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**Barbie Beyond Pink: Intersections of Brand
Activism, Femvertising and Purple-Washing in
Contemporary Film Marketing**

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2. Abstract: Mattel's Barbie is indisputably a Popular Culture phenomenon that has managed to maintain its relevancy throughout the decades. The shapeshifting doll caters to every generation's gender role fantasy, successfully crafting a meticulous brand for itself. In collaboration with Warner Bros. Pictures, a film titled *Barbie* was released to further cement the doll's iconic status, reinventing its brand image to the modern consumer by positioning Barbie as a symbol of modern female empowerment. The 2023 film serves as a significant case study in contemporary brand marketing, illustrating how Nostalgia and Pink Tax along with feminist themes can be strategically employed to revitalize and sustain brand familiarity. As the film delves into Barbie's presence in modern culture, it unveils a deliberate effort by the brand to navigate societal shifts through performative inclusivity and advocacy. However, this intricate clash between commercial interests and social responsibility prompts a closer examination of the authenticity behind these initiatives. The primary objective of this paper is to investigate the deployment of feminist values by Mattel within the context of promotional strategies, specifically delving into the fascinating interplay that unfolds between Brand Activism, Femvertising and Purple-Washing.

Keywords: *The Barbie Movie, Purple-Washing, Femvertising, Brand Activism, Pink Tax, Film Analysis*

3. Introduction

Barbie, a brand meticulously curated by Mattel Co's founding-mother Ruth Handler, has managed to solidify itself as a stable icon of modern popular culture. Constantly re-launching its products and services with a new re-branded package tailored to fit the dynamic target generation of its consumers. Notably, toys and popular culture have always thrived in a symbiotic relationship, influencing each other's longevity as cultural icons and narratives. For this reason, the toy company has been a leading example in maintaining a successful brand through the decades. Rightfully so, the plastic doll has been described as "the most successful and popular toy in history" (Ferorelli). Correspondingly, Mattel is known to continuously renovate its brand identity to accommodate the market demands, which further fuels its relevancy and helps keeping it alive. Mattel's Barbie doll remains a game-changer in the toy industry, flaunting an adult appearance like no other doll, symbolized by her bold fashionable swimsuit and ponytail, which cements its title as the "empress of fashion dolls" (Rogers).

Ruth Handler's Barbie was created to be a flexible "avatar" that exists solely for young girls to manifest unattainable fantasies on (Southwell). The plastic doll was considered an "idealistic and materialistic" American icon (Tamkin), manufactured anywhere but in the United States of America, which certainly scarred its patriotic branding and began a trend of its many contradictions. Moreover, the "biggest-selling fashion doll in history" (Green and Gellene), has always been pressured to accommodate social norms in order to maintain its status as the world's "most commercially successful toy" (Fleming 3). Therefore, Mattel has made sure the doll was inoffensively decent with underpants and no visible nipples. After all, mothers were not willing to buy their daughters a doll with glaring breasts (Gerber). Ultimately, the doll remained a popular culture icon and "a unique indicator of women's history" (Vander Bent), shaping and reflecting societal attitudes towards femininity, fashion, and identity through the years.

Naturally, as societal norms and expectations regarding women have evolved, so too has Barbie. The brand has navigated various cultural shifts, including the rise of feminism and the increasing demand for authentic representations of women in media and advertising (Millard). In recent years, there has been a growing expectation for brands to engage in social responsibility, particularly in how women are portrayed (Mohr et al.). Vredenburg et al.

emphasized how modern marketing has been driven by good causes that eventually leads to expand the reach of the marketing effects. Similarly, more brands have started to understand the meaning of expressing their position in social and political discussions through their marketing (Vredenburg et al.). According to Miller, qualities such as “strength” and “freedom” have become more valuable and attractive factors for today’s women compared to the stereotypical and objectified women that previously existed in advertisements, which Mattel has definitely been guilty of in the past.

Nonetheless, the release of the live-action *Barbie* movie in 2023 marked a significant milestone in the brand's history. While Barbie had previously appeared in numerous animated films and series, this was her first live-action portrayal on the big screen (Dockterman). Mattel’s CEO Ynon Kreiz decided that the film would be the first entry in “a burgeoning cinematic universe based on the company’s toys”. Soon afterwards, Margot Robbie was invited to star and produce the *Barbie* film, with Warner Bros. Pictures announcing Greta Gerwig as the set director and screenwriter only a year later (Dockterman). As a fan of the brand herself, Gerwig was chosen strategically to both spread the propaganda of her undeterred “appreciation of the brand’s history” (Dickson), while stimulatingly luring in a decent number of self-proclaimed feminist consumers. Mattel wanted Gerwig to highlight the controversial brand’s authenticity, lightly poke fun at Mattel, while also giving the doll a “heart” (Dockterman). A strategy that marked Mattel’s very first employment of “femvertising” and “purple-washing”—marketing tactics that aim to dilute the feminist movement into a consumable trend.

From the very opening scene of the film, the brand’s consumers are made aware that the Mogul company, of which the movie’s main character is based after, is involved in its creative making. The straightforward involvement of Mattel reduces the genuine aspect of the film’s message. In its core, Greta’s film aims to tackle the high expectations women face in our modern patriarchal society, using the Barbie doll as a main figure of commentary on these issues. However, the corporation’s involvement both as a character in the movie and a co-production company outside of it, reflects a level of corporate control that alters the authenticity the film promotes. Critics have pointed out that the company's influence could damage the genuine aspects of the film's social commentary, reducing it to a form of “purple-washing”, where feminist values tend to get commodified and stripped of their real substance.

As the movie explores Barbie's role in contemporary culture, it becomes evident that the brand strategically embraced inclusivity and social activism with the sole purpose of selling its products—a clear form of commodity feminism, or what Varghese & Kumar refer to as “corporate feminism”. Brand activism and purple-washing are evident from the very beginning of the film as the viewer is told, “Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything.” (*Barbie* 00:03:10). The intricate push-and-pull between commercial interests and social responsibility prompts a critical examination of the authenticity behind these initiatives. The 2023 *Barbie* movie was a commercial success by all means, driven in large part by a marketing strategy that skilfully blended nostalgia and pink colour association with contemporary social commentary. Mattel’s marketing campaign indicates that, without a single doubt, the modern marketplace speaks the language of feminism fluently. This paper seeks to uncover the hidden layers of the Barbie film’s marketing strategies, highlighting how tactics such as brand activism, femvertising and purple-washing were deeply imbedded within the film’s core, as well as during its promotional activities, in order to spike up the rate of interest and generate unprecedented profit.

