

I'm a Barbie Girl, in a Commodified World

Exploring Commodification of Feminism
in the Context of Barbie (2023)

by

Olga Ivanova & Leonora Olnäs

June 2026

Master's Programme in International Marketing & Brand
Management

Supervisor: Daphne Geveke
Examiner: Carys Egan-Wyer
Word count: 23 350

Abstract

Title: I'm a Barbie Girl, in a Commodified World: Exploring Commodification of Feminism in the Context of Barbie (2023)

Seminar date: June 4, 2026

Course: BUSN39 - Degree Project in Global Marketing

Authors: Olga Ivanova & Leonora Olnäs

Supervisor: Daphne Geveke

Research questions: How do feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers experience, interpret, and negotiate the feminist messaging of Barbie (2023) and its marketing campaign within its commercial and cultural context? Subquestion: How do these consumers make sense of the relationship between empowerment, representation, and commodification in Barbie (2023) and its surrounding marketing?

Theory: Femvertising, postfeminism, commodity feminism, and brand communities are used to understand how feminist messages are incorporated into marketing, how empowerment becomes linked to consumption, and how consumers engage with brand meanings.

Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative, interpretive research approach based on a social constructionist epistemology. Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews with feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers.

Key Findings: Feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers experienced Barbie (2023) in ambivalent ways. While participants recognised the film and its marketing as meaningful, enjoyable, and culturally unifying, they also questioned the limitations of its feminism, in relation to commercialisation, inclusivity, and commodification.

Implications: This study demonstrated that feminist marketing can foster engagement and community, while still being evaluated for authenticity and inclusivity. Brands should ensure that empowerment messages appear meaningful rather than purely commercial.

Key words: Barbie, femvertising, commodity feminism, postfeminism, feminist marketing, consumer culture, brand communities, empowerment, Generation Z, qualitative research.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to our supervisor, Daphne Geveke, for her guidance and support throughout this process. Her feedback and advice have been greatly appreciated, and have helped us develop and strengthen our work along the way.

We would also like to thank our interviewees who made this thesis possible by generously sharing their time, thoughts, and insights with us. Their perspectives have been central to our work and have contributed greatly to the depth and quality of this thesis.

We want to extend our appreciation to our uplifting lecturers at LUSEM, whose teaching and encouragement helped inspire this thesis.

Finally, we are also grateful to each other for the effort, dedication, and support shown throughout this process. Working together has been both motivating and rewarding, and we are proud of what we have accomplished as co-authors.

Olga Ivanova

Leonora Olnäs

2026, Lund, Sweden

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
1.1 Outline of the Thesis	8
2. Theory	9
2.1 How Advertising Adopts Feminist Narratives: Femvertising	9
2.1.1 Feminism in Consumer Culture: A Postfeminist Lens	12
2.2 Empowerment for Profit: Commodification of Feminism	13
2.3 Belonging Through Consumption: Brand Communities	16
3. Methodology	20
3.1 Barbie	20
3.1.1 Barbie and Mattel	20
3.1.2 The Barbie (2023) Movie	20
3.2 Research Approach	22
3.3 Data Collection Method	24
3.3.1 Sampling Strategy	24
3.3.2 Interview Guide	26
3.3.3 Pilot Interview	26
3.3.4 Participants	27
3.3.5 Marketing and Stimuli	28
3.4 Data Analysis	33
3.4.1 Interview Analysis	34
3.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations	35
4. Findings and Discussion	37
4.1 Entering Barbieland: The Barbie Experience	37
4.1.1 Social Media Craze	37
4.1.2 Director and Actors	40
4.1.3 Uniting Through Pink	42
4.1.4 Barbie the Brand	46
4.2 Entering The Real World: Feminism for Whom?	48
4.2.1 Is Barbie's Feminism for Women Only?	48
4.2.1.1 Is it for White or Western Women Only?	53
4.2.2 Is it for Capitalist Feminists Only?	55
4.3 Perceptions Through Nostalgia	60
4.4 Negotiating Feminism Between Meaning and Market	63
5. Conclusion and Further Research	66
5.1 Conclusions and Contributions	66
5.2 Limitations	69
5.3 Further Research	70
References	72
Appendix	82
Appendix A – Interview Guide	82
Appendix B – Declaration of Use of AI	85

1. Introduction

Public discussions surrounding gender equality have increasingly influenced how brands communicate with consumers, particularly in markets targeting women. In response to shifting societal values, many companies have incorporated feminist themes into their messaging, aiming to resonate with audiences who prioritise empowerment, independence, and solidarity (Windels et al., 2020). For example, Always' #LikeAGirl represents the fight for young girls' self-esteem during puberty, as they are being told that they are less physically capable than boys (Yoon & Lee, 2021). Another example is Dove's Real Beauty campaign, which aimed to address stereotypes and challenge traditional, unrealistic beauty standards which are pushed on women through advertisements featuring "real women" of various ages, shapes, and sizes (Murray, 2013). While such initiatives have been praised for raising awareness and fostering positive self-perceptions, they have also sparked critical debates regarding the authenticity of corporate engagement with feminist ideals (Martínez-Aguirre et al., 2025). While femvertising has generated considerable research attention, a central tension remains with brands adopting the language of feminism to increase consumer appeal while simultaneously diluting its political and transformative potential (Billah & Anzari, 2025). This raises the question of whether feminist marketing represents genuine progress or whether feminist ideals are increasingly repackaged as marketable identities expressed through consumption rather than activism, a process described as commodity feminism (Repo, 2020).

Understanding this tension requires attention not only to how feminist messages are constructed by brands, but also to how they are received, interpreted, and contested by consumers. Feminist messages do not exist in isolation but circulate within social and cultural environments where consumers actively engage with, reinterpret, and collectively shape their meaning (Hearn & Hein, 2015). This makes brand community theory particularly relevant, as it provides a framework for understanding how feminist meanings emerge through social interactions rather than individual receptions (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2014). Within brand communities, consumers influence, validate, and challenge each other's interpretations while simultaneously reinforcing patterns of consumption (Krowinska & Dineva, 2025). A postfeminist perspective adds a further layer, highlighting how contemporary expressions of feminism are often entangled with consumer culture, individual choice, and self-expression rather than collective political action (Gill, 2007). At the same time, Modleski (2014) cautions

against reading this relationship as one of straightforward depoliticisation, arguing that consumer interactions with feminist media may themselves constitute meaningful forms of feminist practice and solidarity. Existing research has tended to approach feminist marketing either through a critical lens that foregrounds commodification or through a consumer engagement lens that risks underplaying its ideological dimensions. Less attention has been paid to how feminist-identifying consumers themselves navigate this contradiction, particularly within participatory brand cultures where they do not simply receive feminist messages but actively circulate, reshape, and critique them.

These questions are particularly significant in relation to Generation Z consumers, who increasingly view consumption and brand choices as expressions of personal identity and ethical positioning (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Existing research suggests that attitudes towards gender and feminism among younger demographics are becoming increasingly polarised, particularly within online spaces shaped by algorithmic content and social media discourse (Burn-Murdoch, 2024; Berlingieri et al., 2025). Furthermore, previous studies indicate that 75% of Generation Z consumers would discontinue relationships with brands perceived as sexist, racist, or discriminatory, demonstrating that ethical and political considerations increasingly influence consumption decisions (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

This thesis uses the Barbie (2023) live-action movie as a case study to explore these dynamics. The film, and its extensive global marketing campaign, generated significant cultural attention and became a focal point for discussions around gender roles, identity, and feminism, while simultaneously reflecting and giving form to broader cultural tensions of the present moment. Notably, the release of the film was accompanied by highly visible consumer practices, including coordinated outfits, themed gatherings, and collective cinema visits, which were often shared online and can be explained as ritualistic forms of engagement. These forms of participation further illustrate how brand communities materialise in practice, transforming individual consumption into shared cultural experiences. As a culturally contested brand with a long history in feminist debate, Barbie offers a unique opportunity to explore how audiences navigate contradictory feminist meanings within contemporary consumer cultures. While several studies have analysed the Barbie (2023) campaign's commercial success and feminist shortcomings (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024; Mrabet, 2024; Byrnes et al., 2024), they have done so primarily from a brand strategy perspective, leaving

largely unexplored how feminist-identifying consumers themselves make sense of and negotiate the film's feminist narratives within their commercial context.

This study addresses the research gap by examining how feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers reflect on their experience of Barbie (2023). The study contributes to ongoing debates about the role of feminism within contemporary marketing and consumer culture. This is particularly important in participatory brand cultures, where consumers do not simply receive feminist messages but help circulate, reshape, and critique them through social media, rituals, and shared cultural practices. It aims to move beyond analysing feminist marketing solely as a representational or branding strategy, and instead examines how feminist meanings are socially experienced, negotiated, and at times contested by consumers whom these campaigns claim to address. Therefore, the study proposes the following research questions:

How do feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers experience, interpret, and negotiate the feminist messaging of Barbie (2023) and its marketing campaign within its commercial and cultural context?

Subquestion: How do these consumers make sense of the relationship between empowerment, representation, and commodification in Barbie (2023) and its surrounding marketing?

To address these questions, the study adopted a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in a social constructionist epistemology. Participants were selected based on their identification with feminism and their engagement with the Barbie live-action movie and its marketing campaigns. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' personal experiences, emotional responses, and interpretations of the film's feminist narratives and marketing. The interview data were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, allowing recurring patterns and meanings to emerge from participants' reflections. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how feminism, branding, and consumer cultures are negotiated in practice, and how the same campaign can simultaneously generate genuine resonance and pointed critique among feminist-identifying audiences. The scope of the study is restricted to self-identifying feminist Generation Z consumers located in Europe, and as a qualitative case study, the findings are intended to offer contextual and analytical insight rather than statistical generalisation.

1.1 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, outlines the central tension between feminist marketing and commodification, presents the Barbie case, and states the research questions, aims, and methodological approach. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework, reviewing existing literature on femvertising, postfeminism, commodity feminism, and brand communities, and problematises the existing scholarship to establish the study's analytical position. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology, introducing Barbie as the case study and explaining the research design, data collection process, and analytical approach. Chapter 4 presents the findings and discussion, focusing on how participants experienced the Barbie phenomenon, engaged with it, and reflected on its feminist messages within a commercial context. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by summarising the main insights, answering the research questions, and discussing the study's limitations and directions for possible future research.

2. Theory

The following chapter reviews existing academic literature that forms the theoretical foundation of this study. Femvertising examines how pro-women messaging has become an established marketing strategy, while postfeminism and the commodification of feminism show how empowerment rhetoric becomes reframed as individualised, lifestyle-oriented, and commercially driven. Together, these frameworks illuminate the tensions embedded in feminist marketing, between genuine representation and strategic co-optation, that are central to understanding the Barbie campaign.

However, analysing how feminist messages are constructed by brands captures only a part of the picture. Therefore, the chapter concludes with brand community theory and marketplace cultures, which shift attention towards consumers. These frameworks help explain how audiences actively co-created, circulated, and contested the Barbie phenomenon through collective rituals, social media participation, and shared cultural practices, adding the nuance necessary to understand why the same campaign could generate both deep resonance and pointed critique among feminist-identifying consumers.

2.1 How Advertising Adopts Feminist Narratives: Femvertising

The lifestyle website SheKnows, which held a panel discussion on the topic during Advertising Week in October 2014, is usually credited with popularising the word “femvertising” (Powell, 2014). During the panel, modern advertising tactics that challenge conventional female gender stereotypes were referred to as “femvertising”. The rise in female brand leaders and the demand for female creatives to foster women in advertising firms has influenced the increase in femvertising in recent years (Hsu, 2018). Drake (2017) defines femvertising as a contemporary advertising strategy that incorporates pro-women messages and imagery with the aim of empowering women and challenging traditional gender stereotypes. According to Knoll et al. (2011), femvertising challenges many of the gender stereotypes that consumers have grown accustomed to seeing in advertising and may have the power to change societal attitudes and behaviours, as it also gives brands a new way to connect with female consumers. Previous research by Bernt (2009) shows that modern

women are more prone to marketing that reflects their preferences due to the advancement they have achieved in both their careers and society. This acts as a response to longstanding critiques of advertising's reliance on idealised and often reductive portrayals of women. Femvertising reflects broader socio-economic shifts, including women's increased purchasing power and influence on society.

Historically, advertising has frequently depicted women in subordinate, dependent, or stereotypical roles (McArthur & Resko, 1975). In contrast, femvertising seeks to present women as autonomous, diverse, and capable, to align brand communication with feminist ideals such as identity, agency, and equality (Drake, 2017). Furthermore, the author elaborates that empowerment-based messages often evoke strong emotional responses such as inspiration, pride, or solidarity, and affective responses to advertisements are strongly associated with brand evaluations and behavioural intentions. Additionally, these types of advertisements have been shown to significantly improve attitudes towards both the advertisement and the brand, increase purchase intentions, and foster stronger emotional connections between consumers and brands. Findings suggest that femvertising resonates with audiences, particularly millennial women, by reflecting their values and lived experiences more authentically than traditional advertising approaches and actively constructing alternative representations of women (Drake, 2017; Åkestam et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that Drake's (2017) findings are based on a quantitative approach, which may limit the depth of interpretation regarding how feminist messages are subjectively experienced and personally meaningful to audiences. Similarly, Åkestam et al. (2017) acknowledge that fully understanding femvertising's effects would require a study design that incorporates both traditional advertising effects and an assessment of extended effects such as the target audience's self-perception, suggesting that the emotional and identity-based dimensions of femvertising remain underexplored.

Advertising has been the subject of more feminist criticism and debate than any other kind of media content (Gill, 2007). Media academics emphasise how feminism is now frequently expressed in commercials and marketing campaigns (McRobbie, 2004). However, this change in advertising has been greatly influenced by feminism, but it does not imply that it is essentially feminist. Socialist feminist academics believe that feminism is a political and social phenomenon rather than a question of consumption choice (Ramazanoglu, 1989). As explained by Åkestam et al. (2017), femvertising constitutes advertising that subverts

traditional female advertising tropes and is acknowledged as a groundbreaking approach against historical objectification and gender clichés.

