performative and socially constructed practice, as argued by Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble* Preface), Gill asserts that, in postfeminist media culture, femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a performative act ("Postfeminist media culture" 149). Therefore, femininity becomes a personal attribute to physical appearance rather than social behaviors, roles, or political identities. Consequently, femininity becomes individualized and depoliticized. It is no longer centered on traditionally gendered acts, which are all highly exclusionary, such as caring or nurturing, but on the visible possession of a sexy body (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 149).

The body is framed to be the main source of value and identity, making it the primary source of power. However, this power is contingent upon adhering to narrow aesthetic standards that privilege slimness and youthfulness. Postfeminist media encourages women to continuously monitor, surveil, discipline, and remodel their bodies to conform to the judgment of what is considered female attractiveness (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 149). This leads to an emphasis on slimness, youthfulness, and sex appeal as markers of successful femininity. Women's bodies that do not conform to these markers are at risk of failing, which still becomes most apparent with the cultural obsession with female celebrity bodies, where even minor deviations from normative standards are met with public shame and moral judgment (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 149). To summarize, in postfeminist media culture, success is often portrayed by a sleek, toned, controlled figure. In contrast, excess bodyweight, consumption of calories, cigarettes, or a sloppy appearance is used to indicate an emotional breakdown since the woman is failing to control herself.

According to Gill, the construction of femininity in postfeminist media culture is also closely linked to the pervasive sexualization of women's bodies present in contemporary mass media ("Postfeminist media culture" 150). Sexualization refers to the increase of not only discourses of sex but also the increasingly frequent erotic presentation of children's and adults' bodies in public spaces, which today would also greatly involve online spaces such as TikTok and Instagram. A prototypical woman portrayed in nearly all forms of media, television, music videos, magazines, and social media can potentially be reduced to an instrument for others' consumption (Fredrickson and Roberts 174). Moreover, in postfeminist media, women are constructed as responsible for not only their own sexual desirability and safety but also for managing male desire, ego, and well-being (Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism" 38). This gendered imbalance is evident in how heterosexual relationships are framed. While women's magazines often present men as emotionally complex individuals in need of support, men's magazines reduce women to sexualized fragments such as body parts or fantasies, thereby reinforcing objectification and asymmetry in sexual discourse (Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism" 45, Turner). Gill argues that this uneven distribution of sexual representations plays a crucial role in shaping the gendered dynamics of postfeminist media culture.

The shift from objectification to subjectification

During the 1970s and 1980s, gender inequality was perpetuated by stripping away the voice and agency of women by commodifying their bodies to sell products (Goldman 130). Women in advertising and popular media were reduced to passive, mute objects designed for an assumed male gaze (Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism" 35). However, in the 1990s media culture, representations of women reflect a notable shift away from objectification by a presumed heterosexual male gaze towards a more active stance as subject. Hilary Radner argues that women's sexualization in popular culture began to be reframed as a form of individual expression that suits women's increasingly liberated interests (qtd. in Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 151). Especially in advertising, the long-standing feminist critique constructed a new archetype of women: "the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever 'up for it'" (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 151).

Since this shift represents a modernization of femininity which centralizes sexual knowledge and practice, it is crucial for understanding the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 151). Furthermore, this shift from objectification to subjectification has also changed how power operates. Power was imposed on women from the male gaze. However, with the assimilation of sexualization as individual expression, the male gaze was substituted with a policing, narcissistic gaze. This shift, feminist scholars argue, is even a deeper form of exploitation than objectification since it is based on a female internalization of the male gaze (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 152).

In opposition to the representation of women as sexually active agents, postfeminist media culture has only one alternative archetype: the prude. Thereby, popular postfeminist discourse is dismissing all critique of this shift as anti-sex and excluding most women in its representational practice since only heterosexual, beautiful young women are constructed as active desiring sexual subjects (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 152). Above all, critiquing this shift involves drawing attention to its troubling alignment with neoliberal conceptions of subjectivity, wherein sexual objectification is no longer framed as an act imposed on women by men, but rather reimagined as the voluntary expression of autonomous, confident, and assertive female subjects.

Choice and empowerment

Postfeminist discourse in Western media strongly emphasizes personal choice and individualism. As previously discussed, a key idea of the postfeminist sentiment is that women are encouraged to take charge of their lives and act as empowered, autonomous agents. For example, the surge in popularity of cosmetic surgery over the last few decades has often been, and arguably still is, portrayed as a form of self-care. Women enhance their appearance to increase their own body satisfaction and self-esteem (Mironica et al.). In the early 2000s, women's decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery were commonly explained as purely individual responses to bodily dissatisfaction, with little acknowledgment that cultural and societal norms significantly shaped these desires. This framing extended beyond appearance: experiences of racism, homophobia, or domestic abuse were increasingly interpreted through a personal lens, ignoring a broader political or structural context (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 152). As a result, the famous feminist phrase of the women's liberation movement, "the personal is political," was effectively reversed. Scholar Lois McNay referred to this development as a "reprivatization" of previously politicized issues (qtd. in Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 153). Political and cultural influences on women were being denied equally, as societal problems such as violence against women began to be presented as isolated, personal tragedies. As Gill puts it, postfeminist discourses presented women as autonomous agents who no longer were constrained by inequality or power imbalances between genders ("Postfeminist media culture" 153).

The postfeminist emphasis on free choice strongly builds contrast to a constructed notion of the past where women solely dressed for men, were sexually submissive, and constantly searching for male approval. Of course, this framing of femininity was ridiculous, highly exclusionary, and did not represent the diversity of the female experience of previous decades, but strongly influenced postfeminism's key idea of individual choice. Through a postfeminist lens, women have overcome this tale of the passive housewife and mother and now see themselves as equal to men since they can choose to work and vote just like their male counterparts.

The idea of free choice was also adopted in the realm of female sexuality, where sexual display shifted from patriarchal imposition to a freely chosen expression of confidence. However, Gill argues that this postfeminist archetype of a sexually autonomous woman remains constrained by heteronormative attractiveness standards ("Postfeminist media culture" 153). Therefore, this reclaiming of sexuality aligns with neoliberal ideas of subjectivity, where objectification only masquerades as female empowerment. Through an empowering language, these developments, which might have been interpreted as forms of sexual objectification in earlier feminist critiques, were now framed as tools for individual success, desirability, and self-expression. Again, the question can be asked if this form of empowerment truly originates from within or is dictated by external validation of a changing cultural norm and is therefore only reinforcing sexual objectification under the guise of the personal choice to portray oneself as a desiring sexual subject. Also, what this postfeminist argumentation of individual choice fails to explain is how these seemingly autonomously generated desires all resulted in valuing a slim, young, white, female body, and an overall increase in the sexualization of the body (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 154). Questions about the social construction of these specific beauty ideals and their internalization through mass media are often not asked in a postfeminist context (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 154).

A focus on the individual: self-surveillance, monitoring, and discipline

Besides postfeminist emphasis on individualism, choice, and agency, the female body was put into focus as a site of liberation (Banet-Weiser, "Postfeminism and popular feminism" 152). Counterintuitively, this liberation was driven by the emphasis on self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-discipline in postfeminist media culture (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 155). The monitoring and surveying of women's bodies to emulate a white upper-class ideal has had a long tradition in Western media culture. To successfully perform femininity, women have been subjected to detailed instructions on grooming, posture, attire, and manners for decades (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 155). However, postfeminism dramatically increased the extent of self-surveillance and added new spheres in which this surveillance was argued to be necessary. In addition to monitoring one's bodily shape, size, muscle tone, and attire, sexual practice, career, home, finances, and the interior life became new necessities women were told to constantly observe and re-model (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 156). Women faced a range of new problems that needed attention. However,

this labor should be understood as fun and pampering, and should never be disclosed. Disclosure was so important, Gill argues, because a crucial aspect of femininity itself is to appear confident, carefree, and unconcerned about one's self-presentation ("Postfeminist media culture" 155). Constantly working on oneself, whether it is one's physique, communication skills, or relationships, is still work. What needs to be highlighted is that there was a significant difference in the distribution of discourse on the self as a project that needs to be evaluated, advised, and improved. The media disproportionately addressed women, not men, to work and transform themselves, as exemplified by the popularity of makeover shows in the 90s and 2000s.

The dominance of a makeover paradigm

In line with the focus of postfeminist discourse on the female body and life as a disciplinary subject, media culture in the late 20th and early 21st century became dominated by what Rosalind Gill refers to as a "makeover paradigm" ("Postfeminist media culture" 156). This paradigm is not merely a stylistic trend but a central logic underpinning postfeminist media: it assumes that women's lives and bodies are inherently flawed or lacking and that transformation, achieved through expert advice and modified consumer practices, is both necessary and empowering. This ideology could be found in various media genres, including talk shows, women's magazines, lifestyle programming, and particularly television makeover shows, which became highly popular during the 1990s and 2000s. These shows primarily targeted and featured women, reinforcing the notion that women should constantly improve themselves, whether in terms of appearance, home decor, parenting, or social behavior.

A defining characteristic of makeover shows is their ritualistic narrative. The identification of personal inadequacies (often through public humiliation) is followed by a structured transformation process guided by experts, which ultimately culminates in a better/more socially acceptable self (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 156). As Peck (75) argues, this storytelling arc often relies on the induction of toxic shame in participants, presenting them as failures in need of correction. These programs frequently relied on classist, sexist, and racialized assumptions, framing working-class, non-white, or non-normative participants as deficient and in need of intervention (McRobbie, "Notes on 'What not to wear'" 103). Popular shows such as *What Not to Wear* (BBC), *Extreme Makeover* and *Extreme Makeover: Home*

Edition (ABC), or *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo) exemplified this paradigm. While these programs often framed transformation as self-improvement and empowerment, they also reinforced normative ideals of femininity, beauty, and success through neoliberal logics of individual responsibility and consumption. Even though makeover shows have declined in popularity over the last decade, the logic of makeover culture persists and adapts in the digital age. Newer formats like *Queer Eye* (Netflix), *Dream Home Makeover* (Netflix), and beauty competition shows like *Glow Up* (BBC/Netflix) continue to circulate the idea that transformation leads to personal empowerment, albeit often in more inclusive and emotionally nuanced ways.

Importantly, makeover culture not only reproduces narrow gender norms but also rearticulates class antagonisms through individualized narratives of self-improvement. As Gill notes, the struggles and failures of working-class women are frequently aestheticized and moralized, rather than politically contextualized (“Postfeminist media culture” 157). Instead of questioning structural inequalities or critiquing unattainable societal standards, makeover shows often stage conflict through interpersonal drama, especially between women. In this way, systemic pressures are depicted as personal failures, reinforcing the idea that women are always falling short - yet simultaneously responsible for their own success or failure.

A resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference

During the 1970s and 1980s, a short-lived phenomenon in popular culture emerged in which the idea of male and female equality and of similarities between men and women was popularized. However, during the 1990s, these ideas were already discarded in favor of a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual differences. This key feature of the postfeminist sensibility, as defined by Gill, could be observed, for example, in the discourse on “new masculinity.” A hegemonic dominance of feminism of the past was said to have influenced men to be politically correct, not manly enough, and asexual, which supposedly was not “authentic masculinity” (Gill, “Postfeminist media culture” 158). It was argued that masculinity is libidinous, powerful, and fundamentally different from femininity.

The ideas of a distinctive difference between men and women were popularized through talk shows, popular fiction, newly introduced lifestyle sections in newspapers, and advertising. A reason for the phenomenon was probably the growing interest in evolutionary psychology and developments in genetic science, which started debates about a potential “gay gene” and differences in brain activity related to risk-taking (Gill, “Postfeminist media culture” 158). Also, notions of sexual difference were popularized through the explosion of self-help literature, which further propagated the idea of a battle of the sexes (Gill, “Postfeminist media culture” 158). One of the most famous texts on this topic was John Gray’s *Mars and Venus*, which was published in 2002. Gray claimed that the sexual difference between man and woman can be traced back to fundamentally different psychological tendencies and communication styles, opposed to biological differences, and thereby offered a newer and less cliché argumentation for the supposed difference between man and woman (Gray 11-12). In line with this argument, Deborah Tannen shared the thesis with Gray that male and female communication works differently, which is why the two sexes do not understand each other (25-30). Gill argues that popular media saw itself as translating and mediating men’s and women’s communication, customs, and funny ways to each other, where male power was systematically privileged and existing inequalities were frozen in place, since they were represented as inevitable.

A marked sexualization of culture

Another central feature of postfeminist sensibility identified by Gill is the marked sexualization of culture (“Postfeminist media culture” 150). This refers to the growing prevalence of sexualized representations, imagery, and discourse across media platforms, particularly in the depiction of women. Besides Gill, scholars such as McNair (*Mediated Sex* 1-2), Coleman (164-167), as well as Ringrose and Renold (1-2) also share the belief that the sexualized culture of the 1990s and 2000s is a neoliberal capitalist phenomenon which is linked to consumerism and the discourse of choice and empowerment. Within postfeminist media landscapes, there has been an expansion of accessibility of cultural texts that emphasize sex, sexuality, and sexual display, disrupting the boundaries between public and private discourse of Western culture. Media trends privileged lifestyle, reality, interactivity, and the confessional, which also popularized the commodification of sex and extended sexual consumerism (McNair, *Striptease Culture*). This cultural shift towards an explosion of sexualized content across media

genres and platforms has been referred to by Brian McNair as part of a wider “striptease culture” (*Striptease Culture*). In this context, women’s bodies became the primary visual through which sexuality is performed and evaluated.

Feona Attwood argues that with sexual discourse becoming increasingly accessible to all, sex became a “privileged site through which the personal and the individual are embodied in the public sphere” (82). This visibility also made sexual identities and the female body more available for regulation. While sex is positioned as a form of personal expression, it was simultaneously constrained by narrow cultural scripts. In line with this argument, Gill concludes that the “sexing up” of culture involves a “deliberate re-sexualization and re-commodification of bodies,” which incorporates depictions of women as desiring, active, and cultured and nurtured a self-policing narcissistic gaze in women (*Sexual Subjectification* 101). Gill argues that “sexual subjectification” offered women a limited and commodified vision of active female sexuality and only encouraged sexist views of women. The figure of the “sexually empowered woman” became a dominant trope in postfeminist culture, frequently depicted in advertising, magazines, music videos, and reality TV.

Moreover, the sexualization of culture is not evenly distributed across gender lines. While eroticized male bodies have become more visible, Gill stresses that the burden of sexual display and physical self-surveillance still disproportionately falls on women (*Gender and the Media* 98). Moreover, postfeminist media culture privileges a narrow, exclusionary ideal of femininity: white, slim, youthful, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Women who do not fit this ideal are often marginalized or portrayed as deviant. As Ariel Levy argues in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, this results in a form of raunch culture where women adopt pornographic visual codes in the name of empowerment, even as these codes often replicate male-defined sexual scripts.

Imelda Whelehan aligns with Gill in her critique of how sexualized imagery in popular culture functions as a hostile response to feminism, which essentially repacks sexism in a way that appears progressive (*Overloaded* 11). She also warns against the populist embrace of such imagery without critical engagement, suggesting that much of what is celebrated as empowered femininity in media is more or less sexism with an alibi. To summarize these

scholarly arguments, within a postfeminist sentiment lies a populist tendency to celebrate any depiction of sexual confidence as feminist, which risks neutralizing feminist critique and masking persistent gendered inequalities.

An emphasis upon consumerism

Postfeminist sentiment is deeply embedded in neoliberal capitalist values, in which entrepreneurialism, individualism, and the expansion of consumer markets are not only normalized but also celebrated. Women and girls were increasingly recognized as powerful citizens, but more importantly, as strong consumers. This is contradictory to the complete rejection of consumer and media culture in second-wave feminism (Banet-Weiser, "Postfeminism and popular feminism" 152). As Sarah Banet-Weiser argues, postfeminist media culture encourages women to define and express their identities primarily through consumption, branding, and self-styling ("Postfeminism and popular feminism" 153). She goes so far as to say that even the stereotype of feminists changed from shrill man-haters of the 1970s to intrepid choice-making women. In this context, femininity becomes both a project and a product. It becomes something to be endlessly cultivated through lifestyle choices, beauty routines, and market participation, which ultimately puts consumer and media culture as a potential site of liberation (Baumgartner and Richards 135).

This emphasis on consumerism is often framed as a form of agency and empowerment. Women are encouraged to choose products, appearances, and experiences that supposedly reflect their authentic selves, while simultaneously internalizing market logics that equate personal value with visibility, attractiveness, and success. According to Gill, this creates a contradictory cultural climate in which women are invited to view themselves as empowered yet are constantly subjected to market-driven standards of beauty, fitness, and femininity ("Postfeminist media culture" 153).

