

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article / Article de Recherche

# **Femvertising as a Brand Activism Tool: An Analysis of the Film *Barbie***

**Nuray YILMAZ SERT**

Prof. Dr.  
Manisa Celal Bayar Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi  
nuray.sert@cbu.edu.tr  
ORCID: 0000-0002-5329-5469

**Tuba ÇEVİK ERGİN**

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi  
Sakarya Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi  
tubacevikergin@sakarya.edu.tr  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4632-7987

**Ebru YILMAZ**

Öğretim Görevlisi  
Bilecik Şeyh Edebali Üniversitesi Gölpazarı Meslek Yüksekokulu  
ebru.yilmaz@bilecik.edu.tr  
ORCID: 0000 0002 7243 7928

**Semih KOPUZ**

Dr.  
smhkpz@gmail.com  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4655-8566

## **Abstract**

*Femvertising is an advertising approach positioned within the context of brand activism and one that integrates feminism into marketing processes. Such strategies not only bring social issues such as gender equality and women's rights to the forefront but also intersect with the commercial concerns of brands. The aim of this study is to examine how feminist advertising strategies, known as femvertising, are integrated into the film Barbie within the framework of brand activism and to analyze them considering the existing literature. The limited number of studies on the representation of femvertising in cinematic narratives makes this research significant and contributes to the literature in this context. The study demonstrates that femvertising is not merely a marketing tool but a powerful strategy that brings social issues onto the agenda and has the potential to foster change in these areas, while also underlining the need for critical evaluations. In the research, descriptive analysis,*

one of the qualitative research methods, was employed, and the data obtained were interpreted according to predetermined themes.

**keywords:** advertising, activism, brand activism, femvertising, Barbie

## Résumé

### **Le femvertising comme outil d'activisme de marque : une analyse du film Barbie**

*Le femvertising est une approche publicitaire qui s'inscrit dans le cadre de l'activisme de marque et qui intègre des perspectives féministes dans les processus marketing. Ces stratégies mettent en avant non seulement des enjeux sociaux tels que l'égalité des sexes et les droits des femmes, mais elles s'articulent également avec les objectifs commerciaux des marques. L'objectif de cette étude est d'examiner la manière dont les stratégies publicitaires féministes, connues sous le nom de « femvertising », sont intégrées dans le film Barbie dans une logique d'activisme de marque, et de les analyser à la lumière de la littérature existante. Le nombre limité de recherches sur la représentation du femvertising dans les récits cinématographiques confère à cette étude une contribution pertinente à la littérature. Les résultats montrent que le femvertising n'est pas seulement un outil marketing, mais aussi une stratégie puissante capable de mettre les questions sociales à l'agenda et de favoriser un potentiel changement, tout en soulignant la nécessité d'évaluations critiques. Pour cette recherche, une analyse descriptive – l'une des méthodes de recherche qualitative – a été mobilisée, et les données recueillies ont été interprétées selon des thèmes prédéfinis.*

**mots-clés:** publicité, activisme, activisme de marque, femvertising, Barbie

## Öz

### **Bir Marka Aktivizmi Aracı Olarak Femvertising: Barbie Filmi Üzerine Bir Analiz**

Femvertising, marka aktivizmi bağlamında konumlanan ve feminizmi pazarlama süreçlerine entegre eden bir reklamcılık yaklaşımıdır. Bu tür stratejiler, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği ve kadın hakları gibi sosyal meseleleri gündeme taşıırken, aynı zamanda markaların ticari kaygılarıyla da kesişmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, femvertising olarak bilinen feminist reklamcılık stratejilerinin marka aktivizmi çerçevesinde uygulamasını Barbie filmi üzerinden inceleyerek literatürdeki bilgiler ışığında analiz etmektir. Femvertising'in sinema anlatılarındaki temsiline dair çalışmaların sınırlılığı, bu araştırmayı özgün kılmakta ve bu bağlamda literatüre katkı sağlamaktadır. Araştırma, femvertisingin yalnızca bir pazarlama

aracı olmanın ötesinde, toplumsal meseleleri gündeme getiren ve bu konularda değişim yaratma potansiyeline sahip güçlü bir strateji olduğunu ortaya koymakta ancak eleştirel değerlendirmelere de ihtiyaç duyulduğunun altını çizmektedir. Araştırmada nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden betimsel analiz kullanılmış, elde edilen veriler önceden belirlenen temalara göre yorumlanmıştır.

**anahtar kelimeler:** reklam, aktivizm, marka aktivizmi, femvertising, Barbie

## Introduction

In recent years, it has been observed that brands have sought to position themselves as responsible and socially conscious actors by taking an active role in issues such as racism, environmental problems, immigrant rights, and gender equality. Brand activism emerges as a salient strategy through which corporations adopt an active stance on social, cultural, and political issues that shape both individual life and the social structure. The growing expectations for brands to create value for society beyond profit, along with companies' need to establish stronger and more meaningful connections with their consumers, play a crucial role among the factors driving the development of brand activism. Femvertising, as a form of brand activism, refers to the development of strategies in which brands adopt a socially sensitive approach to issues such as gender equality and women's rights, thereby contributing to social change. Through this strategy, brands transform traditional representations of women by integrating feminist discourses into their marketing processes. However, the tension between the pursuit of commercial profit and the effort to embrace social issues renders the genuineness of femvertising debatable. In the literature, criticisms have predominantly highlighted that femvertising is shaped largely by commercial concerns and used as a tool to enhance brand reputation. Nevertheless, while the advertising industry has for many years reinforced gender inequality by portraying women in traditional submissive roles, femvertising campaigns have offered an opportunity to challenge and transform this perception. For this strategy to be effective, brands employ various communication channels. While television, digital campaigns, and social media constitute the common domains of femvertising, cinema has emerged as one of the most influential mediums with its powerful narrative. Brands that move beyond traditional advertising formats implement femvertising strategies through cinema, thereby disseminating messages of gender equality and women's empowerment to broader audiences. However, existing studies on femvertising in the literature have generally focused on traditional advertising; applications in media forms that contain long narratives, such as cinema, have not been sufficiently examined. This study aims to fill this gap in the field by analyzing how femvertising strategies are shaped in the context of cinema through the film *Barbie*.