4. Literature Review

4.1. History of Barbie and Mattel

Warner Brothers’ girlboss movie features a script that heavily relies on shallow feminist talking points, led by a conventionally attractive white woman playing a literal doll. The storyline is emballaged in hot pink sceneries and a dreamlike escapism land where women can do it all. Conveniently, the *Barbie* movie doesn’t stray far away from the essence of Mattel’s Barbie doll. The success and praise the movie received can be traced back to years of hard work and marketing the company has invested in. Standing at 29-cm tall, the cultural icon has managed to withstand the test of time, officially making its debuting at the American International Toy Fair in New York City during the late 50s (Lord). Originally modelled on the German Lilli doll (Lord), the plastic toy with the figure of a full-grown woman was created by Ruth Handler under Mattel Inc.’s label with the intention of providing an inspirational model for young women to look up to.

Controversial from its very beginnings, Barbie was the byproduct of a risqué gag gift tailored for men's pleasure which Handler discovered by coincidence on a trip to Switzerland alongside her husband in 1956. Ruth Handler claimed that she wanted a role-model for her daughter that represented more than just motherhood depicted in that time's babydolls. Besides that sentiment, she immediately saw great potential in the German doll and began planning for an American soft-launch. At first, Handler was met with doubts from the toy industry, claiming "nobody would want to play with a doll that had breasts" (Tamkin). However, Mattel's scepticism of its commercial success was soon proven wrong (Westenhouer) when Barbie quickly became an iconic figure selling over 350,000 units in her first year. The plastic doll was first sold in 1959, with the target demographic drastically shifting from Lilli's male audience towards a younger sample made up primarily from children (Lord).

Shortly after its debut, Barbie's brand name's status became solidified as a cultural icon after it was licenced to over 100 companies. A strategic move that was meant to expand its presence while also providing Mattel with decades worth of substantial royalty payments, enabling the doll to become a highly profitable asset for Mattel (Rogers). Sixty-five years later, Barbie managed to claim 99% global brand awareness. Consequentially, the plastic doll paved the way for generations of other male and female adult dolls. Its impressive success secured the doll's status as a "true American icon" (Ford), even having renowned artists such as Andy Warhol iconise her in one of his paintings (Moore). The doll evolved from a work of art to an inspirational figure that inspires other artists to make art; thus, the *Barbie* (2023) movie was born.

4.2. Brand Activism

The film didn't rely solely on the doll's brand value and status in the market, choosing instead to pivot the marketing towards a more lucrative strategy; Brand activism. Brand activism manifests itself through a company's marketing and advertising communication; oftentimes, projecting an image of being aligned with the current societal values and political visions (Shetty et al. 163). Strategically, Warner Bros. and Mattel employed this tactic throughout their entire marketing tour, pushing for an image that parades "taking a stand" and being an avid "activist on social issues" in order to sell their products; film and Barbie dolls. Kotler & Sarkar defined Brand Activism as a "business intention to engage in divisive social or political issues", which could be noted during the film's promotional activities. This fairly

new strategy has emerged due to popular demands from consumers requiring brands to be active and outspoken on social issues (Manfredi-Sánchez).

According to Manfredi-Sánchez, brand activism is typically characterized by four dynamic elements that seek to convey certain values in order to connect emotionally with consumers, which the film achieved through the use of nostalgia and employing sentimental feminist talking-points. In addition to sprinkling a sense of a rather “progressive” approach to societal issues aimed at a global audience via the use of digital diffusion, all techniques that could easily be spotted in the *Barbie* film’s promotional strategy. Vredenburg et al, have developed a similar approach by defining an activist brand as a "purpose and value-driven" brand that positions itself on divisive, progressive, or convergent issues, in which the brand participates by communicating in an intangible way and by engaging in the practice. Brand activism; thus, operates in various domains such as business, economic, environmental, political, legal, and social (Kotler & Sarkar).

The *Barbie* film’s promotional team focused mainly on the “social dimension”, which is referred to by Kotler & Sarkar as “anything that deals with societal and community issues”, such as gender-based equality. The marketing team capitalizes vividly on the “gender” aspect throughout the promotional tour, painting everything Barbie pink and plastering catchy feminist slogans on every available billboard and merchandise. The intense colour-association advertising and gender marketing encapsulates the driven motive for the film’s overall marketing strategy: selling a product in the name of feminism.

4.3. Gendered Marketing and Pink Tax

The modern world is bombarded by pointless gendered products where Brands take a similar item with different colouring; oftentimes, pink for women, and re-sell it with absurd prices. The product serves the same purpose regardless of its colour, yet the marketing moguls reinforce the idea that if your product has a custom slogan, pattern or colour, it automatically has more value. This new marketing strategy hidden under a layer of “Gender performativity” (Maclaran et al.) gave birth to the “millennial pink” which became associated with the feminine gender. The marketing strategists has established it as a feminist colour that celebrates the return of an empowered femininity asserted by a traditionally feminine colour now presented in a positive light. It is still “pink” but repackages as a “millennial pink” that lures in women who refuses to choose between traditional femininity and radical feminism (Bideaux).

A form of (re)politicization of pink has introduced the millennial pink trend to many brands that took advantage of this colour becoming a torchbearer of feminism. Millennial pink has been used in marketing strategies since 2014, appropriating the feminist struggles to sell products to eager female consumers (Bideaux). This marketing scheme created a so-called “Pink Tax” that charges an extra amount from women in order to pay for everyday products, from “girls’ toys and school uniforms to canes, braces, and adult diapers” (Aimbalance). Mattel used pink’s association with hyper femininity ages before it became “cool” and “empowering”, dating back to the 70s, the company built itself a strong colour-association brand where the Barbie doll became naturally linked to the colour pink.