Within this paradigm, agency is closely aligned with purchasing power. Empowerment becomes accessible not through structural change, collective action, or critique, but through the acquisition of consumer goods and self-enhancement practices. A postfeminist sentiment succeeded in incorporating liberal feminist discourses of freedom, choice, and independence into media, merchandising, and consumer participation (Banet-Weiser, "Postfeminism and

popular feminism” 153). The result is what Angela McRobbie describes as a “faux-feminist” culture, one that presents consumerism as a substitute for political engagement and reduces feminism to individual success stories shaped by market logic, thereby making it invisible (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 135).

Irony and knowingness

A further defining feature of postfeminism as a sensibility is the pervasive use of irony and knowingness in media representations of gender and sexuality (Gill, “Postfeminist media culture” 159). Irony can serve several functions, but in advertising, it is often used to hail audiences as knowledgeable and sophisticated consumers. Viewers are offered intertextual references that convey the notion that they can see through attempts to manipulate them, leaving them with a superior sense of knowingness (Gill, “Postfeminist media culture” 159). In addition, irony can be used to establish a distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs, as being too passionate about anything was connoted as uncool (Gill, “Postfeminist media culture” 159). Ian Parker exemplifies this issue by arguing that “I love you madly” might be the ironic, postmodern version of “I love you” (Parker 157) as the “madly” creates a more protective distance between the speaker and the expression of love. In line with this argument, Jackson et al. assert that irony may offer an internal defense against ambivalent feelings and against taking something or someone too seriously (104).

However, Gill argues that the most relevant function irony fulfills within postfeminist media culture is to express sexist, homophobic, or otherwise problematic sentiments while claiming that through using irony one is critical of them (“Postfeminist media culture” 159). In this way, sexist tropes are not challenged but reanimated in a new and supposedly more enlightened cultural context. The audience is positioned as knowing and sophisticated and invited to laugh at the outdated gender stereotypes while simultaneously consuming and enjoying them. Examples of this ironic stance are widespread in postfeminist popular culture. Characters in TV series and films, such as Samantha Jones in *Sex and the City* or Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*, may exaggerate hyper-feminine or hyper-sexualized behavior, only to signal their awareness of its constructedness.

Gill has pointed out that the combination of retro imagery and nostalgia with an ironic stance is a key device in the construction of contemporary sexism ("Postfeminist media culture" 160). A recent example of this ironic use of nostalgia can be seen in a 2025 advertisement by the haircare brand Redken featuring pop singer Sabrina Carpenter ("Leave It In, starring Brand Ambassador @sabinacarpenter"). The ad draws heavily on retro imagery, evoking the style and tone of 1950s and 1960s beauty commercials through its use of saturated pastel color palettes, vintage-style hair, wardrobe, and makeup, and overly enthusiastic narration. It appears to wink at the audience, signaling that both the brand and the viewer are in on the joke: this performance is not meant to be taken seriously but rather as a playful homage or parody. In this way, the ad exemplifies the use of ironic knowingness, as theorized by Gill ("Postfeminist media culture" 160), to recycle traditional images of femininity in a way that feels modern, edgy, and safe from critique. Importantly, it can be argued that by framing traditional gendered imagery as retro and ironic, popular media can reintroduce and celebrate outdated ideals of femininity (beauty, passivity, glamour) without appearing regressive. As Whelehan and Williamson have argued, the turn to retro aesthetics in postfeminist media often functions as a cultural alibi, allowing the repetition of sexist tropes under the cover of self-awareness and critique (qtd. in Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 159-160).

Constructions of feminism

Within a postfeminist sensibility, feminism is an integral feature in two ways. One is that feminist-inspired ideas became integrated into mainstream cultural discourse through the media during the 1990s and 2000s. Radio shows, TV discussions, talk shows, and newspaper articles frequently featured feminist-inspired debates about topics such as date rape, sexual harassment, the objectification of women, or domestic violence (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture" 161). These discussions signal that feminist concerns have gained cultural visibility and have become part of public discourse. However, these discussions were not led by an uncriticized feminist perspective but were rather, as Judith Stacey puts it, incorporated, revised, and depoliticized within mainstream culture (323). Rosalind Gill extends this critique by arguing that feminist discourse is not only appropriated but attacked in the media ("Postfeminist media culture" 161). Therefore, the second way in which feminism is featured in a postfeminist sensibility is through being repudiated. This phenomenon of acknowledging and accepting feminist ideas while simultaneously being undermined and dismissed is what

scholar Angela McRobbie has called a “double entanglement” (“Post-feminism and popular culture” 255). McRobbie notes that this double entanglement is central to the postfeminist negotiation of gender, in which neoliberal values of individualism and choice are connected with a selective and depoliticized form of feminism. She also argues that precisely this entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas is what makes media culture not pre- or anti-feminist but postfeminist (“Post-feminism and popular culture” 255).

A strong example of the double entanglement of feminism within postfeminist media culture is the multimillion-dollar bestseller novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding, which was adapted into a screen adaptation in 2001. In this narrative, a liberal feminist perspective, which emphasizes autonomy and individual choice, is portrayed as common sense. Nevertheless, it is continually undercut by the heroine's ultimate pursuit of romantic fulfillment. In doing so, the text blends feminist language with a return to traditional femininity, exemplifying how feminism is appropriated and depoliticized within a neoliberal, postfeminist framework. The film further participates in the cultural undermining of political and structural feminism by explicitly referencing feminist discourses in a dismissive or ironic tone while simultaneously taking a certain kind of liberal feminist perspective for granted. As Traska and Negra observe, postfeminist films often construct a prototype of the feminist as overly radical, angry, humorless, and hostile to traditional femininity, thereby rendering feminism effectively as unattractive or outdated (4). By constructing feminists as extreme, difficult, and unpleasant, Tasker and Negra argue that an othering of feminism takes place (4). Supporting this, Angela McRobbie notes that postfeminist media texts frequently present women as freely choosing conventional roles, such as planning white weddings, adopting their husband's surname, or becoming stay-at-home mothers (“Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones” 37). These choices are framed not as regressions but as expressions of empowered individuality. This return to pre-feminist ideals, as Hollows suggests, can be read as a re-emergence of traditional femininity rebranded in the language of freedom and empowerment (197). Probyn similarly argues that such choices are often framed as postfeminist freedoms, masking the way they reaffirm normative heterosexual femininity and traditional gender roles (136).

To summarize, feminism within a postfeminist sensibility is not absent but transformed. Rather than engaging in collective critique or addressing structural inequalities, it is recast as a set of personal lifestyle choices. This individualized and depoliticized version of feminism aligns comfortably with neoliberal imperatives while retaining the appearance of progressiveness. As feminist theorist Nancy Fraser observed in 2013, feminism has become “a handmaiden of neoliberal capitalism. “

White, heterosexual middle-class ideal

Given this strong connection between postfeminism and neoliberal capitalism, one could argue that postfeminism is a solely Western phenomenon. Even though scholarship tended to focus on white middle-class Western girls and women as subjects for inquiry, postfeminist practices, ideologies, and media representations travel transnationally through transnational media visibility, as Simidele Dosekun argued in 2015 (965). However, the individual subjectivity of postfeminist sensibility clearly privileges whiteness, middle class, and heterosexuality as ideal (Jess Butler 47), which does not mean that nonwhite women are not participating in postfeminist popular culture. This is evident in popular reality shows on TV such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *America's Next Top Model*, and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, which all showcase women of color (Jess Butler 48). Moreover, the music industry offers numerous examples of highly successful women of color, such as *The Pussycat Cools*, *Beyoncé*, or *Jennifer Lopez*, to name a few, who arguably embrace femininity through the consumption of feminine goods and use a vocabulary of choice, empowerment, and sexual freedom as they construct themselves as heterosexual subjects (Jess Butler 48). Still, the presence of women of color in postfeminist popular culture does not signal full inclusion. Rather, it shows how postfeminist norms are adopted and adapted by women of color and different cultural backgrounds, even when the cultural framework remains centered on white, middle-class femininity (Jess Butler 49). In this sense, postfeminist culture continues the pattern of exclusion found in earlier feminist movements. It fails to fully acknowledge or address the different realities faced by women outside this normative ideal. Also, it can be argued that instances of cultural participation in postfeminism outside of a white Western context often remain undertheorized by scholars.

Furthermore, feminist scholar Jess Butler argues that, similarly to previous normative conceptions of gender, postfeminism promotes a limited version of femininity, sexuality, and race and reinstates whiteness as the standard (48). Nevertheless, Jess Butler states that this does not necessarily mean that nonwhite, non-middle-class, non-Western women are altogether excluded from or unaffected by postfeminist discourses (48). Through the global circulation of media, fashion, and consumer culture, postfeminist sensibilities have become visible in non-Western settings as well. However, they often manifest differently across local histories, cultural norms, and gender politics. However, despite its global visibility, the cultural logic of postfeminism remains deeply rooted in Western neoliberal ideals. Its emphasis on individualism, consumer choice, and self-governance often fails to account for the structural realities and socio-political contexts that shape women's lives outside the West.

Also, despite the visibility of some women of color in postfeminist popular culture, the narrow template of ideal femininity leads to a process of conditional inclusion (Ahmed 67). Conditional inclusion describes the process of participation in a cultural phenomenon in which tensions with dominant norms that participants cannot fully inhabit remain unresolved (Ahmed 67). Regarding a culture shaped by a postfeminist sensibility, women of color are positioned in a paradox. Postfeminist success is articulated as universally achievable, as it depends on the ideas of personal autonomy, consumer culture, discipline, and sexual agency. Nevertheless, it remains structurally inaccessible to those outside the racial and cultural center. In this way, postfeminist culture may invite women of color to consume and aspire to these ideals. However, it refuses them the chance to belong as whiteness operates as the invisible benchmark. To summarize, although women of color are somewhat visible in postfeminist media, when looking at racialized exclusion, it is embedded within postfeminist sensibility itself.

Patriarchal culture

To critically engage with postfeminism as a cultural sensibility, it is essential to situate it within the broader historical and structural framework of patriarchy. In addition to the previously elaborated features of a postfeminist sensibility, postfeminism also presents itself as a response to feminism and as evidence of women's progress and empowerment. However, its representations are deeply shaped by, and often complicit with, the enduring norms of

patriarchal culture since concepts of gender and women exist only as elements within the power formation of patriarchy (Ortner 533). Patriarchy is often used as an umbrella term for a range of ideas such as “male dominance,” “male superiority,” or “sexism” (Ortner 533). A classical definition by Sylvia Walby, a feminist sociologist, is: “Patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (Walby 214). Other feminist scholars, such as Raewyn Connell (183) or, more recently, Sherry Ortner (534), add to this definition by noting that patriarchy not only organizes power relations between men and women but also structures the relations of power that men have over other men—Connell names this subordination of other men and marginalized genders, “hegemonic masculinities” (183). Furthermore, patriarchy is almost always intertwined with other structures of power, which can be found in Western culture, such as colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, and racism.

In particular, patriarchy has historically relied on institutional power such as law, religion, education, the institutionalization of marriage, and the nuclear family. All of these have naturalized gender hierarchies and legitimized male authority. As Carole Pateman argues in *The Sexual Contract*, modern Western democracies were built on gendered exclusions, where women's subordination was fundamental to the formation of civil society itself (1-3). Her analysis shows how political and social contracts assumed and reinforced male dominance, rendering women as dependents rather than equal citizens (3).

Similarly, bell hooks critiques patriarchy not simply as a system of male domination but as an ideology that intersects with race, heteronormativity, and class oppression (15). hooks emphasizes that white, middle-class men have historically been positioned as the normative subjects of power. In contrast, white women have often benefitted from their proximity to that power, frequently at the expense of women of color (56-57). This framing is particularly relevant in analyzing postfeminism, which continues to prioritize white, heterosexual, middle-class femininity while erasing or marginalizing other experiences. Also, an intersectional perspective helps to avoid overly simplistic and universalized definitions and highlights the racialized and classed nature of patriarchy. As patriarchy cannot be discussed without addressing structures of power, the following analysis also incorporates aspects of how the

movie addresses race, heteronormativity, class, and institutional power, such as law, marriage, and the nuclear family.

Barbie's critique

This thesis employs a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) following Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (*Media Discourse*) and Barthesian semiotics (*Elements of Semiology*) to examine how *Barbie* critiques postfeminist gender discourse in multimodal terms. Drawing on Fairclough's understanding of CDA, this approach focuses on how language constructs and negotiates power relations, ideological beliefs, and societal norms (*Analysing Discourse* 29). While CDA is often applied to political speech or media texts, it is equally valuable in examining cultural artifacts such as films, where dialogue and character interaction become sites of ideological struggle. In this context, CDA enables a close reading of how *Barbie* negotiates gender norms, empowerment discourses, and structural inequalities through dialogue, narrative choices, and character positioning. As scholar Sarah Kozloff reminds us, dialogue not only propels the plot but also provides insight into character transformation and the ideological positions they embody (33). Characters in *Barbie* do not simply move the story forward but voice and contest broader cultural discourses. Therefore, Barbie's existential questioning or Ken's fragile embrace of patriarchy, among others, are functioning as linguistic enactments of larger societal debates. The examples discussed reveal the film's negotiation of discourses such as aestheticized empowerment, choice feminism, and patriarchy. Specifically, this analysis targets spoken elements (dialogue, monologues) that embody postfeminist themes from Chapter 2. Key conversations, monologues, narrator observations, song parts, and recurring speech acts such as Gloria's monologue on the contradictions of womanhood, Barbie and Ken's exchanges about patriarchy, or the satirical "damsel in distress" performances will be examined in detail. To analyze these elements systematically, this study broadly follows Fairclough's three-dimensional framework for CDA, which includes a description of the text, an interpretation of the discursive practice, and an explanation of the socio-cultural practice (*Media Discourse* 59).

In the first stage, textual analysis, I will examine dialogues, monologues, and recurring speech acts at the micro-level, attending mainly to lexical choices and rhetorical strategies. Although

Fairclough notes that this stage involves a detailed analysis of the formal properties of texts, including vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure (*Media Discourse* 57), my analysis, which focuses on the inversion and critique of postfeminist gender representation, foregrounding lexical choices and rhetoric, will already provide enough relevant information. For example, Barbie's repeated expressions of existential doubt will be analyzed in terms of word choice and emphasis to reveal underlying ideological tensions regarding female empowerment.

The second stage, discursive practice, considers how the text is produced, distributed, and consumed, situating speech acts within the broader narrative and character development. As Fairclough emphasizes, this stage focuses on the processes of text production and interpretation and how texts circulate and are consumed in specific social contexts (*Media Discourse* 58). Applying this to the film, I will analyze how Barbie's and other characters' dialogue is staged and how recurring motifs—such as Ken's quest for identity—interact with postfeminist discourses as established in the theory chapter.

Finally, the third stage, sociocultural practice, interprets how these textual and discursive patterns relate to broader societal structures and ideologies. Fairclough argues that texts are always socially situated and can reflect, reproduce, and potentially transform the social structures in which they are embedded (*Media Discourse* 62). Through this lens, the analysis examines how the film's dialogue and speech acts articulate a critique of patriarchy, aestheticized empowerment, and individualism, thereby connecting cinematic choices to cultural debates on gender, feminism, and social hierarchies. By systematically applying these three stages, the analysis ensures that both language use and social implications are considered, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of how *Barbie* constructs and challenges postfeminist norms.

Equally important as speech elements is the dimension of character and narrative development. In *Barbie*, narrative and character evolution are essential for identifying relevant tropes that critique cultural gender norms. As Judith Butler argues, gender is constituted through repeated, socially regulated performances, which narrative characters can both reproduce and subvert (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179–80). Characters' journeys, such

as Ken's quest to find his own identity, thus function as embodiments and critiques of broader social scripts surrounding gender roles and identities. Also, Ken's attempt to define himself beyond the patriarchal order and Barbie's shift from the idealized doll to an ordinary woman are not just plot points but dramatizations of gendered identity formation and resistance. Ultimately, this examination aims to understand how the characters articulate and navigate their evolving identities and societal roles. Thus, CDA in this study is not applied in a narrow linguistic sense but rather as a means of understanding how characters, through dialogue and interaction, become discursive sites of contestation over gender and power.

While CDA captures spoken critiques of postfeminism, semiotic analysis, as developed by Roland Barthes (*Elements of Semiology*), reveals how *Barbie's* visual storytelling celebrates and undermines postfeminist ideals. This dual approach shows how *Barbie* deconstructs postfeminist sensibility multimodally. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, helps uncover how meaning is constructed through visual codes, color schemes, spatial arrangements, and iconography. Semiotics examines the relationship between the signifier (the form of a sign) and the signified (the concept it represents). It demonstrates how these elements work together within a larger system of meaning (Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* 35). Barthes further distinguishes between denotation (the literal meaning of a sign) and connotation (the cultural and ideological meanings attached to it) (*Elements of Semiology* 89). To apply this framework systematically, the analysis will proceed in three steps.