## **Brand Activism in Advertising**

In daily life, audiences encounter many types of advertising. Most of these consist of consumer advertising that aims to create an institutional or brand identity by promoting a product, service, or idea. However, it is evident that advertising has moved beyond being solely sales-oriented and that brands have begun to take a stand on social issues with their social responsibility messages. Indeed, companies promoting both their products and supporting social causes have become an increasingly widespread trend in recent years (Brough, 2001, p.29).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, global environmental and social challenges have compelled companies to adapt rapidly to new conditions and often assume a pioneering role. In this context, certain brands have adopted an activist identity by taking a stance on polarizing socio-political issues such as LGBTQIA+ rights, racism, environmental sustainability, police violence, gun control, abortion, and the COVID-19 pandemic, and by communicating their views, concerns, and visions on these matters to the public through strategic communication (Cammarota et al., 2023, p.669). In this process, brand activism is defined as companies supporting social, economic, environmental, and cultural issues and aligning them with their core values (Shivakanth Shetty et al., 2019, p.163).

Sarkar and Kotler (2018, p.3) conceptualize brand activism as the deliberate and sustained participation of companies in social, political, economic, and environmental issues to promote change in alignment with their core values. Manfredi Sánchez (2019, p.343) defines brand activism as a corporate strategy aimed at influencing citizen-consumers through campaigns grounded in political values and inspired by the communicative and symbolic practices of social movements. Cammarota et al. (2023, p.1687) states that brand activism refers to companies increasingly taking a public stance on controversial socio-political issues and assuming an activist role in polarized debates. Recent studies have presented important findings by examining different aspects of brand activism. Shivakanth Shetty et al. (2019, p.163) emphasize that brand activism enhances corporate profits by strengthening customer loyalty and contributes to the establishment of stronger connections with consumers who share common values. These emotional bonds with consumers can transcend factors such as product quality and price, thereby providing a long-term advantage for brands. On the other hand, it is suggested that if this strategy is not aligned with the company's core values, ethical principles, and vision, it may be perceived merely as a marketing tactic and could harm brand loyalty. Similarly, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020, pp.784–785) state that brands taking an explicit stance significantly shape consumer perception, which either reinforces brand loyalty or leads to negative reactions. Vredenburg et al. (2020, p.444) argue that when brands align their activist messages with their corporate objectives, values, and

pro-social practices, they not only carry the potential to foster social change but also enhance brand equity. Conversely, they contend that messages disconnected from corporate identity and practices may harm both domains. Indeed, Miguel and Miranda (2023, p.158) also emphasize that insincere brand activism can trigger negative reactions such as boycotts and reputational loss.

Ahmad et al. (2024, p.3) attribute the success of brand activism to communication strategies, noting that inadequate or flawed communication may cause discomfort among some consumers, while reinforcing perceptions of inauthenticity in others. Therefore, several fundamental strategies are recommended for effective activism:

- Brands should create concrete messages that include concrete actions they will take regarding the sociopolitical issue they support.

*Example:* Nike launched a campaign highlighting Colin Kaepernick's stance against police violence to support racial equality and further substantiated its message by donating to his 'Know Your Rights Camp' initiative.

- When comparing internal and external concrete messages, internal ones contribute more significantly to strengthening brand authenticity.

*Example:* Netflix producing more African-American content (internal message) creates stronger brand authenticity compared to merely making donations for racial justice (external message).

- A well-defined internal message enhances the brand's alignment with the sociopolitical issue it advocates.

*Example:* Patagonia reinforces the authenticity of its brand activism by supporting its environmental protection rhetoric through sustainable supply chain practices and the use of recycled materials.

- Brands must remain committed to their promises, as both congruent and incongruent woke washing can significantly harm their authenticity.

*Example:* Ben & Jerry's has consistently supported LGBTQ+ rights for years and has maintained this stance not only through advertising but also by collaborating with relevant organizations.

In conclusion, contemporary consumers expect from brands not only high-quality and affordable products but also a clear stance on socio-political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p.444). As competition intensifies in markets where similar products exist in terms of quality and price, many brands tend to build stronger connections with consumers by reflecting their positions on issues such as women's empowerment, social justice, feminism, climate change, and racism in socially oriented advertising (Eyada, 2020, p.30). In this context, femvertising, which has emerged as a means for brands to express themselves through socially oriented advertising, has become a significant component of brand activism by particularly focusing on issues such as women's empowerment and gender equality.

## **Femvertising as a Form of Brand Activism**

Femvertising, derived from the combination of the terms feminism and advertising (Geantă & Zabad, 2018, p.137), is an advertising practice that has emerged either as a manifestation of feminism or as a form of brand activism (Michaelidou et al., 2022, p.1285). In other words, while feminism refers to women's struggle for equality against the patriarchal order (Mutlu, 2004, p.3; Michel, 1984, p.6), femvertising represents an advertising approach that addresses this struggle within a commercial context.

