THE CHANGING STAGE OF (DIGITAL) SELF-PRESENTATION: INTERNET MEMES AND THE BARBENHEIMER

(DİJİTAL) BENLİK SUNUMUNUN DEĞİŞEN SAHNESİ: İNTERNET MEMLERİ VE BARBENHEİMER

Can CENGİZ[1]

ORCID: C.C. 0000-0002-3938-9506

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:
[1] Can Cengiz
Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University, Türkiye
**E-mail/E-posta:** cancengiz@beun.edu.tr

Abstract
The expanding influence of the internet and social media networks increasingly digitizes individual representations. This digital universe, characterized by the features of a productive network, fosters creativity while enabling a digitized communication environment through accessible, fluid, easily transferable, and adaptable content as a system. One of the most significant elements of this digitalized shared space is internet memes, which generally consist of a combination of textual and visual elements and function through repetition and adaptation. The simultaneous release of the films Barbie and Oppenheimer on July 21, 2023, not only broke box office records but also sparked numerous debates, giving rise to a new concept that originated among cinema audiences and gradually influenced broader audiences. The term Barbenheimer, created by combining the names of these two films, became a medium for digital self-presentation, particularly on social media platforms such as Twitter (now X). Our research focuses on the fluid and evolving nature of the relationship between internet memes, visual communication, and digital self-presentation, based on a content analysis of 250 tweets containing the keyword Barbenheimer and drawing on the emerging literature.

Keywords: Internet Memes, Self-Presentation, Barbenheimer, Digital Self, Visual Communication.

Oz
İnternetin ve sosyal medya ağlarının her geçen gün genişleyen etki alanı bireysel temsillerin de dijitalleşmesini beraberinde getirmektedir. Üretken bir ağın özelliklerini taşıyan söz konusu 'dijital evren', yaratıcılığı teşvik ederken, bir sistem olarak erişilebilir, akışkan, kolayca aktarılabilir ve uyarlanabilir içerikler eliyle dijitalleşmiş bir iletişim ortamını mümkün kılmaktadır. Bu dijitalleşmiş ortak alanın en önemli unsurlarından biri de, genelde metin ve görsel unsurların birlikteliğinden oluşan, tekrarlar ve uyarlamalarla iş gören internet memleridir. Aynı tarihte (21 Temmuz 2023) vizyona giren ve gişe rekorlarının yanı sıra birçok tartışmayı da beraberinde getiren Barbie ve Openheimer filmleri, sinema izleyicileri ile başlayan, giderek daha geniş kitleleri de etkileyen yeni bir konseptin doğuşunu sağlamıştır. Her iki filmin isimlerinin birleştirilmesi ile oluşan Barbenheimer ifadesi, başta Twitter (X) olmak üzere sosyal medyada yapılan paylaşımlarda dijital benlik sunumunun aracı haline gelmiştir. Çalışmamız *Barbenheimer* anahtar sözcüğünü içeren 250 adet Tweet üzerine gerçekleştirilen içerik analizi ve gelişmekte olan literatürden hareketle internet memleri, görsel iletişim ve dijital benlik ilişkisinin akışkan ve değişen doğasına odaklanacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İnternet Memleri, Benlik Sunumu, Barbenheimer, Dijital Benlik, Görsel İletişim.
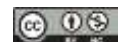
INTRODUCTION

Digitized visual communication content is manifested in various ways on digital platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (X), including the creation and viewing of video content, communication through emojis and GIFs, and the sharing of original or re-produced photographs on social networks. Indeed, it can be observed that visual elements have become dominant over textual elements in the development of social networks. The ratio of text to visuals on social media has been gradually shifting in favor of visuals each year (through photos, videos, GIFs, emojis, stickers, and memes), with platforms like Instagram and Twitter (X), which are increasingly popular among both ordinary users and professionals, playing a key role in this trend (Milosavljević, 2020, p. 10).

Another element whose usage is increasingly rising within digital platforms and social networks is internet memes, which generally consist of a short text and a visually reproducible image. Internet memes emerged as a new format for expressing ideas on the web and have evolved from a simple form of entertainment to a unique communication tool that reflects societal or personal emotions and tendencies. Therefore, the need to analyze the purposes and effects of internet memes, which have permeated nearly every corner of our online world, is steadily growing (Joshi et al., 2024, p. 1831). Internet memes, as digital elements with common characteristics that spread across the web through imitation and repetition, have become an inseparable part of digitized visual culture in recent years and have garnered significant interest both in popular and academic contexts (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 483).

The concept of the meme was first introduced in 1976 by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book The Selfish Gene, which has been translated into Turkish as Gen Bencildir. In his work, which examines the human species within the framework of biological and cultural evolution, Dawkins defines the term *meme* as part of a gene-centered approach and characterizes it as a unit of cultural transmission. Derived from the Greek root mimeme, which signifies an object of imitation and its action, the term was simplified by Dawkins, much like the word *gene*, into a single syllable and evolved into the form *meme*. Musical works, various thoughts and slogans, any architectural structure, or even a fashionable piece of clothing can become widespread and turn into examples of memes. Just as genes propagate through sperm or eggs from one body to another, memes proliferate through imitation. According to Dawkins (2007, p. 200) memes should be considered not only as entities that replicate through imitation but also as living beings that are technically capable of replication. Like any organism, memes can also change depending on the environmental conditions in which they exist, and even propagate.