According to previous studies, consumers respond well to femvertisements and perceive the messages of gender equality (Champlin et al., 2019). Importantly, femvertisements are not explicitly “feminist”, and businesses tend to refrain from using this label (Hsu, 2018). Instead, such communications frequently emphasise “internal empowerment deemed inclusive of all females” (p. 28), possibly in attempts to “soft[en]” this message to a broader audience (Hsu, 2018). Therefore, Hsu argues that this calls the political authenticity of such efforts into question, as the purposeful rejection of the feminist term can imply a business strategy rather than a sincere dedication to feminist principles. Building on this, despite the fact that femvertising is viewed as progressive, Windels et al. (2020) argue that many marketing campaigns, rather than addressing society's unjust institutions, concentrate on enhancing women's internal qualities, and in doing so, it situates consumption as the means of achieving empowerment and equality. In the current media, women are represented as self-assured, autonomous, and sexually assertive, which may be considered postfeminist depictions (Gill, 2007). Therefore, advertisers blend indicators of bodily liberty, freedom, and independence and link them to co-optation. Feminist objectives such as self-determination and control over one's own body are then stripped of their political meaning and resold to us as decisions about what to use (McRobbie, 2004). Other researchers argue that there is frequently a discrepancy between a company's real corporate behaviour and what it claims in its ads (Sharifzadehsaraei, 2023; Sterbenk et al., 2022). While existing research has examined how femvertising functions as a representational and persuasive strategy, less attention has been paid to how deeply companies commit to the causes they promote, and how consumers themselves evaluate this gap between brand messaging and corporate practice (Champlin et al., 2019).

Overall, while femvertising signals a shift towards more empowering representations of women in advertising, its reliance on emotional appeal and consumer engagement suggests that feminist ideals are not displayed but strategically adapted to align with commercial objectives. The previous research predominantly analyses femvertising from the perspective of its effects on attitudes and purchase intentions, which risks reducing a complex cultural phenomenon to a set of measurable outcomes. What remains less understood is how consumers who are themselves invested in feminist politics navigate and make sense of these

campaigns, particularly when the brand's commercial motives are visible. Specifically, it becomes necessary to consider whether these messages reflect genuine feminist progress or whether they are better understood through a postfeminist lens, where empowerment is reframed as an individualised and consumption-driven ideal. The following section situates femvertising within postfeminist theory to see how feminist values are reinterpreted within contemporary consumer cultures.

2.1.1 Feminism in Consumer Culture: A Postfeminist Lens

Feminism has long been an influential movement and philosophy that shapes people's opinions and behaviours, and is described as ideas that favour gender equality, particularly in the political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights arenas (McRobbie, 2004). Postfeminism has emerged as a critical framework for understanding contemporary media and marketing practices, offering insight into how feminist ideals are reinterpreted and commodified in popular culture. As Gill (2007) argues, post-feminism functions less as a coherent ideology and more as a cultural sensibility, characterised by an emphasis on individual choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and the constant negotiation of appearance and identity. In marketing, these sensibilities are frequently mobilised to frame consumption as a form of self-actualisation, where products and brands become tools through which women can perform autonomy and confidence.

Previous research on co-optation and commodification of feminism is often condemned for turning feminist messages into tools for consumerism rather than social change (Windels et al., 2020). Many researchers argue that contemporary advertising frequently adopts the language of empowerment while stripping it of its political roots. For example, research on femvertising shows that campaigns incorporate feminist ideas such as confidence, independence, and body positivity, but simultaneously neutralise feminism's political force by embedding it within commercial contexts. This process is described as commodity feminism, where feminist ideals are repackaged as marketable identities that can be expressed through consumption rather than activism. Postfeminist culture often reframes empowerment as an individual, lifestyle-based achievement, encouraging women to "buy" empowerment through products rather than challenge structural inequality (Gill, 2007). This demonstrates how feminist messages are not rejected, but instead absorbed and reshaped to fit neoliberal and individualistic, profit-driven agendas. Gill further argues that more explanation of this

relationship between postfeminist media culture and contemporary neoliberal social relations is needed, indicating that the way consumers fully perceive and navigate these dynamics has not yet been sufficiently taken into account in practice.

In fact, nowadays, most of what counts as feminist debate in Western societies takes place in the media: social media, radio, television, and print media, discussing the pressure on young girls to meet beauty standards, rather than outside of it. However, it would be wrong to affirm that the media and marketing industries have appropriated feminist ideologies (Gill & Gill, 2007). Therefore, the authors highlight that for feminism to reach broader audiences in mass media, it must contend with paradoxes, such as collaborating with mass communication and advertising systems that both amplify and complicate its message. Postfeminist theory tends to frame the relationship between feminism and consumer culture primarily as one of depoliticisation and co-optation, yet this framing may itself be limiting. It risks positioning consumers as passive recipients of ideological messages, leaving little analytical space for understanding how feminist-identifying audiences actively engage with, contest, and find genuine meaning in commercially embedded feminist narratives. Lastly, using femvertising in media and marketing extends approaches like commodity feminism, which takes advantage of feminist principles for profit (Goldman et al., 1991).

Thus, postfeminist media reveals how feminist ideals are increasingly shaped by market logic. Therefore, feminism becomes not only a cultural discourse but also a resource that can be packaged and sold. However, the predominantly critical stance of postfeminist scholarship, while analytically powerful, has tended to overlook the ways in which consumers themselves understand and navigate this commodification. This is particularly relevant for feminist-identifying consumers, whose engagement with branded feminist content may be simultaneously critical and emotionally meaningful. This highlights the importance of examining the commodification of feminism as a strategic marketing practice.

2.2 Empowerment for Profit: Commodification of Feminism

Commodity feminism is a business and marketing strategy in which feminist ideals are repurposed to promote products and services, positioning consumption as a pathway to

empowerment (Repo, 2020). Rather than demanding structural social change, this form of feminism enables individuals to identify with feminist values, such as autonomy, confidence, and self-worth, through consumption (Dowsett, 2014). This way, feminism is reframed as a lifestyle choice, where purchasing becomes symbolic participation in a broader social movement. However, Scott (2000) argues that feminist ideology's anti-market bias "shuts off an avenue for the advancement of feminism already shown to be broadly effective" (p. 2). This limits positive advances in advertising, such as altering the representation of women. Scott argues that women are terribly oppressed in all economic systems, and complicated gender issues cannot be solely ascribed to an economic philosophy. Capitalism is not the root cause, but the current circumstance.

This shift aligns with what is described as neoliberal feminism, where empowerment is individualised and achieved through market participation rather than political action. As Repo (2020) theorises, feminism is increasingly expressed through "feminist commodity activism", a process occurring at the intersection of social justice and market logic. Here, political engagement is reimagined as consumer behaviour, transforming activism into what can be described as "low-cost heroism", which is a form of participation that requires minimal effort beyond purchasing. It subsequently transfers activist agency from the collective to corporations. Repo (2020) also states that this framework highlights a depoliticising trend where the common social bond of a movement is subsumed by capital, replacing systemic critique with individualised, aestheticised, and market-mediated performances of solidarity. Importantly, this transformation alters not only how feminism is practised but also how it is experienced. For consumers, engaging with commodity feminism offers an accessible and emotionally rewarding experience. It provides a sense of belonging, identity formation, and moral satisfaction without requiring deeper political involvement. The author describes the experience as aesthetic and symbolic, where consumers feel aligned with feminist values through branded environments, narratives, and products. However, this also leads to a depoliticisation of feminism, where systemic critique is replaced by individualised expressions of empowerment (Repo, 2020).

Hsu (2018) states that in order to sell goods and create profit, corporations frequently only seek to capitalise on the widespread potential of pro-women messages, turning female strength into a commodity. This form of commodification is supported by three reinforcing theoretical pillars: commodity feminism, neoliberal feminism, and commodity activism

(Repo, 2020). First, it utilises commodity feminism to strip complex political ideas into semiotic markers of attitude or confidence, which are then inscribed onto consumer goods to make the act of purchasing feel inherently empowering. Second, neoliberal feminism constructs the individual as responsible for their own empowerment through consumption choices. Finally, commodity activism frames purchasing as a meaningful ethical or political act, effectively merging consumption with identity and values (Repo, 2020).

Barbie has historically been criticised for reinforcing narrow beauty standards, but has in recent years strategically repositioned itself as a symbol of diversity, empowerment, and feminist possibility (Gaviria, 2024). This, through the release of dolls of different body types, ethnicities, and professions, aligning itself with contemporary feminist discourses. By embedding feminist narratives into the Barbie brand, Mattel has tapped into a highly profitable cultural moment. The “Barbie craze” extends beyond the product itself into a wider cultural ecosystem, fashion, social media trends, themed experiences, and collaborations, creating a multi-layered consumer experience (Coghlan & Piatti-Farnell, 2025). Consumers are not just buying a doll or watching a film, but they are participating in a cultural movement that feels socially meaningful. Additionally, these practices create a sense of community and cultural belonging. At the same time, they reinforce brand loyalty and drive consumption, demonstrating how feminist discourse can be leveraged to produce both emotional resonance and economic value (Coghlan & Piatti-Farnell, 2025).

While Mattel’s embrace of feminism may contribute to more inclusive representations and broaden public conversations around gender, it also risks reducing feminism to a marketable aesthetic (Gaviria, 2024). The collective, political dimensions of feminism are overshadowed by individual consumption practices, where participation is measured by engagement with the brand rather than commitment to structural change. In this context, the Barbie “craze” exemplifies how culture is actively produced through the interaction of media, markets, and consumers. Feminism becomes both a cultural narrative and an economic asset, one that companies like Mattel can strategically mobilise. The result is a hybrid space where empowerment, identity, and consumption are deeply intertwined, raising ongoing questions about the limits and possibilities of feminism within capitalist frameworks (Coghlan & Piatti-Farnell, 2025).

Although commodification of feminism explains how feminist meanings are constructed and marketed, it does not fully capture how these meanings are experienced by consumers. In practice, the success of such strategies depends on active consumer participation and engagement. The following section, therefore, explores how brand communities and marketplace cultures enable consumers to collectively experience and reproduce these commodified feminist narratives.

2.3 Belonging Through Consumption: Brand Communities

A brand community represents a non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a specific brand (Muñiz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001). These communities are characterised by a commercial and mass-mediated ethos that gives rise to three markers: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. Consciousness of kind refers to the intrinsic connection members feel towards one another and their collective sense of difference from those outside the community. This shared knowledge of belonging is often expressed through a demarcation between "true" users and those who use the brand for what the community deems the wrong reasons. Rituals and traditions serve to perpetuate the community's shared history and culture, often involving the sharing of brand stories or the communal use of advertising text. A sense of moral responsibility creates a felt duty to the community as a whole.

Research by Brodie et al. (2013) explores the complex nature of consumer engagement within virtual brand communities. The authors define consumer engagement as a context-dependent psychological state that occurs within iterative processes involving specific interactive experiences between consumers, the brand, and other community members (Brodie et al., 2013). The conceptual framework identifies three primary dimensions of engagement: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural. Cognitive engagement involves the acquisition of knowledge or learning, while emotional engagement manifests through affective attitudes such as trust, empathy, and a sense of belonging. Behavioural engagement is shown by active participation in the community through contributions or offline actions related to the brand (Brodie et al., 2013). Central to the engagement process are five key sub-processes: learning, sharing, advocating, socialising, and co-developing. Learning and sharing involve the co-creation and exchange of knowledge, while advocating refers to consumers actively

recommending the brand or product to others (Brodie et al., 2013). Socialising facilitates the development of community norms, and co-developing allows consumers to contribute to the creation of new products or industry standards. The research identifies significant outcomes of high consumer engagement, including enhanced loyalty, satisfaction, empowerment, and connection.

Modern brand online communities have shifted from an organisation-centric model to a participative co-created perspective (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Brands are co-created organically through interactions between the company and consumers, who are viewed as essential collaborators rather than passive recipients. The alignment between a brand's public advocacy and a consumer's personal values serves as a fundamental driver for connections that go beyond transactional loyalty (Irawan & Cheng, 2025). When a company's owned social media content mirrors consumers' personal values, it fosters a sense of attachment and belonging. This resonance is critical because consumers who identify with a brand's character are motivated to move into brand advocacy, where they voluntarily promote and defend the brand as an extension of their own social identity.

As outlined in Ogilvy's (2026) research on brand devotion, the conventional mechanisms of consumer retention are increasingly viewed as outdated. Modern consumers seek to be empowered by brands that actively facilitate their personal evolution and self-fulfilment. The transition from loyalty to devotion represents a move from repetitive purchasing behaviour to a state of mutual commitment. For unbound consumers, who prioritise cultural alignment over simple utility, a brand must function as an extension of their own identity and values (Ogilvy, 2026). By fostering environments that encourage fan passion, brands can cultivate a level of "irrational" loyalty. According to Ogilvy (2026), this requires a radical departure from traditional brand management, companies must be willing to "loosen traditional controls" and embrace co-creation. The goal of brand devotion is to move beyond the management of a customer base and towards the stewardship of a digital community. By mirroring the values, culture, and community involvement of their audience, brands can evolve into a vital component of the individual's identity.

This provides significant implications for how this movie had a significant influence on the brand community of Barbie, as it not only focused on selling a final product but also created a whole experience for the audience when viewing it. People were generating content on social

media platforms, engaging with promotional materials, and listening to soundtracks, therefore, supporting the discussion around the movie and its core messages. Therefore, consumption evolves into a socially mediated activity in which people actively contribute to the development and maintenance of social institutions (Cova, 1997). Consumers do not interact with brands in a vacuum. Instead, they find significance in taking part in group rituals, stories, and activities centred on the brand (Cova, 1997). Even though the marketing of the movie was focusing on promoting the core idea of feminism and creating a discussion on gender roles, whether it is feminist depends on the view and knowledge of the viewer, as it was also criticised for being just an introduction into basic feminist values, generating mixed feelings.