Feminism is the common term for various political movements, ideologies, and social movements that share the goal of defining, establishing, and realizing political, economic, personal, and social equality between the sexes. At its core lies the aim of providing women with equal opportunities in all spheres of life and ensuring their access to the same resources as men (Raina, 2017, p.3372). Although some scholars trace the origins of feminism back to Ancient Greece, the struggle of women for equal rights evolved into a distinct and organized movement in the late 19th century (Rampton, 2015), and modern feminism was shaped during this period (Berkday, 2013, p.3). This historical process is represented in literature as three distinct waves of development. The first wave began in 1848, when an abolitionist and feminist group at the Seneca Falls Convention discussed women's social and civil rights (Lindemann, 2023, p.1). Feminists later organized under the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) in London, for the first time demonstrating a strong and systematic form of resistance in history (Arat, 2022, p.43). As a result, regulations such as the right to vote, equal opportunities in education, participation in the public sphere, and equal pay constituted the most significant achievements of the first wave (Güven, 2020, p.11). The second wave of feminism emerged between the 1960s and 1980s (Maclaran, 2015, p.1733). Although women were legally recognized as equal, inequalities persisted in social practices (Taş, 2016, p.169). During this period, feminists directly associated male violence and destructive behaviors with the social and cultural exclusion of women. Radical feminists defined such attitudes as "pornographic" and "oppressive" tracing their origins to the ways in which men approach women. French feminists addressed the issue on a more philosophical level, linking the "rejection of the feminine" to the positioning of woman as man's counterpart and as the 'other.' Freudian feminists, in turn, regarded the man's separation from the mother in the transition to adulthood not merely as an individual maturation but as the foundation of patriarchal society (Donovan, 2014, p.320). Although the second wave of feminism encompassed different approaches, it was instrumental in securing numerous rights struggles by centering women-oriented values. The 1980s marked a period in feminist theory in which postmodern and multicultural perspectives emphasized the concept of 'difference' and approached distinctions among women—based on race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality—in a more inclusive

manner (Sevim, 2005, p.54). This era laid the foundations of third-wave feminism, a process in which diversity and identity politics came to the forefront. Indeed, in the third and final wave, instead of a singular definition of womanhood, attention was directed to individual issues, and it was argued that the diverse experiences of oppression and marginalization faced by each woman should be made visible in the political sphere (Taş, 2016, pp.171–172).

With the advent of third-wave feminism, the adaptation of the feminist movement to popular culture created a discrepancy between the female images in advertisements and the ways in which women perceive themselves. This situation placed critiques of women's representation on the agenda and, in response, gave rise to 'femvertising,' an advertising approach centered on women (Love & Helmbrecht, 2008, pp.41–58). In traditional advertising, gender roles are presented to consumers through a masculine perspective; women are most often represented as sexual objects, housewives, or mothers. In contrast to these stereotypical representations, through the approach of femvertising, brands have taken steps toward transforming gender stereotypes by portraying women in diverse professions and roles, thereby moving beyond the limited female images characteristic of traditional advertising.

Femvertising stands out as an approach that aims to empower women in every respect (Hsu, 2018, p.28). Its primary promise is to remove the female figure from a passive and timid position and to represent her in a stronger and more active manner, while also preventing the objectification of the female body. In this way, women have begun to appear in advertisements not only in passive roles but also through representations of success, naturalness, intellect, and humanity (Cihangiroğlu, 2018, p.10). With the rise of post-modernism and the strengthening of women's movements, global brands have increasingly turned to femvertising practices. One of the pioneers in this field has been Dove, followed in later years by brands such as Pantene and H&M, which have produced advertising campaigns from a feminist perspective (Jalakas, 2016, p.18).

Although femvertising appears to be an approach that demonstrates social sensitivity through feminist discourses, it is frequently criticized on the grounds that the primary objective of brands is not only to create a positive image but also to increase sales, generate awareness, and build brand loyalty. In other words, it is argued that the fundamental motivation behind femvertising is commercial concerns. In this context, Zeisler (2016) defines femvertising as a money-making technique through which brands turn the concept of "women's empowerment" into a marketing tool. Similarly, Iqbal (2015) questions the sincerity of femvertising by stating that "The advertising industry, once bent on selling us sex is now selling us its disgust with sexism". These criticisms have sparked debates over whether femvertising serves gender equality or merely functions as a marketing device.

In activist brand strategies, the insincere use of social issues as marketing material is explained in the literature through the concept of “washing”. In this context, for cases in which feminism is employed solely for marketing purposes, Sterbenk et al. (2022, pp.491–505) propose the concept of “fempower-washing”. In the literature, the term “purple washing” has also been used to describe strategies that instrumentalize feminism to promote corporate values yet lack consistency or coherence with the actual practices of the organization (Pelaez, 2024; Martínez-Fierro & Garza-Veloz, 2022; Mrabet, 2024). Both concepts define, from a critical perspective, practices that reduce brand activism in the context of gender and women’s rights to a mere marketing instrument.

Although some brands attempt to create a positive image through femvertising strategies, their practices are often overshadowed by criticisms of inconsistency and “washing”. For instance, Unilever, regarded as one of the pioneers of femvertising, achieved great success with its 2004 “Campaign for Real Beauty”; however, the fact that its Axe brand continued to feature sexist advertisements for years created a contradiction for consumers (Feng et al., 2019, p.293). This situation indicates that it remains debatable whether feminist advertising truly embodies a feminist stance, as commercial concerns are often decisive. On the other hand, research demonstrates that femvertising campaigns are associated not only with the commercial interests of corporations but also with consumers’ brand perception and purchasing behavior. Compared to traditional advertising, femvertising has been found to generate positive effects on brand perception, purchase intention, and emotional attachment (Drake, 2017, p.593). This finding reveals that, although the impact of femvertising on gender equality remains contested, it constitutes a powerful marketing tool influencing consumer behavior.