First, it will identify important signs and signifiers in the filmic text, such as costume choices, color schemes, props, and recurring symbolic motifs. By examining these elements in key scenes, subversive messages relating to the thesis statement are uncovered. Second, these signs will be analyzed at the level of denotation, describing what is literally shown on screen, for instance, Barbie's sparkling pink world, Ken's macho Western outfit, or the flat feet that disrupt Barbie's perfection. Third, the analysis will move to connotation, examining how these denotative elements produce ideological meanings about gender, power, and identity. As Barthes asserts, connotation is central to understanding how cultural codes naturalize ideology, making social constructs appear universal, innocent, and self-evident (*Mythologies* 128). Finally, the analysis will situate these connotative meanings within what Barthes

terms “mythologies,” which are described as modern ideological constructs that naturalize social realities as eternal truths (*Mythologies* 110) and which films can reproduce or contest.

As moviemakers amplify themes, characters’ inner states, cultural contexts, and societal critiques through set design and color palettes (Hamad), a semiotic analysis will provide further insights into the evolving criticism of postfeminist ideas. Specifically, through this step, *Barbie*’s use of hyper-femininity, plastic aesthetics, and the contrast between Barbie Land and the Real World will be interpreted as interventions into dominant myths of postfeminism, consumerist empowerment, and patriarchal order.

By integrating semiotics with CDA, this thesis captures the film’s critique at both the linguistic and visual levels as dialogue articulates the contradictions of postfeminist discourse. In contrast, visual symbolism reinforces and complicates those critiques. Rather than treating language and imagery separately, this combined approach reflects the film’s own multimodal strategy, in which humor, irony, and satire are conveyed simultaneously through both what characters say and how the world around them is staged. Ultimately, this methodological framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of how *Barbie* interrogates gender norms, consumerist ideals, and structural inequalities, while also satirizing the contradictions at the heart of postfeminist sensibility.

Choice, empowerment, and consumerist ideals

The opening scene of *Barbie* is a parody of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, rich in symbolic meaning and immediately introduces postfeminist themes by combining a rejection of traditional gender roles with a promotion of consumerist empowerment. Detached from the main plotline, this opening scene serves as a mystical origin story for the Barbie doll. The scene shows a dry, desolate landscape where little girls feed baby dolls, hang up laundry, and pretend to cook. Their clothes are kept in beige and brown, and there is an earnest expression on their faces.

Fairclough’s first stage, textual description, reveals how the imagery of domestic play contrasts the sudden arrival of the iconic first Barbie, towering like Kubrick’s monolith. The narrator’s voice-over establishes the restrictive gender discourse, “little girls can only ever

play to be mothers with their baby dolls" (*Barbie* 00:01:30–00:01:40). The visual codes (beige clothing, miniature laundry lines, toy irons) reinforce confinement within traditional femininity. At the semiotic level, rupture occurs when a giant Barbie, styled after the 1959 original, enters the frame. Barbie becomes the symbolic center of this scene, replacing Kubrick's monolith, visually signifying the arrival of a new era and a cultural breakthrough. The following scene, in which the young girls destroy the baby dolls, dramatizes the rejection of maternal domesticity. Here, empowerment is visually encoded as a break from care-oriented femininity toward postfeminist ideals of independence. This scene thus marks a shift from "girls as caregivers" to "girls as empowered consumers."

Fairclough's second stage, the interpretation of discursive practice, positions Barbie as the solution to the girls' dissatisfaction but, crucially, frames this liberation through consumerism. The transformation appears not as a collaborative feminist struggle, but as the embrace of a new commodity: the Barbie doll itself. This exemplifies what Gill identifies as a central feature of postfeminist sensibility: the rearticulation of feminist progress as consumer choice (*"Postfeminist media culture"* 153). The girls' agency emerges through the destruction of old toys in favor of new ones, situating Barbie as both savior and product. In this way, the scene already anticipates the film's later critique of postfeminist logic by showing how liberation is bound to and limited by the marketplace.

Fairclough's third stage, socio-cultural practice, exposes the ideological work of this scene. The narrative advances the idea that gender equality is achievable through symbolic representation and consumption, foreshadowing McRobbie's critique of postfeminism's "undoing" of feminism, in which empowerment is reframed as a lifestyle rather than a political movement (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 26). The Barbie-as-monolith sequence establishes the film's central tension: dramatizing liberation while limiting it to market logics.

Continuing the opening sequence, the narrator recaps the evolution of the Barbie doll and extends this postfeminist logic.

"Yes, 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. Thanks to Barbie, all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved.”
(*Barbie* 00:02:47–00:03:40)

At the textual level, statements such as “Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything” (*Barbie* 00:02:47–00:03:40) universalize Barbie’s individual success, transforming her into a stand-in for all women regardless of their social realities. Semiotically, the monologue is paired with images of Barbies with different skin tones, professional uniforms such as a pilot’s or reporter’s suit, and diverse body shapes (a veterinarian Barbie in a wheelchair, a Barbie in a spacesuit with a more average body shape). These images communicate inclusion and progress. However, they enact the very surface-level diversity that feminist scholars such as Tasker and Negra (108) critique, since the celebration of visible difference stands in for substantive structural change. The presence of Barbies of color, Barbies with disabilities, and Barbies in male-dominated professions, such as astronaut or pilot, suggests inclusivity and gender equality. Nevertheless, these representations are aestheticized and decontextualized, offering no acknowledgment of the structural barriers that real women—especially those marginalized by race, class, ability, or body size—continue to face. As Banet-Weiser points out, postfeminist media culture frequently presents diversity as a surface-level feature, using visible difference to signal progress while avoiding any engagement with systemic injustice (*What’s Your Flava?* 201-203). Even though Barbies with different skin tones and disabilities are represented, the majority shown remain predominantly slim, conventionally attractive, and stylishly dressed, reinforcing narrow beauty standards and signaling that empowerment is contingent upon maintaining an idealized feminine aesthetic. This exemplifies what McRobbie (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 60-70) terms the “postfeminist masquerade”: empowerment is contingent upon the continued performance of an idealized femininity—slim, stylish, glamorous—even when framed as diversity.

By listing Barbie's possessions ("her own money, her own house, her own car, her own career" *Barbie* 00:03:10-00:03:14), the narrator ties empowerment to neoliberal ideals of independence, consumer power, and property ownership, confirming McRobbie's critique of postfeminist culture's embrace of individualism, consumerism, and self-management (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 120). When the language of empowerment is absorbed into market-friendly narratives, McRobbie argues, the undoing of feminism can occur, as power and fulfillment are represented as matters of individual effort rather than collective political struggle (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 47-51).

The ironic claim that "all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved" (*Barbie* 00:03:33-00:03:40) reveals the profound disconnect between the real world, where gender inequality persists so acutely that equality can only be imagined through an absurd fantasy land ruled by feminist Barbies, which long symbolized normative femininity and were harshly critiqued by feminists. The cheerful, matter-of-fact tone suggests that the narrator is mimicking and mocking neoliberal feminism's tendency to equate symbolic representation and consumer choice with actual equality. In this case, the ironic tone disrupts the seamless narrative of Barbie as a postfeminist heroine and opens the door for the film's deeper interrogation of structural inequality. Also, irony becomes explicit in the closing line: "At least that's what the Barbies think. After all, they're living in Barbie Land. Who am I to burst their bubble?" (*Barbie* 00:03:40-00:03:47). Textually, this inserts a second voice that destabilizes the preceding celebration. Through this rhetorical move, the film introduces a layer of self-awareness, inviting the audience to question the apparent resolution of feminist struggles presented moments earlier. Fairclough's concept of interdiscursivity (*Media Discourse* 66-67) is evident here, as the text combines a celebratory empowerment discourse with ironic distancing, creating space for critique. Semiotically, the "bubble" metaphor suggests fragility and detachment and plays on both a literal and a metaphorical level: Barbie Land, which is introduced right after, is a hyper-aestheticized, sealed-off fantasy space where postfeminist promises appear intact, but, as the narrator's comment suggests, can easily collapse when confronted with reality.

The scene not only mobilizes a familiar postfeminist idea of female success and empowerment that are tied to neoliberal ideals of individual achievement (Gill, "Postfeminist media culture"

163-164) but also subtly exposes its limits. While postfeminist media typically centers a white, heterosexual, middle-class ideal as the implicit norm of successful femininity, *Barbie* appears at first glance to depart from this pattern by foregrounding a multi-ethnic ensemble of Barbies in positions of power and prestige. However, this diversification of bodies and ethnicities does not fundamentally unsettle the underlying neoliberal framework of individual achievement. Instead, it extends the older white middle-class ideal into a more inclusive but still aspirational model of feminine success, in which structural inequalities are rendered invisible because anyone can now be Barbie. This dynamic reflects what McRobbie describes as the postfeminist undoing of feminism, whereby the language of inclusion and opportunity works to cancel out structural critique by presenting gender and racial justice as already achieved and folded into consumer choice (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 11-13).

In this sense, the film's visualization of racial and ethnic diversity both draws on and complicates a postfeminist sensibility. On the one hand, the multiplicity of Barbies appears to answer long-standing critiques of the white, blonde, middle-class Barbie as the normative feminine ideal, on the other hand, these figures remain uniformly glamorous and successful, and thus continue to embody what Gill identifies as a postfeminist linkage of female empowerment to individual aspiration and self-fashioning ("*Postfeminist media culture*" 163-164). The presence of non-white Barbies in high-status roles can therefore be read as signaling that feminism's goals have been met since it dismantles the dominance of a white middle-class. However, the film's later narrative reveals that such symbolic diversity leaves intact wider regimes of racialized and gendered inequality. This sets the stage for the film's later exploration of the limitations of aestheticized empowerment and symbolic diversity, reinforcing McRobbie's argument that postfeminism operates through a double entanglement, in which feminist ideas are both invoked and discredited through their articulation in commodified, market-friendly forms (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 24-26). Taken together, this opening sequence crystallizes key postfeminist themes—femininity as bodily property, empowerment through consumption, and the aestheticization of diversity – while also signaling that the film will interrogate these very discourses.

Barbie Land a postfeminist utopia

Following the ironic closing of the narrator's introduction, the film transitions into a detailed world-building sequence that establishes the internal logic and aesthetic of Barbie Land. Barbie Land is constructed as a self-contained, hyperreal, utopian matriarchy that initially appears to be detached from the so-called Real World. At a descriptive level, the pastel color palette, minimalist toy-like architecture, and plastic props closely mimic the original Mattel products, signaling the artificiality and perfectionism of this world. The key signifiers include Barbie's Dreamhouses without walls, showers without water, and Barbie floating from her rooftop to the street. All of this presents Barbie Land as a fantasy space that is detached from physical realism.

Each Barbie is introduced performing their professional role (mail women, road worker, president, Nobel Prize-winning author, Supreme Court justice) while dressed in perfectly coordinated, brightly colored outfits that harmonize with the pastel environment. The professions themselves symbolize achievement and authority, but they are stripped of struggle or labor. This absence of labor and effort constructs female success as effortless. Author Barbie receives praise without evident work, and President Barbie leads without bureaucracy, as can be seen in the following dialogues:

Barbie President: "Everybody, turn to the Barbie next to you. Tell her how much you love her. Compliment her. Reporter Barbie, you can ask me any question you want.

Reporter Barbie: Well, how come you're so amazing?

Barbie President: No comment. [...] Ah, I love you guys." (Barbie 00:06:45 – 00:06:55).

Nobel prize Barbie host: "The Nobel prize for journalism goes to ... Barbie.

Journalism Barbie: I worked very hard, so I deserve it. [all applauding]" (Barbie 00:07:00–00:07:05)

Lawyer Barbie: "In our assessment, money is not speech, and corporations have no free speech rights to begin with. So, any claim on their part to be exercising a right is just their attempt to turn our democracy into a plutocracy. [applauding] This makes me emotional, and I'm expressing it. I have no difficulty holding both logic and feeling at

the same time. And it does not diminish my powers. It expands them. [all cheering, applauding]" (Barbie 00:07:10-00:07:33)

The narrator does not speak in this segment, but the discursive voices are embedded in the Barbies' dialogue. For example, President Barbie commands, "Everybody, turn to the Barbie next to you. Tell her how much you love her. Compliment her." (*Barbie* 00:06:45–00:06:55), which establishes the notion of a regime of affirmation. Nobel Prize Barbie asserts, "I worked very hard, so I deserve it" (*Barbie* 00:07:00–00:07:05), and Lawyer Barbie proclaims, "I have no difficulty holding both logic and feeling at the same time ... it expands [my powers]" (*Barbie* 00:07:33). When looking closer at this last statement by Lawyer Barbie, it can be interpreted as a rejection of the patriarchal binary that positions reason as masculine and emotion as feminine, with the latter historically devalued in political and intellectual spheres (Jaggar; Code; Lloyd). From a theoretical perspective, Barbie's statement resonates with Alison Jaggar's concept of "outlaw emotions," which argues that emotions can be a legitimate and even essential source of knowledge, specifically for marginalized groups (166-169). By asserting that combining logic and emotion enhances, rather than weakens, her powers, Lawyer Barbie disrupts the patriarchal epistemology that privileges detached rationality over knowledge. In addition, this line aligns with the feminist epistemological stance that reason and emotion are not mutually exclusive but complementary in producing more holistic and inclusive understandings of justice (Jaggar 157-160). In the context of Barbie Land, this sentiment functions as an empowering maxim, suggesting that emotional intelligence amplifies rational argumentation rather than undermining it. However, because this is framed within the postfeminist utopia of Barbie Land, it appears as an effortless given rather than a contested feminist achievement. This risks flattening the real-world struggle to have emotional expressiveness valued as much as rationality, reinforcing the postfeminist illusion that gendered hierarchies of knowledge have already been dismantled.

Lexically, these statements emphasize positivity (love, amazing, deserve, powers), meritocratic achievement (worked very hard), and the integration of reason and emotion, which takes up feminist epistemological themes. The tone is celebratory and uncritical, constructing empowerment as a naturalized given. Discursively, they establish a regime of affirmation and consensus: applause, cheering, and compliments replace debate or critique.

Here, a parallel can be drawn to McRobbie's double entanglement, since feminist values such as mutual female support and solidarity among women are incorporated in a way that seems to neutralize the need for further feminist struggle (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 24-26). In line with this argumentation is Lawyer Barbie's monologue. Even though it is politically charged and articulates a complex critique of democracy, rather than sparking a real political debate, her arguments are met with applause and reduce politics to performance. The statements by Lawyer Barbie construct emotional expressiveness as a feminine strength, which is met with cheering and emotional openness, suggesting that Barbie Land is a place where structural power is already equitably distributed among all participants of society. This imagined equality exemplifies the postfeminist fantasy of a post-patriarchal world, where political and social struggles are presumed resolved, and where empowerment is measured by affirming the self within an already-perfect system (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 15; Projansky 67).

At the interpretative level, these dialogues function as ritualized speech acts that dramatize the illusion of an already-achieved feminist utopia. President Barbie's directive normalizes mutual praise as a discursive expectation. Nobel Prize Barbie's meritocratic claim aligns with neoliberal ideals of individual effort and reward. Lawyer Barbie's integration of reason and emotion draws on feminist epistemological critiques of patriarchy (Jaggar; Code; Lloyd). Nevertheless, within Barbie Land, this critique is depoliticized since it is applauded as a performance rather than as contested knowledge. In this way, character voices serve as sites of power negotiation, but the negotiation is only one-directional: authority consolidates consensus rather than inviting dissent. Intertextually, this aligns with broader cultural discourses of "girl power" and postfeminist meritocracy. Also, by linking success to individual effort, neoliberal ideals are already introduced in these world-building scenes.

Since the Barbies are shown in their professional environment in this specific manner, it can be interpreted as a visual sign that connotes a world of ease, control, aesthetic pleasure, where femininity equals competence. At the denotative level, the scene depicts Barbies effortlessly succeeding in high-status roles. Together, text and imagery present a world where female achievement and beauty coexist seamlessly, free of struggle or contradiction. This sequence situates Barbie Land as a discursive space in which power is negotiated through affirmation and performance rather than through conflict or debate. The dialogues function

as ritualistic speech acts: applause, cheering, and reciprocal compliments replace critique or contestation. The voices of authority (President Barbie, Lawyer Barbie) do not invite deliberation but rather consolidate consensus, showing how discourse itself enforces a hegemonic order of positivity.