With the resurgence of the pink tax imposed by the millennial pink’s popularity, Mattel and Warner Bros. worked overtime during the promotional tour of the film to reinforce Barbie’s claim over the colour pink, which helped significantly with their sales. Pink is no longer reserved to shallow femininity or little girls; it has evolved as a rallying colour waved by feminists in protests (Cochrane). In that regard, Benhamou and Diaye have noted that “pink” is an effective communication tool used by brands to display “progressiveness”. The recovery of millennial pink in its relation to feminist values by brands is a recycled form of gender marketing called “femvertising” which uses feminists’ concepts to generate quick profit. Consequentially, this manipulative marketing technique leads to the inevitable depoliticization of the colour (Erner).

4.4. Femvertising and Purple-Washing

According to Åkestam et al., femvertising stands for “female empowerment advertising”, in which brands promote their products and services through the use of shallow feminist speech. On their own accord, Abitbol & Sternadori defined “femvertisement” as the sort of advertisements that reveal women's empowerment through “women's real-life messages and bodies images”. Drake characterizes femvertising as being a strategic marketing process where women empowerment content is utilized in order to inspire women and increase their confidence in themselves, consequentially effecting their daily life purchase choices. These advertisements capitalize on women's desires and insecurities by spreading pro-woman messages (Varghese & Kumar 6). Cosmetic brands such as Dove promotes its products as being an empowering form of challenging beauty standards while simultaneously selling these so-called beauty products to fix women’s flaws (Johnston & Taylor 942). Similarly, *Babrie’s*

“femvertising” strategy, a contraction of “feminism” and “advertising”, consists in using feminism to sell. It unabashedly exploits the feminist concept of “empowerment” and “body-positivism” to promote its products; film and dolls alike.

Mattel and Warner Bros. rely on this strategy which in itself relies on playing with gender stereotypes, queer aesthetic or by reclaiming the codes of girl power (Milcent). Femvertising has become a branch of brand activism sternly demanded by the millennial consumers from modern firms, pushing them to adopt it as a marketing scheme in order to sell their products (Kotler & Sarkar; Manfredi-Sánchez). According to Shetty et al., these consumers are keener in investing in brands that manifest brand activism in their marketing, with the tendency to show more trust and long-term loyalty towards companies engaging in social issues. However, Mattel and Warner Bros’. marketing efforts were not faced with merely gullible consumers who praised them for their feminist take, as the current generation does not hesitate to denounce sexism in marketing; particularly in advertisement.

Femvertising is not the only current sub-branch of brand activism, Sterbenk et al. have coined another expression that refers to such practices as “fempower-washing”. Brands are accused of practicing fempower-washing when they use feminism to sell their services yet completely abstain from engaging themselves into programs that support women inside or outside the company, which Mattel has been accused of in the past. There is also the term “woke-washing”, used by Vredenburg et al., to denounce brands using “woke” activist messages without a record of any real actions that seek to uplift feminist voices. Notably, the most popular term to have been born out of this marketing trend has been the expression “purple-washing”, which denounces companies' practices that capitalizes over the feminist movement. According to Martinez-Fierro et al., purple-washing is used to define a “diversity of marketing and political strategies intended at promoting people, companies, associations, and other organizations through an appeal to gender equality”. Feminist values are dissected at these companies’ convenience, using them for monetary profit while completely discarding gender equality within their interior hierarchy.

Mattel and Warner Bros. did not skip on this profitable trend during the promotional activities for *Barbie*, albeit the fact that brands such as these are oftentimes labeled as hypocrite entities that only care about selling their products, the use of femvertisement and purple-washing practices guarantees bringing in new consumers who hang on every empowering word and pink tainted item, which in return results in the skyrocketing of their sales revenue without the need to actually commit to their feminist speeches (Varghese & Kumar 7).

5. Analysis

5.1. *A Deep Dive into the Premise of the Film and its Creation Process*

The premise of the 2023 *Barbie* film directed by Greta Gerwig, alludes to a revolutionary depiction of feminism encapsulated in the iconic frame of Barbie, a doll turned movie star. The viewer is invited to follow along as the iconic plastic doll comes to life in the form of the Hollywood actress Margot Robbie—introducing us to Barbieland, a utopia with pink undertones that parallels the real world, as she navigates through her recycled daily life routine (*Barbie* 00:03:25). Surrounded by identical replicas of herself and Kens, Barbie gains self-consciousness and begins to experience sudden existential doubts as she no longer feels like she fits in among her community. The doll has an epiphany as she wonders, “Do you guys ever think about dying?” (*Barbie* 00:13:37), which ends up causing a rip between Barbieland and the real world, resulting in the opening of a portal. This odd incident sets the tone for the remaining of the film, as Barbie, joined by Ken (played by Ryan Gosling), seeks answers to her dilemma from her own creators (Mattel).

The film tackles serious issues such as; identity, motherhood and gender inequality. However, the cinematography, constant wardrobe changes and dream-like setting gives off the impression of a long toy commercial meant to target young consumers, with the notable exception of the feminist messages bombarding the scenario every once and a while. It is still a big scale commercial, but promoted as a meaningful one embedded with feminist values. Early on in the film we get lines such as; “Thanks to Barbie, all problems of feminism and equality, have been solved.” (*Barbie* 00:03:38), followed by a humorous “At least that’s what the Barbies think, after all, they’re living in Barbieland.”, which is a playful jab at how Barbieland is a universe where women are privileged and hold the most power, thus, feminism has never been needed nor invented. The narrator continues to say; “Who am I to burst their bubble?”, reflecting a sense of self-awareness which the movie seems to utilize as a key component in its storytelling (Horton). The majority of the messages are spoon-fed to the audience with a very simplistic tone through monologues aimed at hitting all the necessary feminist talking points. The characters tell us out loud what the themes of the movie are with an on the nose sort of delivery.