Adjacent to brand communities, marketplace cultures refer to social worlds that emerge around shared consumption practices, where consumers form communities, rituals, and collective meanings linked to particular brands, products, or experiences (Cova et al., 2023). Rather than viewing consumption as an individual act, this perspective emphasises the social and cultural dimensions of consumption and highlights how consumers interact through shared marketplace interests. Authors also state that these consumer collectives can take many forms, including brand communities and fan cultures, within such communities, shared symbols, practices, and narratives help create a sense of belonging and collective identity among participants. Through these interactions, consumers actively participate in producing and circulating cultural meanings associated with brands and cultural products. As consumers increasingly migrate through various networks of marketplace cultures, they seek out these spaces to find emotional bonds and a sense of shared identity (Cova et al., 2023). The role of brands within these cultures has evolved, where iconic symbols provide the necessary resources for collective performance. Furthermore, digital platforms have accelerated these processes. Consumers no longer just receive brand meanings but actively co-create them and engage directly with brands through digital engagement on social media, campaigns, and events, blurring the lines between consumer and producer.

Arvidsson (2005) further conceptualises consumption as a form of immaterial labour, an unpaid, autonomous activity that produces an ethical surplus, such as social bonds, shared experiences, or common identities. Consumers utilise a "General Intellect", defined as a shared reservoir of symbolic resources and cultural knowledge often provided by media culture, as a means of production to create meaning around goods. Arvidsson (2005) argues

that exploitation occurs as brand management "subsumes" the autonomous productivity of the social, absorbing the free time of consumers and capturing the human ability to create a common social world as a source of surplus value.

These dynamics are particularly relevant in the context of large-scale cultural phenomena, where brands extend beyond products to become immersive, participatory experiences. Consumers do not merely engage with brand messages but actively contribute to the creation of cultural meaning, identity, and community. This provides a useful framework for understanding how contemporary media events, such as the Barbie (2023) film and its surrounding marketing, operate not only as commercial strategies but as sites of cultural production and collective engagement.

The theoretical literature reviewed in this chapter revealed an important gap. Femvertising, postfeminism, and commodity feminism have been extensively theorised from the perspective of how feminist meanings are produced, packaged, and sold. Brand community theory and marketplace cultures, by contrast, draw attention to how meanings are actively co-created and shaped by consumers. Yet, the previous research has rarely been brought into direct conversation, particularly in relation to how feminist-identifying consumers negotiate the tension between genuine resonance and commercial co-optation. Existing literature has often approached this phenomenon from two separate perspectives: one that foregrounds depoliticisation and co-optation, and another that emphasises consumer engagement while risking an underestimation of the ideological dimensions of branded feminism. This study seeks to address that gap by examining how feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers make sense of their engagement with the Barbie (2023) phenomenon, dealing with both the critical and the meaningful dimensions of their experience. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach through which this was explored.

3. Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the case used in this research and outlines the methodological framework, providing data requirements, sampling techniques, and analytical approach.

3.1 Barbie

3.1.1 Barbie and Mattel

Barbie was created by Ruth Handler, co-founder of its parent company Mattel, and launched on March 9, 1959 (Last, 2025), with the intention to create a toy that would encourage girls to envision their lives outside typical expectations of motherhood. Despite a progressive premise, Barbie has long been a contested figure within feminist discourse. The doll's emphasis on beauty, self-presentation, and material success still implicitly promotes patriarchal norms (Last, 2025). Due to this, even while Barbie's gender projection is strong, it obscures her ability to embrace feminist ideas fully (Wright, 2021). This tension has made the brand a focal point for debates around postfeminism and commodity feminism, where empowerment is expressed through consumption rather than structural change (Gill, 2007).

Over time, Mattel has actively responded to these critiques through strategic brand repositioning. Since the 2010s, the Barbie doll has been diversified to include a wider range of body types, ethnicities, and abilities, reflecting broader societal conversations around inclusion and representation (Wu, 2020). This strategy simultaneously responds to criticism of the brand while expanding its market potential (Byrnes et al., 2024). While this shift can be interpreted as a meaningful engagement with feminist and social justice concerns, it also aligns with corporate interests in expanding reach and maintaining brand relevance. In this sense, Mattel's approach illustrates what Repo (2020) describes as the intersection of market logic and social justice, where feminist values are incorporated into branding strategies.

3.1.2 The Barbie (2023) Movie

Barbie (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig (IMDb, n.d.), engaged with Barbie's contested legacy by presenting her as both a cultural icon and a site of critique. In the matriarchal utopia

of Barbieland, different iterations of Barbie live in bliss, while the different Kens are unnoticed except in their relation to the Barbies. "Stereotypical Barbie" (Margot Robbie) exists in a state of perfection until the intrusion of human existential dread forces a journey into the "Real World". Accompanied by Ken (Ryan Gosling), she enters a patriarchal world, a system Ken quickly adopts due to his own feelings of inadequacy. Barbie allies with Gloria, a mother dealing with midlife anxieties, and returns to Barbieland, which Ken has transformed into a hyper-masculine, sexist society. Through the power of shared female experience and a deconstruction of the impossible standards of womanhood, the Barbies restore order by turning the Kens' competitive, fragile egos against one another. Barbie encourages Ken to find self-worth independent of her validation, while she seeks her own purpose.

Gerwig's involvement may also have strengthened the film's appeal among feminist audiences, as she is widely associated with women-centred storytelling and contemporary feminist themes (Pulver, 2023). Cannes Film Festival described Gerwig as a filmmaker who explores "contemporary feminist issues" with both depth and skill (Pulver, 2023). This association helped make Barbie appear credible to audiences interested in feminist narratives, while its global box office success of US\$1.44 billion demonstrated the commercial power of this positioning (Mrabet, 2024). Gerwig said that Barbie "most certainly is a feminist film", adding that it steps into what is the negotiation of what women need to be (Ferguson & Freri, 2023), and the marketing made feminism a core selling point of the film (Murray, 2023).

Barbie (2023) and its marketing campaign reinforced themes of female empowerment, expanded Mattel's appeal to a wider audience, generated significant attention, and led to many brand partnerships (Chakraborty & Biswal, 2024). It was celebrated for including discussions of feminism in a high-profile, family-friendly blockbuster, yet it has also drawn criticism for commercialising feminist ideas (Last, 2025). Barbie collaborated with influencers, released merchandise, and collaborated with brands such as Zara, Crocs, and Balmain to create branded products (Canavarro & Imamović, 2024). Barbie demonstrated how feminism can be mobilised as both a cultural narrative and an economic resource. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, popular feminism is often characterised by its visibility and marketability rather than its capacity for structural change. The soundtrack, which went viral on social media (Brammer, 2026), further supported this emotional branding. For example, Billie Eilish's song "What Was I Made For" explored themes of identity and how women strive to meet

expectations (Lowe, 2024), and hit 155 million streams on Spotify during its first week (Fraser, 2023).

The marketing campaign extended Barbie's visual identity and feminist associations into a participatory consumer experience. Barbie pink was used not only as a recognisable brand aesthetic but also as a tool for audience engagement, encouraging viewers to dress up, share content online, and participate in trends such as #BarbieCore, which received over 60 billion views on TikTok (Rubin, 2023; Gao, 2024). In this way, the campaign targeted a female audience often overlooked by blockbuster marketing while leveraging women's purchasing power and transforming the film into a broader cultural event (Temple University, 2023). This participatory dynamic was further amplified by the "Barbenheimer" phenomenon (Goldsmith, 2023). Barbenheimer was a fan-made movie crossover event that combined Barbie with the World War II era biopic film *Oppenheimer*, which premiered on the same day. Although Barbenheimer was not initiated by the studios, it expanded online engagement by encouraging audiences to frame cinema-going itself as a shared cultural ritual. The trend positioned Barbie not only as a film or brand campaign, but as part of a wider cinema event shaped through audience participation, humour, and online circulation.

Overall, the Barbie case highlights how marketplace cultures are constructed at the intersection of media, consumption, and identity. The film and its marketing demonstrate how a brand can capitalise on feminist discourse to create both cultural relevance and economic opportunity. At the same time, they reveal the tensions of commodity feminism: while it enables participation and representation, it risks reducing feminism to a stylised, individualised, and market-driven practice. The marketing material is further described in [3.3.5 Marketing and Stimuli](#).

3.2 Research Approach

This study adopted a relativist ontological stance, which assumes that there is no single truth and that facts depend on the perspective adopted by the observer (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This assumption is consistent with the fact that interpretations of feminist messages are not objective and universal, but are fundamentally shaped by personal experiences and contexts. According to Easterby-Smith et al., a social constructionist epistemology argues

that, rather than being given as an objective, permanent reality, knowledge is socially produced via relationships, language, and shared meaning. A social constructionist approach was suitable for this study as it sought to understand how participants establish and negotiate meanings around feminism, branding, and consumer cultures through discussions and reflections. Rather than measuring whether a marketing campaign is perceived as truly feminist, the research focused on how feminist meanings are interpreted, challenged, and reproduced by consumers within broader social and cultural contexts (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This also aligned with the study's focus on brand communities, where meaning emerges collectively through participation and interaction.

Given the relativist and constructionist orientation of this study, it is acknowledged that the researchers are not entirely detached from the research process. Interpretations of participants' responses are inevitably influenced by the researchers' own understanding of feminism, media, and consumer culture. Hence, reflexivity was important throughout the research process, particularly during data collection and thematic interpretation, to remain attentive to potential biases and assumptions shaping the analysis.

Additionally, this study followed an inductive logic of reasoning, as it focused on forming theory directly from empirical observations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). An inductive approach is suitable because research has primarily focused on how brands produce and commodify feminist messages, while less attention has been given to how audiences themselves interpret these campaigns. Since the study aimed to explore participants' subjective perceptions, emotional responses, and reflections on the Barbie (2023) campaign, it was important to allow themes and patterns to emerge from the interview data rather than imposing rigid theoretical assumptions from the outset (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This approach supports a more nuanced understanding of how consumers negotiate feminist meanings within contemporary consumer culture and brand communities.

Given that this study aimed to understand how self-identifying feminist consumers interpreted the feminist messaging of Barbie (2023), a qualitative approach was suited to exploring how consumers perceive feminist messages in advertising. This approach provided extensive insights into consumer perceptions and allowed for a more thorough examination of individual narratives about consumer-brand interactions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The primary goal of qualitative interviewing is to try to capture insights into a respondents'

perceptions, and this type of research was specifically chosen to capture a deeper and subjective consumer experience with feminism being used as a marketing tool.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with self-identifying feminists who had actively engaged with the film and its promotional materials, to explore their perspectives and experiences with the Barbie movie “craze”. The authors deliberately chose semi-structured interviews, considering that more open interview questions tend to generate richer and more detailed data. An interview guide was set up to help with interviews by allowing us to explore topics that were pertinent to the interviewee while maintaining focus on those topics (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Exploratory research is typically used when a topic is not yet well understood and aims to generate new insights in a flexible and open-ended way. This method allowed for a flexible dialogue, enabling participants to move beyond surface-level reactions and explore complex perceptions of femvertising. Therefore, this epistemological position is consistent with the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research questions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Insights from the data were continuously interpreted in relation to existing research on femvertising and commodification of feminism, brand communities, and marketplace cultures.

3.3.1 Sampling Strategy

The interviewees were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy, which ensures that respondents met specific criteria relevant to the research questions to provide insightful information (Palinkas et al., 2015). This meant identifying consumers who self-identify themselves as feminists and have both watched Barbie (2023) and engaged with its marketing campaign. Engaging with the marketing campaign includes seeing advertisements, posting Barbie-related content on social media, and interacting with online Barbie content. This way, it could be ensured that participants were selected according to the intention of adding the greatest value to the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This sampling strategy works especially well for investigating individual perceptions and requires in-depth subjective reports of individual experiences and perspectives (Patton, 2002). However, because of

limited time and resources, convenience sampling was also used, meaning that interviewees were selected based on accessibility to the researchers. The interviewees were recruited through personal networks.

The study further focused on Generation Z participants, as younger generations have become increasingly central to discussions surrounding gender, identity, and feminism (Berlingieri et al., 2025). A generation is described as a group of people with similar birth years who experience similar vital life events at crucial developmental periods (Costanza et al., 2023), and Generation Z is defined as people born between 1997 and 2012 (Beresford Research, n.d.). Research by the European Commission suggests that attitudes towards gender issues among younger demographics are becoming increasingly polarised, particularly through the influence of digital media and online discourse (Berlingieri et al., 2025). Generation Z also represents a highly digitally engaged demographic that actively participates in social media trends, online brand communities, and identity-based consumer cultures, making them specifically relevant for examining the reception of feminist marketing campaigns. Since the Barbie (2023) campaign relied heavily on participatory digital culture, including memes, TikTok trends, and user-generated content, Generation Z participants were particularly well-positioned to reflect on how these messages were experienced, interpreted, and circulated within online communities.

Since the study focused on a European context, participants were recruited from a range of countries in Europe. The final sample included respondents from seven different European countries, all of whom were highly proficient in English and had completed their education at bachelor's level or higher across various academic subjects. Although educational background was not a selection criterion, the relatively high educational level of the sample emerged as a result of the convenience sampling strategy.

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), in the context of constructionist design, the credibility of the study depends heavily on three main criteria: authenticity, plausibility, and criticality. Therefore, the authors state that the quality of the study is based on its ability to provide deep knowledge and understanding linked to an ongoing concern or phenomenon. The interview guide enabled consistency in the process of data collection by ensuring the coverage of fundamental themes. The topic of trustworthiness in qualitative research, which adopts an interpretivist or constructionist paradigm, is also discussed extensively by Bryman

and Bell (2015). They argue that traditional criteria used in quantitative studies, such as internal validity, reliability, generalisability, and objectivity, are not properly applicable to qualitative studies due to the various presumptions underpinning each research approach. To tackle this, Lincoln and Guba's proposed framework of criteria helps to assess the quality and integrity of qualitative research findings, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Enworo, 2023).