Although internet memes are often formed through the combination of text and visual elements, it is observed that the visual element predominates over the text. Indeed, today, the term meme and its various applications are widely used in the online environment, and they are often associated with specific images that have become popular among online users, rather than being referred to Dawkins' original definition. Consequently, with the rapid growth of forums, chat rooms, blogs, and various social networks via the internet, the concept of the meme has acquired a new meaning. Memes have emerged as a new form of digital communication and, while still related to Dawkins' original concept of memes, they have developed unique characteristics, such as modes of dissemination and rates of reproduction (Díaz, 2013, p. 83). These memes are typically designs that can convey complex messages by simplifying them, contain associative meanings, and are widely accepted, particularly due to their humorous content. As a result, memes have become one of the most commonly used forms of online visual communication. The visual content used in memes is often *borrowed* from other cultural forms, such as TV shows, films, or popular news, and is constantly re-produced in this context (Milosavljević, 2020, p. 11).

The simultaneous theatrical release of Barbie (2023), a fantasy comedy directed by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, and Oppenheimer (2023), based on Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography American Prometheus, has triggered a contemporary phenomenon whose effects are also felt on digital platforms. Audiences have become divided over whether to choose one of the films or which one should be watched first. This situation has not only led to approaches that prioritize one film for various reasons but also highlighted and propagated a sense of being torn between the two. The

459

term Barbenheimer, derived from the names of both films, has come to symbolize this condition, and the texts and visuals created alongside this expression have opened the door to a new global trend. Barbenheimer has become one of the most popular frameworks for internet memes to the extent that it parodies and gamifies the contradictions and conflicts experienced by cinema audiences among themselves and even within themselves (Figure 1).

Barbenheimer has functioned as a framework used by audiences and content creators to express their approaches and personal preferences regarding two popular films. The Barbenheimer trend, which began just before the films' release, has shown itself to be a meme with the potential to spread across various domains, particularly through the expression *this is my Barbenheimer* (Figure 2). People creating content on digital platforms and social networks have repurposed this framework across a wide range of areas, from fashion and friendship relationships to political preferences (Figure 3) and sports commentary. Moreover, memes under the Barbenheimer title, while continuing to exist under this label, have also become the subject of re-production using similar templates for films released on the same date after these two, undergoing changes along the way (Figure 4).
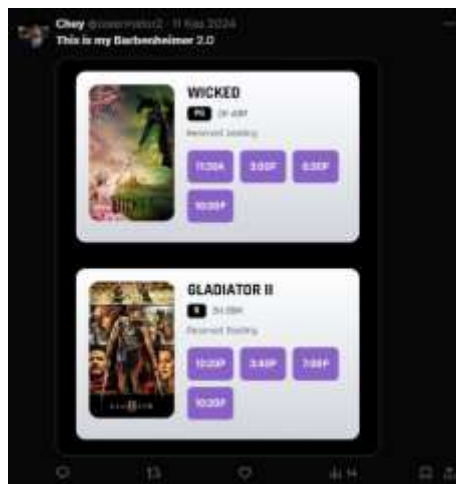

Figure 1. Barbenheimer Becomes a Film (8/11/2023)

Figure 2. This is my Barbenheimer – Glicked I (11/11/2024).

Figure 3. This is my Barbenheimer*: Political Preferences (06/11/2024)

Figure 4. This is my Barbenheimer – Glicked II (24/11/2024)

Barbenheimer, as a template, has become a medium for its users and content creators to convey their personal preferences, serving as a tool for self-presentation for those who produce or share accompanying text and visuals. Emerging from cinema-related preferences, this trend has brought individuals together in online spaces accessed through digital technologies. Digital networks and the Barbenheimer framework have become a new platform for self-presentation -defined as the effort to convey information about oneself and construct an identity aimed at a target audience by creating a specific image in others' minds (Guo & Duan, 2017, p. 237).

Erving Goffman's conceptualization of self-presentation, developed in the late 1950s, continues to provide opportunities for new research, particularly in the context of contemporary technologies and individuals' existence as representations constructed within networks. With the increasing use and impact of visuality today, the concept of self-presentation -originally related to interpersonal communication- has also undergone significant change. In the present day, subjects/actors articulate their life practices, value systems, and norms within a given digital culture (Tutar, 2019, p. 491). As a result, the producers and carriers of this individualized digital culture also become the subjects of digital selves and their presentations. While Goffman's concept of self-presentation, which likens everyday life to a theatrical stage, has inspired academic writing on new representations in digital media, internet memes have not been extensively explored within this framework. In the literature, existing studies have focused on how memes are distributed, the speed of their dissemination, and their repetition, often emphasizing the mapping of interactions rather than their relationship to self-presentation.

From the perspective of popular culture and approaches, internet memes are often unilaterally regarded as ephemeral elements primarily associated with humor and entertainment (Milosavljević, 2020). Existing academic studies on internet memes in social media have primarily focused on analyzing their spread over time and mapping their dissemination (Ling et al., 2021). However, these studies have

largely overlooked the semantic content of memes, the preferences of users, and, consequently, their role in self-presentation. Other studies have concentrated on identifying hate speech and misogyny (Kiela et al., 2021), aiming to classify memes based on whether their intent is harmful. Yet, in doing so, they have neglected the original context of each meme and the personal representational purpose of the creator/user (Joshi et al., 2024, p. 183). Consequently, the examination of internet memes as digital tools for expressing personal attitudes and preferences (and thus as significant visual culture artifacts for self-presentation) remains insufficient.