In brief, femvertising is defined as a strategy that combines feminism with advertising, aiming to promote women’s empowerment and support gender equality. Through this strategy, brands seek to represent women beyond traditional roles, portraying them in stronger and more independent ways. However, femvertising is frequently criticized for being shaped primarily by commercial concerns and for serving the interests of brands rather than fostering genuine social transformation. Nevertheless, it has been argued that femvertising has contributed to certain gains in terms of women’s empowerment and gender equality, and that these gains may be further enhanced through similar campaigns in the future. Therefore, it is anticipated that femvertising will continue to exert both commercial and social effects and will remain adopted by brands in the long term.

## Research Methodology

### *Purpose and Significance of the Study*

Launched in 1959, Barbie dolls have become an important part of popular culture over time; however, they have also been the focus of criticism for confining women's social roles and perceptions of beauty to narrow stereotypes. These criticisms have led the Barbie brand to reposition itself over time and to take steps toward creating a more inclusive image. In this context, the selection of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* film as the object of analysis offers a significant opportunity to examine both the brand's transformation and the ways in which femvertising strategies are shaped through cinema. The aim of this study is to examine the application of feminist advertising strategies, known as femvertising, within the framework of brand activism in cinema through the *Barbie* film, and to analyze them considering the existing literature. The limited number of studies on the representation of femvertising in long-form cinematic narratives underscores the importance of this research and its potential to fill a significant gap in literature. In this context, the research questions of this study are as follows:

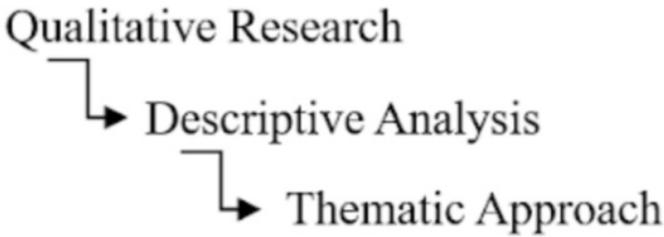
1. How are femvertising strategies applied in cinema, and how does the Barbie film reflect the transformation that brands undergo in line with these strategies?
2. How does the Barbie film reconstruct gender representations through femvertising?

Little (2025, p.35) emphasizes that feminism cannot be explained through a single linear process of progression; rather, it should be understood as a combination of various theoretical approaches. The author further defines the current cultural moment as distinctly postfeminist. According to Schreiber (2014, p.3), the most visible and persuasive site of postfeminist discourses is popular media, as these discourses are often intertwined with an appealing individual, product, or narrative. In this context, recent postfeminist cinema frequently transforms female professionalism into a mythological narrative or addresses it from a reactionary perspective, thereby focusing on visions that are far removed from reality (Leonard, 2007, p.123). Similarly, the film *Barbie* presents female professionalism and female identity not within a realistic social context but rather in a colorful, parodic, and allegorical universe. Although it addresses issues concerning women's roles in the workforce and in the public sphere, it does so by transforming them into a mythological and ironic narrative through a fictional world such as BarbieLand. Therefore, the film *Barbie* constitutes a distinctive example for understanding the cinematic reflections of postfeminist discourses and has thus been chosen as the object of analysis for this study.

## Research Model and Limitations

In this study, descriptive analysis, one of the qualitative research methods, was employed. According to this approach, the data obtained are summarized and interpreted based on pre-determined themes. For this purpose, the data are first described in a systematic and comprehensible manner. These descriptions are then interpreted to arrive at certain conclusions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016, p.240).

**Figure 1.** Methodological Framework of the Study



In this context, three main themes that stand out in the film and are considered to be closely related to femvertising strategies are presented below:

1. Critique of the Female Role
2. Critique of Patriarchy
3. Critique of the Idealized Female Body

These themes constitute the categorical framework of the findings obtained through descriptive analysis, revealing how femvertising strategies are embedded in the film's visual and narrative structure. However, in line with the chosen method, the visual and narrative elements were not placed at the center of the analysis; instead, they were treated as contextual support elements that contribute to a better understanding of the themes. This constitutes the main limitation of the study. In other words, the study employs a descriptive-analytical approach that emphasizes thematic and contextual interpretation rather than technically oriented methods, such as narrative analysis or semiotic analysis.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Critique of the Female Role*

Contemporary feminist literature has long regarded the media's reproduction of traditional representations of femininity and the commercialization of empowerment discourse as problematic. Douglas (2010) and McRobbie (2009) argue that representations of women in popular media often reinforce

normative gender roles under the guise of empowerment discourse, reproducing them rather than transforming them. Douglas (2010, p.10) explains this phenomenon through the concept of "enlightened sexism", suggesting that portrayals of strong and independent women frequently serve to obscure existing systemic inequalities. McRobbie (2009), on the other hand, defines this process as the "disarticulation of feminism"; she argues that the individualization of women's experiences and the reduction of collective struggle to personal success or failure stories have weakened feminist solidarity and critical resistance. Butler's (1990, p.33) concept of "gender performativity", based on these perspectives, asserts that gender is not an innate and fixed identity, but a structure constructed through the repetition of acts grounded in specific social norms and rules, which over time come to be perceived as "natural". In this context, while femvertising campaigns appear to critique gender roles, they may also inadvertently reproduce them.

The film opens with images of children engaged in the play of motherhood. These images convey messages regarding gender roles and the representation of traditional femininity (such as taking care of babies, doing laundry, cooking, ironing, etc.). While the children in the visuals play with dolls, they perform behaviors associated with the societal role of women. Historically, playing with dolls has been seen as a practice that prepares girls for the role of motherhood from an early age. The film primarily presents a critique of this situation through the theme of playing house, where girls assume the role of the mother.