3.3.2 Interview Guide

The interviews were based on an interview guide, an informal list of subjects and questions to cover throughout the interview that is frequently used in semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). One of the main benefits of adopting an interview guide is its adaptability, which allowed us to modify the questions to better reflect the respondent's emotions and worldview (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, a flexible pre-designed interview guide was developed, aiming to balance consistency across interviews with the openness to explore emergent and unexpected topics (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This type of interview was particularly appropriate for this study because perceptions of feminism, empowerment, and authenticity are highly subjective and emotionally nuanced. The flexible interview structure enabled participants to elaborate on personal experiences, contradictions, and reflections that may emerge through more structured methods such as surveys. Interview questions were tailored based on the main theoretical ideas highlighted in the previous literature, including femvertising, commodification of feminism, marketplace cultures, and brand communities.

3.3.3 Pilot Interview

A pilot interview was held on April 3, 2026, to evaluate the interview guide and refine the study's overall approach. This session revealed that while the participant vividly remembered their emotional reactions and the cultural impact of the film, they struggled to recall specific promotional materials. To facilitate a richer discussion, it was decided to include specific visual materials as prompts in subsequent interviews.

Moreover, the pilot interview proved useful in identifying the weaknesses of the guide, such as overly abstract and irrelevant questions, allowing for informed adjustments to the questions

to improve clarity and effectiveness. Additionally, it allowed for the assessment of the estimated duration of interviews and the natural sequencing of topics. In this sense, based on feedback and observations from the pilot, corrections were made to improve the natural transition between sections, facilitating the conversational tone of the interview and enhancing the flow. These revisions helped enhance the relevance and suitability of the guide to ensure it would provide the tools to answer the research questions.

The interview also showed that the interviewee frequently shifted the conversation towards the movie's plot rather than the marketing or experience itself, which prompted an adjustment of the questions to keep the focus on the research objectives. The interview guide also needed to be expanded to include more targeted questions on immaterial labour and brand community perspectives, as these topics were lacking in the conversation.

3.3.4 Participants

A total of 12 participants were interviewed online in English. The same guide was used for all of the interviews (see [Appendix A](#)). Conducting this number of interviews helped ensure that the findings were not idiosyncratic to a single set of individuals and allowed observation of whether similar ideas emerged across different discussions.

The sample size was guided by data saturation, the point at which further data collection no longer uncovers new themes, insights, or new patterns to the study subjects (Guest et al., 2006). Although the sample size was limited, consistent patterns started to arise throughout the interviews, indicating adequate depth. This indicated that sufficient understanding had been attained and that more interviews were unlikely to yield insightful and original results (Guest et al., 2006). The decision was made with the assumption that achieving data saturation is necessary to guarantee the validity and richness of the results.

Participant	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Length of interview
1	Anneliese	F	22	41 minutes
2	Blair	F	23	46 minutes
3	Chelsea	F	23	44 minutes
4	Derek	M	24	40 minutes

5	Eric	M	23	58 minutes
6	Francie	F	23	61 minutes
7	Grace	F	24	64 minutes
8	Harry	M	25	58 minutes
9	Isla	F	25	52 minutes
10	Jenny	F	24	47 minutes
11	Kevin	M	24	58 minutes
12	Leonard	M	24	40 minutes

Table 1. Participants.

3.3.5 Marketing and Stimuli

To ensure consistency across interviews, minimise variation in interpretation, and overcome recall bias, all participants were exposed to the same visual stimuli during the interview process. Specifically, three official promotional posters from the Barbie campaign were shown to each participant, alongside one non-official poster. These posters were selected because each one represents a distinct dimension of the campaign that is directly relevant to this study's theoretical focus and were widely circulated on social media. The selected posters acted as discussion facilitators, assisting respondents in expressing interpretations that could be challenging to convey through direct questions. This strategy is consistent with the photo elicitation methodology, which has been demonstrated to enhance qualitative interviews by fostering more in-depth, thoughtful, and visually grounded responses (Gill, 2024).

A notable limitation of prior research is the narrow selection of stimuli used. Several studies examining feminist brand campaigns have relied on award-winning advertisements, which tend to represent the most polished and ideologically explicit end of femvertising and may not reflect how campaigns are actually encountered by everyday consumers. Previous research specifically examining the Barbie brand has frequently used images of the dolls as a physical product rather than the film as a cultural event, which limits insight into how the campaign functioned as a participatory media experience rather than a product advertisement (Gaviria, 2024). Furthermore, studies that have included the Barbie (2023) campaign have tended to

focus only on the poster featuring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling as the archetypal Barbie and Ken, without incorporating the wider cast of characters or the user-generated dimensions of the campaign. Canavarro and Imamović (2024), for instance, referenced the selfie-generator as a crucial element of the campaign's participatory strategy, but did not include examples of its output as stimuli, leaving unexplored how audiences responded to seeing themselves or others inserted into the campaign's visual language.

The stimuli selected for this study were chosen to address these gaps and to ensure that participants were not steered towards interpreting the campaign solely through the lens of its most stereotypical representations. Rather than relying on a single image of the blonde Barbie and her Ken, the selection was designed to reflect the campaign's diversity in a range of characters, its inversion of gender hierarchies, its participatory digital culture, and its use of consumers as producers of brand meanings. Additionally, the selected advertisements were chosen due to their prominence and visibility within public and media discussions surrounding the movie's release. In particular, the posters received substantial online circulation and were frequently referenced in magazines, social media discussions, and analyses of the film's branding strategies. The selected posters were also closely connected to trends that emerged during the campaign. For instance, slogans such as "She is everything. He is just Ken" became widely used across social media platforms, particularly on TikTok, where users adapted the format into memes, personalised edits, and parodies (Yakalı, 2024). Therefore, they provided particularly relevant stimuli for examining how consumers interpreted and engaged with the feminist themes embedded within the marketing materials. Participants were also encouraged to consider digital and participatory elements of the campaign, including social media trends, memes, and user-generated content, as part of the overall marketing experience.

The first poster, "This Barbie is a...", centred on Barbie's professional achievements and aspirational identity, highlighted the femvertising logic of presenting women as capable and autonomous. The different Barbies are depicted in traditionally male-dominated positions, such as presidents, lawyers, and doctors. The second poster, "He's another Ken", shows the male characters as non-descript, different versions of Ken. This poster reinforced the campaign's deliberate subordination of male characters to secondary roles (Becker-Herby, 2016), inverting traditional gender hierarchies in advertising through humour. These two

posters are illustrative of how the campaign packaged feminist critique into a commercially acceptable and easy-to-share format, reflecting femvertising and postfeminism.



Pictures 1 and 2, Promotional Material for Barbie (2023) (Sharf, 2023).

In addition, an official Barbie selfie generator was released, where you could add your own picture to the posters (Hudgins, 2023). By lowering the barrier to entry, social media users made and shared their own promotional material for the movie. It also became a trend to incorporate other memes and celebrities into the Barbie and Ken posters, by both users and companies, to make humorous statements or praise someone's work. The poster below, featuring basketball player Angel Reese, was included as the third stimulus. It connects directly to the campaign's participatory dimension and speaks to the brand community. It also illustrates how the posters produced outputs that extended the campaign beyond its original cast, diversifying the faces associated with the Barbie brand and enabling consumers to engage in immaterial labour (Arvidsson, 2005).



Picture 3, Fan-made Poster (Hudgins, 2023).

The fourth poster showed Robbie's Barbie and Gosling's Ken with the tagline "She's everything. He's just Ken", which turned into a viral internet meme, with users ascribing the tagline to other famous real and fictional couples where the man is perceived as unworthy of his female partner (Stevenson, 2023). The poster engaged with feminist themes, using humour and irony in a way that risks downplaying gender politics while simultaneously making them commercially acceptable, which is illustrative of commodity feminism. Speaking of the characterisation of Ken before the movie's release, Gosling said that he is "an accessory, and not even one of the cool ones". This served to bolster the pre-release narrative that had formed online, that the film would subvert traditional gender roles, placing men firmly in the periphery of a women-centred world and highlighting the character's deliberate lack of agency compared to Barbie.



Picture 4, Promotional Material for Barbie (2023) (IMDb, n.d.).

It was also selected as it was the main poster for the promotion of the movie, featuring the main elements of the Barbie brand: the logo, the colour pink, and the main characters that the Barbie universe is known for.

Together, these stimuli offered a structured way to examine how feminist themes, commercial framing, and participatory cultures intersected across the campaign. It should be noted that showing participants specific posters may have primed them to focus on particular interpretations of the campaign, potentially drawing attention towards its visual and commercial dimensions at the expense of other aspects. This is a recognised limitation of stimulus-based interviewing, and responses should be understood as shaped in part by the framing that the selected material provided.

By framing marketing in this broader sense, the study acknowledges that contemporary campaigns extend beyond traditional advertising and are often experienced as immersive and culturally embedded phenomena. This approach aligned with the study's focus on brand communities and marketplace cultures, where meaning is not only transmitted by brands but also co-created through consumer interaction and participation. In line with Cova's (1997) understanding of consumption as a socially mediated activity, the Barbie campaign functioned not simply as a promotional strategy, but as a participatory cultural event in which audiences actively contributed to the circulation and development of the brand's meanings and values.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis approach, which facilitated the theoretical interpretation and analysis of qualitative data and ensured the subjectivity of the researcher. After the interviews were transcribed, the material was reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes and patterns. These themes were then interpreted in relation to the research questions. The analysis focused on understanding participants' perspectives rather than producing generalisable results.

To foster reflexivity and strengthen the analysis's transparency, consistency, and reliability, the authors carried out the coding process together. This enabled us to evaluate our assessment, reducing the possibility of missing important patterns and potential biases. Theme formation was impacted by the researcher's interpretations, as qualitative interviews stem from human conversations, leading to a complicated range of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Though transparency and reflexivity were our goals, subjective bias was still a possibility. A variety of themes in the dataset were discovered after classifying the codes. A colour-coded visual map was created to group codes under emerging themes and simplify the analytical process. Throughout this stage of analysis, the researchers continuously reviewed the research questions to make sure the themes matched the study's overarching objectives.

Braun and Clarke (2006) stress that defining and developing themes requires determining the underlying meanings connected to each theme as well as the portion of the data it covers, once themes have been discovered and developed in preparation for in-depth research. To avoid overcomplication, the authors also emphasised the need to maintain clarity while establishing themes. As a result, essential factual data for every subject had to be reassessed and arranged into coherent narratives that were accompanied by statements from the participants. Furthermore, it was critical to review them both alone and in relation to one another in order to avoid overlapping themes.

Patton's (2015) dual criterion was used for evaluating themes, internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, to refine the themes that were identified. There were two phases to the theme evaluation and refining to determine whether the coded fragments from each theme exhibited a continuous pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coded empirical data within each category were examined. After establishing internal consistency, each theme's validity within

the overall dataset was assessed. This entailed assessing whether the empirical data were accurately and meaningfully represented by the thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This study sought to establish credibility through various methods. Initially, with participants' direct consent, every interview was transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the recorded responses and facilitate a comprehensive, detailed analysis. The transcription process helped ensure that no significant insights were overlooked, simplified the analysis, and assisted in the detection of persistent patterns among participants (Kowal & O'Connell, 2014). This process was enhanced by incorporating direct quotes from respondents to support the findings and demonstrate authenticity. Transferability refers to the extent to which the results of qualitative analysis can be applied to different contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Consequently, the present study aimed to offer detailed descriptions of the research setting, the subjects involved, and the phenomena examined, ensuring that the reader has sufficient information to evaluate the relevance of the results. [Section 3.5](#) further discusses the study's limitations. Furthermore, dependability assesses whether the research procedure is coherent, thoroughly documented, and easily traceable (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Considering the context-specific characteristics of the analysis, which neither permitted nor aspired to replicability, it aimed to establish dependability by offering a clear and transparent description of the methodological approach used. Similarly, the research used a systematic and clear coding structure to organise data into the relevant themes. Lastly, confirmability links to the neutrality or objectivity of the data and interpretations by verifying that the results are based on the data and not impacted by researchers' biases or preconceptions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Even though it is acknowledged that achieving complete objectivity in qualitative business research is untenable (Bryman & Bell, 2015), this study tackled confirmability using various strategies designed to minimise biases and ensure that data interpretations stem from empirical evidence. The direct quotations from participants were included in [Chapter 4](#) to reinforce interpretations with evidence and enable the reader to evaluate the credibility of the analysis.

3.4.1 Interview Analysis

Each session was held online via Google Meet, which allowed us to recruit participants from a broader range of backgrounds to capture a more extensive perspective, and allowed flexibility for the interviewees. All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of each participant to ensure the accuracy of the data, and they were later transcribed

automatically with Klang AI (see [Appendix B – Declaration of Use of AI](#)). Transcribing the interviews served several important functions. It allowed for a detailed and systematic analysis of the data, facilitated the identification of recurring themes, and improved the understanding of data during the coding and interpretation process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure accuracy of the data, each transcription was manually reviewed.

The first stage of thematic analysis was to become familiar with the transcribed empirical data to determine initial codes. To begin the coding process, the transcripts had to be collectively reviewed, as preliminary observations might impact the formation of ideas and the identification of the patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To code the data into themes, the software MAXQDA was used, where all interview data was uploaded and colour-coded into different themes.