The pristine costuming, set design, and polished smiles on the Barbies' faces function as visual shorthand for competence and beauty, coexisting without contradiction. There is no visible tension between career and aesthetic appeal as Barbies wear high heels and full makeup while performing high-status roles, thus reinforcing a postfeminist ideal that women can "have it all." By presenting career success as effortless and unmarked by structural barriers, the film mirrors what Gill identifies as a hallmark of postfeminist sensibility: the erasure of systemic inequality through the celebration of individual achievement (*"Postfeminist media culture"* 162-164). Thus, while the outlined dialogues and statements appear to be feminist, they operate within the fantasy of Barbie Land, where structural change has already been completed, leaving only symbolic gestures of empowerment. This framing turns feminist politics into a celebratory performance, mirroring postfeminism's tendency to depoliticize feminism and recast it as individual, emotionally gratifying affirmation (Gill, *"Postfeminist media culture"* 162-164; McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 15). These visual cues situate Barbie Land within the realm of spectacle rather than reality, foregrounding its function as an aestheticized projection of female empowerment rather than a lived social condition.

Gender and power dynamics in Barbie Land

Generally speaking, after this first world building sequence the audience is introduced to the other inhabitants of Barbie Land with the narrator's transition, "Barbie has a great day every day. But Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him" (*Barbie* 00:07:58). To clarify, each Barbie has her own Ken that is suggested as her supposed romantic interest. For the main protagonist, Stereotypical Barbie, this is Beach Ken, who will be referred to as Ken in the following chapters of this thesis, just as Stereotypical Barbie will be referred to as Barbie. The narrator's line in minute 00:07:58 functions as the discursive hinge that introduces the gender relations of Barbie Land. The utterance directly situates Ken's identity and happiness as contingent on Barbie's attention. From a discourse analytical perspective, this line explicitly frames Ken's existence in relational terms. This inversion echoes Simone de Beauvoir's

observation that, under patriarchy, women are cast as “the Other” whose existence is defined relative to man (De Beauvoir 41). In Barbie Land, this hierarchy is flipped, with Ken becoming the Other, dependent on Barbie for meaning. Lexically, the line juxtaposes Barbie’s “every day” fulfillment with Ken’s conditional “only if,” reinforcing the asymmetry. At the interpretative level, this reversal is staged not as a radical critique but as playful irony. The narrator’s light-hearted delivery cues the supposedly knowing audience to laugh at Ken’s dependency and presents this flipped power dynamic as ironic. Again, a parallel can be drawn to Gill’s concept of postfeminist sensibility, in which irony and knowingness are often used to create distance from specific beliefs (*“Postfeminist media culture”* 159). Rather than presenting gender power dynamics as a serious challenge to structural inequality, the film frames it as a knowing “what if” scenario.

Furthermore, parallels with McRobbie’s notion of undoing feminism can be found since a supposedly feminist utopia (men as the subordinate gender) is neutralized and ridiculed by being presented as a parody rather than as a systemic critique (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 47-51). To summarize, this scene describes a hierarchy of recognition and signals to the audience that gender relations are inverted in this world. At the mythological level, the statement contributes to the broader cultural fantasy of a postfeminist utopia where patriarchal asymmetries are humorously reversed rather than dismantled. The following beach sequence further develops these dynamics through visual and discursive cues, as its main function in the narration is to introduce all the Kens and their relations to one another. The Kens are shown exchanging envious glances, puffing their chests, and competing for Barbie’s gaze. Ken’s surfboard, his exaggerated gestures, and the repetition of failed attempts to impress Barbie all function as visual signifiers of Ken’s insecurity and rivalry. On a denotative level, these images depict competition among the Kens while signifying fragile masculinity constructed on external validation. A cultural fantasy in which men’s social currency depends entirely on being noticed and recognized by women is created here. Therefore, women are positioned as the arbiters of men’s social status.

From a discourse analytical perspective, these interactions between Barbie and the Kens can be read as ritualized speech and gesture acts. Although the Kens rarely engage in long dialogue in this segment, their body language serves as nonverbal discourse that conveys dependence

on Barbie and rivalry among themselves. Ken's failed surf attempt, repeatedly cut against Barbie's disinterested gaze, functions as a speech act of supplication: his gestures request acknowledgment. Also, the repeated shots of Ken's failed attempts to outshine other Kens serve as a visual shorthand for a male identity built on rivalry and external validation. However, the comic frame, emphasized through slapstick timing, undermines the seriousness of this dependency. At the interpretative level, this humor invites the audience to laugh at male vulnerability, thereby trivializing the very power asymmetry being portrayed. Rather than criticizing the structural logic that ties self-worth to recognition, the film reverses the dependency while keeping the relational logic intact.

To summarize, the beach scene mimics patriarchal relational hierarchies through gender role inversion while neutralizing political critique through comedic framing. Rather than dismantling the notion that personal value derives from another's recognition, the scene merely reverses dependency's direction—from women to men to men to women. This exemplifies postfeminist media's negotiation of gender power, specifically aligning with McRobbie's double entanglement, in which feminist values appear superficially realized (women dominant, men subordinate) yet remain contained within parody that preserves underlying inequality (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 60-64). It can be argued that this mechanism re-secures patriarchal logic by retelling the myth that worth is defined through relational hierarchy. Furthermore, the audience is not yet asked to imagine dismantling relational hierarchies altogether but only to enjoy their temporary inversion. As such, the structural foundation of inequality, defining identity through another's recognition, remains untouched. The broader world-building of Barbie Land reinforces these discursive patterns. Systemic barriers have been eliminated since all positions of political, professional, and cultural authority are held by women. At the same time, men possess no institutional power, as their existence is organized around leisure and romantic aspiration. It can be argued that this establishes a matriarchal utopia where gender inequality appears to be reversed.

Ultimately, Barbie Land simulates gender equality through matriarchal reversal: it is presented as a hyperreal fantasy detached from the material and structural realities of the real world, where women hold all power while relational hierarchies persist. There is no aging, mortality, scarcity, or ecological constraint; even the laws of physics do not apply. The utopian quality of

Barbie Land thus depends precisely on its detachment from reality, dramatizing a fantasy of post-patriarchal harmony that conceals ongoing inequalities outside the frame. By combining semiotic cues (color, costume, gesture) with discursive strategies (narrator irony, Barbie affirmation, Ken competition), the film constructs a playful but politically ambivalent vision of gender dynamics. The effect is to satirize male dependency and celebrate female power, while leaving intact the deeper cultural logic of relational hierarchies.

Cracks in the utopia: disruptions of gender and perfection in Barbie Land

Following the beach sequence, the film moves into a large-scale dance party in Barbie Land (*Barbie* 00:11:13–00:13:36) that sustains Barbie Land’s celebratory tone and aesthetic perfection through synchronized choreography, elaborate costumes, and verbal reassurance between the Barbies. However, the light-hearted dynamic of the party is abruptly interrupted when Barbie blurts out, “You guys ever think about dying?” (*Barbie* 00:13:37). This sudden intrusion of mortality operates as a signifier for rupture in the otherwise seamless fantasy of Barbie Land. Barbie’s outburst disrupts the prevailing self-affirming and celebratory rhetoric while also shedding light on the fragility of the postfeminist utopia the Barbies live in. Moreover, the moment can be interpreted as foreshadowing the instability of a world built on surface perfection, signaling that the fantasy of aestheticized empowerment is precarious and easily unsettled.

A quieter follow-up scene to the party reinforces this disruption. When Ken suggests staying over, Barbie rejects him firmly with “You can go now” (*Barbie* 00:14:35) and “Oh, but I don’t want you here” (*Barbie* 00:14:49). Discursively, this exchange inverts the heteronormative narrative convention that positions female characters as romantic and that oftentimes male persistence is rewarded with sexual favors (Bowler 188-190). However, here Barbie’s autonomy is expressed through these two statements and functions as proof of her refusal to frame her identity in relation to Ken. This dialogue serves as a feminist disruption of an oftentimes compulsory romance that postfeminist media culture is structured around. Postfeminist media such as *Sex and the City* or *Bridget Jones’s Diary* famously celebrate this trope of female protagonists defining their identities and narrative arcs heavily through their relationships with men (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 25-27). In contrast, Barbie’s

asserting of boundaries inverts this heteronormative script. Furthermore, in the utopian context of Barbie Land, Ken's experience of rejection is free from real-world consequences, as Ken's wounded pride remains comedic, not threatening. To summarize, a feminist fantasy is enacted here since a woman's autonomy is universally respected and remains unquestioned without negotiation or conflict, and the centrality of romance that usually drives postfeminist narratives is rejected.

The scenes that follow Barbie's sudden existential question, "Do you guys ever think about dying?" (*Barbie* 00:13:36), intensify the cracks in perfection and introduce a thematic shift in the narrative. Until this point, Barbie Land has functioned as a visually and ideologically polished space where empowerment, beauty, and success coexist without contradiction. However, visual clues such as a cold shower and expired milk lead Barbie to notice changes in her body. Especially interesting on this account is the volleyball beach scene (*Barbie* 00:17:07), in which not only do beauty standards become even more apparent, but we also see a reversal of gender roles. In this scene, the Barbies play volleyball against one another while the Kens enthusiastically cheer them on from the sidelines. It can be argued that through placing female agency at the center, traditional gender roles are visually and narratively reversed since cinematic tropes typically present women as passive spectators of male athleticism. Therefore, the Kens' exaggerated cheerleading—complete with pompoms, excitement, and performative enthusiasm—mimics stereotypical portrayals of femininity, functioning as both satire and symbolic commentary. From a semiotic perspective, the portrayal of women dominating athletic action and male cheerleading questions the naturalness of gendered behavior by exposing their constructedness: what appears absurd when men perform stereotypical femininity, reveals how gender roles are performative rather than innate (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179). However, the comedic tone of the scene also fits within a postfeminist framework where gender inversions are played for laughs rather than offering a deep critique. As Gill argues, postfeminist texts often use irony and parody to "have it both ways," simultaneously mocking and reinforcing gender norms without challenging the structures that produce them (*"Postfeminist media culture"* 159).

Besides the reversal of gendered behavior, Barbie is also confronted in this sequence with her feet, once in a constant tiptoe pose, becoming flat. The other Barbies' reaction to this event

is exaggerated horror and collective pretend vomiting. On the surface, the flat feet symbolize a disruption of Barbie's aesthetic perfection; a loss of the hyperfeminine, permanently tiptoed body that defines her idealized form. Mythologically, the other Barbies' reaction signifies the internalized surveillance and discipline of persisting postfeminist beauty standards, where even slight deviations from the ideal provoke disgust and social panic. What stands out in this scene from a feminist perspective is that even though it is set in the utopia of Barbie Land, narrow bodily ideals imposed on women are enforced not by patriarchal structures, but by women themselves. The vomiting gesture, though exaggerated for comedic effect, highlights how deeply women have internalized patriarchal thinking, even within a world where women appear to hold all the power.

Taken together, these disruptions mark the gradual unraveling of Barbie Land's discursive order. Visual and narrative signals of bodily vulnerability, discomfort, and gender anxiety disrupt the initial promise of a postfeminist utopia. By exposing the fragility of Barbie's ideal form and subverting traditional gender scripts, the film dramatizes the contradictions of postfeminist culture. On the surface, the utopia embodies completed feminism since women hold all institutional power, set boundaries without contest, and occupy both athletic and professional domains. However, the cracks expose how fragile this fantasy is. Barbie's existential question signals that even in a postfeminist fantasy, mortality and imperfection haunt the promise of effortless empowerment. The rejection of Ken reflects a feminist aspiration for autonomy, but its consequence-free portrayal undercuts its resonance with real-world struggles where male entitlement often resists boundaries. The volleyball scene and the vomiting reaction to flat feet demonstrate how inversion and exaggeration can be used to critique gender norms. Again, a parallel to McRobbie's double entanglement can be drawn since feminist values, such as stereotypical gender performances, are reversed. At the same time, beauty standards are exaggerated and neutralized by being reduced to parody (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 24-26).

Weird Barbie as the othered feminine figure

The narrative continues with Barbie seeking help for her malfunctions (flat feet, thoughts of death) from Weird Barbie. What is immediately apparent is that Weird Barbie's appearance is visually deviant from the hyper-polished Barbie norm. With her messy, short-cut, colored hair, chaotic makeup, and acrobatic movements, she stands in sharp contrast to the other perfectly styled Barbies. Instead of neatness and harmony, she semiotically embodies messiness, disruption, and physical expressiveness. Her visual and behavioral differences can be understood as a symbolic representation of what Julia Kristeva terms "the abject," which is that which disturbs identity, order, and cultural boundaries and is thus cast out to preserve social and symbolic stability (4). Her nonconformity can also be seen through expressions such as "That Ken of yours, he is one nice-looking little protein pot. [...] I'd like to see what kind of nude blob he's packing under those jeans" (*Barbie* 00:20:23). Her line clearly breaks the prevailing discourse of Barbie Land's childlike naivety around the topic of sexuality. Also, this sexual reference can be understood as a signifier of Weird Barbie being an "unruly woman." The concept of an unruly woman was first described by Kathleen Rowe in 1995 as a woman who claims her own desires and does not have to be polite or nice to achieve her goals, and by doing so, inverts the traditional stereotype of female characters being overtly feminine, polite, or being a "damsel in distress" (31).

In addition, the myth surrounding Weird Barbie's origin, which is that she once was a regular Barbie doll but became weird because girls played too hard with her, carries significant cultural implications. First and foremost, this backstory explains her specific appearance. However, the idea of playing too hard also deviates from stereotypical expectations of how girls should play. Rough or destructive play, such as cutting hair, coloring faces, and twisting limbs, is culturally coded as masculine behavior and can be understood as a lack of proper girlhood behavior. Therefore, it can be argued that Weird Barbie embodies the fear of unruly women, since she is the material manifestation of what happens when girls transgress the boundaries of acceptable feminine play. In this sense, Weird Barbie exposes the fragility of Barbie Land's utopia by making visible the suppressed possibility that femininity can be messy, resistant, and nonconforming. What also sets Weird Barbie apart is that she has no male counterpart, as she lives isolated from the others on the margins of Barbie Land with her dog and other discontinued Barbie dolls. Again, this seems to point to Weird Barbie's character being a

deviation from the stereotypical femininity persistent in Barbie Land and being a representation of the suppressed underside of the postfeminist utopia. She can function as a reminder that the empowering ideal of perfection is maintained by rejecting all that does not conform to it. Through her figure, the film satirizes the narrow expectations of both femininity and girlhood, revealing how tightly controlled behavioral norms are reproduced through toys and play.

This exclusionary logic of Barbie Land becomes explicit in Barbie's and Weird Barbie's exchange about Barbie's malfunction. Weird Barbie warns, "Or you're gonna keep going funny. Look at your upper thigh." (*Barbie* 00:21:15) When Barbie gasps at the sight, Weird Barbie diagnoses it as cellulite and predicts, "That's gonna spread everywhere. And then you gonna start getting sad, mushy and complicated." (*Barbie* 00:21:23) The scene draws directly on postfeminist culture's pathologization of ageing and bodily imperfection. Cellulite is framed as a sign of decline, an imperfection that threatens Barbie's happiness, and even her emotional stability. In semiotic terms, cellulite functions as a marker of the abject body, one that reveals the fragility of the polished feminine ideal and the inevitability of bodily change. Weird Barbie's blunt naming of it punctures the fantasy of perfection, while also reinforcing the beauty norms her appearance seems to challenge. Her diagnosis signals that within Barbie Land's framework, physical change is not simply natural but catastrophic. It appears that those who are "mushy and complicated" (*Barbie* 00:21:23) are incompatible with the utopia's seamless vision of empowered femininity.

The narrative continues with Weird Barbie explaining to Barbie that the cause of her thoughts of death, flat feet, and cellulite is because the girl playing with her in the Real World is in some emotional distress. Barbie responds in disbelief, "Why would she be sad? We fixed everything in the Real World so women can be happy and powerful." (*Barbie* 00:21:50) Semiotically, Barbie's statement functions as a signifier of ideological naïveté, as her claim that feminism has succeeded reflects a postfeminist discourse. The remark reinforces the cultural fantasy that gender equality is a completed project, which is referred to by Whelehan as "forgetting feminism" (*Remaking Feminism* 168), meaning the idea that feminism is no longer necessary because its goals have been achieved, shifting empowerment into the domain of individual attitude, choice, or self-presentation rather than a collective political struggle. Importantly,

the irony of this statement is foregrounded by the film's narrator earlier words: "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?" (*Barbie* 00:03:40) This framing primes the audience to read Barbie's confidence as misguided, transforming her line into satire rather than affirmation. Within a discourse-analytical lens, Barbie's voice thus operates as a site where ideological assumptions are exposed. Her words dramatize the belief that symbolic victories in fantasy worlds automatically translate into real equality. By positioning the Barbies as unknowing characters, the film highlights the disjuncture between postfeminist optimism and the lived realities of structural inequality, setting up a narrative arc in which Barbie's journey to the Real World dismantles this comforting illusion.