In the subsequent scene, Barbie's arrival, symbolized through her silhouette reminiscent of being held before the sun, marks the end of the old order and the beginning of a new era. Immediately following this, the appearance of Barbie's towering legs signifies to the children the emergence of a different role model beyond motherhood and domestic roles. After this moment of rupture, the children are seen dismantling and scattering their old dolls and domestic play items. These acts represent not only the destruction of toys but also the breaking of the molds imposed by traditional roles of femininity and motherhood. However, Barbie dolls have been criticized in feminist studies on the grounds that they played a significant role in shaping traditional beauty standards and in fostering negative perceptions of women toward their own bodies. In the scenes mentioned above, while Barbie reveals the exaggeration of the ideal female body, she also offers her own self-critique of this condition by stating, "*Barbie may have started out as just a lady in a bathing suit, but she became so much more*". The film, while acknowledging these criticisms regarding Barbie's past representations, simultaneously opens a space for redefining itself and conveys the message that Barbie has undergone a transformation over the years, a transformation that has been influential in reshaping traditional gender roles. From the perspective of femvertising, Barbie teaches young girls not to be confined

to traditional roles such as motherhood but to become strong individuals who can exist with their own identities in all areas of life. In this respect, it is observed that Barbie goes beyond being merely a commercial brand and demonstrates an effort to take a partisan stance against a social issue.

In the film, the depiction of female characters in occupations traditionally associated with men, such as construction, repair, and postal work, emphasizes that women can take an active role in all areas of social life. This also highlights femvertising's aim of challenging gender norms. Femvertising promotes gender equality by demonstrating that women can exist not only in traditional roles of femininity but also in occupations attributed to men.

The cultural structures and sexist discourses of societies constitute one of the greatest obstacles to women's advancement into leadership positions. In this context, gender roles are both restrictive and carry the prejudice that women lack the necessary capacity (intelligence, knowledge, experience, personality, etc.) to perform such duties. Beyond this, women in senior executive positions are perceived as needing to display behaviors consistent with traditional male roles, reinforcing the belief that this is a requirement. Therefore, the presence of women as women in high-level positions becomes even more difficult due to many factors. In the world of Barbie, however, women occupy senior management roles with their female identities. For example, in the film, the president of *BarbieLand* is a woman. The female president is seen dancing in an evening gown at a party and combing her hair in pajamas during a girls' night. Such representations of women are considered significant in demonstrating that one can be a leader without conforming to "male norms".

However, these positive representations are not always presented from a critical perspective; in some scenes, the discourse of empowerment provides a basis for the reproduction of gender norms. For instance, Barbie's questioning of her own existence also signifies a questioning of the traditional roles and beauty norms imposed on women. Yet, while images are offered that empower women and challenge gender roles, these representations often remain within the boundaries of the normative order, as they are frequently reproduced with commercial concerns in mind. This situation, in line with the contradictory structure of postfeminist discourses, transforms into a "femvertising" strategy that, on the one hand, emphasizes freedom, while on the other hand, renders existing inequalities invisible. Therefore, the film occupies both a critical and a reproductive plane.

### ***Critique of patriarchy***

According to Naiman (1988, p.25), patriarchy is a chain of social relations which, although constituting a hierarchical order with a material basis under male domination, simultaneously produces and reinforces mutual dependence and solidarity among men, thereby enabling them to keep women under control. Within the patriarchal system of the “family based on private property,” women are regarded as the property of men within the household. In male-dominated discourse, women are defined as having “the sole and primary purpose of giving pleasure to men” and are frequently regarded as less valuable than objects. All laws and traditions regulating “family relationships” are shaped in accordance with the male perspective. This social structure sustains the notion that women must serve men, thereby ensuring the persistence of the patriarchal order (Donovan, 2014, p.101). Harding (1981, p.140) states that men’s renunciation of these privileges cannot be achieved merely through declarations of intent; rather, it requires the construction of anti-patriarchal institutions and the cultivation of “new men” within these institutions who adopt a feminist perspective. According to her, masculine privilege is not abandoned by individual choice, since it is automatically assigned to all men by patriarchal, capitalist, racist, and heterosexist institutions. The practices that produce these privileges are deeply embedded in the social structure, and thus the issue must be addressed at a structural, not individual, level.

In the opening scene of *BarbieLand*, an imaginary universe where Barbie dolls lead their idealized lives, the Kens are positioned as passive figures entirely dependent on Barbie’s existence and focused on her approval. They have no decisions, goals, or achievements of their own. The sole purpose of men in daily life is to attract Barbie’s attention. The statement, “*Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him.*” summarizes the definition of masculinity in *BarbieLand*. In this way, while masculinity is represented as unable to become a subject and confined to a secondary position, power and subjectivity are concentrated entirely in the female figure, presented within a structure where the gender order is reversed. However, with the transition from *BarbieLand* to the real world, the patriarchal order and its gender roles are reflected to the audience. Despite their initial common point of departure, the experiences that Barbie and Ken acquired in the real world unfold in subjective and divergent ways, providing a basis for the internalization and representation of gender norms in different forms. On this journey, Barbie, who sets out to find the person playing with her in the real world to understand the cause of the change that disrupts her perfection, is located by Mattel officials (the company that created and owns Barbie) and taken to the headquarters. Barbie’s question, “*Are there no women here?*” upon realizing that all the senior positions in the building are occupied by men, exposes the male-dominated institutional structure. The scene in which Mattel demands that Barbie return to the box, claiming that all problems can only be resolved

within its own mechanisms of control, serves as a critique of both the patriarchal system's assertion that issues must be solved within its boundaries and its desire to bring women back under control. While "returning to the box" signifies the re-limitation of female identity, Barbie's escape demonstrates her rejection of this imposition and her assertion of a will to liberation.