3.5 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Throughout the research process, various ethical issues may emerge, making it important to recognise and address them to uphold the study's integrity. As the study involved human participants, ethical considerations were addressed in line with institutional requirements. For instance, the matter of anonymity had to be addressed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, identifying information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used throughout the analysis and reporting process. Audio recordings and transcripts were also accessible only to the researchers. Additionally, the respondents were briefed on the research's purpose and the goals related to the interviews, including how their empirical information would be utilised. Before agreeing to participate in the interview, every participant was given the chance to address questions, ensuring that they fully understood the research and their role within it. Transparency was maintained throughout the entire study process to prevent any possible deception. Additionally, the participants were informed that the anonymised empirical data would be applied in academic presentations and publications.

The attentive management of data fostered trust between participants and researchers and encouraged openness throughout the interview process. This method not only adheres to ethical standards but also promotes a more transparent and genuine involvement, allowing interviewees to engage more thoroughly and offer comprehensive answers without fear of

personal exposure (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Reflexivity was likewise a fundamental ethical issue since, as interviewers, our perceived authority might impact how participants respond. Therefore, our goal was to establish a connection and uphold a neutral, unbiased position during the interviews.

Additionally, several limitations of this study should be acknowledged in relation to its scope, methodology, and conceptual boundaries. To begin with, one key limitation concerns the geographical and demographic specificity of the sample. The study focused exclusively on Generation Z individuals located in Europe. Additionally, all participants had completed an education at a bachelor's level or higher. This meant that the sample had limited educational diversity, and the findings may therefore primarily reflect the perspectives of relatively highly educated individuals. The findings also primarily reflect the interpretations of consumers already engaged with feminist discourse. Thus, the findings reflect a relatively homogeneous group with potentially similar cultural values, levels of media literacy, and exposure to feminist discourse. This limits the generalisability of the results, as understandings of feminism and its marketing relationship vary significantly across different cultural, political, educational, and socio-economic contexts. In regions with differing levels of democratic development, educational access, or gender equality, both the reception and interpretation of feminist messaging may differ substantially.

Another limitation relates to the temporal distance between the phenomenon of the study and the data collection. Participants were asked to reflect on experiences and perceptions related to a campaign that occurred and a movie that was released approximately three years prior to the study. This introduces the possibility of recall bias, as participants may not accurately remember their initial reactions or may reinterpret them in light of more recent experiences and cultural shifts. Consequently, responses may reflect retrospective sense-making rather than immediate engagement with the campaign.

Additionally, the use of selected promotional materials as stimuli may have shaped participants' responses by directing attention towards specific representations of the campaign. While this was necessary to ensure consistency across interviews, it may have constrained the range of associations participants would otherwise have drawn from their own experiences.

4. Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the empirical data collected and provides a structured thematic analysis of the material. It outlines the main observations and themes that emerged from the data in relation to the research questions, supported by theoretical interpretation and discussion. Based on the empirical data, three major themes, six subthemes, and one additional subsection were identified.

The findings show that participants interpreted *Barbie* (2023) through a tension between feminist meaning and commercial logic. They valued the movie's marketing, visibility, humour, nostalgia, and collective rituals contributing to feminist visibility, while also questioning the limits of its commercial feminism. Rather than treating commodification as automatically invalidating, participants assessed whether the film's market-based feminism still enabled recognition, discussion, and belonging. Therefore, the findings show how feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers negotiate commodified feminism through both critique and participation.

4.1 Entering Barbieland: The Barbie Experience

This section explores how participants experienced *Barbie* (2023) not only as a film, but as a wider cultural and social phenomenon. Participants reflected on a broader set of practices surrounding it, including social media trends, dressing in pink, discussing the film with friends, engaging with its soundtrack, and recognising its highly visible marketing campaign. These experiences show how *Barbie* became embedded in everyday consumer culture and functioned as a shared point of reference among interviewees.

4.1.1 Social Media Craze

Social media was central to how participants experienced *Barbie*. For many respondents, *Barbie* was not encountered first as a film, but as a cultural atmosphere. Before entering the cinema, participants shared that they had already met *Barbie* through TikTok sounds, Instagram posts, Ken memes, fan-made posters, outfit pictures, cinema selfies, discussions, and soundtrack trends, which influenced them to go and see the movie. The marketing campaign did not remain confined to official promotional material, but became part of

everyday digital culture. Social media functioned as a form of social invitation, and the campaign's feminist meaning was shaped through circulation and repetition. The decision to watch Barbie was shaped not only by the official campaign but also by the sense that others were already participating in something culturally relevant. Barbie became a participatory media event, and the campaign's symbols were recognisable and easily reproducible. Isla captured this clearly when she explained the phenomenon:

"I saw many posters. But what I mostly saw was actually fans and the audience. It became bigger and bigger because it quickly became a thing of making reels with it and posters and selfies, and then everyone, when they go to the cinema, takes the pictures in their pink outfits."

The audience did not simply respond to marketing, they became part of it. This reflects Ogilvy's (2026) argument that brands seeking deeper consumer commitment must loosen traditional control and allow audiences to participate in shaping brand meaning. Barbie's marketing became powerful precisely because it was easy to personalise and circulate. This also connects directly to Arvidsson's (2005) concept of immaterial labour, as feminist belonging was made available through market-based symbols such as pink clothing, cinema rituals, branded posters, and social media participation. Posts, memes, reels, outfit pictures, and discussions maintained the visibility of the film and helped transform it into a social event. Derek's observation that *"even if you have not seen the movie, you have for sure heard about it"* illustrates how this unpaid labour worked. The Barbie craze became difficult to avoid precisely because consumers kept reproducing it across digital platforms. The brand captured the autonomous creativity of consumers and turned their social activity into cultural and economic value. This also reflects the logic of marketplace cultures, where consumption is a socially mediated practice through which people create shared meanings (Cova et al., 2023). To understand the memes, recognise the pink outfits, or laugh at trends was to be part of the same cultural moment.

For several participants, the online conversations around Barbenheimer also created a symbolic division between the two films, noting that the different cultural framing of the two films encouraged some viewers to position their preference as a form of identity or social alignment. This division also revealed gendered assumptions about cultural value, as some

respondents felt that Barbie was positioned as less serious or less intellectually valuable. Isla recalled feeling angry over how Barbie was mocked at an award ceremony:

“It was like this one big prize nomination thing, where the moderator said, ‘Oppenheimer’s this great movie about historic things, and so great, and then Barbie is just about having cellulitis and the hanging breasts’ or something like that. And it just made me so mad that there were so many people who just did not understand Barbie at all.”

These reflections suggest that participants’ support for Barbie was shaped not only by enjoyment but also by a desire to defend a feminised cultural product against dismissal. This complicates a purely critical reading of Barbie as shallow or depoliticised. Through a postfeminist lens, participants’ digital engagement with Barbie demonstrates how empowerment was made visible through style, affect, and consumer participation rather than through collective political action (Gill, 2007). However, their responses also complicate a straightforward critique of postfeminism. Participants did not experience this visibility as politically empty, but as a socially recognisable way of aligning themselves with a feminised cultural moment. The limitation, therefore, was not that Barbie’s feminism lacked meaning, but that its meaning became accessible primarily through branded forms of participation. Feminist visibility was amplified, but only within the aesthetic and commercial conditions set by the campaign. Similarly, Repo’s (2020) concept of commodity feminism is useful for understanding how Barbie translated feminist ideals into marketable and profitable forms. However, participants’ responses demonstrate that this commodification did not automatically strip the film of meaning. Instead, Barbie’s commercial feminism created a space in which femininity, girlhood, and feminist identification could be publicly legitimised. The campaign therefore operated ambivalently: it converted feminism into brand value, but it also allowed participants to experience feminised popular culture as something socially visible, collectively defended, and culturally worthwhile. This connects to brand community and marketplace culture theory, where consumers actively create meanings, identities, and belonging through collective consumption practices (Cova et al., 2023). Barbie, therefore, illustrates a central tension: its feminism may be commodified, yet still experienced by participants as personally and collectively meaningful.

Social media transformed feminist engagement into a participatory marketing practice. Participants’ unpaid circulation of memes, outfit pictures, reactions, and discussions generated

affective and economic value for the Barbie brand, but it also enabled them to reinterpret the campaign on their own terms. This complicates an understanding of femvertising as a message produced by brands and received by consumers. In this case, Barbie's feminism was not simply communicated by Mattel, but socially produced through the circulation, adaptation, and evaluation of campaign materials by audiences themselves. The findings therefore suggest that femvertising operates not only as representational strategy, but as a participatory process in which consumers help determine what feminist branding comes to mean. While social media shaped how participants first encountered and participated in the Barbie phenomenon, the film's ability to generate this level of cultural engagement was not accidental. Behind the campaign's participatory energy stood a set of deliberate creative choices, most notably the people who made and starred in the movie, whose public identities shaped how audiences read the feminist messages before they had even entered the cinema.

4.1.2 Director and Actors

Greta Gerwig's role as director became an important part of how expectations were formed before the film was even seen. For several participants, her involvement signalled that the movie would not simply be another commercial extension of the Barbie brand, but a more reflective and feminist orientation. Gerwig functioned as a marker of credibility. Grace pointed out that watching the film directed by women is a way of "*supporting women and marginalised groups*". Harry also stated that Greta Gerwig was "*a big part of it for feminists and a stamp of approval*" and a way for audiences to "*feel personally attached to the movie*".

This reflects how brand activism depends not only on the message itself, but also on whether audiences perceive the people behind the message as authentic and aligned with the values being communicated. As Vredenburg et al. (2020) and Mrabet (2024) suggest, brand activism becomes meaningful when brands position themselves in relation to social and political values in a way that resonates with consumers. In this case, participants' trust in the feminist message was partly attached to Gerwig's public image as a filmmaker associated with women-centred and emotionally complex storytelling. Her presence helped soften the contradiction between feminism and a highly commercial Mattel-owned blockbuster, because respondents found her as someone who could give the project feminist depth. This shows that perceived authenticity in feminist branding is not located only in the message itself, but in the

cultural credibility of the people through whom that message is mediated. Blair connected this credibility to Gerwig's lived experience as a woman in a male-dominated industry:

"I think as a woman, especially in Hollywood, trying to make it in the 80s and 90s. She experienced the rise of feminism in the early 2000s, and especially how it is still not fully embraced in society. So I thought she had a lot of personal experience to share."

This connects to the study's use of femvertising theory. Rather than showing only that feminist narratives are more persuasive when they appear to reflect women's lived experiences, the findings suggest that femvertising gains credibility through perceived biographical authenticity (Drake, 2017; Åkestam et al., 2017). Participants trusted the feminist message not because Mattel claimed empowerment, but because Gerwig's public identity made the message appear grounded in women's experience. Blair also situated Gerwig's role within a broader political climate, describing *"the [conservative] wave that we are experiencing across the world"*. Gerwig strengthened the film's activist credibility by linking Barbie's message to ongoing social tensions around gender equality, which connects to brand activism as a strategy that gains relevance through alignment with contemporary political values (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Mrabet, 2024).

The actors also shaped how participants experienced the film's feminist message. Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling were central to the visual identity of the movie's campaign, and their press appearances, red-carpet styling, and commitment to the promotional world of Barbie helped extend the film into a broader and participatory culture. Anneliese and Blair said that lead actors dressing up for interviews and red carpets created engagement from the audience on social media, and Harry pointed out that the actors' wide familiarity helped the film reach more people. The feminist message became easier to circulate because it was attached to familiar, commercially successful figures. This illustrates how commodity feminism depends not only on the marketability of feminist ideas, but also on the marketability of the bodies, personalities, and celebrity identities through which those ideas are delivered (Repo, 2020). Robbie and Gosling helped translate feminism into a form that felt entertaining, mainstream, and socially safe.

Yet this accessibility was also a limitation, other participants' reflected that the same celebrity appeal that expanded the film's reach also made its feminism dependent on conventional

beauty, desirability, and star power. The lead actors' societal privilege and conventional physical attractiveness made the campaign more approachable, while also creating tension with translating the film's broader messages about inclusivity and challenging narrow beauty standards. For instance, Isla said, *"It is hard to tell women, on the one hand, it does not matter what they look like and then on the other side, only showing them the most beautiful women"*. This reflects Gill's (2007) argument that postfeminist media often presents women as confident and empowered while continuing to organise that empowerment through beauty, desirability, and self-display. The cast made Barbie's feminism attractive and widely consumable, but this attractiveness was not neutral. It meant that the film's critique of narrow beauty standards was delivered through people that largely conformed to those standards. Participants therefore encountered Barbie's feminism as both challenging patriarchal expectations while still relying on the aesthetics through which those expectations are maintained.

Therefore, Gerwig and the cast functioned as authenticity cues, allowing participants to take the movie's feminist ambitions more seriously despite its corporate and commercial setting. The movie being directed by a feminist filmmaker allowed audiences to resolve, at least temporarily, the tension between Barbie as a corporate product and Barbie as a feminist statement. This resolution was constructed by participants themselves who drew on the cultural meanings attached to Gerwig's filmography and the actor's public personas to make the movie's feminist credentials feel earned. This points to a broader dynamic in which the perceived authenticity of femvertising depends less on what brands claim and more on the interpretive work that consumers perform around those claims. The credibility provided by the director and the cast helped frame Barbie as a culturally serious event worth participating in. This participation extended well beyond watching the movie itself. Audiences organised around the release in ways that transformed cinema-going into a collective and uniting ritual.

4.1.3 Uniting Through Pink

Participants frequently described the Barbie experience as something that exceeded the act of watching a film. Anticipation, dressing up, taking pictures, discussing the film afterwards, and feeling part of a wider cultural moment transformed cinema-going into a collective ritual. This ritual produced what Arvidsson (2005) describes as ethical surplus: social bonds, shared experiences, and a sense of common identity generated through consumer participation.

However, this ethical surplus was also commercially productive. The same practices that made Barbie feel communal and emotionally meaningful also intensified the film's visibility, extended the campaign's reach, and created financial value for the brand. This was particularly visible in the way Blair described going to watch the movie as *"a kind of uniting activity"*. Grace pointed out that people were excited to go and see the movie with friends and moms.