Goffman conceptualized self-presentation as a creative performance within everyday life, integrating dramaturgical elements. By utilizing terms such as performance, actor, audience, stage, backstage, and setting, his perspective on self-presentation aims to explain the complexity of social interaction through structural determinants. In this context, the self-presentation that finds its place within internet memes is also produced alongside certain elements that *set the stage*. An internet meme, emerging from a previously created and shared general framework that has evolved into a trend over time, is re-produced through unique interventions. A key characteristic of a popular internet meme in the digital interaction space is that, while it may be derived from an imitation, it can also serve as the starting point for further reproduction. Individual contributions to this reproduction are invariably tied to a general text (e.g., This is my Barbenheimer) and visual form, or even aesthetic elements (such as the pink-and-black contrast in the Barbenheimer).

Our study aims to analyze the background of how the Barbenheimer framework was constructed, focusing first on the two films central to the phenomenon and the dilemmas they represent and popularize. Furthermore, the study presents findings from a content analysis of how these dilemmas were reflected and to what extent they appeared on the Twitter (X) platform. For this purpose, a total of 250 tweets containing the term Barbenheimer between July 2023 and December 2024 were examined. Binary oppositions and their associated topics (such as cinema, music, politics, sports, and gaming) were categorized.

THE PRESENTATİON OF DİGİTAL SELF AND MEMES

Goffman, in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (2016), asserts that social relationships and interactions provide a foundation for individuals to share and reproduce their desired self-image. The process of constructing a self and its image depends on social interactions and the strategies employed within these interactions. Individuals engage in efforts to present themselves in a particular way and leave a specific impression in social relationships to control others' reactions and elicit positive feedback. This effort, whether conscious or unconscious, verbal or non-verbal, bears similarities to a theatrical stage where actors and actresses perform their roles. Life is akin to a stage where people behave differently in various social contexts, just as actors portray distinct characters. Although often unplanned and composed of more spontaneous elements and reactions, social interactions in daily life can be understood as a performance enacted on this stage (Goffman, 2016, pp. 13-16).

In the stage of social relationships, the individual, acting as a performer, strives to create a specific impression on others during interactions (Goffman, 2016, p. 29). The performer, seeking the desired response from their audience or interactants, acts in accordance with the role they have adopted. Goffman refers to this act or activity as a performance and emphasizes that the presentation of self in social interactions has a calculated and strategic nature. Individuals exhibit carefully crafted behaviors to create the desired impact on others and gain acceptance. This theory provides a significant perspective for understanding how individuals act as performers in social life and how social interactions possess a staged structure (Xu et al., 2024, p. 2). Performance, and therefore the presentation of self, involves not only the individual presenting but also the audience of that presentation. The audience comprises those who observe the performance, either directly or indirectly, face-to-face or through mediated technologies (Birnbaum, 2008, p. 73). On the other hand, the primary determinants of a performance cannot be assumed to be limited to the performer and the audience.

The stage -and even the off-stage or backstage- stands among the significant elements that partially or profoundly shape an individual's performance. The actions or strategies of the performing individual

are fundamentally influenced by the key characteristics of the stage. Beyond the stage witnessed directly by the audience, there is also the existence of the performer's private or personal space, which constitutes a backstage area. While presenting a performance to the audience on stage, the individual continues their existence backstage or offstage, in a space outside the performance, where they may experience a greater sense of freedom. Moreover, it is crucial to note that a stage does not exist in isolation but is interconnected with other stages and the entirety of social performance. The stage and the backstage/offstage intertwine and mediate one another, functioning as dualities that shape the performance and, consequently, the presentation of self.

An individual's self-presentation, which may appear or be perceived as personal, exists within social contexts and is subject to their influence. Through the dramaturgical analogy, this indicates that the performance enacted is shaped by the expectations and norms of the audience, the unique rules of the theatrical stage, and the framework of the play being performed. In the contemporary era, where identities are predominantly represented in virtual/digital realms, it becomes evident that the social stage, in Goffman's terms, has shifted to social media platforms and digital networks. This shift necessitates an analysis not only of offline self and self-presentation but also of the distinctive characteristics of digitalized self-presentation. One of the critical components of such an analysis is undoubtedly the concept of the digital self.

In this day and age, the boundary between the offline self and its online reflection or extension -often referred to as the digital self- has become increasingly blurred (Morva, 2016, p. 43). The online individual, who designs or constructs themselves under the influence of established audiences or followers on digital platforms, constitutes the central subject of digital self-presentation. The conceptualization of the digital self provides a significant perspective for understanding how individuals structure and maintain their relationships in digital communication through mental images and perceptions.

Digital environments offer individuals the opportunity to create idealized identities and sustain relationships through these identities (Zhao, 2005, p. 398). Broadly speaking, the digital self refers to individuals' online identities. It encompasses all the digital information produced by a person on the digital platforms they use (Morva, 2016, p. 44). In the digital age, where content production has become boundlessly widespread, this information includes personal emotions, attitudes, and expectations. The digital self is the subject of an interactive presentation that not only involves the representation of the body through various visuals but also incorporates numerous psychological processes.

The self possesses two distinct modes of existence and representation: one in the non-virtual/real world and the other on digital platforms. However, the sharp distinctions between these modes increasingly lose their validity, as the presentation of self predominantly becomes digitized. Consequently, the rigid boundary between the real and the virtual dissolves. This indicates that identity and its online representation, or the presentation of self, cannot easily be distinguished from everyday (real) practices (Cover, 2016, p. 10). The literature on how internet users represent themselves, on the other hand, primarily focuses on the physical presentation of the content creator, often analyzing selfies' as a key medium (Orekh et al., 2016; Brubaker, 2020). Yet, the conceptualization of the digital self generally provides a framework that emphasizes an individual's inner World (thoughts, emotions, and preferences) rather than external attributes, such as height, weight, or appearance (Zhao, 2005, p. 398). Another conceptualization related to the digital self and its presentation is the extended self, which eliminates the boundaries between physical appearance and the offline or online realms. In addition to consisting of representations of the self in relation to others (Roesler, 2008, p. 422), the presentation of self today freely traverses digital platforms and the shared groups or spaces within them.