Nonetheless, the film release has been a phenomenon in popular culture as it is the first of its kind to be made centring Mattel's darling; Barbie. Throughout the years, the company has been very protective over its doll's brand image, making sure to not allow any exploitation of it on onscreen, unless they had full creative control. Barbie appearing as a supporting character in *Toy Story 3* and *Toy Story 4* in the 2010s, exemplified Mattel's vigilant attitude towards any attempt at soiling the doll's brand, be it Pixar studio trying to poke fun at Barbie and Ken or Aqua's (a Danish-Norwegian group) mocking hit single "Barbie Girl" which witnessed an era of intense series of lawsuits. 2023 Mattel; however, seems to project a more lenient attitude towards its copyrights, sampling what was once a nightmare fuel to the company into the new *Barbie* film's soundtrack, performed by Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice's under a recycled title, "Barbie World" (Dockterman). In a quest to reinvent its brand, the *Barbie* movie has been in the works since 2009, with stars like Anne Hathaway and Amy Schumer being considered briefly before Mattel came to the conclusion that attaching a face and a personality to the doll could ruin its aesthetic. The doll is supposed to be a blank vessel meant to allow young children to project their hopes and dreams onto her canvas (Dockterman and Lang), which allows a bigger demographic of consumers.

In 2018, Mattel CEO Kreiz Ynon completely rebranded Mattel by including more services and products (streaming shows, games, a theme park in Arizona, and movies), emphasizing that, "Once you think of all those people who buy your product not just as consumers but as fans, you realize you have an audience and all these other opportunities become obvious." (Dockterman). Kreiz joined the company with the goal of milking Mattel's Barbie till its last drop, focusing on creating a loyal fanbase rather than a fleeting commercially successful film. Starting with a cinematic universe where Margot Robbie was thought to be the perfect ambassador for the brand (Dockterman), Ynon and Margot both quickly agreed that the film should be made into a "cultural moment." (Lerner and Lerner). Margot Robbie even pointed out in an interview for a TIME cover story, that "Barbie has the sort of enviable global recognition only achieved by brands like Coca-Cola", continuing to emphasize the brand's powerful position by labelling it as a "staple of the culture, a touchpoint for pop icons like Nicki Minaj, and has become synonymous with a specific shade of pink" (Dockterman). Moreover, Mattel showcased an equal level of diligence and scrutiny in selecting the director, as the movie's core represents a typical feminist manifesto. Therefore, Greta Gerwig, known for her strong feminist values and women empowerment films, was strategically selected. Gerwig reinvented the plastic doll's brand image in alignment with what the new version of Mattel

stood for, repainting the stereotypically vain and materialism driven Barbie as an “ambitious, self-sufficient and independent female protagonist” (Clara).

Considering the doll’s controversial past, the rebrand comes as a salvation to the company’s plummeting sales. Once criticized for having “too much of a figure”, Margot Robbie, explained that while Barbie is “sexualized”, she “should never be sexy” (Aguirre). Accordingly, the doll has been mainly advertised by Mattel to children, even with its “womanly figure”, cementing its status as the first toy company to broadcast commercials to children (Lord). Barbie meant young girls could play with a doll that looked like a woman, not a baby doll, which was revolutionary for its time. Ruth Handler, in a 1965 interview, argued that American young girls needed a doll with a “teen-age figure and a lot of glorious, imaginative, high-fashion clothes” (Giacomin and Lubinski), which was wittily referenced in the film itself when the narrator said that “Since the beginning of time, since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls.” (*Barbie* 00:01:08), and then cuts to Barbie being shown standing tall as a godly figure with the classic black and white striped swimsuit. A nod to Barbie’s “sassy ponytail, heavy eyeliner, a healthy dose of side-eye and a distinctly adult body” original look (Blackmore), as she embodies the role of the saviour, rescuing the young girls from the “mother role” confinement (*Barbie* 00:01:48).

If one could ignore Barbie’s biggest fear being cellulite rather than having abnormally flat feet for a stereotypical Barbie, as the doll humorously states that “I would never wear heels if my feet were shaped this way.” (*Barbie* 00:19:28). In addition to, unfairly isolating the Weird Barbie simply for being different in a universe that supposedly celebrates all women no matter the differences, the 2023 *Barbie* film according to Emma Carroll Hudson, was highly successful with its marketing campaign. Utilizing a “multi-faceted approach centred on fan participation”, Hudson praises the marketing team for being able to “foster a cultural phenomenon” (Coghlan et al.).

5.2. Promotional Activities’ Tactics

The very first promotional tactic employed by the *Barbie* film makers was an intentional leak of some of the film’s scene shoots and wardrobe, which created an instantaneous buzz around the movie. The stills of Margot Robbie dressed as Barbie alongside Ryan Gosling dressed as Ken was enough material to generate an eager fanbase swearing their loyalty to the film (Horton). Albeit the criticism surrounding Barbie’s tendency towards

excessive materialism communicated through the doll's "lifestyle" and "unrealistic body proportions" (Lord), Mattel and Warner Bros. kept the doll's idealization of wealth accumulation and its infamous unhealthy body image inside and outside of the film, with a staggering marketing budget of \$150million that completely eclipsed the \$145million it cost to actually make the film itself (Geraghty).

Moreover, Mattel granted various licenses for brands to release limited-edition Barbie merchandise and experiences in order to solidify the doll's brand image (Ascolese). Dipping its plastic toes in the fashion industry, Barbie partnered with Aldo Shoes, Forever 21, along with gap, target and crocs, to release various fashion items and accessories (Clara). While in the beauty industry, Barbie partnered with MAC cosmetics, NYX, and with Moon oral, to name a few (Clara). Besides that, Barbie also partnered with Swoon Frozen Lemonade and Pink Berry in the Food industry to create customized pink delicacies. Not sparing the hospitality industry, Mattel even approved a rental Barbie Dream House built in Malibu which was made available on Airbnb.

These strategic collaborations helped push the Barbie brand even beyond the movie. (Clara), and while women can be anything they want in Barbieland, they still have to conform to feminine beauty standards enforced on them by their surrounding patriarchal society, encouraged to plunge themselves towards excessive consumerism. Despite its pro-feminist driven narrative, *Barbie* the film is a Mattel product just like any other manufactured doll meant to be sold.

5.2.1. Interactive Advertisement

In a bid to win-over their target audience with technological innovation, the *Barbie* film's marketing campaign utilized user-generated content (The Barbie Selfie Generator) to allow fans an immersive experience where they get to create their own unique Barbie style posters and slogans (Clara). Additionally, the marketing team allowed users to recreate their Barbie moments and get an opportunity to be posted on Barbie's social media pages and win prizes through different challenges. Similarly, the incorporation of "templates, hashtags, and filters" allowed clients to interact on a personal level with the brand. These interactive advertisement-based strategies helped create a connection between the consumers and the brand, fostering brand awareness through the use of free publicity that contributed significantly in improving Mattel and Warner Brothers' sales (Clara). Furthermore, amplifying the sense of

nostalgia and emotional attachment within clients drove them to get more invested. The clients became a driving force in the marketing campaign themselves, creating and reposting content of their own which made for an effective free-of-charge promotional tool (Clara).