The exchange between Weird Barbie and Barbie culminates in the symbolic choice scene. Barbie must choose between a high-heeled shoe, symbolizing the maintenance of the perfect, curated life in Barbie Land, and a brown Birkenstock sandal, representing a departure into the Real World to search for the girl who is playing with her. As Gill describes, a postfeminist sensibility supports the idea that women's life paths are a matter of personal choices, ignoring the structural, cultural, and ideological pressures that make some choices far more acceptable or desirable than others ("*Postfeminist media culture*" 149). In the sandals vs. high heels scene, this illusion of choice is on full display. On the surface, Barbie is empowered to choose between two life paths: stay in Barbie Land (high heels) or go to the real world (sandals) to find the girl who is playing with her. However, in reality, Barbie is confronted with a binary where one choice is stigmatized as irrational, as it would mean becoming an outcast, just like Weird Barbie with cellulite, flat feet, and even more malfunctions. Therefore, the sandals are implicitly the only viable option. As Barbie repeatedly chose the high heels, only to be pushed back to the sandals, it becomes clear that the conditions of autonomy are already predetermined. This reflects Gill's observation that in postfeminist media, certain options (often those that uphold dominant beauty ideals and consumerist lifestyles) are presented as freely chosen, while others are framed as deviant or undesirable. However, here Gerwig flips the script, making imperfection the narratively preferable choice while still showing how heavily choice is steered. So, the lack of actual choice critiques postfeminist sensibility by undermining the empowerment-through-choice narrative and exposing how freedom often

masks guided outcomes. Also, this scene is parodying the rhetoric of autonomy, since Barbie thinks she is deciding, although the conditions of the choice are preset by Weird Barbie. Therefore, postfeminist sensibility and its idea of choice are critiqued.

In summary, the character of Weird Barbie embodies the abject feminine and unruly woman that must be excluded to sustain the fantasy of empowerment-as-perfection. Her deviating appearance and behavior signal that postfeminist equality depends on strict boundaries that exclude imperfection, messiness, and sexuality. Moreover, the cellulite diagnosis and Barbie's shock illustrate how beauty norms remain a disciplining force even when women hold all symbolic power. This reflects the persistence of neoliberal postfeminism, where bodily maintenance is a constant obligation. Weird Barbie's discourse dramatizes how women themselves become agents of enforcement, naming and shaming imperfection. The consecutive choice scene consolidates the critique. By parodying agency as simply choosing between shoes, the film satirizes postfeminism's obsession with individual choice. Barbie's guided decision reveals how empowerment-through-choice is itself ideological: certain options are coded as normal, others as deviant.

Gender dynamics and autonomy

Barbie's departure from Barbie Land to the Real World marks a key narrative and symbolic turning point. Guided by Weird Barbie, she embarks on a journey to the Real World in search of the girl whose distress has caused her malfunction. The send-off from the other Barbies again foregrounds the ideological naïveté regarding Barbie's role in the achievement of feminist goals. Barbie's friends express jealousy that she will "[...] get to see all the good work we've done to fix the world" (*Barbie* 00:25:13), predicting she will be celebrated as a hero by women in the Real World (*Barbie* 00:25:15) and affirm that they "owe their wonderful lives to Barbie" (*Barbie* 00:25:20). As already explained earlier in other examples, we can find here an insistence that feminism's struggles are resolved, gender equality has been achieved and that women live empowered lives. The voices of the Barbies thus function as a discursive site in which postfeminist ideology is dramatized. Within these statements, one can also find irony, as the audience knows that the Real World does not reflect this utopian vision, and that Barbie, as a pop cultural figure, is not viewed as having played any substantial role in past feminist achievements.

However, shortly after Barbie's journey begins, her autonomy is undermined by a comedic intrusion of Ken. Ken, who has not been invited to join her, hides in the backseat of her car and only reveals himself once they are on their way. Although Barbie expresses annoyance and initially points out, "You're only gonna slow me down." (*Barbie* 00:26:27), which momentarily affirms her independence, the narrative quickly undercuts this assertion by forcing her to accept Ken's presence. This scene has important implications as it foreshadows how Ken will later co-opt her mission while also offering a critique of the postfeminist narrative of female agency. In postfeminist discourse, women are framed as fully autonomous agents, free to make empowered choices. However, Barbie's quest, which was initiated as a solitary act of self-determination, is immediately reshaped by an uninvited male presence, reflecting how men can intrude upon and redirect women's agency. The humor of the scene lies in Ken's absurd stowaway reveal from the backseat, while Barbie sings along to the radio. Ken's unwanted intrusion signals a destabilization of Barbie's control and undermines the fantasy of untroubled, individual empowerment that Barbie Land promises. Moreover, the humor masks the seriousness of this dynamic, aligning with Gill's observation that postfeminist media often trivializes gendered power struggles by framing them through irony and play (*"Postfeminist media culture"* 159).

Visually, the transition to the Real World is staged through a whimsical travel montage that maintains the film's playful tone while also serving as a transitional space where the boundaries between the Barbie Land fantasy and the Real World begin to blur. Barbie and Ken pass through candy-colored sets and use absurd modes of travel, such as speedboats, tandem bikes, and rocket rides, which visually signal to the audience that they are moving from an entirely manufactured world into a realm of complex social dynamics. Importantly, the montage also reproduces a visual grammar: Barbie's journey of self-discovery is presented as glamorous, effortless, and aestheticized, aligning with a media logic that renders female transformation as a stylish adventure rather than a messy or destabilizing process. The final sequence of the montage, in which Barbie and Ken seamlessly roll into Los Angeles without any transition shock, reinforces this. Their world-crossing is rendered visually smooth, masking the ideological tensions that will soon surface.

Taken together, this sequence exposes the limits of Barbie Land's postfeminist utopia. On one level, Barbie's journey is framed as an empowered choice since she leaves her comfort zone to confront the unknown. However, the send-off from the Barbies, with their self-congratulatory rhetoric, highlights that this empowerment is situated within a fantasy discourse of completion. Ken's intrusion destabilizes this image of autonomy, foreshadowing how male agency will later reshape Barbie's mission. Finally, the travel montage illustrates how postfeminist culture aestheticizes women's journeys by rendering the crossing of boundaries into a glamorous, smooth spectacle. In this way, the departure sequence showcases the film's broader critique by continually negotiating the promises of empowerment, autonomy, choice, and representation through discursive voices that reveal the fragility and contingency of these concepts.

Patriarchy and the objectification of the female gender

Stepping into the Real World with the confidence that Barbie Land's achievements have translated beyond its borders, Barbie is confronted instead with a reality that strongly contradicts her expectations. Upon arriving at Venice Beach, Barbie's assumptions about the Real World begin to unravel almost immediately. Barbie was expecting praise and admiration for the supposed good work all of the Barbies have done for women. However, instead she is exposed to catcalls, intrusive stares, and unsolicited and sexualized remarks such as "Give us a smile, blondie," "You are hot," and "Damn, girl." (*Barbie* 00:27:58-00:28:25) The camera lingers on Barbie's shifting expression (*Barbie* 00:27:50), visibly marking her discomfort as she becomes self-conscious under the male gaze which is a strong contrast to the adoration she enjoys in Barbie Land. She states "I feel kind of ill at ease. Like I don't know the word for it, but I'm ... conscious, but it's myself that I'm conscious of." (*Barbie* 00:28:07-00:28:14) Ken, however, interprets the same attention entirely differently, namely as admiration which is conveyed through him starting to smile broadly and stating "Yeah, they're also staring at me. [...] Wow!" (*Barbie* 00:28:00) When Barbie approaches a construction site in search of "some good feminine energy" she is only met with further harassment. Her literal and naïve reply that she has "no genitals" is quickly undercut by Ken's boast, "I have all the genitals" (*Barbie* 00:29:01), positioning male sexuality as the dominant frame of meaning. The scene reaches its climax when a man slaps Barbie's buttocks, prompting her to reply by slapping him in the face. This leads to Barbie and Ken being processed at the police station. Even there,

objectification persists, as Barbie receives yet another comment on her outfit, prompting her to suggest a change of clothes.

Discursively, this sequence dramatizes the collapse of Barbie Land's postfeminist illusion in which women's empowerment is complete, untroubled, and universally recognized. The catcalls, groping, and commentary transform Barbie's body into a site of vulnerability and surveillance. The gestures and remarks function as signs of patriarchal entitlement. The stares and whistles signify women's objectification, while Barbie's discomfort signals the destabilization of her unquestioned authority in Barbie Land. Ken's misreading of the same environment in the Real World as admiration underscores how gendered experiences of space diverge. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Barbie's discomfort and Ken's inflated confidence highlights the asymmetry of power. Ultimately, the described utterances reveal the gendered asymmetry in the Real World since they portray how female autonomy is diminished while Ken's experiences elevate male autonomy. Moreover, the exchanges and physical violations dismantle the illusion of a safe, egalitarian society that Barbie has imagined. The scene's humor, conveyed through Barbie's literal reply about lacking genitals and Ken's boastful counterclaim, critiques both the naïveté of Barbie's worldview and the normalization of male sexual entitlement. By framing sexuality through this comic exchange, the film underscores how language itself becomes a site of power negotiation in which women's attempts at self-definition are overridden by patriarchal discourse. Through these first scenes in the Real World, Fairclough's notion of discourse as a site where ideologies are enacted becomes clear since the Real World does not just look different from Barbie Land, it actively speaks a different power structure into being (*Media Discourse* 12-13).

From a postfeminist perspective, Barbie's experiences at what is supposed to resemble Venice Beach in the early 2020s critique the assumption that symbolic gender equality automatically translates into lived equality. In postfeminist logic, women's empowerment is reframed as a matter of personal choice or confidence, yet the harassment Barbie faces demonstrates that such individualizing narratives collapse when confronted with enduring structural inequalities. The sequence demonstrates how, within patriarchal structures, aestheticized empowerment and public visibility can transform from sources of agency into instruments of objectification. Barbie is suddenly confronted with her being reduced to a sexual object by men. This

phenomenon, which highlights the patriarchal lens that sexualizes and objectifies women, is described as “male gaze” by theorist Laura Mulvey (837). What was celebrated as visibility in Barbie Land now becomes a mechanism of control in the Real World.

Following Barbie’s unsettling encounters with sexism, Ken’s solo walk (*Barbie* 00:30:15) offers a critique of gender dynamics beyond the patriarchy in Barbie Land. While Barbie has experienced objectification, harassment, and limitations of autonomy, Ken is greeted with admiration and respect as he explores the Real World on his own. In a montage of businessmen in suits, men encouraging each other at the gym, big cars, policemen riding horses, and American presidents on Dollar bills, the persistence of male privilege in the Real World is revealed to Ken. On a semiotic level, this montage associates masculinity with power, desirability, and social capital, which Ken responds to with big smiles, nods, and chuckles (*Barbie* 00:30:47-00:31:36). This semiotically constructed divergence between Barbie’s and Ken’s experiences underscores the asymmetry of gendered power. Barbie’s realization that she has been reduced to her body and subjected to the male gaze confronts the myth of female empowerment promoted in Barbie Land. In contrast, Ken’s positive reception reveals that male identity continues to be affirmed and celebrated in the Real World. In its layering of harassment, gendered double standards, and male entitlement, these scenes dismantle Barbie’s postfeminist assumption that equality has already been achieved.

In contrast to Ken’s discovery of male entitlement, Barbie’s next encounter in the Real World takes on an entirely different tone, offering a quiet yet profound challenge to the ideals that shaped her identity in Barbie Land. Sitting on a bench, Barbie notices an older woman with grey hair and deep wrinkles. This representation of women is absent from Barbie Land’s hyper-polished, ageless-beauty aesthetic. Gazing at her, Barbie softly says, “You’re so beautiful,” to which the woman confidently replies, “I know it.” (*Barbie* 00:33:45) Interpreting the visual aspects of this scene, the elderly woman functions as a signifier of age, imperfection, and history whose features were omitted in the symbolic grammar of Barbie Land. The wrinkles and grey hair here do not denote decline but can instead be interpreted as signifying resilience and authenticity. The woman’s reply, which is delivered without hesitation, rejects the logic of external validation, which Barbie is accustomed to in her world. This small acquaintance shows the audience that an inward, self-defined sense of worth can exist even within a

patriarchal world of male entitlement. The dialogue positions language as a site where competing discourses of beauty and empowerment collide. This exchange disrupts the postfeminist equation of empowerment with youthful perfection and consumerist aesthetics, revealing instead a beauty that is unbound by age and independent of external validation. Postfeminist media often portrays beauty as a matter of individual maintenance and self-discipline, aligning empowerment with perpetual attractiveness (Gill, "*Postfeminist media culture*" 155). Within that framework, aging represents a failure to keep up with the demands of femininity. By juxtaposing Barbie's astonishment with the older woman's calm self-assurance, the scene subtly critiques the appearance-centered framework of Barbie Land, where empowerment is tied to consumerist ideals of coordinated outfits, perfect bodies, and eternal youth, all of which align with current dominant media imagery. Also, this small exchange exposes the cultural myth that empowerment is inseparable from youth and appearance, and offers an alternative narrative that roots beauty in age, experience, and self-possession. The older woman embodies what that system suppresses: the inevitability of aging and the possibility of self-worth beyond aesthetics. Her confident "I know it" (*Barbie* 00:33:45) resists patriarchal and postfeminist logics alike, asserting an autonomy that depends neither on male validation nor on self-improvement. By presenting beauty as self-defined, the film not only broadens the definition of what is valued but also plants the seed for Barbie's later transformation.

Mattel as the gatekeeper of femininity

The narrative introduces a parallel storyline to Barbie's journey in which Mattel, Barbie's inventor company, responds to the sighting of a human-sized Barbie in Los Angeles. As news spreads through corporate channels, the executives quickly decide she must be put "[...] back in the box" (*Barbie* 00:38:15). This phrase, while denoting the literal act of returning her to her doll packaging, also foreshadows the film's critique of the corporate mechanisms that seek to regulate and commodify femininity. The subsequent scenes at Mattel headquarters visually and narratively reinforce this agenda through its architecture and visual storytelling. The audience sees a high-rise façade, endless rows of identical grey cubicles, and interchangeable men in dark suits, visually communicating depersonalization, hierarchy, and male dominance. The vertical structure of corporate power is stressed through having the CEO's office on the floor named "all the way up." This symbolizes that decision-making is concentrated at the

top—here, exclusively in the hands of men. The phrase “put Barbie back in her box” operates as a key discursive site. While its denotative meaning is pragmatic brand management, since literally it refers to returning Barbie to her packaging as a doll, its connotations extend to the regulation and containment of femininity within corporate logics. Semiotically, it functions as an ideology: women who deviate from established ideals, here Barbie leaving her world of flawless empowerment, must be disciplined and repackaged into forms that remain controllable and profitable. The box becomes a sign of containment since it masks the violence of restricting female autonomy under a pastel packaging of corporate logic. The male-dominated boardroom, speaking in cheerful yet condescending tones, treats this containment as routine brand management, signaling that any deviation from the profitable ideal is unacceptable and will be addressed. The office aesthetically mirrors this discursive control. The homogeneity of suits and cubicles signifies depersonalization and conformity, while the building’s upward verticality can be interpreted as a phallus that naturalizes patriarchal hierarchy. Within this framing, Mattel serves as a symbolic embodiment of capitalist patriarchy, where the aesthetics of space and the homogeneity of its mainly male workforce reinforce hierarchical and exclusionary patriarchal power structures.

Discursively, Mattel’s role reveals the contradictions of postfeminist empowerment. Barbie Land, imagined as a utopia where women occupy every position of power, is exposed as a corporate product, fabricated and sustained by the same patriarchal structures that seek to contain Barbie when she escapes their design. In other words, the fantasy of a matriarchal paradise is already compromised by its origin in a system of commodification. The executives’ insistence on returning Barbie to her box dramatizes the fragility of postfeminist ideals: empowerment is contingent, marketable, and always subject to withdrawal when it threatens profit or order. By foregrounding this contradiction, the film dismantles the postfeminist illusion that empowerment can exist independently of structural power. Instead, it exposes empowerment as a carefully managed commodity, tightly circumscribed within capitalist hierarchy.

The collapse of postfeminist fantasy

The second narrative arc follows Barbie's search for Sasha, the girl who is supposedly playing with her. After finding her in school, the confrontation between Sasha and Barbie (*Barbie* 00:39:00–00:41:35) marks a turning point in the narrative, as it shows one of the film's most explicit deconstructions of the utopian worldview Barbie has carried from Barbie Land. Until this moment, Barbie has maintained the belief that her existence has served as a force of universal empowerment for girls. Through the Barbie brand's portrayal of Barbies as doctors, lawyers, senators, and Nobel Prize winners, and by creating a female-dominated society in Barbie Land, Barbie assumed that Sasha and her friends wanted to thank her for being their favorite toy. Moreover, as already mentioned in the goodbye scene, Barbie expected praise for fixing the world (*Barbie* 00:25:15).