While this scene exposes the mechanisms of suppression directed at female identity, Ken's experience in the real world reveals how masculinity is rewarded and linguistically reinforced. Expressions such as "*We need to act like men*", "*You're a real man*", and "*bro*" reflect the forms of verbal solidarity established among men. These expressions also reveal how hegemonic masculinity is produced through everyday language. Such discourses enabled Ken to experience, for the first time, a sense of "being seen", and "being accepted", and by associating this feeling with masculinity norms, they provided the basis for him to develop a sense of belonging. Social, cultural, and economic representations in which men are associated with authority, economy, power, physical strength, and heroism left a profound impact on Ken, leading him to perceive the world through male-dominated structures.

By transferring the patriarchal structure he experienced in the real world to BarbieLand, Ken reconstructed the social order on male-dominated foundations and, in the process, shaped his own identity in accordance with patriarchal power relations. Within the repertoire of masculine representations Ken adopted in this period, the "horse" and "drinking" culture stand out as symbolic carriers of masculine power and authority. Horses are associated with power, control, and struggle, and are coded as a physical and ideological extension of masculinity. Alcohol, meanwhile, is staged as a symbol of masculine solidarity, comfort, and social belonging. The placement of Ken's symbols on the government building, the depiction of the desire for control through a TV remote, and the exaggerated display of the male body's muscles are other representations associated with masculinity, power, and authority. At the core of all these representations is Ken's perceived lack of space. The most obvious deficiency Ken experiences in *BarbieLand* in terms of spatial representation and belonging is not having a home. Ken's appropriation of the "dream house" in Barbie's absence is not merely an attempt to fill this void; it is simultaneously an effort to establish a space through which he can render himself visible and constitute himself as a subject. Barbie's insistence, "This is mine.", is not merely about possessing a house; but also an assertion of ownership over her own identity. This statement represents both a reaction against the male-dominated order that Ken seeks to establish and a symbolic objection to the intrusions into women's spaces. At the same time, the patriarchal system that renders women passive and reduces them to serving roles is critically reflected. The transformation of female characters from their professional identities into decorative figures, and their voluntary compliance with the patriarchal order without questioning anything, are among the most evident manifestations of this structure.

These scenes in the film directly engage with the fundamental areas of debate in feminist theory, particularly the question of how individuals identify with gender roles and internalize them without questioning is one of the core issues of feminist thought. In this respect, the film relies on a narrative strategy that triggers the process of women's awakening and renders visible the contradictions of the patriarchal system. Barbie's existential crisis can thus be interpreted not merely as an individual psychological turmoil, but also as an expression of the multiple and contradictory expectations imposed by the gender regime. The long monologue delivered by the female character from the real world underscores the inconsistent demands placed upon women in society, *to be beautiful yet intelligent, nurturing yet strong, modest yet independent, and at the same time obedient*, while simultaneously opening to scrutiny not only the pressures on female identity but also the sustainability of the social order itself. The women's attainment of awareness and their development of a collective stance of resistance initiate the process of disintegration of the patriarchal structure in *BarbieLand*. This disintegration, in turn, paves the way for the Kens to question their own gender roles and confront their existential crises.

Feminist theory, while contesting the structural inequalities faced by women, also emphasizes that gender produces restrictive and oppressive effects on men. In this regard, men's support for feminism contributes not only to the empowerment of women but also to men's liberation from hegemonic masculinities, thereby fostering the construction of a more egalitarian society.

In the film *Barbie*, the portrayal of Alan and Ken as supportive and egalitarian figures carries noteworthy messages within the context of femvertising. Alan is the only male character not identified with the Kens. He is neither part of the patriarchal order established in *BarbieLand* nor an actor in the Kens' displays of power. On the contrary, he is openly uncomfortable with the patriarchal system the Kens have built. Throughout the film, Alan often sides with the female characters and actively takes on a supportive role in solving problems. This representation demonstrates that men, as a result of gender role constructs, can occupy not only leadership or dominant positions in society but also supportive roles. This portrayal can be read as a critique of the idea that men should be defined solely through physical or social power, while also emphasizing the importance of male support in women's struggle for existence. At the beginning of the film, Ken, positioned in Barbie's shadow, begins to question his own identity in parallel with Barbie's search for identity and enters a process of transformation regarding his individual existence. By the end of the film, the phrase "*I am Kenough*", formed by combining the statements "I am Ken" and "I am enough" printed on his clothing, conveys the message that Ken is a self-sufficient individual who can exist independently, without Barbie. This representation underscores that the issue of gender equality is not limited to women alone and, through the implication that "neither Barbies nor Kens should remain in the background", highlights the necessity for men to question the roles imposed upon them in this struggle.

## Critique of the idealized female body

Lacan (1977, pp.67-77)'s concept of "the power of the gaze" presents a psychoanalytic framework in which the subject constructs itself through the gaze of the other. According to him, while constructing their identity, individuals identify with the image reflected in the gaze of others. In this context, *Cliché Barbie* is in the position of a "mirror" reflecting society's ideal image of women. This perfection imposed upon her objectifies her on the one hand, while also preventing her from becoming a subject on the other. According to Donovan (2014, p.258), when women begin to see themselves as objects rather than subjects, they become overly focused on their physical appearance and bodies. This focus eventually turns into an obsession with conforming their bodies to men's standards of beauty. In the *Barbie* film, the idealized female body, especially as embodied by the main character, "Stereotypical Barbie", is presented as an aesthetic form where both traditional and modern beauty norms converge. With her slim, tall, and perfectly proportioned body; smooth skin; stylized clothing; and perpetually well-groomed appearance, Barbie is the symbol of the socially constructed image of the "ideal woman". This representation aligns with Thesander's (1997, pp.7-15) approach, which argues that the female body is not innate but is ideologically shaped through historical and cultural processes. Beauvoir's (1956, p.273) statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", serves as a clarifying reference here; for the Barbie character, rather than embodying a biological reality, constitutes the cinematic manifestation of an ideologically constructed representation of "womanhood" through cultural and visual codes.