The emotional dimension of this shared experience became especially visible in Grace's description of the film's ending. She recalled:

"At the end of the movie, it was a very sad scene, and everyone was very emotionally connected to it [...] when everyone was still sitting down and just digesting what just happened while Billie Eilish's song was still playing, that also made you more connected to the other people around you because you were like, 'you are feeling what I am feeling'."

This moment shows how the Barbie experience created what Brodie et al. (2013) describe as emotional engagement within brand communities, where affective experiences such as empathy, belonging, and shared feeling strengthen connections between consumers and brands, not through ideology alone. This collective engagement became especially visible through dressing up in pink and organising themed gatherings. Through dressing in pink, sharing memes, and recognising Barbie references, participants entered a temporary brand community that was not based on long-term brand loyalty alone. This also reflects Ogilvy's (2026) argument that contemporary brand relationships increasingly move beyond conventional loyalty towards brand devotion, where consumers seek emotional resonance, cultural alignment, and opportunities for self-expression. In the case of Barbie, participants' engagement was not primarily expressed through repeated purchasing, but through participation in a shared cultural moment. It allowed consumers to temporarily integrate the brand into their identities and social relationships. Barbie therefore functioned as a cultural resource through which participants could perform belonging and femininity (Ogilvy, 2026) and signal belonging, humour, and feminist awareness (Muñiz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001). Blair also highlighted dressing up and community as essential parts of embracing womanhood:

“I think it just brought back simple womanhood and how women act and how they should be appreciated in all they do. Brought back the love for dressing up, doing activities together, and enjoying your nature.”

Participants did not necessarily experience the Barbie phenomenon as radical political activism. Instead, they often described it as a softer, everyday form of feminist recognition: being able to enjoy femininity, gather with others, and feel that such practices were worthy of celebration. This connects to Repo’s (2020) argument that commodity feminism offers consumers emotionally rewarding experiences of belonging and identity formation because feminist belonging is made available through market-based symbols, such as pink clothing, cinema rituals, and branded participation.

Harry’s reflection adds another layer to this dynamic by showing how male participation could also challenge gender norms and signal solidarity:

“I think that maybe many girls do not expect men to dress up, and maybe just like pink, those norms are still, I think, pretty active. So, I think it was positive for them to see a group of guys all dressing up and actually taking part in this and ... just expressing themselves.”

This suggests that the Barbie ritual not only affirms feminine belonging among women, but also opens space for men to participate in and support a feminised cultural event. Their participation became a visible gesture of solidarity, showing how brand communities can include practices of advocacy and social alignment (Brodie et al., 2013; Irawan & Cheng, 2025). However, participants were not uncritical of the relationship between empowerment and consumption, as expressed by Isla:

“I do not think that female empowerment is about looking as beautiful as possible. And I felt so understood by the movie, but I did not feel empowered by the movie in general.”

As Repo (2020) argues, feminist values can become aestheticised and individualised, expressed through market-mediated performances rather than structural critique. This reflects postfeminism because participants interpreted pink as an individual choice and a source of empowerment rather than as a fixed symbol of restrictive femininity. However, this also revealed the limits of postfeminist empowerment on how femininity is revealed. Barbie

allowed interviewees to feel seen and connected, but it also risked turning feminist belonging into something performed through appearance, pink items, and consumption.

The use of the colour pink was a central talking point in the interviews. Participants recognised it as both a recognisable Barbie brand code and a shared symbol through which audiences could signal participation. They also connected it to broader cultural meanings surrounding femininity. Harry described Barbie's use of pink, a "*feminine*" and "*girly*" colour, as intentional, "*the idea might be to educate people that pink is not a weak colour*", while Francie said that its use of pink reminded her of her own experience "*it is a universal experience, when girls started hating pink because it is associated with you being a girl and the roles you have to follow*", but that now, younger girls can "*re-evaluate*" it. Blair further elaborated on the colour's connection to womanhood:

"I think pink, in general, and what the Barbie movie also achieved, showing that pink was actually one of the strongest colours. It was encouraging to be strong, to have compassion, to forgive, and also to have that same compassion to achieve and push forward."

Their reflections capture the postfeminist ambiguity of the campaign. As Gill (2007) argues, postfeminist culture often reworks traditional feminine codes through self-expression, style, and choice. Therefore, pink is not rejected, but re-signified. It remains connected to femininity, yet is presented as something that can be chosen, enjoyed, and reclaimed. It also connects to femvertising theory, particularly Drake's (2017) argument that empowerment-based advertising attempts to challenge gender stereotypes by presenting women as autonomous, capable, and emotionally resonant.

The campaign shows how ethical surplus and financial surplus can become mutually reinforcing. Participants experienced pink clothing, group cinema visits, and social media sharing as expressions of belonging, but these practices simultaneously operated as unpaid promotional labour (Arvidsson, 2005). This makes the Barbie phenomenon a clear example of how brand communities can convert affective participation into commercial value. Participants felt seen and connected, yet the primary force for that connection was appearance, styling, and branded participation rather than collective critique. It illustrates how commodity feminism operates in practice by creating affective experiences of feminist identity that are real in their emotional effects while remaining oriented towards consumption.

The question the findings raise is not whether the rituals were authentic, but what kind of feminist practice they made available.

4.1.4 Barbie the Brand

Participants did not simply interpret Barbie as a film character, but as a brand carrying a long and complicated cultural history. Their reflections often returned to Mattel's role in managing this history. The film appeared to acknowledge Barbie's feminist contradictions while simultaneously transforming those contradictions into a renewed brand asset. This reflects a central tension in femvertising, where brands use pro-female narratives to challenge stereotypes and produce emotional resonance, while still operating within commercial objectives (Drake, 2017; Åkestam et al., 2017).

Participants often interpreted the film as a self-aware critique of the brand itself. Rather than ignoring Barbie's contested legacy, the movie seemed to place it at the centre of the narrative. Isla captured this paradox by describing it as:

"It was a little bit ironic that the one doll that was always so criticised for contributing to misogyny and believes [of] sexist understandings of the world was then the main figure [of a feminist film]."

Her reflection points to the uneasy transformation of Barbie from feminist problem to feminist symbol. This does not erase the brand's history, but instead makes that history part of the film's appeal. In this sense, Barbie becomes an example of postfeminist media culture, where earlier feminist critiques are not rejected, but absorbed, repackaged, and made available through popular culture and consumption (Gill, 2007).

Anneliese similarly read the film's self-critique and humour as intentional rather than accidental, arguing that *"their self-awareness brings out the problems they have had as a company, and they do not want to just glaze over that"*. However, this confrontation also functions strategically. As Vredenburg et al. (2020) argue, brand activism is often constructed through alignment with consumer values. Postfeminist theory also states that feminist ideas are often communicated through irony, parody, and self-awareness rather than direct political critique (Gill, 2007). By openly acknowledging Barbie's flaws, Mattel could position itself as reflective, responsive, and culturally aware in a friendly, humorous way. Hsu (2018) argues

that this brings into controversy the political authenticity of such efforts, as the deliberate avoidance of explicitly feminist language may reflect a commercial calculator rather than a sincere dedication to feminist principles. Therefore, the critique of the brand becomes part of the brand's own appeal because the movie appeared to acknowledge and repackage them as self-aware feminist critique, allowing Mattel to transform past criticism into renewed cultural and commercial relevance.

For the participants, the film's feminist potential came from its attempt to change what Barbie means for feminism. Her interpretation connects closely to Gaviria's (2024) argument that Barbie has been strategically repositioned as a symbol of diversity, empowerment, and feminist possibility. The brand's past is not removed, rather, it is reworked into a story of progress. However, respondents also questioned whether this self-awareness was enough, and if Mattel's motives were simply to try to appeal to a larger audience. Eric's response highlights the limits of symbolic repositioning when the product itself continues to carry problematic meanings:

"That is where it becomes a bit controversial, if we talk about the current state of the product with feminism. I do think perpetuating high standards of beauty within the product of Barbie is a mistake. I would not say it is not feminist, but it kind of contradicts feminism."

This reflection points to the gap that Champlin et al. (2019) argue remains underexplored of how consumers evaluate the distance between a brand's feminist claims and its actual corporate practice. For Eric, Mattel's self-awareness within the film did not resolve the contradiction embedded in the product itself, suggesting that symbolic repositioning has its limits when the underlying commercial logic remains unchanged.

Others also expressed doubt in the humours and self-reflective strategy, as Chelsea expressed:

"I feel like they really tried to do the humour part, which kind of worked, but again, it demolished the main meaning of it being way worse than it was actually shown, and how harmful sexism is for women."

This reflects the critique of commodity feminism, where feminist ideals such as empowerment and representation are attached to products without necessarily challenging the structures that produced the problem in the first place (Repo, 2020). As Repo further argues,

feminism can become a form of “commodity activism,” where political engagement is reimagined through consumer culture. What participants’ engagement with the Barbie brand revealed is that feminist-identifying consumers do not evaluate femvertising solely based on its content. They evaluate it in relation to the brand’s history, its corporate behaviour, and the distance between what it claims and what it sells. Mattel’s self-awareness was appreciated but also scrutinised, and for several participants, this was never fully resolved. This suggests that the effectiveness of feminist brand repositioning is conditional as it can generate renewed cultural relevance and emotional engagement, but among critically literate consumers, it does not erase the contradictions embedded in the product itself.

4.2 Entering The Real World: Feminism for Whom?

While Section 4.1 showed how participants experienced Barbie as a collective and emotionally engaging cultural phenomenon, Section 4.2 turns to the boundaries of that engagement. Interviewees did not simply ask whether Barbie was feminist, but rather what kind of feminism it offered, who could recognise themselves within it, and what forms of feminist politics were left outside its commercial framing. This section, therefore, develops the central ambivalence of the study: Barbie made feminism visible, enjoyable, and socially shareable, but it also narrowed feminism into forms that were most compatible with mainstream consumer culture.

4.2.1 Is Barbie’s Feminism for Women Only?

Another important tension in the interviews concerned whether Barbie’s feminist message was inclusive of men, or whether it risked presenting feminism as a struggle between women and men. While several participants valued the film’s critique of patriarchy, others reflected on how its framing could make some male viewers feel excluded, criticised, or misunderstood. This finding is significant because it shows that participants not only evaluated the film’s feminist message in terms of whether it empowered women, but also in terms of how it represented gender relations more broadly.

Some respondents suggested that the film’s representation of men was too simplified. Eric, for instance, argued that while the movie addressed the pressures placed on women, it offered a more superficial portrayal of male experience:

“Men suffer the same issues, same psychological issues that women can have, but they are a bit unseen. We also compare ourselves. It also gave a very superficial lens to manhood.”

Eric developed this criticism further by arguing that:

“It fails to really project the failures of feminist movements and the causes of inequality, and it just touches upon the stereotypes, all the stereotypes. Like, to the point that I sometimes felt that they, especially in terms of gender, radicalised a lot of men.”

This does not necessarily mean that the film itself intended to exclude men. Rather, his interpretation points to a concern that when feminist messages are framed through satire, reversal, and exaggerated gender stereotypes, they may be read by some viewers as anti-men rather than anti-patriarchy. This distinction was important to several participants. Kevin, for example, also felt that the movie promoted the idea of feminism as a conflict between men and women:

“To some, feminism kind of feels like a battle between the genders, but to me, it is a fight against the battle, you want unity.”

This reflects Åkestam et al.’s (2017) understanding of femvertising as a form of advertising that weakens traditional gender representations to provoke reflection on inequality. However, the interviews demonstrate that these reversals are not interpreted evenly by audiences because their reception depends heavily on the viewer’s prior relationship to feminism. While some interviewees recognised the critique of patriarchal structures, others perceived the exaggerated portrayal of masculinity as oversimplified or hostile. This supports Gill’s (2007) argument that postfeminist media often rely on uncomplicated and highly visible gender performances, where empowerment narratives can simultaneously challenge and reproduce stereotypes.

Several participants reflected on the possibility that Barbie might repel male viewers, especially those who do not already identify with feminist values. Harry described this as one of the film’s central limitations:

“It is about repelling men. I would say the biggest problem is for right-wings or conservatives and stuff like that. It is hard. It is an impossible question because I think they have made up

their mind about how the world is shaped. So, it is a generational question and a generational war. But it is repelling anti-feminists.”

This quote shows that respondents recognised the limits of mainstream feminist storytelling as a persuasive tool. For viewers who already reject feminism, the film may not function as an entry point into feminist thinking. This shows the tension within femvertising identified by McRobbie (2004) and Gill (2007), where feminist ideas become highly visible within media, but are translated into commercially digestible forms that can be interpreted differently depending on the audience’s pre-existing beliefs and identities. Feminist advertising often prioritises emotionally resonant and accessible narratives over deeper structural critique (Windels et al., 2020), and in doing so, it may reinforce rather than bridge existing ideological divisions.

A related issue concerned the word “feminism” itself. Several participants suggested that the term can create resistance, even among people who may support gender equality in principle. Eric explained this tension clearly:

“There is a group of people who love the word feminism, and there are people who hate the word feminism. To the fact that even if they agree with the concept, there is something that revolts it. They disagree just by hearing the word feminism because if you were to elaborate on the word equality opportunity, I think most people would agree. And I see a lot of guys who fall and tumble in that aspect that the word feminism is just, they just despise it because it goes against their identity.”

This reflection highlights that resistance to Barbie’s feminism may not only be about the content of the message, but also about the identity positions attached to feminism as a label. This connects to Irawan and Cheng’s (2025) discussion of value alignment within brand communities, as consumers are more likely to engage positively with branded messages when they feel the alignment with their existing identity and worldviews. As Eric stated, for some viewers, however, the label of feminism appeared to create symbolic distance from the campaign and the product, even when they supported ideas of equality in principle.

Blair made a similar point, noting that feminism is often misunderstood as being exclusively about women rather than equality:

“If you talk about feminism, you are very much hated and criticised from a men's perspective, because in many male individuals' eyes, feminism is just the right for women's rights only, whereas it is really just about equality.”