Looking at the visual layer of this scene, we see Barbie standing before the group of girls in her bright pink cowgirl outfit, with perfectly styled hair, big hand gestures, and a bright smile. In contrast, Sasha and her friends, all dressed in black, are sitting on picnic tables with skeptical expressions. This visual contrast prepares the ground for conflict between Barbie's fantasy of universal empowerment and Sasha's experience of alienation from everything Barbie represents. The dialogue makes this clash explicit. Sasha calls Barbie "a professional bimbo" who has "set the feminist movement back 50 years," "destroyed girls' innate sense of worth," and contributed to environmental degradation through advertising "rampant consumerism." (*Barbie* 00:39:47–00:41:00) These accusations directly target the logic of postfeminism, which equates empowerment with individual success, consumer choices, and aspirational representation. Sasha's language reframes Barbie's supposed achievements, not as liberating but as complicit in sustaining harmful gender norms and capitalist exploitation. Semiotic cues reinforce this reading. Barbie's appearance embodies perfectly styled, commodified femininity, a quality the toy has symbolized since her first creation. At the same time, Sasha's plain teenage attire and sharp tone signify resistance, authenticity, and awareness of systemic issues. The confrontation positions Barbie's identity as a series of commodified, hyper-achieving roles that are an embodiment of consumerist postfeminism, which mask deeper inequalities through an aestheticized empowerment. In opposition, Sasha articulates the counter-discourse of feminist critique.

Discursively, this encounter functions as a site of power negotiation where generational and ideological tensions collide. Barbie, whose identity has been shaped by corporate branding and the myth of universal female empowerment, faces Sasha, who represents a younger, socially critical voice rejecting the notion that symbolic victories translate into lived equality. Using Barthes' terms, the sign of Barbie (the career woman, the flawless beauty, the doll of endless possibilities) is elevated into the myth of empowerment. Barbie is a cultural story that naturalizes consumerist femininity as liberation. Sasha's accusations expose this myth as a commodified illusion sustained by capitalist patriarchy. What Barbie sees as a record of progress, Sasha exposes as hollow simulations that distract from inequalities and even harm girls' sense of self-worth. The broader critique here is twofold. First, the scene demonstrates that empowerment, when framed as representation and consumption, can easily obscure structural inequalities. Second, it highlights how feminist critique itself becomes part of intergenerational discourse, as Sasha's rejection of Barbie reveals that younger audiences may no longer accept postfeminist branding as liberatory but instead recognize its complicity in sustaining systemic oppression. Barbie's emotional retreat from the exchange dramatizes the rupture in her self-conception, forcing her (and the audience) to confront the gap between the myth of empowerment and lived reality.

Satirizing the persistence and absurdity of patriarchal thinking

After separating from Barbie, Ken embarks on a solo exploration of the Real World. His discoveries unfold in comedic sequences. He explores library books titled as *Why Men Rule*, *Men and Wars*, *The origins of the patriarchy* and *Horses* (*Barbie* 00:41:43-00:41:47). He tells himself that patriarchy is "where men and horses run everything" (*Barbie* 00:42:03) and he seeks employment at a corporate firm by requesting "a high-level, high-paying job with influence." (*Barbie* 00:42:12-00:42:18) After he gets rejected, he approaches a female doctor and a lifeguard, insisting that his gender alone should qualify him for authority. However, each encounter reinforces the same outcome, namely, Ken is dismissed because professional expertise and legal requirements outweigh his claims. However, his confidence persists, and horses increasingly appear as visual symbols of his patriarchal fantasy.

Meanwhile, Barbie confronts Mattel's all-male board, who insist she step into a giant packaging box so that she "go[es] back to Barbie Land. And everything will be as it was."

(*Barbie* 00:45:45-00:45:50) Before Barbie agrees to get into the box, she requests to meet the woman in charge, the CEO. To answer Barbie's request, the CFO defensively states, "We had a woman CEO in the '90s... another one at some other time" (*Barbie* 00:46:45) and continues to mention a list of supposedly markers of progress that the company has made (gender-neutral bathrooms, personal affection for women) while the camera highlights the rows of identical men in dark suits. The absurdity peaks when one board member whispers, "I am a man without power. Does that make me a woman?" (*Barbie* 00:46:33) This can be read as a satire on how patriarchal institutions often trivialize gender politics. The narrative continues with Barbie's escape from the Mattel office. Here, the audience is introduced to Gloria, the only female employee at Mattel and Sasha's mother. It is revealed that Gloria has been projecting her insecurities onto Barbie, causing her malfunctions.

When analyzing Ken's journey and the narrative's continuation, we can see how patriarchal ideals are both seductive and unattainable. Ken's rudimentary definition of patriarchy humorously underlines his superficial grasp of the concept and satirizes patriarchy through exaggeration and simplification of a complex socio-political system. Therefore, it exposes how shallow and performative patriarchal thinking can be when it is reduced to phallic symbols of manliness (horses, war, suits). Furthermore, his request for authority, because he is a man, parodies gender essentialism by showing how absurd it sounds when stripped of institutional power. In this specific scene (*Barbie* 00:42:28), the recruiter's admission that "[man] just hide [patriarchy] better now" points to the persistence of systemic male dominance, albeit it being more hidden under contemporary discourses of equality. This can be interpreted as a meta-commentary on contemporary corporate culture, where patriarchal structures often persist invisibly. Semiotic elements reinforce the tension between Ken's understanding of patriarchy and the social system in place in the Real World. Ken's bright pastel clothing and cowboy aesthetic clash with the muted suits and white coats worn by the professionals he approaches, signaling his outsider status in these institutional spaces. The recurring horse motif also operates as a signifier. It can be interpreted as a satirical exaggeration of how gender essentialism often latches onto arbitrary symbols of strength or leadership. Within the movie, the horse motif is used to represent leadership and conquest while also creating a myth, which reduces patriarchy to arbitrary icons of manliness. When focusing on the Mattel headquarters, the towering skyscraper, endless grey cubicles, and the CEO's office "all the way up" signify

vertical hierarchy and male concentration of power. The giant doll box, which is presented to Barbie on the top floor, also becomes a central symbol. Literally, it is only the plastic packaging in which dolls are sold; however, metaphorically, it signifies containment, control, and commodification of femininity. Moreover, when Barbie asks about female leadership, the CFO's defensive tone and the contradictory claim that the company is "literally made of women" (*Barbie* 00:46:45) expose how corporate discourse uses tokenism to mask structural inequality. Also, Barbie's refusal to enter the box underscores her demand for total self-determination and her rejection of being represented as a packaged, sellable version of female empowerment from which capitalist, male-dominated institutions can profit.

Gloria's intervention to help Barbie escape repositions resistance within Mattel's patriarchal system. What has not been mentioned yet is that Gloria holds a position as assistant to the CEO at Mattel, which encodes her complicity within patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, her action of helping Barbie escape semiotically signifies resistance to this assumed complicity. The act of physically escaping the building mirrors the metaphorical refusal to be boxed in by roles and ideals imposed by both capitalism and patriarchal norms. When the narrative reveals that Gloria is the source of Barbie's problems in Barbie Land, the focus shifts from Sasha's critique of Barbie as a traitor of feminism to Gloria's existential crisis wearing off on Barbie. Arguably, this broadens the film's feminist commentary, as it highlights that struggles with self-worth extend across generations and that even supposedly empowered women internalize feelings of inadequacy perpetuated by beauty standards and consumer culture.

Discursively, these sequences critique two interconnected myths. First, Ken's misreading of patriarchy exposes the persistence of gender essentialism. By exaggerating patriarchy into a system "where men and horses rule everything," (*Barbie* 00:42:03) the film ridicules how patriarchal power often rests on arbitrary signs of masculinity, which are naturalized as common sense. This satirical reduction destabilizes the myth of patriarchy as coherent, instead presenting it as both absurd and fragile. Second, Mattel's attempts to control Barbie reveal the myth of postfeminist corporate empowerment. Like many companies, Mattel packages empowerment as a marketable product while simultaneously using tokenism to blur existing patriarchal structures. The board's tokenistic claims exemplify what Whelehan refers

to as “forgetting feminism”—a selective memory of progress that masks ongoing structural exclusion (*Remaking Feminism* 168).

Finally, Gloria’s role reorients the critique toward lived female experience. Her insecurities highlight how corporate consumer culture continues to burden women with impossible standards, even in a supposedly postfeminist era. By aligning Barbie’s existential crisis with Gloria’s dissatisfaction, the film demonstrates that postfeminist ideals of choice and confidence cannot resolve systemic oppression, injustice, and problems. Instead, they individualize responsibility for empowerment while leaving patriarchal and capitalist structures intact. Together, Ken’s misguided embrace of patriarchy, Mattel’s corporate containment, and Gloria’s disillusionment dismantle the fantasy that empowerment can be achieved through symbolic representation or consumer choice. The film exposes patriarchal power as simultaneously absurd and enduring, while unmasking postfeminist empowerment as a commodified illusion sustained by capitalist patriarchy.

The rise of Kendom: satirizing patriarchal fantasy

To hide from Mattel, Barbie decides to bring Gloria and Sasha back to Barbie Land. After their arrival, Barbie discovers that Ken has transformed Barbie Land into Kendom, a hyper-stylized parody of patriarchal society. The mise-en-scène also communicates this change; the pastel Dreamhouses now bear masculine markers such as horse imagery, beer cans, sports memorabilia, and toy trucks. The once also, in pastel tones, color-coordinated Kens replaced their wardrobes with cowboy hats, fur jackets, and gym gear. These exaggerated signs link directly back to Ken’s earlier confusion of patriarchy with “men and horses running everything.” (*Barbie* 00:42:03) The transformation signals a change in discourse since the Kens dominate conversation, decision-making, and everyday rituals, which presents their authority as natural and inevitable. However, Ken’s understanding of patriarchy has evolved from his first idea to the realization that horses and “everything exists to expand and elevate the presence of men” (*Barbie* 00:59:55). His statement functions as a discursive marker of internalized patriarchal ideology. While delivered with childlike conviction, it reframes male centrality as the sole organizing principle of society, displacing female agency entirely.

The visual and verbal signs in Kendom illustrate how gender essentialism gains traction through repetition and performance rather than substantive authority. Semiotic exaggeration is central here. Horses, for instance, act as signifiers, evoking cultural associations of strength, conquest, and masculinity. At a mythological level, horses stand in for a patriarchal order that naturalizes male dominance as both heroic and inevitable. Similarly, the cowboy attire and visual references to alcohol parody cultural stereotypes of masculinity and turn them into a uniform of male supremacy for the Kens. Ken's utterance that "[...] everything exists to expand and elevate the presence of men [...]" (*Barbie* 00:59:55) expands this logic from objects and roles to an all-encompassing worldview. The stress on "everything" widens the symbolic scope since patriarchy is no longer about isolated privileges but about a totalized structure that organizes social life around male visibility and validation. Ken's statement frames male dominance not only as one aspect of society but as its sole organizing principle. His voice, positioned as the newly dominant narrative in Barbie Land, highlights how discursive authority is not grounded in reason or expertise but in confident repetition of ideology. The humor lies in the mismatch of his grand declaration with the hollowness of its material expression through beer cans, fur coats, and horse posters. Barbie's silence and shock in this sequence are equally important. Her lack of voice signals the temporary silencing of feminist discourse, underscoring how easily egalitarian systems can be overturned when power is redefined through spectacle and performance rather than democratic negotiation.

On a discursive level, the transformation of Barbie Land into Kendom satirizes both the fragility of social systems and the ease with which gender essentialist ideologies can take root when reinforced through aesthetics, language, and performative dominance. The exaggerated décor and dialogue expose how patriarchy often operates not through coherent logic but through symbolic performances that normalize male dominance. By equating authority with arbitrary icons of masculinity, the film unmasks the ideological emptiness of patriarchal power. Furthermore, Kendom, as a social system, demonstrates that the repetition of familiar cultural signs is often enough to override the lack of substantive structures of competence within patriarchal systems. At the same time, Ken's pride in his new philosophy parodies patriarchy's disguising itself as common sense. His belief that male visibility alone justifies social order mirrors real-world patriarchal systems, which naturalize men's centrality in institutions and cultural narratives. However, by presenting this conviction as comic

exaggeration, the film destabilizes the myth, inviting viewers to see its arbitrariness rather than its inevitability. To summarize, the transformation of Barbie Land into Kendom demonstrates how patriarchal dominance can be imposed through aesthetic spectacle and discursive repetition rather than structural legitimacy. Through satire, the film reveals patriarchal authority as hollow, arbitrary, and dependent on cultural myths that collapse under scrutiny.

Barbie's collapse and the reversal of feminist gains

Upon returning to Barbie Land, the Barbies who once occupied positions of authority now appear as deferential companions in Kendom. Instead of being recognized by others as president or senator, the Barbies now occupy new titles such as “long-term-low-commitment-distance girlfriends” or “bride wives” (*Barbie* 01:00:40), which erase their previous professional political authority and define them in relation to the Kens. This shift is encoded in both speech and aesthetics. Their once assertive tones are replaced by giggles, diminutives, and self-effacing phrases, while their wardrobe shifts from professional attire to hyper-feminized costumes, including housemaid uniforms, that evoke retro pin-up imagery. The Barbies' postures also reinforce the transformation. Through inwards-pulled shoulders, submissively tilted heads, and eyes raised toward the Kens, the Barbies are visualized as helpless and dependent on the Kens. Everyday practices, such as serving drinks or laughing at Kens' jokes, complete the picture of agency directed toward male validation.

The verbal exchanges underline this reversal. Doctor Barbie now cheerfully describes herself as “a helpful decoration,” while others gush about massaging Ken's feet or enjoying the supposed freedom of “not having to make any decisions... It's like a spa day for my brain. Forever.” (*Barbie* 01:01:13-01:01:30). In stark contrast, Ken frames male privilege as liberation, “Now that you Barbies don't run everything, we can do our hair however we like.” (*Barbie* 01:00:00) Later, he asserts absolute control of Barbie's domestic and cultural space with the declaration, “This is my Mojo Dojo Casa House, it's not Barbie's Mojo Dojo Casa House. [...] Every night is boy's night.” (*Barbie* 01:04:00-01:04:44) Barbie's resistance, “You can't just undo [everything that is Barbie Land] in a day” (*Barbie* 01:03:50) is met with his mocking retort, “Literally and figuratively, watch me.” (*Barbie* 01:03:54). Visually, Barbie herself becomes diminished. Her clothes are mocked (“Take your celebrate disco bell

bottoms... your pretty paisley palazzo pants!" (*Barbie* 01:05:00), her posture slumps, tears streak her face, and she finally concedes defeat, saying she gives up (*Barbie* 01:06:50).

The shifts discussed in both language and imagery function as a satire of how patriarchy recasts women's roles around service, ornamentation, and desirability, while presenting subordination as pleasurable or even liberating. The Barbies' new outfits and submissive body language signify a cultural script where femininity is equated with availability rather than agency. Semiotic elements also reinforce this point. The housemaid uniforms and pin-up aesthetic signal a cultural mythology of an ideal femininity as decorative rather than agentive. By embodying passivity through posture and gesture, such as the feet massaging, the Barbies dramatize how patriarchal discourse does not simply silence women but reconfigures their voices into self-erasure. Ken's voice is central in this negotiation of power. His assertion that Barbie Land can be undone in literally a day highlights the precariousness of symbolic empowerment when it lacks a structural foundation. The Mojo Dojo Case House becomes a symbolic site where ownership of space equates to ownership of identity, transforming Barbie's Dreamhouse from a utopian female space into a marker of male triumph. His taunting rhetoric underscores how patriarchal discourse legitimizes dominance by framing dispossession as both inevitable and amusing. Barbie's silence, tears, and eventual collapse embody the ideological consequences of this discursive shift. Where she once embodied hyper-competence, she is now rendered powerless, visually and emotionally enacting the dismantling of feminist agency. This collapse is not presented as an isolated failure of Barbie Land but mirrors the dynamics seen in the Mattel headquarters, where an all-male boardroom sought to confine Barbie back into her box. In both spaces, Kendom and Barbie Land, patriarchy re-establishes control by reducing female autonomy to spectacle, containment, or service.

This sequence showcases how the film critiques postfeminist ideas of empowerment and agency by showing how quickly symbolic gains can be reversed when confronted with structurally embedded patriarchal power. Postfeminism has long promoted the notion that equality is achieved and that empowerment lies in personal choice, confidence, or aesthetic freedom (Gill, "*Postfeminist media culture*" 149). However, Kendom demonstrates how quickly these supposed gains collapse when patriarchal discourse reasserts itself. The

exaggerated submission of the Barbies satirizes cultural narratives that rebrand subordination as freedom, echoing postfeminist discourses in which choice is framed as opting out of ambition or responsibility in favor of pleasing men. Ken's triumphalism illustrates how patriarchal ideology weaponizes choice to naturalize inequality, disguising domination as liberation. By dramatizing Barbie's humiliation and despair, the film reveals that empowerment built solely on representation or aesthetics is unstable. Without structural transformation, such progress remains vulnerable to reversal. The parody of Kendom thus serves not only as a comedic exaggeration but also as a critique of real-world gender politics, where gains in visibility or representation can be undone unless they are secured through enduring institutional and cultural change.