As in the myth of Prometheus, the concept of the extended self was once chained to pre-digital thinking and the tangible world of objects. Today, however, the self's limitless expansion across time and space has become detached from the concrete world of people, places, and objects. This new perspective offers a significant framework for understanding how individuals redefine and expand their identities in the digital age (Belk, 2014, p. 133). Another key characteristic of the digital self, which extends beyond

objective reality, lies in its reliance on certain popular narratives and contexts. The formation of the digital self begins the moment individuals start narrating their experiences, self-describing, and sharing their preferences or judgments with others online (Morva, 2016, p. 45). Digital environments provide users with the opportunity to create narratives that incorporate textual, visual, and auditory technologies or to enrich the digital self by producing new content within existing narrative frameworks.

In the context of the presentation of the digital self, internet memes point to a highly functional and increasingly widespread trend within the framework of specific templates or, in our chosen analogy, the stage. On the surface, internet memes may appear simple or insignificant, often perceived as trivial jokes that circulate briefly before being forgotten. However, despite their lack of seriousness, memes represent a distinctive product of contemporary digital culture and symbolize its core characteristics (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 484). Moreover, the use of memes on the internet has grown so rapidly that it could be argued that the term *meme* itself has transformed into a meme due to its constant repetition and recurrence (Díaz, 2013, p. 83).

The emergence of visual communication forms on the internet has been prominently marked by memes, particularly in the form of videos or photographs. Memes are primarily humorous caricatures and imitations; however, as the visual representation of humor has become one of the most popular elements of internet communication, these visuals have turned into trends in fields such as information, marketing, politics, and even a form of art. The entertaining and simplified nature of memes makes them a medium and a tool for visual communication that can be utilized for various purposes (Milosavljević, 2020, pp. 10–11). It is therefore unsurprising to encounter memes in propaganda and political communication. While humor serves as a fundamental building block of memes, the functions of these visual contents extend beyond mere entertainment. They also cater to broader communication objectives, such as message delivery, idea dissemination, mass mobilization, personal preferences, and self-presentation.
The fundamental characteristics that make internet memes an effective and popular form of social visuality include imitation, originality, humor, simplicity, high semantic density, and the combined use of text and visuals (Milosavljević, 2020, pp. 11–12). These features highlight the coexistence of seemingly contradictory elements. An internet meme functions within the fundamental trends, templates, and stages shaped by the digital environment and culture, relying heavily on repetition. At the same time, every internet meme must make an original intervention in prior content to attract a sufficient audience or followers, thereby supporting self-presentation and personal performance. Furthermore, an internet meme requires the ability to distinguish textual and visual components from one another formally, while simultaneously creating cohesive meaning. Finally, for a meme to reach a wide audience, it must possess a simple form while maintaining high semantic density through varied repetitions. As demonstrated by the Barbenheimer example, a meme template or stage can be utilized across vastly different contexts and may itself evolve into new trends, templates, or stages.

To gain a closer understanding of the contradictions discussed earlier and analyze the nature of internet memes, the following sections will classify the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon and evaluate the coexistence of fundamental oppositions. To this end, the analysis will first address the films *Barbie* (2023) and *Oppenheimer* (2023), the origins of the trend, and the underlying contradictions that function as a backdrop in their public reception.

FROM CİNEMA TO DİGİTAL PLATFORMS: BARBENHEİMER
The cinematic adaptation of Mattel's globally renowned Barbie dolls, Barbie (2023), premiered following numerous animated films and television programs. The film was named one of the top ten films of 2023 by the American Film Institute and the National Board of Review, garnering significant acclaim with 12 Grammy Award nominations and 2 Golden Globe nominations (ijsr, n.d., p. 1270). Furthermore, released on the same date as Oppenheimer (2023), it achieved blockbuster status, gaining attention both as a standalone feature and in comparison to Oppenheimer (2023). The film, closely followed by academic circles, has particularly been the subject of analysis and critique within the framework of feminism (Taşkın & İnanç, 2024; Houghton et al., 2024; Burke, 2023).
Greta Gerwig's Barbie (2023) film reflects the influence of children's imagination and toys on adult life, as well as the unique significance of a toy representing a 'strong woman'. However, beyond the story

of an ordinary toy, the film's narrative unfolds against a backdrop shaped by profound social issues and contradictions. At first glance, the plot may appear simple and primarily targeted at children, but this does not diminish its cultural significance; on the contrary, it enhances its reach and, therefore, its impact. Legal transformation, ownership, dissent, inequality, and revolution are not merely subplots in the film but are fundamental elements that permeate every scene and drive its main characters (Houghton et al., 2024, p. 608).

One of the central contradictions in the film revolves around how a toy often considered to reproduce gender stereotypes can be aligned with a feminist paradigm through a cinematic narrative. On the other hand, the inherent contradictions within the film itself have facilitated broader discussions about its narrative, extending beyond a purely feminist perspective. Beyond the general conflict between the Barbie world and the real world, the dichotomies of Barbie Dreamhouse vs. Mojo Dojo Casa House, Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie) vs. Beach Ken (Ryan Gosling), and tyranny within a governing system vs. aspirations for social equality exemplify the contradictions embedded in the film (Houghton et al., 2024, p. 609). Furthermore, the primary contradictions that led to the emergence of the Barbenheimer phenomenon stemmed from the juxtaposition of Barbie (2023) with Oppenheimer (2023), a film that similarly incorporates numerous contradictions within its own narrative.