Barbie's representation of the perfect body is central to the film, but it is contrasted with characters of different body types and identities. Thus, the film both critiques this ideal and creates a space where non-normative representations are made visible. In this context, some characters in the film highlight the following representations:

***Pregnant Barbie:*** Midge was introduced in the 1960s as one of Barbie's friends and re-released in 2002 as a pregnant doll figure. Due to criticism and reactions that it encouraged children to become pregnant, Mattel decided to discontinue production of this figure shortly thereafter. The withdrawal of Pregnant Midge indicates the brand's preference to align with traditional family values and customer expectations. Although it was withdrawn from production for not conforming to social norms, the portrayal of Pregnant Barbie enjoying herself in the "girls' night" scene carries an important message in terms of femvertising, highlighting the representation of diverse female bodies. While pregnancy is recognized as a natural aspect of the female body in societies, its representation remains notably limited in sectors such as the media and toy industry, where "ideal" body types are predominantly emphasized.

**Disabled Barbie:** Another criticism regarding different physical conditions is presented through the disabled Barbie figure. One of the main goals of femvertising is to ensure that individuals are represented in a strong and active way that reflects their own potential. The Disabled Barbie, in this respect, is not merely a symbol of diversity but also appears as an active and visible subject on screen. In scene in which the wheelchair-using character is shown dancing demonstrates that disabled individuals, who are often marginalized in society, can in fact be dynamic and equal participants in social life. By portraying this figure on the same level as other characters, the camera emphasizes that the disabled body is not passive or deficient but rather represented as strong and empowered. In this way, the film translates the discourse of inclusivity into a more concrete form.

**Older Woman "Ruth":** The discourse of inclusivity addresses not only bodily differences but also age-related stereotypes from a critical perspective. While older women are either absent from media representations or predominantly portrayed in negative ways, one of the characters that challenges this perception in *Barbie* is Ruth. Ruth is not a Barbie but a fictional representation of Ruth Handler, Barbie's real-life creator. She is depicted as a confident, independent, and strong older woman. The scene in which Barbie, while fleeing the Mattel building, encounters Ruth in the kitchen is particularly striking in terms of this character's placement. From the perspective of gender roles, the kitchen has traditionally been one of the primary spaces where women are situated and their roles defined. In the background, alongside typical kitchen utensils, a sewing machine can also be seen. From a feminist standpoint, such symbols represent women's labor and effort that are often overlooked and undervalued by society. Moreover, the portrayal of two women from different age groups supporting one another throughout the scene reinforces, from a feminist perspective, the strength and solidarity of women.

**Black Barbie:** The film also draws attention to its strong emphasis on inclusivity and diversity through ethnic identities. In *Barbie*, ethnic diversity is not employed merely to provide superficial visual difference, but rather as a deliberate representational strategy that reinforces the film's feminist messages. This is most clearly reflected in the character of *BarbieLand's* Black female president. The president not only demonstrates that women can hold leadership positions in society but also underscores that individuals from different ethnic backgrounds can be represented in such powerful roles. In other words, positioning a Black woman as president embodies a dual stance against both gender and racial inequalities. Throughout the film, not only the president but also other Ken and Barbie characters are portrayed as coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This creative choice reflects the ideal of an inclusive world where every individual enjoys equal representation.

**Trans Barbie:** The film *Barbie* goes beyond being a narrative centered solely on women's empowerment, creating an inclusive universe that makes visible the multiple layers of gender. In this context, casting trans actress Hari Nef as Doctor Barbie can be interpreted as a deliberate choice aimed at LGBTQ+ representation. This portrayal does not remain at the level of mere "visibility"; it also delivers a strong message that trans individuals can occupy respected, expertise-based roles that contribute meaningfully to society. The film neither explicitly reveals the character's trans identity through dialogue nor visually emphasizes it. Instead, the fact that the role is played by a trans woman, combined with subtle nuances such as her voice, serves as a powerful yet understated indicator of the film's inclusive approach. This mode of representation, aligned with contemporary feminist and queer narratives, reflects an effort to ensure visibility without labeling.

**Weird Barbie:** One of the most unusually constructed characters in the *Barbie* film is Weird Barbie. In the narrative, Weird Barbie is designed as a figure that directly challenges aesthetic norms, beauty ideals, and the obsession with perfection. In this sense, she serves as a metaphor for individuals labeled by society as "damaged" or "broken." With chopped hair, a painted face, and unconventional movements, this character embodies the version of Barbie that results from children playing roughly or in unconventional ways with the doll. Weird Barbie lives apart from the others, in a house on top of a high hill. This physical separation symbolizes her exclusion or marginalization from the community due to her difference. At the same time, the elevated position grants her the ability to see events from above, offering a broader perspective and deeper understanding of what is happening. In other words, Weird Barbie is portrayed as an outsider who, by observing from a distance, possesses greater awareness than the others. Through this role, Weird Barbie becomes both a guide in Stereotypical Barbie's journey of self-discovery and a catalyst for transformation in the social order—acting as both the instigator and the mentor in the process of change.