To conclude, Barbie Land's transformation into Kendom inverts a postfeminist fantasy of stable, irreversible feminist progress. When empowerment is reduced to symbolism and aesthetic representation, its fragility and reversibility become overt. The Barbies' shift from professional autonomy to decorative servitude, Ken's redefinition of freedom through spatial domination, and Barbie's emotional collapse all demonstrate how quickly feminist gains can be undone when they are not grounded in structural change. In doing so, the film exposes postfeminist ideals of choice and confidence as insufficient for securing lasting gender equality.

Saving Barbie Land

Gloria and Sasha are about to leave Barbie Land when they decide to help save the Barbies. They find Barbie having a full-blown existential meltdown in Weird Barbie's house, where all the discontinued dolls of the Barbie universe are waiting for the Kens to take over Barbie Land fully. As Barbie is convinced that she is not enough and has failed the Barbies and all the women in the Real World, Gloria responds with what is arguably the film's most overtly feminist monologue (*Barbie* 01:13:49–01:16:05).

"It is literally impossible to be a woman. 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 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." (Barbie 01:13:49- 01:16:05)

Gloria's speech serves as the film's most explicit articulation of the contradictory demands placed on women, illustrating what feminist theorists such as Kathleen Hall Jamieson have termed the "double binds." Jamieson describes double binds as non-win situations for women in a patriarchal society in which any available choice will result in criticism or failure (Jamieson 3-6). To elaborate on one of these binds, Jamison describes the bind of femininity and competence in a professional context as the balance women need to find between showing stereotypical feminine and masculine features (Jamieson 121). On the one side of this bind, women showing too much femininity risk being perceived as dumb and powerless, whereas on the other side, if a candidate is not feminine enough, she might be perceived as too masculine, cruel, or hateful. Of course, gender stereotypes and gendered language are factors strongly reinforcing these binds. In a patriarchal culture, double binds are not anomalies but structural features of gendered expectations, as Gloria's speech tries to highlight: be thin but not too thin; be a leader but never mean; be attractive to men but not threatening to other women. When Gloria states, "You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about

your kids all the damn time”, she assesses that motherhood is framed as a desirable role. Yet, it is coupled with an expectation to remain career-oriented and socially available, echoing the neoliberal postfeminist ideal of having it all (family and career). Also, the health and wellness discourse is featured in Gloria’s monologue. In contemporary cultural discourses, wellness and health are strongly connected to the empowerment framework while simultaneously reinforcing beauty standards and body surveillance, which are integral to the postfeminist sensibility in media discourses. By including both traditional imperatives such as “stay pretty” and “love being a mother” and newer neoliberal ideals such as “be a boss” and “have money”, Gloria’s speech captures the paradoxical merging of feminist gains with a reassertion of conventional gender norms. Parallels of these merging types can also be found in McRobbie’s concept of double entanglement. As already discussed in the theoretical part of this thesis, double entanglement can be described as how postfeminist culture simultaneously incorporates feminist ideas and actively reasserts traditional gender norms (McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* 24-26). Entanglement means that both strands operate together. For example, feminist gains such as women’s leadership opportunities are celebrated, but the stereotype of agreeable, non-threatening, and gentle women still applies to female entrepreneurs.

Beyond the monologue’s language, its syntax and rhythm form a linguistic pattern that mimics the discursive overload women face when navigating these contradictions. From a semiotic perspective, the scene’s visual and auditory design reinforces this tension. Gloria’s voice overlaps with reaction shots of Barbies, their blank expressions shifting to realization. Gloria’s emotionally charged delivery, as the signifier of the speech, denotes exhaustion and frustration, but connotes collective awakening. Through this layering, the scene transforms an individual confession into a shared feminist consciousness, disrupting the isolation typical of postfeminist self-narratives. In this way, the scene is not just listing generic double binds but revealing how postfeminist rhetoric itself manufactures these binds by framing them as personal challenges to be mastered rather than structural contradictions to be dismantled. The film uses this exaggerated list to undermine the idea that women cannot win under these rules. By exaggerating and cataloguing these contradictions through rapid-fire delivery, the film satirizes the very logic of postfeminist gender ideals, making visible the cognitive dissonance required to live up to them. In doing so, *Barbie* reverses the celebratory tone often

found in postfeminist media, which tends to frame such balancing acts as signs of women's empowerment. Instead, Gloria's speech reframes them as exhausting, unwinnable, and systemic, thereby aligning the narrative with a structural feminist critique rather than a postfeminist celebration of having it all. It has to be stressed that Gloria's speech not only describes the contradictory expectations put on women but also performs a shift from postfeminist self-surveillance to structural critique. By enumerating the impossibility of compliance, she repositions the "problem" of womanhood from the individual to the systemic level.

The film's subsequent deprogramming sequence visualizes this linguistic critique. As the characters have made their plan for how to take back Barbie Land, all the patriarchy-compliant, brainwashed Barbies offer a sharp satire of postfeminist gender logics. In this sequence, the Barbies, guided by Gloria and Sasha, weaponize stereotypical forms of feminine inadequacy to dismantle the Kens' patriarchal regime and its problematic gender dynamics. In a series of exaggerated performances, Barbies pretend to embody helplessness, technological confusion ("My tiny head is just swimming with technical jargon like color bands and magnetic lassos" *Barbie* 01:17:59), financial naivety ("I just have all my money in a savings account" *Barbie* 01:19:15), and physical incompetence ("Here, let me show you," *Barbie* 01:20:08-01:20:14 as Kens touch Barbies under the guise of correcting their sports form).

Again, a parallel with McRobbie's concept of double entanglement can be found, since in these scenes women are also imagined as freely choosing to perform femininity. However, their choices remain constrained by heteronormative and patriarchal structures. By strategically deploying this trope of helpless femininity, the Barbies reveal its artificiality and performative character. What Judith Butler theorized as the performativity of gender (*Gender Trouble* 179–180) becomes here an instrument of resistance, exposing the absurdity of naturalized gender binaries. Gloria's tactical advice, such as pretending to have never seen *The Godfather* so that Kens may explain it in patronizing detail (*Barbie* 01:18:42), highlights the persistence of men's symbolic domination through the repetition of a gendered habitus (Bourdieu 37-39). This can be read as a critique of how postfeminist media often indirectly re-centers male authority, even while celebrating women's surface-level empowerment. In these scenes, the performative foundations of male authority itself are exposed because repeating patriarchal

scripts are set off by superficially submissive female behavior. Crucially, the Barbies' parody of gender performances does not restore them to individualized empowerment but instead fosters solidarity. Only once they collectively reject the patriarchal scripts can they begin to retake Barbie Land.

When situating this sequence within broader social structures, it can be said that Gloria's monologue and its aftermath expose how postfeminist culture sustains patriarchy through contradiction rather than suppression. By dramatizing the exhaustion of trying to be extraordinary yet grateful, thin yet not vain, the film exposes the affective economy of postfeminism, which relies on women's self-regulation and self-blame. In this sense, the film functions as a critique of postfeminist sensibility itself since it refuses to celebrate women's adaptation to contradictory norms and instead foregrounds the psychological toll of living within them. The exaggerated catalogue of binds becomes a form of satirical amplification, which transforms the familiar rhetoric of empowerment into a spectacle of absurdity. The deprogramming scenes extend this critique from discourse to performance. By feigning incompetence, the Barbies parody the stereotype of a dumb woman. Their collective rebellion only succeeds when they abandon individualized performances of perfection and embrace solidarity. This transition signals the film's rejection of neoliberal postfeminist individualism and its reclaiming of feminism as a collective, structural project. Thus, the *Barbie* movie challenges postfeminist ideas about gender by revealing how an empowering rhetoric masks prevailing systemic contradictions. Rather than merely reversing patriarchal hierarchies, the film dissects the ideological apparatus that sustains them and shows that emancipation requires not self-optimization, but the exposure and dismantling of the cultural myths of femininity and choice.

Turning the Kens against each other

The final stage of the Barbies' plan unfolds in the Mojo Dojo Casa House sequence and culminates in the Ken war at the beach while the Barbies take back the authority over Barbie Land. This last act of the movie offers a parody of both fragile masculinity and postfeminist narratives of the "new man", the supposedly sensitive, egalitarian male subject who remains centered within patriarchal relations, while leaving patriarchal hierarchies intact. Barbie's faux-submissive offer to remain Ken's "long-term, long-distance, low-commitment casual

girlfriend" (*Barbie* 01:22:12) sets the stage for a satirical deconstruction of gendered power dynamics. When Ken declares, "I'll play the guitar at you" (*Barbie* 01:22:45), the absurd phrasing exposes the one-directional dynamics of male self-expression within heteronormative scripts. This moment parodies classical cinema's active/passive sexual division, where "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure" while the man "emerges as the representative of power [...] as the bearer of the look," leaving the woman as a passive erotic object rather than a narrative agent (Mulvey 838).

The bonfire scene that follows exaggerates this imbalance. The Kens' hour long synchronized performance of the song *Push* by Matchbox Twenty turns the contradictory lyrics, which are a mixture of self-pity ("I don't know if I've ever been really loved") and latent aggression ("I wanna push you around, well, I will", into a commentary of the cultural rebranding of dominance as vulnerability (Tasker and Negra 21). Through parody and exaggeration, the movie visualizes what Gill describes as postfeminist masculinity (*Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men* 199-200). This is realized through close-up shots and slow camera pans over Ken, who fixes his gaze on Barbie, positioning his suffering as a spectacle that demands female spectatorship and masking his entitlement as moral complexity, rather than challenging gendered hierarchies. Theoretically, the Kens' exaggerated sincerity while performing this romantic beach scene functions as affective labor that reasserts male centrality, and their emotional confessions normalize dominance as the authentic honesty all men feel (Gill, *Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men* 197-99).

In addition, through Barbie's strategy to undermine the Kens by redirecting their attention toward one another, during this supposedly vulnerable scene, a second layer of critique is added. Gloria's commentary from the off piningly articulates this with, "You play on their egos and their petty jealousies, and you turn them against each other." (*Barbie* 01:24:57) When the Barbies' leave their Kens to flirt with rival Kens, "That's a beautiful song you're playing. Did you write it?" (*Barbie* 01:27:35), they expose the fragility of masculine validation. Even though the newly established patriarchal order appears dominant, it still relies on constant female recognition, and once the Barbies withdraw that recognition, the Kens' identities begin to unravel. As the Kens' fragile egos fail to cope with repeated female rejection, the plotline shifts into a carnivalesque parody of war between the two rival groups of Kens. The resulting Beach-

Off fight, with tennis rackets, volleyballs, and exaggerated slap-fights, transforms male aggression into childish play. From a semiotic perspective, the plastic rackets, beach balls, and pastel costumes operate as signifiers of artificiality, denaturalizing patriarchal codes of war and conquest. Their playful absurdity highlights the myth of male heroism as performance rather than substance. The Beach-Off thus literalizes Fairclough's concept of discursive struggle: the Kens' speech and actions attempt to sustain dominance as in traditional romances but collapse into parody when mirrored back through exaggeration (*Media Discourse* 66-67).

Ken's wounded insecurity—needy for love, anxious about status—exemplifies what Gill identifies as postfeminist masculinity's "fluid" emotional expressivity and "unheroic heroes" who fail to mature (*Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men* 191-94). Rather than a genuine self-critique, this affective display re-centers masculine subjectivity by demanding female recognition (*Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men* 193). *Barbie* subverts this strategy through an exaggerated musical performance, transforming male sensitivity into a hollow spectacle of victimhood. The toy-fighting and choreographed pathos reveal postfeminist media's tactic of rebranding patriarchal entitlement as emotional authenticity, stripping away its sympathetic veneer (Gill, *Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men* 191).

Ken's musical number "I'm Just Ken" (*Barbie* 01:25:55) extends this critique. The song's lyrics present Ken as both victimized ("Doesn't seem to matter what I do, I'm always number two" (*Barbie* 01:25:58-01:26:07) and entitled to romantic recognition ("what will it take for her to see the man behind the tan and fight for me?" *Barbie* 01:26:47-01:26:53). This fluctuation between self-pity and demand for validation re-centers men as emotionally complex subjects even in female-driven narratives. However, Gerwig subverts this move by turning it into a performance through choreography, glittering costumes, and a pastel-and-black aesthetic. Ken's lament is transformed into a spectacle of exaggerated fragility, exposing masculinity as equally constructed and performed (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179–80).

Building on Rosalind Gill's theorization of postfeminist masculinity, Ken's exaggerated self-presentation can also be read as embodying the "wounded" or "unheroic" masculinity typical of postfeminist media (*Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men* 191-94). However, this emotional

male performance could also be marketed as evidence of gender progress within the broader ideological discourse of postfeminism. In contradiction to that, Gill argues that postfeminist representations of men as insecure and self-deprecating only aim at recentring masculine identity within a female-led narrative. The only difference is that, rather than choosing dominance as a male character trait to achieve this goal, vulnerability is used instead. In *Barbie*, Ken's performative insecurity, explicit in the Kens' fight against each other as well as the song "I'm just Ken," reproduces this postfeminist trope of a wounded (un)hero and inverts it through pushing it into absurdity. The Ken War and musical spectacle reveal that the supposed evolution of masculinity, from domination to emotion, remains trapped within patriarchal logic since women still serve as mirrors for male self-discovery, and power remains organized around male visibility.

As the Kens exhaust themselves in battle and song, the Barbies exploit the distraction to re-establish their political agency by quietly restoring the constitutional order of Barbie Land. The juxtaposition of the Kens' theatrical chaos against the Barbies' collective action articulates the film's feminist intervention. Rather than resolving gender tensions through individualized romance or consumerist fantasies of empowerment, *Barbie* insists on collective female solidarity and structural transformation. Ultimately, *Barbie* dismantles postfeminist masculinity by rendering it visible as performance. The film refuses to rehabilitate the wounded male as a new moral center, instead redirecting narrative authority to collective female action. By transforming Ken's fragility into farce and his pathos into parody, Gerwig dismantles the postfeminist illusion that equality can be achieved through empathy without structural change. In doing so, the sequence reveals the limits of postfeminist discourse. Gender liberation cannot emerge from the rebranding of male entitlement as emotional truth but from exposing the ideological labor such narratives perform.

Reimagined liberation

The film's final act stages a dual resolution, the Barbies' reclamation of their political autonomy and Ken's crisis of identity, which together destabilize the patriarchal order that had briefly dominated Barbie Land. After the Kens return to their Mojo Dojo Casa Houses, they notice their houses are dreamier than before, visually emphasized by brighter colors, sparkling interiors, and a return to their original look. This aesthetic shift semiotically signals the end of

patriarchal rigidity. President Barbie explains that the Barbie Land Constitution has been reinstated, restoring the Barbies' agency. This moment sets the stage for Ken to confront the emptiness of his previous role, which had been tied entirely to his relationship with Barbie and, later, to the establishment of the patriarchal hierarchy in Barbie Land. Ken's first emotional response to the realization of his failed patriarchal revolution is a dramatic display of crying. When Barbie approaches him, asking if he is okay, Ken only replies, "Yeah. Totally" (*Barbie* 01:32:50), but his tears betray a deeper vulnerability. Barbie reassures him that crying is natural, noting that she cries too and finds it "kind of amazing." Ken's acknowledgment, "I'm a liberated man. I know crying is not weak" (*Barbie* 01:32:54), is again an example of how the film transforms an emotional script into satire. By exaggerating this pose of enlightenment, with Ken sitting in a fur coat surrounded by pastel décor and his theatrical breakdown, the film exposes that emotional literacy can be another performative act of masculine self-preservation. The scene then continues with Ken reflecting on the burdens he has carried as a leader in Barbie Land. He complains about trivialized power ("And those mini-fridges are so small, you could only fit a six-pack in them [...] *Barbie* 01:33:20) while also expressing existential frustration ("To be honest, when I found out that patriarchy wasn't about horses, I lost interest anyway." *Barbie* 01:33:33). These humorous lines underscore the arbitrariness of the social structures Ken had previously constructed, revealing that his identity had been built around meaningless symbols of status rather than on a genuine self. Barbie's calm reply marks the shift from competition to empathy, positioning dialogue rather than control as the new mode of relation between Barbies and Kens.