Christopher Nolan's Oppenheimer (2023) is based on the biography American Prometheus (2005) by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. The film explores the life of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the leading figure behind the development of the atomic bomb, while uncovering the multifaceted contradictions, entrenched power dynamics, and inevitable moral dilemmas arising from humanity's relentless pursuit of innovations that carry the potential for self-destruction (Abbas, 2023, p. 9). Oppenheimer's optimistic motivation to end World War II was manipulated and constrained by military and political forces. As depicted in the film, the dilemmas, betrayal, and disillusionment experienced by J. Robert Oppenheimer (often likened to a modern Prometheus) combine with the destructive power of the atomic bomb to shape the film's profoundly somber atmosphere.

The simultaneous release of the two films leads to debates among movie enthusiasts, resulting in the circulation of related digital content. Individuals who wish to watch both films but remain undecided about which to see first or which might better suit their preferences constitute the primary source of the Barbenheimer trend and the self-presentations facilitated by internet memes. Moreover, some content creators generate memes expressing a preference for one film over the other. However, fully aligning with the nature of memes and adding their own contributions and rules to the stage, a third way arises: the creation and circulation of visuals as memes that combine Barbie's pink, vibrant world with Oppenheimer's dark, pessimistic atmosphere.

The Barbenheimer phenomenon and the initial internet memes emerged prior to the release date of the two films, July 21, 2023. Within the scope of this study, a total of 250 tweets containing the keyword Barbenheimer were compiled through criterion sampling between July 7, 2023, and December 31, 2024. Criterion sampling, defined as a method of selecting samples that reflect the characteristics of predetermined criteria (Koç Başaran, 2017, p. 491), was chosen to ensure a holistic approach. In criterion sampling, it is essential for the selected sample to provide appropriate opportunities and rich possibilities for a comprehensive analysis. Moreover, an internet meme inherently combines both visual (sign) and textual (caption) elements, necessitating an integrated approach (Akhther, 2017, p. 1). To facilitate this holistic approach for the reader, the titles derived through content analysis will be supported with select visuals below.

Internet memes generally consist of a combination of text and visuals. However, in contemporary contexts, memes can also be created solely through animated images, such as GIFs or short videos. Within the scope of our analysis, 23 tweets containing the keyword Barbenheimer consist exclusively of text -words or sentences- and are responses to other tweets. The remaining 227 tweets include 162 that feature photographs and 65 that share videos. Of the 162 photographs, 112 are composed by juxtaposing two distinct visuals in alignment with the nature of the Barbenheimer phenomenon (Figure

5). On the other hand, 50 photographs employ digital editing techniques on a single image to create a dual narrative within one visual (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Side-by-Side Use of Two Distinct Visuals and Music Preference (23/09/2024)

Figure 6. Play and Synthesis in Digital Design I

When categorizing the 250 tweets containing the Barbenheimer keyword by topic, it becomes evident that the majority of the tweet content is cinema-related. Over time, new meme examples that move beyond the Barbie (2023) and Oppenheimer (2023) dichotomy and compare other films indicate that the Barbenheimer phenomenon has expanded in different directions. This expansion reflects a structure through which content creators frame their preferences, cinematic choices, and personality traits (Figure 7), thereby presenting their digital selves. The emergence of the Glicked trend (Figure 8), sparked by the simultaneous release of Gladiator II (2024) and Wicked (2024), can be seen as a wholly renewed meme trend and a new digital stage evolving from Barbenheimer (Khomami et al., 2024).

In addition to memes focusing on cinema and films (173 instances), creators also produced content related to music, primarily K-pop (27 instances – Figure 10), politics (7), sports (4), and other categories, including food, fashion, digital gaming, text-only memes, and uncategorized content (Figures 11–12). Finally, although produced under the same theme and in the context of dualities, some users shared memes favoring one side (e.g., one of the films), while others expressed indecision. Additionally, a subset of memes pointed to new productions that deconstruct the dichotomy (Figure 13).

Figure 7. Personality Traits and Barbenheimer (23/07/2023)

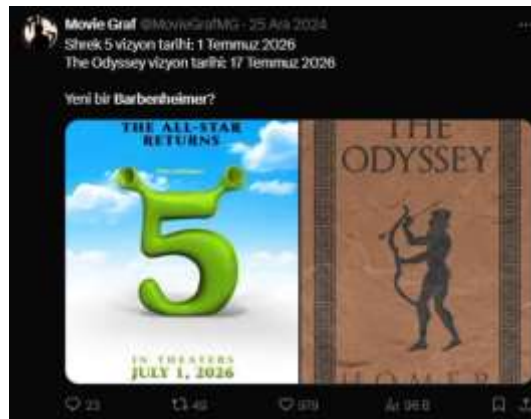**Figure 8.** A New Barbenheimer I – Glicked (13/11/2024)

Figure 9. A New Barbenheimer II – *Shrek 5* and *The Odyssey* (25/12/2024)

Figure 10. The Presentation of Music Preferences and Barbenheimer (22/09/2024).

Figure 11. Eating and Drinking Habits (25/12/2024).