5.2.2. Bumble: Meet Your Ken!

The virtual interactive advertisement went beyond user-generated content, as Mattel and Warner Bros. took it upon themselves to further capitalize on the real life “romantic” interactions of their consumers. The image of an independent Barbie who inspires other women to rely and priorities themselves over Kens (men) immediately shatters into pieces once you realize that the film’s team collaborated with the online dating application Bumble to encourage fans into the dating scene. And while there is nothing inherently wrong with finding your soulmate online in this virtual age, the collaboration completely contradicts the message of the film, where Barbieland centres around Barbie and her passion for independency. Ken, who was a mere “accessory” to Barbie, introduced to the market in 1961 by Mattel (Lord), becomes an essential part to her brand.

Cameron Curtis, EVP of global digital marketing at Warner Bros. Pictures, said in a statement that, “Teaming up with Bumble for this experience has been a fun and creative way to showcase all of the film’s Barbies’ and Kens’ personalities as they venture into the real world via the app, bringing their innate positivity with them.” The partnership with the dating application is promoted as a sensible endeavour that preaches the slogan “women-first” where women users are, allegedly, given more power which parallels the Barbie film’s tag headline, “She’s everything. He’s just Ken.” (Calfee). Whitney Wolfe Herd, founder and CEO of Bumble, stated that, “The power of kindness in creating healthy connections and relationships is undeniable, and compliments is just one of the many ways we empower our community to lead by example and make more meaningful first moves,” (Writers). The application allows users to send a Barbie-inspired compliment to people they like in their swipe queue (Go), while also having the option of matching with characters of the movie and receive uplifting messages (Deyo). This strategy not only capitalizes on the concepts of “love” and “kindness”, but also brilliantly curates a well-crafted brand image that seeks to humanize Mattel’s dolls and enforce brand familiarity.

5.2.3. *The Commodification of Nostalgia*

According to Lissitsa & Kol, Millennials are far more aware of marketing “old tactics” in comparison to other generations; therefore, they tend to be more suspicious regarding advertisements. Whereas, Valentine & Powers suggest that this generation is a key element in the success of companies because of their “growing purchasing power”; hence, the need to adopt more effective marketing techniques in order to lure them in (Moreno et al. 138). Mattel and Warner Bros. were well aware of the power of nostalgia, and how it can be commodified as a marketing tool that creates a strong emotional connection between present experiences and cherished memories (Aprile). Albeit their critical attitude towards “old” advertising tactics, Millennials are quite susceptible when it comes to nostalgia. The *Barbie* movie capitalizes on that aspect as it strikes the “perfect balance between modernizing Barbie’s narrative and inspiring nostalgia in adults” (Go).

In Aqua’s 1997 hit song “Barbie Girl”, Barbie represented a “blonde bimbo girl in a fantasy world” (Fletcher), the band’s critical portrayal of the doll’s outdated female stereotype launched a legal battle in which Mattel unsuccessfully sued MCA Records over alleged trademark infringement. This charged past between the two creatives didn’t stop Mattel from reviving the legendary pop song for some nostalgia bait. According to Margot Robbie, Nicki Minaj and Ice Spice’s “Barbie World” which was a remake of the original song came to fruition after she begged Gerwig to find a way to include the iconic track (Blancaflor). The new version of “Barbie World” garnered over 65 million plays (Go), racking up an impressive number of plays on Spotify for the full album.

The Barbie soundtrack strategically capitalized on Generation Z and Millennials’ nostalgic attitude towards the doll and its former association with the catchy “Barbie World” song, further indulging them by marketing the film’s soundtrack around these demographics’ musical and artists preferences (including names such as; Dua Lipa, Bille Eilish, Ice Spice, and Nicki Minaj). This nostalgia fuelled tactic generated a huge promotional buzz for both the film and the musical album release, which inspired Mattel to announce new plans to produce more recycled toy-centric content in the near future (Ascolese).

5.2.4. *Barbenheimer*

Among all Mattel and Warner Bros. Pictures' promotional activities, *Barbenheimer* proved to be the most fruitful. A fan-made movie crossover event that combined *Barbie* with its World War II era biopic rival film, *Oppenheimer*. According to the studios behind the two films, their marketing teams had nothing to do with this phenomenon, as fans of *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* took it upon themselves to meld the two universes together as a double feature. The moviegoers were encouraged to engage with both films, as the notion of watching two polar-opposite films became a trendy summer activity for many (Siu). According to a poll done by The Quorum, "6% of people who saw *Oppenheimer* only did so because *Barbie* was sold out". In an unprecedented collaborative spirit, the two films set a post-pandemic record at the box office (Dockterman and Lang), with *Barbie* crushing box office expectations with an estimate \$337 million globally and *Oppenheimer* debuting to \$80.5 million.

Together, they made history as the biggest collective box office turnout of the pandemic era, as well as the fourth-biggest in history (Rubin). However, despite the buzz generated through this collaboration, both of the films' creative marketing teams claimed that they didn't orchestrate this peculiar marketing experience. The filmmakers and main actors from both films joined in into the hype by encouraging their fanbases to watch both movies. In the midst of the frenzy, Gerwig and Robbie bought tickets to *Oppenheimer*, while Christopher Nolan and his leading man Cillian Murphy of *Oppenheimer* expressed their fascination of the outcome *Barbenheimer* crossover has generated. Additionally, Nolan candidly informed IGN's Mariah Espada that, "For those of us who care about movies, we've been really waiting to have a crowded marketplace again, and now it's here and that's terrific." (Dockterman and Lang), emphasizing how important this "accidental" promotional tactic has been for both films' sales revenue.