Ken's confession, "I just don't know who I am without you" (*Barbie* 01:34:22), articulates the dependency underpinning postfeminist masculinity in which identity is defined through relational validation rather than self-knowledge. This echoes Gill's analysis of wounded masculinity, in which men perform vulnerability to reclaim moral centrality within narratives of equality (*Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men* 191-94). Ken's tears and uncertainty, while appearing progressive, reproduce a postfeminist trope in which male emotion substitutes for structural critique. Barbie's role in this exchange functions as a counter-discursive force. Her reassurance redirects the narrative's emotional center away from Ken's self-pity toward mutual recognition. Through language and gesture, she reclaims interpretive authority, demonstrating what Fairclough terms "discourse as social practice" (*Media Discourse* 62),

where empathy becomes a mode of resistance to hierarchical relations. The Kens' realization that they were only fighting because they did not know their true self marks a collective turning point. The Kens' awakening transforms individual vulnerability into communal awareness, subverting the postfeminist fixation on self-optimization. This shift from personal emotion to social understanding signals a move from postfeminist individualism toward feminist collectivity.

As Ken navigates his self-discovery, Barbie begins to confront her own dissatisfaction with the scripted roles of Barbie Land. She apologizes to Ken for taking him for granted, acknowledging the limitations of the social roles she herself had enforced, like "girls' night" exclusivity. This moment signals a shift from performative postfeminist empowerment, which often centers on control, appearance, and status, toward relational awareness. Barbie recognizes that leadership and agency are not simply about dominating a narrative, but about responsibility, fairness, and empathy. However, Barbie's existential uncertainty is not yet overcome and only intensifies when Mattel begins discussing the closure of the portal between Barbie Land and the Real World. Ultimately, the question is raised about what happens with Barbie. When asked what she wants for herself, Barbie admits, "I don't know. I am not really sure where I belong anymore. I don't think I have an ending." (*Barbie* 01:40:00).

This scene explicitly critiques the narrative of popular postfeminist texts and their aim of completion, which is presented as only achievable through either finding authentic romance or material achievement. Unlike traditional Hollywood storylines where a female character's arc concludes with love or success, Barbie recognizes that her identity is open-ended and self-directed. Her conversation with Ruth, the creator of Barbie, explicitly inverts postfeminism's promise of individual completion. Rather than having it all through career, family and romance, Ruth reframes humanity as open-ended imperfection. The scene ends with Barbie's realization that "[she] wants to be a part of the people that make meaning, not the thing that's made." (*Barbie* 01:43:13).

In the final scene, Barbie's understated declaration, "I'm here to see my gynecologist" (*Barbie* 01:47:13), anchors this inversion in embodied reality. This moment operates semiotically as an anti-myth. Instead of closing with transcendence or spectacle, the narrative ends in

ordinariness, rejecting the postfeminist commodification of empowerment as glamour or success. The film thus inverts postfeminism's core gender claim: empowerment is not individual self-optimization but collective deconstruction of gendered myths.

From girlboss to backlash: Barbie's cultural moment

To fully appreciate the implications of this analysis, it is useful to briefly situate *Barbie* within the broader trajectory of popular feminism in the 2010s and early 2020s. During the 2010s, feminism was increasingly articulated as an individualized, entrepreneurial project, in line with postfeminist and neoliberal logics. The now-often-referred-to-as “girlboss” era of feminism can be traced back to entrepreneur Sophia Amoruso's *#Girlboss* autobiography, which presents the original girlboss as a woman who becomes successful by aligning herself with neoliberal ideals of self-responsibility, agency, and hustle culture. Structural issues such as pay gaps, racism, care work, and labor exploitation were framed as obstacles to be overcome by the right mindset rather than as political problems and success stories centered mostly around white, heterosexual, middle-class women. Fast-forward a couple of years to the COVID-19 pandemic, and women's societal position was once again profoundly tested. As schools, care facilities, and workplaces closed or shifted to remote modes, women disproportionately shouldered additional domestic and caregiving burdens. The pandemic revealed how deeply entrenched the gendered division of labor remained beneath the surface of neoliberal narratives of equality. Existing economic inequalities were intensified, and the fragility of the postfeminist promise that women could have it all was exposed. The pandemic disrupted the confidence of the girlboss ethos. It revealed the limits of an empowerment discourse since the crisis made visible how care work, emotional labor, and domestic responsibilities continue to be feminized and structurally undervalued.

Simultaneously, legal and cultural shifts further challenged the notion that feminism had secured irreversible gains. The 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States marked a historic rollback of reproductive rights, enabling severe restrictions and outright bans on abortion in multiple states. This decision not only curtailed bodily autonomy but also symbolically signaled that rights long treated as settled achievements could be easily withdrawn. On a similar note, the growing wave of anti-trans legislation in various countries tried to frame gender equality and LGBTQIA+ protections as ideological excesses. Also, the

cultural climate around the #MeToo movement became increasingly ambivalent. While the initial wave of disclosures had exposed pervasive sexual harassment and abuse, subsequent high-profile trials and media narratives about cancel culture and #NotAllMen contributed to a backlash against the movement, which subtly re-centered male vulnerability and cast doubt on the legitimacy of feminist critique on rape culture.

Taken together, the girlboss era's individualized empowerment, the pandemic's exposure of entrenched gendered labor, and the rollback of reproductive and sexual rights form the backdrop against which Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* has to be read. It is within this landscape of disillusionment with postfeminist promises and renewed awareness of structural vulnerability, in which feminists' central achievements seemed open to negotiation, that the film's postfeminist critique can be clearly recognized.

Conclusion

To answer my thesis question of "How does the 2023 *Barbie* movie challenge or invert postfeminist ideas about gender?" I can answer: The film inverts postfeminist ideas about gender by dramatizing the collapse of the celebration of aestheticized female empowerment, consumer choice, and presumed equality of both genders. Postfeminism appears as a patriarchal accomplice with its individualist rhetoric of "you can be anything" while simultaneously sustaining inequality by obscuring structural barriers. *Barbie* unravels core myths about femininity as surveilled performance and choice is revealed as itself ideological. In summary, the film's postfeminist critique is organized in a three-phase structure. First, *Barbie* constructs a postfeminist utopia through symbolic consumerism. Second, this fantasy implodes into absurd patriarchal reversion via Kendom, exposing symbolic gains as fragile. Third, collective subversion of femininity, through Gloria's monologue and deprogramming, reclaims structural feminism over individual performance.

Barbie Land initially embodies postfeminism's core fantasy: a matriarchal hyperreality detached from material constraints, in which women hold all institutional power and men exist only in relation to women as pretty ornaments seeking female validation. The narrator's ironic commentary ("Thanks for Barbie, all problems of feminism and equal rights have been

solved.” (*Barbie* 00:03:33), mocks the neoliberal equation of symbolic representation with equality, aligning with McRobbie’s double entanglement (*The Aftermath of Feminism* 24-26), in which feminist gains are invoked via consumerist diversity yet discredited as already achieved, precluding further struggle. Visually, pastel aesthetics, glamorous Dreamhouses, and effortless success connote femininity as seamless competence, erasing labor or barriers, a hallmark of Gill’s postfeminist sensibility, where individual achievement replaces systemic critique (*Postfeminist Media Culture* 162-164). Furthermore, diversity is aestheticized as non-white, curvy Barbies remain slim and aspirational, extending the postfeminist white, middle-class ideal without unsettling neoliberal self-fashioning. When Lawyer Barbie insists on her competence by integrating logic and emotion, feminist epistemology is parodied and depoliticized. Furthermore, this scene represents an applauded performance that flattens the feminist struggle into a “girl power” consensus. Irony is used to foreshadow the fragility of the previous celebration of solved feminism by framing Barbie Land as a naïve, self-deluding fantasy, hinting that its perfection depends on a willful ignorance of real-world inequality. Simultaneously, relational hierarchies persist unchanged as men remain defined by women’s validation, merely flipping patriarchal dependency without eliminating the underlying logic. These elements invert postfeminism by staging its utopia as an artificial spectacle of empowerment and lifestyle performance rather than political reality, since inequality’s root structure is preserved.

Next, first cracks expose the utopia’s precarity as Barbie’s existential crisis, embodied through flat feet, cellulite, and thoughts of death, shatter the postfeminist promise of bodily perfection as feminine property. These flaws reveal that even in utopia, self-surveillance remains a disciplining force, while the character of Weird Barbie further accelerates this disruption of feminine perfection. Her character as the abject other embodies the exclusion of imperfection, thereby reinforcing the trope of bodily surveillance. Simultaneously, her marginalization proves that postfeminist diversity is conditional. Also, the postfeminist fantasy of choice is being parodied through Weird Barbie, giving Barbie the choice between two pairs of shoes.

The Real World – Barbie Land contrast escalates the satire of postfeminist matriarchal fantasy. At the same time, Kendom’s emergence dramatizes the rapid reversibility of symbolic gains,

mirroring cultural backlashes in which surface-level visibility (e.g., Mattel's curvy dolls, girlboss feminism's success stories) masks entrenched patriarchy. In the Real World, Barbie confronts catcalls, objectification, and Sasha's rejection, revealing that a patriarchal male gaze strains her symbolic power. Ken, by contrast, encounters glorifying montages of male power, misreading this as a coherent patriarchy worth importing to his world. This asymmetry exposes Barbie Land's matriarchy as a fragile symbol, not a structural reality. Back in Barbie Land, Kendom actualizes this reversion as Barbies are recast as ornamental "long-term-low-commitment girlfriends" and Ken boast "I can undo [Barbie Land] literally [...] in a day" (*Barbie* 01:00:54). Thereby, postfeminism's core vulnerability is exposed since empowerment rests on aesthetic representation and consumer choice rather than institutional change leading to feminist gains that evaporate overnight. This phase thus inverts postfeminism by staging its utopia's collapse, paralleling real-world dynamics where feminist progress is curtailed through a backlash against the #MeToo movement or the renegotiation of reproductive rights after decades of choice and empowerment rhetoric.

In the film's final act, Goria's monologue marks the pivot from individual burden to collective critique. Her rapid-fire speech exemplifies double binds placed on women and captures postfeminism's affective economy in which women internalize contradictory norms and experience empowerment as exhausting self-regulation. This further exposes how postfeminist rhetoric individualizes structural inequality. The subsequent deprogramming of the Barbies through feigning the "dumb woman" or "damsel in distress" stereotypes to divide the Kens is a weaponizing performance of a misogynic femininity against a backdrop of patriarchal overconfidence and again strengthens the inversion of postfeminism's emphasis on individual choice and achieved equality. At the same time, Ken's pathos is parodied rather than redeemed through his performance of "I'm just Ken" (*Barbie* 01:26:32). His wounded masculinity is exaggerated into a farce, and *Barbie* refuses to rebrand entitlement as emotional truth in the final conversations with Ken in Barbie's Dreamhouse. Barbie's story arc culminates in a rejection of the postfeminist idea of having it all, as the character embraces mundane vulnerability over glamorous success or a romantic resolution with Ken. In this final phase of the film, Gerwig inverts postfeminist ideas about gender by replacing individualized exhaustion with collective awakening and proving that empowerment requires dismantling myths rather than mastering them.

This thesis contributes to postfeminist media studies by providing a multimodal analysis of *Barbie* and showcasing how postfeminist tropes are used to expose their exhaustion and make space for a renewed structural inquiry amid a backlash against feminism. Nevertheless, as its focus is on postfeminism, further analysis of the movie's connection to "girlboss" feminism and its broader feminist implications would be needed to understand the film's role in current feminist discourses fully. Here, an empirical analysis of TikTok's #BarbieTheMovie might offer insights into whether the film truly revitalizes the discourse of structural feminism or merely repackages it as viral irony. As the analysis centers almost exclusively on white, heterosexual femininity through a postfeminist lens derived primarily from McRobbie and Gill, a queer, racialized, and intersectional reading could further illuminate the film's blind spots and stance towards these issues. In addition, this narrow postfeminist focus constrains the analysis's feminist scope by emphasizing the textual critique *Barbie* offers rather than the corporate implications the film, as a product, has for Mattel's neoliberal branding. While these gaps limit comprehensiveness, they underscore the thesis's deliberate intervention.

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Abstract

This master's thesis examines Greta Gerwig's 2023 film *Barbie* as a cultural text critiquing postfeminism in popular culture. Drawing on Rosalind Gill's framework of postfeminist sensibility, which is characterized by ideas of aestheticized empowerment, individualism, self-surveillance, consumer choice, symbolic diversity, and presumed gender equality, the analysis employs a multimodal approach of Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Barthesian semiotics to answer, "How does the 2023 *Barbie* movie challenge or invert postfeminist ideas about gender?" Through dialogue, visual semiotics, irony, satire, and character development, the film dramatizes and ultimately critiques postfeminist ideas about gender, specifically, the celebration of aestheticized female empowerment, consumer choice, and presumed gender equality is portrayed as fragile illusions sustained by neoliberal capitalism and patriarchal essentialism. Situating the film within Barbie's historical evolution from a simple doll to a cultural phenomenon, this thesis argues that *Barbie* advocates a return to collective, structural feminism rather than individualized empowerment. As this thesis focuses on a postfeminist textual analysis, queer, racialized, and intersectional readings of *Barbie* remain necessary to support these claims further.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht Greta Gerwig's 2023 prämierten Film *Barbie* als kulturellen Text, der postfeministische Ideen in der amerikanischen Popkultur kritisch beleuchtet. Rosalind Gills Definition eines Postfeminismus als Sensibilität, die durch Merkmale wie ästhetische Selbstermächtigung, Konsum, Individualismus und den Mythos der erreichten Geschlechtergerechtigkeit gekennzeichnet ist, dient als theoretisches Rahmenwerk. Durch Norman Faircloughs kritische Diskursanalyse (CDA) und die barthesianische Semiotik werden Narrativ, Dialoge, visuelle Motive und die Entwicklung der Charaktere kritisch analysiert, um die zentrale Forschungsfrage „Wie fordert der Film *Barbie* (2023) postfeministische Geschlechtervorstellungen heraus oder kehrt sie um?“ zu beantworten.

Die Antwort dazu entwickelt sich in drei Phasen. Als erste Phase konstruiert der Film mit Barbie Land eine postfeministische Utopie, in der stereotype Geschlechterrollen umgekehrt werden, ohne die geschlechtliche Hierarchie aufzugeben. Durch ironische Voiceovers wird die neoliberale Gleichsetzung von symbolischer Repräsentation mit authentischer Machtverteilung hinterfragt, während in pastellfarbener Glamour-Ästhetik Weiblichkeit als perfektionistische Selbstermächtigungs-Performance inszeniert wird. In der zweiten Phase folgt der Zusammenbruch dieser postfeministischen Utopie aufgrund Barbies Existenzkrise. Durch komödiantische Überhöhung körperlicher Makel und die Einführung der Figur der Weird Barbie werden körperliche Perfektion als feminines Eigentum in Frage gestellt sowie ein postfeministisches Diversitätsversprechen als konditional entlarvt. Der Kontrast zwischen Barbie Land und der realen Welt eskaliert in der Satire, während Kens Einführung einer absurden Version des Patriarchats in Barbie Land die Reversibilität symbolischer feministischer Gewinne demonstriert. Im dritten Akt markiert Glorias Monolog eine Wende hin zu einer kollektivistischen Kritik. Ihre Rede entlarvt das postfeministische Versprechen von „having it all“ (Familie und Karriere) als in einer patriarchalen Gesellschaft unerreichbar. Das Konzept der stereotypen Männlichkeit wird durch die überzogene Performance der Kens ins Lächerliche gezogen, ohne in Absolution zu enden, da Barbies Handlungsstrang in der Ablehnung einer romantischen Auflösung endet.

Zusammenfassend kritisiert *Barbie* strukturelle Ungleichheiten, indem sie das kollektive feministische Bewusstsein mit der individualisierten Performance verbindet. Diese

Masterarbeit zeigt, wie *Barbie* postfeministische Tropen nutzt, um deren Erschöpfung sichtbar zu machen und Raum für strukturelle Fragestellungen zu schaffen. Der postfeministische Fokus auf weiße, heterosexuelle Weiblichkeit schließt jedoch queere, rassismuskritische und intersektionale Perspektiven aus, die weitere Rückschlüsse zur strukturellen feministischen Kritik in *Barbie* ermöglichen würden. Zudem können zukünftige empirische Analysen zur medialen Rückmeldung des Films Rückschlüsse auf dessen Rolle in vergangenen und aktuellen feministischen Diskursen geben.

Erklärung zur Nutzung generativer KI-Tools

Hiermit bestätige ich, dass ich generative KI-Tools (z.B. ChatGPT, Perplexity, Grammarly) wie folgt eingesetzt habe:

Zur Strukturplanung und Argumentationsfeedback: Ja (ChatGPT, Perplexity)

Zur Quellenrecherche: Ja (Perplexity)

Zum Korrekturlesen: Ja (Grammarly)

Zur stilistischen Verbesserung: Ja (Grammarly)

Alle KI-generierten Entwürfe wurden vollständig von mir überarbeitet. Die endgültige Arbeit entspricht meinen eigenen wissenschaftlichen Leistungen.

Innsbruck, 7. April 2026

Michaela Pfeisinger