Figure 12. Fashion, and Barbenheimer (8/06/2023)

Figure 13. Play and Synthesis in Digital Design II (15/01/2024)

The primary tendency of memes produced by users participating in the presentation of the digital self under the Barbenheimer theme is the expression of their preferences between the two films. The discussions, sparked by the announcement of the films' release dates, have particularly focused on two aspects of self-presentation: expressing artistic preferences or tastes related to cinema and films, and the difficulty in choosing between the two films or favoring one over the other. Moreover, some meme creators incorporated their friends or families into their film preferences, thereby utilizing self-representation that includes primary groups. An example of this can be seen in the case of then-UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who shared that his family chose to watch Barbie (2023), accompanied by clothing choices dominated by pink hues (Figure 14). As with many Barbenheimer-themed memes, film critics writing for popular cinema magazines or web portals often highlighted that both films were equally worth watching. Similarly, examples where no distinction was made between the two films include the opinions of Oppenheimer (2023) lead actor Cillian Murphy, which were widely shared online (Figure 15).

Although the examples provided above are part of the Barbenheimer phenomenon, it is challenging to categorize them as typical memes in the conventional sense, as they often resemble photos or news shares. On the other hand, there are numerous examples of memes that mimic other visual cultural products, such as films or TV series (Figure 16). Memes that point to collective identity and politics represent one of the newest fields in which contemporary visual culture intersects with ideology. For instance, American users humorously referencing the atomic bomb attacks on Japan during World War II have triggered responses from Japanese content creators. The familiar Barbenheimer template was restructured by Japanese users and redesigned to specifically reference the September 11 attacks (Figure 17).

Figure 14. The UK Prime Minister's Family and Their Preference for Barbie (2023) (22/07/2023)
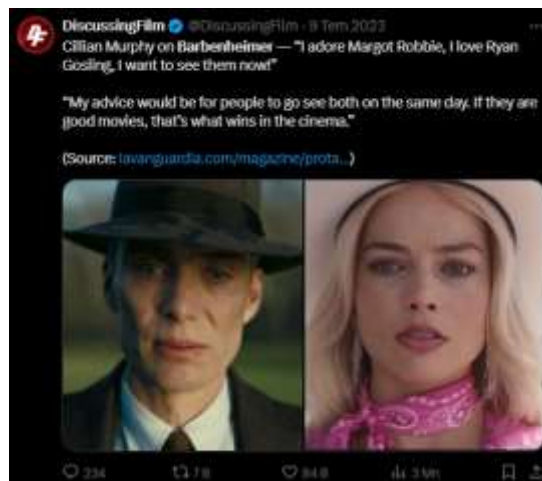

Figure 15. The Preference for Both Films (09/07/2023)

Figure 16. Barbenheimer and Its Dissemination in Visual Culture (12/07/2023)

Figure 17. Barbenheimer and the Presentation of Collective Identity (02/08/2023)

Digital platforms, particularly social media, serve not only as spaces for information sharing but also as mediums that support social connections and community building (Huang, 2014, p. 416). While some perspectives suggest that internet technology enables boundless freedom, creativity, and originality, digital productions, like all human actions, carry traces of the structures they inhabit. For instance, the production, sharing, and reception of internet memes rely on both complex cultural practices and the dynamics of technological mediation. Although these dynamics may appear decentralized and chaotic, meme creation necessitates the continuity of certain patterns through repetition and imitation (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017, p. 483). The *Barbenheimer* framework/pattern represents the display of personal preferences within the scope of self-presentation and through fundamental binary oppositions. In many meme examples, Barbie's vibrant pink color palette is combined with Oppenheimer's dark tones and images of nuclear explosions (Figures 5–6).

The rapid dynamics of memes and their potential to transcend context expand the boundaries of possible signifiers, particularly when combined with the possibilities of play and humor/jokes. As both a creative and liberating force, as well as sometimes a cruel and destructive one, play plays a significant role in shaping human experience (Schechner, 2013, p. 89). Today, our identities, which have taken on an algorithmic form, are inevitably subject to change, and the fluid nature of our digital selves lacks stability (Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p. 26). Our selves must be presented within the boundaries of play, but in forms that challenge those boundaries. The play exhibited on stage within dramaturgical contexts follows a set script, but it also advances through improvisations, carrying itself to new scenes. As a result, memes and the presentation of memory in the Goffmanian sense exist as actions and performances that are meaningful, culturally, and psychologically embedded in context, repeated but rewriting the rules of the game with each repetition. Indeed, Barbenheimer continues to transport the presentation of self from one stage to another through digital possibilities. In the case of Barbenheimer, memes with a certain level of interaction are being reproduced through these improvisations.

CONCLUSION

Internet memes, which consist of a small number of words or characters and images that can be reproduced by different users, are increasingly used in digital platforms and social networks. The concept of the 'meme' first emerged in the 1970s within a biological framework but, in accordance with its nature, rapidly expanded into cultural domains. Memes have evolved beyond merely serving as simple representations of users' humorous or ironic perspectives; they have become unique communication tools that reflect social and personal emotions and tendencies. Memes, whose etymological origin refers to 'imitated object or activity', have acquired unique characteristics such as their dissemination patterns and reproduction speed, and have become the subject of academic studies. The release of the fantasy comedy Barbie (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, and Oppenheimer (2023), based on Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography American Prometheus, on the same day had an impact on digital platforms. Audience expressed

differing opinions on which film to prioritize or the ideal sequence in which to watch them. Beyond merely favoring one film over the other, this phenomenon introduced a sense of 'indecisiveness' and 'in-betweenness' into the audience experience. The term Barbenheimer, derived from the titles of both films, encapsulated this duality and evolved into a widely recognized global trend. The Barbenheimer phenomenon enabled cinema audiences to reframe their preferences and discussions about the films within an ironic and gamified narrative structure.