5.3. *Reflections of Brand Activism, Femvertising and Purple-Washing*

Despite its youthful appearance, the plastic doll is over 60 years of age since it has been first introduced to the market. Imposing itself as a distinctable childhood core memory for different women around the globe. Mattel's Barbie doll demographic centred around young girls in the past few decades, but Gerwig's 2023 film has re-introduced the doll to a larger

population of consumers. In efforts to reinvent its iconic status, Ynon exclaimed that he wanted to turn “consumers” into loyal “fans.” This ambitious vision targeted a new audience composed of the Silent Generation, who were the first to purchase the doll for their children, to the newest Barbie consumers, Gen Alpha (Morrison). Gerwig’s Barbie is not exclusive for young children, the film has a humorous campy component that caters more for adults than any other younger generation (Kim).

In that regard, the company in collaboration with Warner Bros. Pictures repackaged the doll in a new brand identity. Barbie is no longer a shallow entity for kids to project their hopes and dreams on, but rather, a more sophisticated icon that preaches for gender equality. Anna Temel criticized the 2023 film’s attempt at reinventing the doll’s brand image by repositioning Barbie from its association with gender stereotypes to a symbol of feminist empowerment, a clear attempt at purple-washing (Coghlan et al.). Further emphasizing that, Gerwig denounced the “ideal woman” only to position a controversial doll known for its ideal core value as a vehicle through which contemporary feminism and womanhood can be interrogated. Temel considers the depiction of Barbie in the 2023 film as a failed venture that aimed to sell Mattel’s products under the guise of shallow feminist talking-points (Coghlan et al.).

In relation to that, it has been noted in the past years, that customers have proven to be more loyal to brands that take a stance for political and social issues in their marketing (Vredenburg et al.). Clients are now demanding that their products not only serve their designated purpose, but also ethically advocate for societal issues. According to Shetty et al., this awareness has pushed companies to connect on a more emotional level with their consumers, thriving to secure customer loyalty and association with consumers who shares similar values. Precisely, female empowerment and the challenge of gender inequalities have become a popular trend in advertisements (Drake 593). This new genre of advertising has been labelled “femvertising” (Drake 593)—a type of profitable brand activism that leans on social activism (Varghese & Kumar).

Of its own accords, the *Barbie* marketing team did not refrain from utilizing “femvertisement” and “purple-washing” practices to promote and sell the movie, constantly projecting loaded feminist advertisement to lure in more of their female audience’s loyalty (Clara). After all, the film does insist that “Barbie changed everything. All of these women are Barbie, and Barbie is all of these women.” (*Barbie* 00:02:54). Mattel’s engagement on social issues through the use of social networks allowed a level of resonance with the targeted

consumers, and while the Barbie movie does provide many feminist instances, it still feels overdone and empty, with little to no depth that could be explored nor revolutionary changes that got suggested. The film does acknowledge the “un-coolness” of Barbie when a middle-schooler pokes fun at Barbie for her delusional belief that Barbieland has “fixed” gender inequality in the real world. The scene is a playful jab at the doll’s ironic “duality of existing as both a feminist icon and a symbol of capitalism, patriarchy and oppressive beauty norms”. However, even with self-aware scenes like the latter, no content with real substance was detected in the blockbuster movie (Kain).

5.4. Brand Colour Association: Barbie Pink

During the 2000s, several feminist movements reclaimed the colour pink as a symbol of political resistance. The Gulabi gang in India, for instance, adorned themselves in pink Sarees (traditional Indian dresses) as they took to the streets to campaign against domestic violence towards women (Berthod). While the American “Pussyhats” movement, fiercely demonstrated against the presidential campaign of Donald Trump with distinctive pink cat-eared woollen hats (Hestir). As a result, to this sudden rise of pink’s political value in the market, the colour started being strategically used in Gender Marketing to provide products specifically manufactured for women’s “taste”—associating the said colour with femininity as well as with feminism so that pink products become the “normalized” obvious option for female consumers. Women no longer have the choice to select a desired item passively, for most feminine products in the market are typically a glaring shade of pink. Moreover, marketing experts have managed to successfully appropriate the codes of feminism (Franck); in this case, pink’s association with it, to impose a Pink Tax and generate more profit in our contemporary consumerism driven culture.

Mattel’s Barbie is no stranger to the colour pink, as the brand has managed to keep a tight association with the “girly” colour for decades—Barbie Pink is a brand identifier in itself. In the 2023 film, Barbieland is a female-dominated paradise distinguished for its pink shades that compliment most of our plastic doll’s wardrobe choices. Additionally, Gerwig’s film promotions included pink billboards, pink outfits, and even a pink carpet (Morrison). The hue has become inexplicably linked to femininity and is oftentimes depicted as a feminist “power colour” (Brown), which Mattel spared no expenses capitalizing on it. The brand’s association

with pink has been “an amazing asset” for Barbie’s brand image, as the plastic icon has succeeded in conjuring thoughts of its movie through the use of a single colour (Carroll).

Due to the brand’s powerful colour association strategy, a single-colour billboard with the film’s release date in the corner and the iconic Barbie pink pantone splashed all over it, no visible logo or text whatsoever, was instantly recognizable as Barbie’s trademark during the film’s promotions (Carroll). According to Manzo, the film production has even infamously admitted to causing an international pink paint shortage. Consequentially, these marketing tricks further exemplifies Mattel’s power of colour psychology in practice. The *Barbie* movie’s marketing playbook is on a league of its own (Go), as the brand in collaboration with Warner Brothers, has successfully managed to make history by turning the entire world pink.

5.5. Beyond the Pink: Expectations VS Reality

The *Barbie* film accumulated more than \$1.44 billion worldwide, making history as the highest-grossing film debut ever for a film directed by a woman. Despite its hypocritical commentary on capitalism and blatant use of purple-washing, the movie is still considered a win for feminism (Lerner and Lerner). Gerwig described Barbie as a female figure that “mourns the loss of innocence that comes with understanding the realities of living in a patriarchal society” (Picado), yet still has the vigour to celebrate female relationships, precisely that between mother and daughter. The heartwarming nod towards motherhood is inspired directly from Ruth Handler’s initial reason for creating the doll. Ultimately, Barbie is named after her own daughter. This sentiment contradicts the movie’s opening scene where young girls are depicted savagely breaking their babydolls in order to embrace the new independent “hot” Barbie (*Barbie* 00:02:15), metaphorically rejecting motherhood and embracing a modern sense of female empowerment. This said “empowerment” is being shamelessly utilized to sell dolls and similar Mattel products to gullible consumers, which is a certified form of femvertising marketing.