Together, Eric and Blair's reflections show that the accessibility of feminist messaging is shaped not only by how feminism is presented but also by how audiences already understand the term. This is particularly relevant in relation to femvertising, where brands adopt feminist narratives to connect with audiences through values such as empowerment, equality, and solidarity (Knoll et al., 2011; Dowsett, 2014; Drake, 2017). While such messages can feel affirming to feminist-identifying consumers, they may also be read differently by those who see feminism as exclusionary or politicised. Thus, the same message that creates recognition for one audience may create defensiveness in another.

However, participants did not agree that Barbie simply excluded men. Several respondents argued that the film's representation of Ken was important precisely because it showed how gender roles can be restrictive for everyone. Rather than interpreting Ken's storyline as anti-male, these participants saw it as a reversal that made patriarchal structures visible. Through the “Just Ken” marketing, Barbie temporarily placed men in a position of dependency and marginality, allowing viewers to recognise the absurdity of gendered hierarchies. Isla, for example, appreciated that the film incorporated men into its gender critique:

“I liked what it did with gender, that it also incorporated men a lot. I think many men, probably also women, just understood Ken's role as in that he is nothing without Barbie, and men are shit. But essentially, as impossible it is to be a woman, as impossible it is sometimes to be a man.”

Her quote shows a more nuanced interpretation of the film's gender politics, which closely reflects Gill's (2007) notion of postfeminist media culture, where gender is presented as something continually negotiated through identity, emotion, and self-understanding. Rather than reading Ken's role as a statement that men are inferior, Isla understood it as a commentary on how gender expectations constrain both femininity and masculinity, showing that femvertising can resonate beyond its primary target audience when it connects to lived experiences of gender pressure more broadly (Drake, 2017).

The movie's portrayal of masculinity enabled some respondents to reflect critically on male insecurities, dependency, and social pressure rather than viewing the narrative as simply anti-men. Male interviewees especially reflected on Ken's role and how Ryan Gosling's performance, his popularity with male audiences, and his embrace of the role made the critique of masculinity entertaining rather than purely confrontational, as explained by Kevin:

"It was about feminism, so of course, there are going to be famous women in the movie, but to see a famous male actor [Ryan Gosling] and the way he was really embracing the role, in the interviews, and during the song at the Oscars. I think it was also a really big part of it. Probably because he is really big, especially with male audiences."

His embrace of Ken made the critique of patriarchy feel less exclusionary and more culturally shareable, which aligns with femvertising's reliance on emotional appeal, humour, and identification to make feminist themes more accessible to broad audiences (Drake, 2017). Additionally, Leonard elaborated further that the director tried to represent many ethnic groups and races as well. Other participants also interpreted the reversal of gender roles as a useful critical strategy. Derek argued that the film was not mocking men, but using reversal to reveal inequality:

"I would say it was put down in a good way, to show how bad it is nowadays and to show the real picture of it. I would not say it was mocking the male gender, anything like that. It was just to show how it is, really."

In contrast, Eric stated that the movie showed *"a very superficial lens to manhood"* he even found it upsetting that the movie looked down on how men also suffer from the patriarchy as women do, but it did not portray it in this manner.

This reflects Åkestam et al. 's (2017) argument that femvertising frequently uses the reversal or disruption of traditional gender norms to encourage audiences to critically reflect on inequality. By exaggerating male dominance and dependency through satire, the movie created what participants interpreted as a visible illustration of patriarchal imbalance rather than a direct attack on men. This also supports Cova et al.'s (2023) understanding of marketplace cultures, where consumers actively negotiate and reinterpret brand meanings through discussions and shared engagement.

The gendered reception of Barbie's feminist message illustrates a fundamental tension within femvertising of how strategies are designed to make inequality visible through reversal and exaggeration, which are necessarily interpreted through pre-existing identity positions. This reflects the broader contradiction of commodity feminism, where feminism must be simplified into recognisable messages to become mainstream and marketable, yet that same simplification can weaken its structural critique and make it easier to dismiss (Repo, 2020).

Beyond the question of male inclusion, participants also reflected on a related but distinct form of exclusion within the film's feminist framing. Even among women who felt represented by Barbie, some later questioned whether that sense of recognition was itself a product of privilege, raising the issue of whose feminism the movie was actually portraying. For male feminist-identifying interviewees, Ken's marginalisation was read as a critique or an attack. This reflects the broader challenge identified in the literature that commercially embedded feminist messages must simultaneously appeal to those who already hold feminist values and those who do not. Barbie's feminism was most legible to those who were already disposed to receive it.

4.2.1.1 Is it for White or Western Women Only?

A further limitation raised by participants was whether Barbie's feminism mainly spoke to white, Western, and relatively privileged women. While the film made feminist issues visible and emotionally relatable, some respondents questioned how far this representation could travel beyond its own cultural context.

Grace made this cultural limitation explicit, noting that the film's feminism is rooted in a specific Western context:

“Obviously, this all is connected to, probably, Western culture feminism. I cannot really speak for feminism in very rural African countries, maybe because I have absolutely no knowledge on that. Obviously, the movie was made by American or Canadian makers, and their culture has a very specific way, and it is also females in that culture who share the same views. So, maybe you can not really apply everything that you saw in that movie to very different cultures.”

Her reflection shows that participants did not view the film's feminism as universal. Instead, they recognised that its message was shaped by the cultural assumptions of Western popular media. This connects to the postfeminist lens because empowerment is framed through individual choice, identity, and self-expression within consumer culture, which naturalises Western middle-class experience as the norm against which feminist progress is measured (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004).

Isla's reflection further highlights how recognition depends on social position:

"In the beginning, when I watched it, I loved it, and I felt so represented. But when I thought more about it over the years, I was like, I felt represented because I am a white young woman in a Western country. It is just this teeny tiny aspect of feminism. There is so much more to feminist issues that so many women outside of the rest have to go through. And I do not think that these women feel represented in any way by the movie. And I also think it is such an individualistic movie."

This quote captures the central tension of the subsection. Isla's retrospective recognition that her sense of representation was itself a product of privilege is one of the most analytically significant moments in the data. It reveals that postfeminist empowerment does not merely exclude certain women, it does so in a way that initially feels universal. Her description of the movie as *"individualistic"* connects to postfeminist consumer culture, where empowerment is presented as personal awareness or self-realisation rather than collective structural change (Gill, 2007), and commodity feminism's tendency to narrow feminism to the forms most easily consumed within Western popular cultures (Gill & Gill, 2007).

The emotional accessibility of Barbie's feminism, familiar aesthetics, Western cultural references, and individualised framing was precisely what made its exclusions invisible at first encounter. This suggests that commodity feminism's reach is not simply limited by who it addresses, but by the cultural assumptions it naturalises in the process. Barbie's feminism tended to speak most clearly to those who already occupied positions of relative social and economic privilege, and this pattern pointed participants towards a further question, whether the movie's feminism was not only Western and individualised, but also fundamentally tied to the ability and willingness to consume it.

4.2.2 Is it for Capitalist Feminists Only?

A further tension in the interviews concerned whether Barbie's feminist message could be meaningful within such an explicitly commercial context. Interviewees recognised that the film brought feminist themes into the mainstream, but they also questioned whether it was too closely tied to capitalism and consumption.

Several participants were sceptical of the film's ability to create bigger social change. Leonard, for instance, argued that the movie may have offered viewers a feeling of empowerment without challenging the structures that produce inequality in society:

"It is just refeeding the structures of power that have already been put in. I have got a sad feeling that the movie might have given this feeling of empowerment, but it did not really make much of a change in society or in the culture."

This reflects a central critique of commodity feminism, where feminist ideals are transformed into marketable narratives of empowerment rather than demands for structural change, such that audiences feel connected to feminist ideas without that feeling necessarily translating into social transformation (Repo, 2020). Isla expressed a similar concern, arguing that the film presented feminism as more unified and easily achievable through individual action than it is in reality:

"Feminism can be so ugly, and it can suck so much. And the feminism [in Barbie] is so beautiful, and all women stand united, and eventually they achieve what they want to achieve. But that is just not the reality. Feminism can be so painful and so sad. And women are, unfortunately, not united, and we live in completely different realities that we cannot understand. It just does not show the ugly reality, and it also gives a false feeling that with our individual action, we can achieve so much, and I wish we could, but we just cannot."

Isla's critique presents feminism as unified, beautiful, and achievable through personal action. By smoothing feminism's contradictions, the film reproduced what Gill (2007) identifies as a postfeminism sensibility characterised by an emphasis on individual choice and the negotiation of identity rather than structural critique, and what Repo (2020) describes as a depoliticising trend, replacing systemic critique with aestheticised and market-mediated performances of solidarity. Many marketing campaigns concentrate on enhancing women's

internal qualities rather than addressing unjust institutions, situating them as the means of achieving equality (Knoll et al., 2011; Windels et al., 2020).

Participants also questioned the authenticity of using feminism as a marketing strategy. Kevin reflected that brands may adopt feminist messages because they provide access to specific consumer groups:

“Often it feels like [companies] really just want to access the market on the left wing, so a lot of times it feels ingenuine. Companies really just do it because if they do, then people will buy their things because they think ‘these companies are also feminist’.”

This resonates with Hsu’s (2018) argument that brands promoting feminist values tend to favour language of internal empowerment over explicit feminist identification, softening the message for mass audiences in ways that raise questions about political sincerity. The deliberate avoidance of the feminist label, Hsu suggests, may itself signal a commercial strategy rather than a genuine ideological commitment.

This tension was identified instinctively by several participants in their reflections on the Barbie campaign. Chelsea was particularly critical of how the film and marketing simplified feminism into a sellable aesthetic:

“It kind of made fun of feminism in a way of making products out of it, making something that sells and really simplifying it. Simplifying it by giving it one colour pink [...] It is not a girl power logo, it is way more, and it is way more serious, and the movie and the marketing felt like money making more than raising awareness about the problem.”

This reflects how commodity feminism strips complex political ideas down into semiotic markers of confidence and empowerment inscribed onto consumer goods (Sharifzadehsaraei, 2023; Sterbenk et al., 2022). Leonard described the film as *“more of a marketing strategy”* than a serious feminist statement. Harry criticised the *“corporate soullessness”* of a campaign built around *“selling everything”*, while Jenny similarly reflected that although the pink, collective cinema experience was enjoyable, *“eventually it was also just a way of making money”*. These responses demonstrate what Champlin et al. (2019) identify as a key gap in femvertising literature: while existing research has examined how feminist messaging functions as a representational and persuasive strategy, less attention has been paid to how

deeply companies actually commit to the causes they promote, and how consumers themselves evaluate the gap between brand messaging and corporate practice. The participants' scepticism suggests that feminist-identifying consumers are particularly attuned to this gap, and that perceived inauthenticity can co-exist with emotional engagement rather than simply cancelling it out.

At the same time, participants did not view this commercialisation as entirely negative. Several respondents argued that even if Barbie commodified feminism, it still helped bring attention to feminist issues. Anneliese, for example, suggested that simplification may be acceptable if it helps reach a mass audience:

"Maybe it did not show all parts of it or made it into a light thing, but if that is what gets the message across to the masses, I do not see anything wrong with it. I am not going to take this word-for-word. It is kind of a conversation starter."

Harry expressed a similar opinion:

"I think advertising is a form of normalisation. Normalising women's empowerment is a basis. But then again, commercialising and normalising could also be negative in the sense that it waters it down."

Francie also highlighted that:

"I really want to believe that at some point in time, we will not even have the distinction between this marketing is feminist, and this marketing is not feminist."

These reflections suggest that respondents recognised both the possibilities and limits of feminist marketing. On the one hand, advertising and popular culture can normalise feminist ideas and make them more accessible. On the other hand, they can also dilute feminism by turning it into a simplified message that fits commercial formats. This reflects the scepticism towards femvertising: it may challenge traditional gender stereotypes and create positive emotional responses, but it also adapts feminist ideals to fit commercial objectives (Dowsett, 2014; Drake, 2017).

Participants did not see marketing as irrelevant to feminism. Rather, they saw it as a powerful cultural force that can either reproduce or challenge social norms. Jenny framed the issue as a trade-off:

“It draws attention to an important subject. So I think that there is a trade-off between the benefits and taking advantage of the attention. I mean, of course, they wanted to make money, but at least it started more conversations and people felt connected to each other.”

One of the most valued outcomes of the film was its ability to spark conversations. Participants frequently described discussing the movie with friends, family, partners, and online audiences after watching it. These conversations were seen as important because the film helped articulate experiences that could otherwise be difficult to express. Isla explained this clearly:

“The movie talks about so many things that we all have experienced. And sometimes it is really tough to find the right words for the experience that we all go through. The movie managed to share these experiences without us having to say a single word, and also describe feelings that I had better than I could have ever done. And afterwards, we discussed it.”

These reflections suggest that participants valued Barbie less as a complete feminist text and more as a shared vocabulary for discussing gendered experience. The film’s feminist value therefore lay not only in representation, but in its social afterlife: the conversations, recognitions, and debates it enabled after viewing.

Grace similarly emphasised the film’s ability to open up feminist discourse:

“It definitely opened up the discourse about what feminism is, what it entails, what we need to change in society to reach proper equality and to reach the goals of feminism. And even if you would say that there are some parts of it that set us back or were not necessarily feminist, it still helped you to get into the topic and to understand the core idea.”

While Isla emphasised emotional recognition, Grace emphasised the political discussion. Together, these responses show that Barbie’s feminist value operated on two levels: affective validation and discursive accessibility. Barbie may have used feminism for commercial gain, but participants’ reflections show that commercial intent did not exhaust the film’s feminist meaning. The film created discussion, recognition, and connection, suggesting that feminist

value can emerge within, rather than outside, commercial culture. Brodie et al.'s (2013) framework of consumer engagement helps explain this process: participants engaged cognitively by debating the film's feminist claims, emotionally by recognising shared gendered experiences, and behaviourally by discussing, circulating, and participating in the Barbie phenomenon. The campaign therefore became a space where feminist meaning was socially negotiated, even while that negotiation remained embedded in brand value creation (Muñiz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001; Brodie et al., 2013). Isla's reflection summarises this dilemma:

"Feminism and empowerment have to be everywhere. And if it is done in a capitalistic way, everything is done in a capitalistic way. It feels stupid not to fight back with the same weapons."