The Barbenheimer concept has emerged as both a mediator and a framework for digital self-presentation in social media discourse, particularly on Twitter (X). On the other hand, internet memes, especially within the context of popular culture, are often perceived as short-lived and ephemeral phenomena primarily associated with humor and entertainment. Existing academic studies on internet memes in social media have focused on analyzing their dissemination patterns over time by mapping their spread. However, these studies have largely overlooked the role of memes in the self-representation of content creators.

On the other hand, Erving Goffman's conceptualization of 'the presentation of self' developed at the end of the 1950s offers opportunities for new research with today's technologies and the presence of individuals as representations established/constructed on networks. Goffman's metaphor, which centers on theatrical performance, has been reinterpreted within the framework of digital platforms, where the concepts of stage and play have acquired new dimensions. Meme creators, while expressing their individual identities, simultaneously contribute to a collective cultural narrative, thereby constructing a structure in which personal and societal representations intertwine. This evolving structure allows for the continuous transformation of its rules, dynamics, and actions, while also enabling the emergence of new performative spaces that can themselves shift and adapt.

Our study approaches the Barbenheimer framework as a new medium for self-presentation, distinguishing it from existing academic research. Additionally, it examines how the state of binary opposition and in-betweenness is reproduced, particularly in visual contexts. Through a content analysis of 250 tweets containing the keyword Barbenheimer and a review of the emerging literature, this article analyzes the fluid and evolving nature of the relationship between internet memes, visual communication, and digital self-presentation. Individual contributions to reproduction are necessarily based on a generic text (e.g. 'this is my Barbenheimer') and visual form, even aesthetics (e.g. the contrast between pink and black in the case of Barbenheimer). To provide a background analysis of how the Barbenheimer framework was constructed, our study first focuses on both films and the dualities embedded within and propagated by them. Furthermore, it explores how these dualities manifest and to what extent they are represented on Twitter (X).For this purpose, a total of 250 tweets containing the term Barbenheimer were examined between July 2023 and December 2024. Binary oppositions and their associated thematic categories (such as cinema, music, politics, sports, and gaming) were identified and systematically categorized.

Within the scope of our analysis, 23 of the tweets containing the keyword Barbenheimer consisted only of text, words or sentences that responded to another tweet. Of the remaining 227 tweets, 162 consisted of photos and 65 consisted of videos. Among the 162 photographs, 112 were created by juxtaposing two distinct images, aligning with the nature of the *Barbenheimer* phenomenon. On the other hand, 50 photographs employed digital editing techniques on a single image to construct a dual narrative within a single visual composition.

An analysis of the categorization of 250 tweets containing the Barbenheimer keyword reveals that the vast majority of tweet content is related to cinema. Over time, new meme variations have emerged that extend beyond the binary opposition of Barbie (2023) and Oppenheimer (2023), incorporating comparisons between other films. This expansion indicates that the Barbenheimer trend has evolved

into a broader framework that reflects content creators' preferences, cinematic tastes, and ultimately, their self-presentation. In this context, the reproduction of a phenomenon like Barbenheimer across various domains (including fashion, music, politics, and sports) demonstrates the multifaceted nature of memes and their inherent adaptability.

The fluid nature of memes influences how individuals express their identities on digital platforms, allowing them to continuously reshape their personal performances and create new forms of play or stages. The emergence of the Glicked trend -sparked by the simultaneous release of Gladiator II (2024) and Wicked (2024)- can be seen as a reinvention of the Barbenheimer phenomenon, evolving into a new meme trend and a redefined digital stage. Enabled by technological affordances, digital selfhood serves as a mirror of the content creator's inner world and personal preferences.

Although produced under the same overarching theme and within the framework of binary oppositions, users have engaged with Barbenheimer memes in different ways. Some have shared memes that explicitly favor one side (e.g., one of the films), while others have emphasized the inability to choose between the two. Additionally, some memes have pushed the boundaries of the binary structure by introducing new creative interpretations. Barbenheimer represents the presentation of personal preferences within the context of self-presentation, framed through fundamental binary contrasts. Many meme examples visually juxtapose Barbie's vibrant pink color palette with Oppenheimer's dark tones and nuclear explosions, reinforcing the thematic opposition through aesthetic contrast.

The rapid dynamism of memes and their potential to transcend their original context, particularly when combined with the affordances of play and humor, expands the boundaries of possible signifiers. The inherent contradictions and oppositions within each film generate new possibilities for creativity and humor, enabling content creators to engage in a game within a game while enriching their self-presentation and personal narratives. Barbenheimer, in this sense, continues to facilitate the transition of self-presentation from one digital stage to another. As seen in the Barbenheimer phenomenon, memes with a certain level of engagement are repeatedly reinterpreted and reproduced through improvisational adaptations.

In conclusion, internet memes serve as a crucial cultural communication tool of the digital age, playing a significant role in the presentation of individual identities and the shaping of digitized social discourse. The Barbenheimer phenomenon provides a compelling example of how content creators represent themselves on digital platforms and how these representations integrate with broader cultural and social meanings. Future research can further explore the individual and societal impacts of memes, offering a more comprehensive analysis of the evolving dynamics of digital culture and emerging visual culture. In doing so, internet memes may become a central subject of academic discourse, recognized as a tool that influences meaning-making within the framework of digital self-presentation.