On a similar note, to Gerwig’s vision of fostering female relationships and women uplifting other women, one of the many controversies that surrounded the *Barbie* Movie was the fact that the film’s main female stars Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie got snubbed by the Oscars Film Academy for Best Actress or Director categories. The uproar by the film’s fans was manifested in the idea that the film was Oscar worthy but not the women who created it, which emphasized the ideology that women will always be sidelined in a patriarchal society.

This passionate reaction by the fans in itself snubbed the film's second lead, America Ferrera. The first-ever Oscar nominee of Honduran descent in any category, as well as the ninth Latina nominee in the Best Supporting Actress category. The *Barbie* film fans have also chosen to ignore three other nominees for Best Picture that were directed by women. Whereas, the point of Gerwig's film was that all women's achievements should be equally celebrated, *Barbie*'s cult-following decided that some are more worthy than others, completely missing the film's point of female solidarity (Mouriquand).

Ironically, the feminine tone of the movie was completely overshadowed by Ken's popularity among its enjoyers, ranging from the surge of catchy phrases like "Kenough" taking the internet by storm, Barbie's Dream House turning into Ken's Mojo Dojo Casa House, to Ryan Gosling getting an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his brilliant performance. The hit song "I'm Just Ken", sung in the film by Gosling, became the most viral clip from the entire film, utterly eclipsing the rest of the soundtrack. Barbie, a female centric film about resisting the patriarchy, was sidelined as film-goers celebrated the accidental representation of the patriarchy with Ken's addictive theme song (Mouriquand). The male doll's unprecedented popularity has even inspired Greta to hint the possibility of a Ken centric movie (Croxtton).

The 2023 movie seems to thrive in contradictions, as the only solution they have managed to offer for patriarchy, is a reversal of gender dynamic. Kens live as subordinates in comparison to the Barbies, and are only ever satisfied with their day if Barbie acknowledges them, which makes the whole Barbieland fail as a utopian concept. We then jump from a Matriarchal society where Kens are homeless to a Patriarchal society where Barbies' houses are stolen by Kens, and eventually the storyline is rounded back to Matriarchy. The dynamics of oppression are never resolved, simply reversed. This highlights the marketing campaign's shallow attempt at clinging to femvertising and purple-washing to promote a doll commercial.

In response to that, Mattel Films' executive producer, Robbie Brenner, explicitly stated that *Barbie* is "not a feminist movie.", in order to avoid the public's scrutiny. It is clearly a movie meant for kids, even though one of its main promotional collaborators was an adult dating application. However, according to Brown, "given Barbie's feminist history, there is nothing else her first motion picture could have been." A statement supported by Greta Gerwig who has labelled *Barbie* as "most certainly a feminist film", completely contradicting Mattel executives' prior announcements (Treisman). In the midst of these contradictory narratives the film seems to embody, the plastic doll who has long been criticized for perpetuating outdated

gender norms and an unrealistic body image was suddenly reinvented in the film as a “feminist icon” (Treisman). Rafia Zakaria, the author of “Against White Feminism”, said that feminist activists are supposed to “put the fangs back in feminism” but instead, Barbie put “sparkly lipstick on”. Rafia claims that these “factory-made models” of plastic manufactured feminists simply say what is comfortable for everyone to hear without any real substance—a “feel-good” feminism which falls short in uplifting women voices (Mahdawi).

Unfortunately, reality is far from being a Barbie Pink coloured dreamland, as 86% of Mattel’s executive officers team is made up solely of men (Bogarin). Mattel’s CEO before Ynon was a woman named Margo Georgiadis who quit after only one year with the toy company. Despite Ruth Handler being the founding-mother of the company, very few women took charge of the CEO and Chairman positions after her (Lerner and Lerner). The film humorously takes a jab at that disheartening fact within one of its scenes, where Barbie is seen demanding to meet the “woman in charge” and is told there isn’t any. The Mattel CEO, played by Will Ferrel in the film, defends his all-male board by saying “We are a company literally made of women! We had a woman CEO in the ’90s and then another one...at some point. So that’s two right there!” (*Barbie* 00:46:46). Today, Mattel’s Board of Directors consists of six men and five women, a promising division that pales in comparison to the film’s Barbieland. Unsurprisingly; however, only one female executive officer can be detected out of seven other men (Lerner and Lerner), which further proves Mattel’s attempt at purple-washing its own brand image.

While consumers are more outspoken about denouncing fake activism nowadays, and have shown an impressive tendency of being much more critical of companies’ performative “woke” actions (Shetty et al. 165), brands are still prioritising sales over authenticity. Selling anything from emotions and happiness to even sex appeals and political values (Volkert). Modern consumers are capable of clearly seeing through companies’ forced initiatives that lack genuine commitment and connections with their target audience (Van der Meer), which was the case with some of the *Barbie* movie’s critics. Moreover, as advertising typically functions as a mirror, clients are allowed the luxury to form an image of themselves and identify with what they are consuming (Åkestam et al. 795). Kapoor & Munjal have deducted that some women project a high public consciousness which reflects in having a positive attitude towards femvertising, a possible reason that explains the massive female fanbase the film has managed to accumulate.

Furthermore, Mattel's chief executive and chairman, Ynon Kreiz, has stated that, "The *Barbie* movie became a global cultural phenomenon, and marked a key milestone for Mattel." (Makortoff). These positive results didn't appear from thin air, the company has always advertised its brand image as what an audience desires to achieve or gain. A tactic that has been very successful throughout the decades in attracting young impressionable children and has now moved towards an older demographic, smoothly influencing Millennial consumers' decision-making process (Drake 593)—even with the use of unethical marketing strategies like purple-washing and femvertising. According to Ynon, "The movie has broadened Barbie's fan base, which will be an important contributor for the brand as part of our long-term franchise marketing strategy," (Thaler). This unprecedented success has even inspired Warner Bros. to consider making a *Barbie* sequel, with or without Greta Gerwig directing it (Ruimy).