McRobbie (2009, p.12) argues that feminist demands are circulated not directly as "political discourse" but primarily through cultural production processes (film, fashion, media, advertising, popular culture, etc.), which she conceptualizes as visibility strategies. Within this framework, the depiction of Stereotypical Barbie alongside non-normative female figures can be interpreted as a symbolic attempt to dismantle the pressures of physical appearance. Nevertheless, the continued centrality of the "marketable" beauty ideal within the narrative illustrates the persistence of the "beauty myth" dilemma identified by Wolf (1991, pp.9-19). According to Wolf, as women have gained legal and social rights, patriarchy has reasserted its control through the beauty myth. In this way, women's bodies have been transformed into a new "prison," and their freedoms have been overshadowed by imposed roles.

The film *Barbie* constitutes one of the most salient examples of this strategy within the cinematic context, as it demonstrates both the ways in which the brand has reconfigured itself in response to past criticisms and the manner in which femvertising is operationalized through narrative structures and character representations. Accordingly, this study employs a descriptive analytical approach to examine how femvertising strategies are applied in the realm of cinema and how the *Barbie* film reconstructs gender representations in line with these strategies. Within this framework, the findings derived in response to the research questions can be summarized as follows:

**Research Question 1:** *How are femvertising strategies applied in cinema, and how does the Barbie film reflect the transformation that brands undergo in line with these strategies?*

The film reveals the brand's attempt to reposition itself from a feminist perspective in response to past gender-related criticisms. Barbie's shift away from traditional notions of beauty and femininity toward a search for identity reflects the brand's transformation in line with femvertising strategies. At the same time, the film incorporates a critical awareness of these strategies. Although the main character, Barbie, is represented with a body type close to the societal "ideal," she openly questions this image of perfection throughout the narrative. Rather than responding defensively to criticism, she acknowledges that she may have contributed to women's self-confidence issues and sincerely portrays her own transformation process with this awareness. However, despite its critical dimension, the persistence of a normative body type at the center of the narrative also exposes the inherent marketability pressure in femvertising and the limited transformation of its empowerment discourse.

**Research Question 2:** *How does the Barbie film reconstruct gender representations through femvertising?*

Unlike classical examples of femvertising, the *Barbie* film not only delivers an empowerment message but also presents a critical and analytical framework toward the gender order. In particular, it challenges the understanding that confines traditional female roles to narrow molds, constructing an alternative narrative that positions women as subjects and decision-makers. At the same time, the film questions the long-standing "ideal female body" image associated with the Barbie brand, offering a more inclusive space for representation by making women of different ages, body types, and styles visible. This diversity is supported not only through the character ensemble but also by expanding the roles attributed to women within the Barbie universe. Furthermore, through the transformation of male characters, the film develops a critical perspective on social norms. Especially Barbie's search for identity and the humorous interrogation of the patriarchal order demonstrate that femvertising in this context goes beyond female empowerment, addressing gender norms in a multi-layered manner.

## Conclusion

The Barbie film reflects the efforts of a brand long associated with sexist beauty ideals to adopt an activist stance, articulate a critical discourse on gender norms, and transform its image accordingly. This transformation constitutes one of the most prominent cinematic examples of the femvertising strategy, which aims both to establish an emotional connection with consumers and to draw attention to social issues. Indeed, in recent years, femvertising campaigns have gained popularity by focusing not on reducing women to sexual objects but on representing their identities in an authentic manner. This approach not only generates a significant transformation in the representation of women in advertising but also carries the potential to draw attention to political, cultural, and social movements.

However, it is observed that many brands, instead of adopting an in-depth approach to gender equality, prefer to produce more superficial feminist discourses aimed at appealing to broader audiences. For example, while femvertising campaigns often emphasize the importance brands place on racial diversity, they do not adequately address women facing different socio-economic, cultural, and structural disadvantages, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and others. This indicates that, despite its claim of inclusivity, femvertising possesses a limited perspective that can exclude certain social groups. Therefore, although femvertising campaigns claim to empower the representation of women, they actually present a more complex structure. While contributing to the more positive representation of women in the media, the simplification of feminist discourse into a marketing strategy leads to criticism of these campaigns. In short, it should be considered that femvertising may be shaped more by commercial concerns than by the aim of promoting social change; in other words, rather than supporting genuine social transformation, it may function as a tool that reinforces the commercial interests of brands.

Femvertising strategies have mostly been examined through television commercials, social media campaigns, or digital content to date. However, this study fills a gap in the field by analyzing femvertising in long narrative forms such as cinema. The research examines the process of transforming the historical image of the Barbie brand, a powerful example both in terms of branding and culture, within the context of gender representations. Thus, it contributes not only to advertising but also to the fields of cultural studies, women's studies, and communication strategies. It also provides a conceptual framework for how corporate brands can engage with social norms.

In this study, the descriptive analysis method was adopted, and the visual and narrative elements in the film were evaluated as contextual components supporting the thematic analysis. However, this choice led to the exclusion of a detailed analysis of the film's visual language (such as the use of color, framing,

and editing) and narrative structure (such as dramatic structure, inter-character relationships, dialogues, etc.) from the scope of the study. In this context, it is recommended that future research adopt methodological approaches such as narrative analysis and semiotic analysis to examine the multi-layered structure of the film in greater depth. Moreover, through comparative analyses with different films or audience reception-based studies, it would be possible to obtain more comprehensive data on how femvertising strategies are perceived. Such methodological diversity is considered to contribute to a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of femvertising, both at the level of cultural representations and in the context of audience perception.

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Ethics committee permission is not required for this study.

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