REFERENCES

Abbas, S. Z. (2023). Oppenheimer's Dilemma: A Marxian Examination of Power Dynamics and Ethical Justifications in Nolan's Oppenheimer. *International Journal of Literature Studies*, *3*(3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.32996/ijts.2023.3.3.2

Akhther, N. (2017). *(PDF) Internet Memes as Form of Cultural Discourse: A Rhetorical Analysis on Facebook*. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/sx6t7

Belk, R. W. (2014). The Extended Self Unbound. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *22*(2), 133–137. https://doi.org/10.2753/MTP1069-6679220202

Birnbaum, M. (2008). *Taking Goffman on a Tour of Facebook: College Students and the Presentation of Self in a Mediated Digital Environment*. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Taking-Goffman-on-a-Tour-of-Facebook%3A-College-and-a

Brubaker, R. (2020). Digital hyperconnectivity and the self. *Theory and Society*, *49*(5), 771–801. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-020-09405-1

Cheney-Lippold, J. (2017). *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*. NYU Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1gk0941

Cover, R. (2016). *Digital Identities: Creating and Communicating the Online Self* (1st edition). Academic Press.

Dawkins, R. (2007). *Gen Bencildir: The Selfish Gene*. TÜBİTAK Yayınları

Díaz, C. (2013). *Defining and characterizing the concept of Internet Meme*. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Defining-and-characterizing-the-concept-of-Internet-

Goffman, E. (2016). *Günlük Yaşamda Benliğin Sunumu*.

Guo, H., & Duan, Y. (2017). *Self-presentation Strategy of WeChat Users with Motives Impact on the Formation of Online Social Capital*. 236–240. https://doi.org/10.2991/isbcd-17.2017.48

Hollenbaugh, E. E. (2024). (PDF) Self-Presentation in Social Media: Review and Research Opportunities. *ResearchGate*, *9*, 80–98.

Houghton, R., Murray, C. R. G., & O'Donoghue, A. (2024). Kenstituent power: An exploration of feminist constitutional change in Barbie. *Feminist Theory*, *25*(4), 608–625. https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291463

Huang, H. (2014). *Self-presentation Tactics in Social Media*. 416–421. https://doi.org/10.2991/icss-14.2014.76

Ijsr, S. K., International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR). (n.d.). Crafting a Marketing Masterpiece: The Transformation of the Barbie Movie into an Iconic Brand and Cultural Sensation, IJSR, Call for Papers, Online Journal. *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*. Retrieved 6 January 2025, from https://www.ijsr.net/

Joshi, S., Ilievski, F., & Luceri, L. (2024). *Contextualizing Internet Memes Across Social Media Platforms* (No. arXiv:2311.11157). arXiv. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2311.11157

Khomami, N., Arts, N. K., & correspondent, culture. (2024, November 23). Glicked double bill may not match Barbenheimer buzz, experts say. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/nov/23/glicked-double-bill-may-not-match-barbenheimer-buzz-experts-say

Kiela, D., Firooz, H., Mohan, A., Goswami, V., Singh, A., Ringshia, P., & Testuggine, D. (2021). *The Hateful Memes Challenge: Detecting Hate Speech in Multimodal Memes* (No. arXiv:2005.04790). arXiv. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2005.04790

Koç Başaran, Y. (2017). Sosyal Bilimlerde Örnekleme Kuramı. *The Journal of Academic Social Sciences*, *47*(47), 480–485. https://doi.org/10.16992/ASOS.12368

Ling, C., AbuHilal, I., Blackburn, J., Cristofaro, E. D., Zannettou, S., & Stringhini, G. (2021). *Dissecting the Meme Magic: Understanding Indicators of Virality in Image Memes* (No. arXiv:2101.06535). arXiv. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2101.06535

Milosavljević, I. (2020). The Phenomenon of the Internet Memes as a Manifestation of Communication of Visual Society—Research of the Most Popular and the Most Common Types. *Media Studies and Applied Ethics*, *1*(1), Article 1.

Morva, O. (2016). Ben, Kendim ve Dijital Benliğim: Dijital İletişim Çağında Benlik Kavramsallaştırması Üzerine. İn *Dijital- Kavramlar, Olanaklar, Deneyimler*. Kalkedon.

Nissenbaum, A., & Shifman, L. (2017). Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan's /b/ board. *New Media & Society*, *19*(4), 483–501. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815609313

Orekh, E., Sergeyeva, O., & Bogomiagkova, E. (2016). Selfie phenomenon in the visual content of social media. *2016 International Conference on Information Society (i-Society)*, 116–119. https://doi.org/10.1109/i-Society.2016.7854191

Roesler, C. (2008). The self in cyberspace. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, *53*(3), 421–436. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5922.2008.00735.x

Schechner, R. (2013). *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. Routledge & CRC Press. https://www.routledge.com/Performance-Studies-An-Introduction/Schechner/p/book/9781138284562

Taşkın, H., & İnanç, A. S. (2024). Barbie Filmine Feminist Kuramlar Bağlamında Göstergebilimsel Bir Değerlendirme. *Türkiye Film Araştırmaları Dergisi*, *4*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.59280/film.1476422

Tutar, C. (2019). *Dijitalleşen Dünyanın Gündelik Yaşam Aktivitelerinde Kendilik Kaygısının Yükselişi*. https://www.academia.edu/40476843/

Xu, Q., Kim, E., & Guo, S. (2024). Digital selves: A cross-cultural examination of athlete social media self-presentation during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *59*(5), 726–746. https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902231224438

Zhao, S. (2005). The Digital Self: Through the Looking Glass of Telecopresent Others. *Symbolic Interaction*, *28*(3), 387–405. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2005.28.3.387