The toy company's exemplary achievements came as the result of various risky marketing endeavours, successfully avoiding Brand identity damage even with their questionable business ethics. Mattel CEO Ynon has said during one of the toy company's third-quarter earnings call, that "Dolls continue to grow with the benefit from the *Barbie* movie", reporting sales surged 9% to \$1.9 billion for a three-month period (Thaler). Mattel and Warner Bros'. collaboration strategically invested in trendy social and political themes, greedily capitalizing on anything and everything, ranging from pink coloured items to dating applications. In "The Coolness of Capitalism Today", McGuigan has pointed out that, "neoliberal capitalism has constructed popular legitimacy" which huge corporations like Mattel has been accused of in the past. These moguls are constantly pushing for consumerism to be normalized as part of everyday life, buying pink items is "cool" because they represent feminism, so is the case with everything else these companies are selling.

Capitalism has even been observed to milk any criticism of its structure into profit, just like Mattel's *Barbie* film did with its cartoonish self-criticism of the brand's problematic past, served to the consumers with a "carefully curated, narrowly limited and unthreatening" delivery (Lobel 2). Mattel villainizes itself throughout the movie, because the corporation isn't seeking likeability, Barbie is its main star and banking off of it is the company's sole goal, for as long as you buy what they're selling, the toy company doesn't mind being the laughingstock of the film. Overall, the 2023 *Barbie* at its core was a toy commercial, and the messages within the movie didn't really deviate far from that.

Conclusion:

The *Barbie* film showcased a new form of advertisement ploy that guaranteed unprecedented commercial success for both Mattel and Warner Bros. Pictures. The two companies' collaboration serves as a case study for modern brands' shameless exploitation of feminist values to sell services and products. The feminism embedded in the movie and promotional activities feels as plastic as the iconic doll itself, yet has splendidly served its purpose. *Barbie* has managed to bring back the doll on the map after facing years of struggles by creating a unique brand experience for their target audience to consume, further capitalizing on the feminine branding of the film by a strategic film release date which coincided with International Women's Day. The consistent interactive visual branding, user-generated content, and nitpicked collaborations (Clara), have all worked as a sort of a personalized set of advertisements explicitly back-riding the feminist movement.

This form of Brand Activism manifested in "femvertising" and "purple-washing" has allowed Mattel to comfortably sell its products and services to women, while simultaneously capitalising on their quest for gender equality (Clara). According to Chappet, the 2023 *Barbie* film showcased that Barbie is still a "lightning rod for the messy, knotty contradictions of feminism, sexism, misogyny and body image". The criticism surrounding the Barbie doll has motivated consumers to wonder whether "Barbie is a feminist icon, or a doll which props up the patriarchy?" This duality of Barbie as both a feminist icon and a tool of the patriarchy, reflects the broader tensions inherent in femvertising, a marketing strategy that seeks to empower women while continuously profiting from their insecurities and societal pressures.

Moreover, Fleming insists that "It is impossible to conceive of the toy industry as being anything other than dependent on a popular culture which shapes and structures the meanings carried by toys", which was evidently applied in Mattel's promotional tactics—actively pushing their doll towards a stable status of brand familiarity. In addition to that, the company resorted back to humour and "self-deprecation" in order to project a sense of acceptance manifested in embracing the brand's darkest side and failures (Bogarin). This element of self-awareness has been strategically utilized in the film as well, following Barbie's desire to "be part of the people that make a meaning, not a thing that is made."—Mattel uses this scene in order to humanize the doll, aiming for a sense of relatability and better customer engagement. Ruth Handler,

herself, appears in the movie as a character claiming that she is Mattel and that Barbie was never meant to have an end (*Barbie* 01:40:35), the doll is meant to be recyclable and will keep on being re-invented through the decades for the sole purpose of generating profit.

According to Herter et al., women consumers have been regarded as much more loyal customers in comparison to men. Furthermore, proving to have a higher tendency than men to make repurchases and spread positive word-of-mouths. In that regard, female customers should be prioritized in most organizations' marketing plans. Instead of a genuine investment in these clients' loyalty; however, brands utilize femvertising strategies that vaguely alludes to empowering women and breaking gender roles (Bahadur). While the messages conveyed through this advertisement tactic are laudable, these companies couldn't care less about these causes internally. Completely ignoring wage indifferences and gender inequality within their workforces (Abitbol & Sternadori). Vredenburg et al consider that when the practical reality of a brand's engagement is "misaligned with purpose, values and messaging", the brand's activism is inauthentic. Brands, like Mattel, use the theme of feminism to sell their products—projecting a progressive image through their marketing that is oftentimes devoided of any actual depth, which is peak Purple-washing.

Ultimately, the feminist movement and its symbols are now being used for commercial purposes, the radical message of the feminist movement has been neutralized and trivialized into a mere marketing ploy. The neo-liberal capitalistic system has officially appropriated the movement. In its core, the film was created to rehabilitate Mattel's image and modernize it for a larger consumer audience. As a result, Mattel seems to be capitalizing on everything, from the colour pink, to ageism related insecurities, to depression and anxiety to sell Depressed Barbie, humorously stating that "anxiety, panic attacks and OCDs are sold separately" (*Barbie* 01:07:31). The problematic company has even pushed for its plastic doll to get positioned as an ecological ambassador. Eva Boesenberg questions the motivations behind Barbie's sudden "eco-crusade", accusing the powerhouse brand of entering a new era of corporate greenwashing, especially after successfully milking millions of dollars out of purple-washing and femvertising in its first movie release experience (Coghlan et al.).

In conclusion, similarly to how capitalism has appropriated the criticism surrounding it in order to normalize its unethical practices, Mattel has taken the memo and made it its mission to reinvent its problematic doll's brand image using the exact same tactics. The mogul corporation used the criticism directed towards it to mock itself in a performative "self-parodic" gesture to drain consumers' pockets. Mattel's new marketing techniques allowed the brand to

flatter clients' senses by providing a well-curated image that mirrors today's trendy political and social values, with little to no actual internal change to be noted. Eventually, the 2023 *Barbie* film serves as a vehicle for the brand's manufactured activism where progressive themes are commodified—making Barbie relevant to a new generation while simultaneously expanding the company's market reach. Mattel's efforts highlight how corporations can appropriate social consciousness to maintain profitability, blurring the line between genuine cultural engagement and commercial exploitation.

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