She also questioned whether feminist-oriented media are sometimes judged more harshly than other commercial films:

"I also think sometimes it is a bit unfair that I feel we hold such a feminist movie to completely different standards than other movies."

Isla's response complicates a purely critical reading of commodity feminism. Her argument echoes Scott's (2000) claim that feminism's relationship with the market should not be understood only as co-optation. The market constrains feminist politics by translating them into profitable and easily consumable forms, but it also provides one of the most visible arenas through which feminist ideas can circulate. Participants therefore treated capitalism not simply as the opposite of feminism, but as the place where popular feminist visibility currently takes place. Therefore, the findings suggest that feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers evaluate commodity feminism pragmatically rather than absolutely. They do not ask only whether feminism has been commercialised, they ask what commercialised feminism enables and what it forecloses. This evaluative stance is critical but not dismissive. It is not fully captured by commodity feminism theory when that theory frames commercial feminism primarily as co-optation, nor by brand engagement theory when it treats participation primarily as positive connection. Participants occupied a more ambivalent position: they recognised the limits of market feminism while still valuing its capacity to generate discussion, recognition, and cultural access.

While participants debated the political limits of feminism packaged within a commercial movie, their engagement with the film was rarely purely critical. For many, the decision to watch Barbie, and to take its feminist message seriously at all, was shaped less by ideological alignment than by something more personal and affective. Nostalgia played a powerful role in mediating between the movie's commercial identity and its feminist ambitions.

4.3 Perceptions Through Nostalgia

A key finding is that nostalgia shaped the conditions under which participants became willing to engage with Barbie's feminist message. Rather than functioning merely as a pleasant emotional backdrop, nostalgia acted as an interpretive filter that made the film's feminism feel familiar, accessible, and less overtly corporate. For participants with childhood memories of Barbie, the brand's emotional history softened scepticism towards its contemporary feminist repositioning. Harry pointed out that the live-action movie was exciting because many in his generation watched Barbie movies growing up:

"I think a lot of my generation, especially girls, were watching the Barbie series, I guess, so that becoming a live-action was kind of a big deal, and I was super hyped for that reason, I think."

Similarly, Francie reflected that nostalgia is playing an important role in consumption choices nowadays:

"I feel like nowadays nostalgia is, in general, influencing a lot of consumption choices."

These reflections show that nostalgia worked as an affective entry point into the film's feminist discourse. Participants were not necessarily drawn to Barbie because they expected a feminist message, but because the brand already carried emotional and cultural meaning from childhood. This deepens the relevance of brand community theory, the shared consciousness surrounding Barbie did not emerge only during the film's release, but was built through longer histories of play, media consumption, and gendered socialisation (Muñiz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001). These earlier attachments shaped the conditions of reception, making participants more willing to interpret the film's feminist message generously despite its commercial setting. Moreover, the affective response preceded the feminist content entirely, rooted instead in

childhood memory and brand familiarity, which means that nostalgia shaped not only whether respondents watched the live-action film but also how open they were to its feminist message prior to encountering it (Drake, 2017).

Importantly, the nostalgia also made the feminist message more accessible. Since participants already had an emotional relationship with Barbie, they were more open to engaging with the film's more serious themes. Anneliese described this connection between childhood memory and unexpected feminist reflection:

"A lot of people in our generation had Barbies growing up. And we all watched the old Barbie movies. So then, a new Barbie movie is coming out, and it was kind of nostalgic. When I was going to watch it, I did not really know that it was going to be an emotional and feminist movement."

The known brand created emotional openness, while the film used this familiarity to introduce themes of gender inequality, patriarchy, and empowerment. This extends Åkestam et al.'s (2017) understanding of femvertising as advertising that disrupts traditional female tropes. In Barbie, the feminist message did not become engaging only because it challenged stereotypes, but because it did so through a brand that participants had already internalised as part of their personal histories. The effectiveness of femvertising therefore depended not only on the content of the message, but on the affective relationship between audience and brand.

Respondents recognised that Barbie's status was central to the live-action movie's impact. Kevin argued that the feminist message would not have had the same reach without the Barbie name:

"I think one of the big things was the Barbie theme. And if it were just called something else and it did not have any connection to this brand that everyone knows, I think it would not have that nearly the same effect. The brand of Barbie was a really big thing."

He further explained that the combination of nostalgia and seriousness made the film more successful:

"I do not think that many people would watch it if it were just a playful Barbie movie. Because then I mean, who cares that much about Barbie unless you are someone who grew up

on it, or you are a kid. So I think that helped towards the success as well, that it was actually a movie talking a lot about a serious topic.”

However, Harry stated that using feminism in a promotional way might make the movement seem weaker than it is, *“Feminism is so much more than advertising”*. This highlights a key tension that nostalgia itself helps to sustain. By combining childhood familiarity with a more serious feminist narrative, Barbie made feminist discussion emotionally approachable while also renewing attachment to the brand. Nostalgia made commodity feminism feel personal, familiar, and less corporate, even as the film and its marketing stimulated renewed consumption of Barbie-related products. In this sense, nostalgia did not sit outside commodification, it was one of the mechanisms through which commodification became affectively acceptable. With Barbie, feminist ideals could be expressed through consumption rather than activism (Repo, 2020). Nostalgia functioned as the affective mechanism through which Barbie’s feminist repackaging came to feel authentic rather than manufactured. In this case, nostalgia did not merely accompany the film’s feminist framing, it actively mediated it. By anchoring the feminist message in childhood memory and affective brand loyalty, nostalgia softened the political edges of Barbie’s feminism and made its commercial repositioning easier to accept.

This dynamic is consistent with postfeminist sensibility, where feminist identity is expressed through lifestyle, self-expression, and participation in consumer culture rather than structural critique (Gill, 2007). As Repo (2020) notes, commodity feminism provides consumers with a sense of belonging and moral satisfaction without needing deeper political action. Nostalgia expanded this effect, transforming what might otherwise have been a more challenging feminist text into an accessible, pleasurable, emotionally resonant experience and a commercially successful event.

Therefore, nostalgia acted as an affective bridge between the commercial Barbie brand and the film’s feminist message. This points to a limitation in both femvertising and commodity feminism theory. Femvertising theory often focuses on the persuasive power of empowering representations, while commodity feminism theory focuses on how feminist ideals are repackaged for market exchange. Neither fully explains how prior emotional attachment to a brand shapes whether commercial feminism is received as cynical, meaningful, or both. The

Barbie case suggests that feminist marketing must be understood not only through message content or commercial intent, but through the affective histories consumers bring to the brand.

4.4 Negotiating Feminism Between Meaning and Market

Taken together, the findings reveal a consistent pattern that neither existing femvertising literature nor commodity feminism theory fully captures on its own. This ambivalence is not a contradiction to be resolved but a defining feature of how feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers experience feminist marketing. The Barbie phenomenon occupies a hybrid space in which feminist visibility, commercial logic, nostalgic attachment, and collective participation were deeply intertwined. Participants navigated this space neither fully endorsing the movie's feminist credentials nor dismissing them.

From a femvertising perspective, the Barbie campaign succeeded in making feminist themes visible, emotionally resonant, and culturally accessible, broadly in line with findings of Drake (2017) and Åkestam et al. (2017) of how pro-women messaging creates identification and affective engagement. However, interviewees were not passive recipients of empowering messaging, as they identified the softening of feminist language, questioned corporate sincerity, and recognised the gap between brand positioning and structural commitment, which Champlin et al. (2019) and Hsu (2018) point to as an underexplored dimension of femvertising research. The campaign resonated not because participants were persuaded by it, but because it gave cultural form to experiences they already recognised.

From a commodity feminism and postfeminist perspective, the findings both confirm and extend the existing critique. Repo's (2020) argument that commodity feminism offers belonging and moral satisfaction without requiring political involvement is confirmed across multiple themes, from dressing up in pink to the nostalgic entry point that made the feminist message feel personal rather than just political. Postfeminist sensibility, researched by Gill and Gill (2007), is equally visible in how empowerment was framed through style, self-expression, and individual recognition rather than structural critique. The findings also reveal the limits of a purely critical consumer experience. Participants debated the movie's representation of men, questioned its Western and racially narrow feminism, challenged Mattel's motives, and held the campaign to feminist standards because they cared about what

it claimed to stand for. This suggests that commodity feminism does not straightforwardly replace feminist politics with consumption, but creates a contested space where feminist meanings are actively negotiated.

Brand community theory and marketplace cultures offer the most generative framework for understanding what the Barbie phenomenon produced beyond the film itself. Barbie created conditions for collective feminist engagement through shared rituals, online participation, and conversation. However, the community that formed was not a stable brand community based on long-term loyalty alone. It was temporary, affective, and contested, held together by shared recognition of Barbie as a cultural moment rather than by uncomplicated devotion to the brand. Arvidsson's (2005) concept of immaterial labour captures how audiences generated cultural and economic value for Barbie through their own creative participation, including memes, outfits, discussions, and user-generated promotional content. Brodie et al.'s (2013) engagement framework helps explain why this labour did not feel exploitative to participants: it was experienced cognitively as interpretation, emotionally as belonging, and behaviourally as participation. The theoretical tension between these frameworks is precisely what the Barbie case reveals. The same practices can be understood as unpaid value creation for the brand and as meaningful cultural participation for consumers. Importantly, the community that formed around Barbie was temporary, absorbent, and internally divided, and not the unified brand devotion that Ogilvy (2026) describes, but a more ambivalent collective held together by shared cultural recognition rather than brand loyalty.

The findings showed that feminist marketing cannot be evaluated along a single axis of authentic versus commodified, or empowering versus depoliticising. Participants navigated the Barbie phenomenon through negotiated ambivalence: they recognised the film's feminist message as simplified, commercialised, and exclusionary, while also experiencing it as emotionally resonant, socially connective, and culturally productive. This ambivalence is not a weakness in participants' interpretations, but the central mode through which commodified feminism was made meaningful. This points to the gap that existing literature has not adequately addressed: the experience of feminist-identifying consumers who are critically literate about commodification but still find meaning, connection, and recognition within it. The findings suggest that these consumers are neither passive recipients of branded feminism nor fully resistant critics standing outside consumer culture. Instead, they participate knowingly in commodified feminist culture while evaluating its limits. This position requires

a theoretical framework that can hold critique and attachment together. Understanding this position requires bringing femvertising, postfeminist critique, commodity feminism, and brand community theory into conversation. The Barbie case shows that feminist meanings in consumer culture are not simply imposed by brands or freely created by consumers. They are negotiated through the interaction of commercial strategy, affective brand histories, participatory labour, and critical interpretation. The same practices that made Barbie's feminism accessible and emotionally meaningful also made it commercially productive and politically limited. This is how feminist meaning is made in a commodified world: not outside the market, but through an ambivalent struggle over what market-mediated feminism can do.

5. Conclusion and Further Research

This concluding chapter summarises the study and the key findings. It also outlines the study's main contributions, limitations, and suggests directions for future research to further explore femvertising, commodification of feminism, marketplace cultures, and brand communities.

5.1 Conclusions and Contributions

This thesis set out to explore how feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers experience, interpret, and negotiate the feminist messaging of Barbie (2023) within its commercial and cultural context. This study found that they experienced Barbie through negotiated ambivalence. They interpreted the film and its marketing as emotionally engaging, socially connective, and culturally significant, while simultaneously recognising its feminism as simplified, commercialised, and limited by Western, individualised, and capitalist assumptions. Rather than accepting or rejecting the campaign and experience, participants moved between enjoyment and critique, showing that commodified feminism can be emotionally meaningful and problematic at the same time, especially when it is circulated through brand communities, social media practices, and shared consumer rituals. The study shows that these mixed responses are central to understanding how feminist marketing operates. It cannot be understood only as commercial co-optation, nor only as consumer engagement, as much of the previous literature states. The Barbie phenomenon operated as what Coghlan and Piatti-Farnell (2025) describe as a hybrid space, where feminist discourse, commercial logic, nostalgic attachment, and collective participation were deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing. They evaluate whether commercial and commodified feminism can still produce recognition, conversation, community, and emotional access, while remaining critically aware of its exclusions and structural limits.

In response to the subquestion, participants made sense of empowerment, representation, and commodification as deeply interconnected rather than separate. Empowerment was valued when Barbie made feminist ideas visible, accessible, and emotionally recognisable. Representation was appreciated because the film offered women-centred narratives and moments of collective identification, but it was also criticised for being narrow, Western, and

insufficiently intersectional. Commodification was not understood as cancelling out these meanings entirely, instead, participants recognised that the same commercial mechanisms that limited Barbie's feminism also made it widely visible, shareable, and socially powerful.

The study contributes empirically by foregrounding the perspectives of feminist-identifying Generation Z consumers, a group that is central to contemporary feminist and digital consumer culture. Existing research on Barbie (2023) and feminist marketing has often focused on brand strategy, representation, or commercial success, while paying less attention to how consumers themselves negotiate the contradictions of branded feminism. By examining participants' reflections, this thesis shows that consumers are not passive recipients of feminist marketing. They actively interpret, circulate, question, and reshape feminist meanings through social media, shared rituals, nostalgia, and collective discussion.

The social media craze surrounding Barbie meant that participants encountered the film's feminist identity not only through official marketing, but also through memes, trends, fan-made posters, and digital rituals before the cinema visit. Practices such as dressing in pink, attending screenings collectively, and engaging with branded experiences created affective communities of belonging. The Barbenheimer phenomenon further shaped participants' interpretations, as the dismissal of Barbie as culturally lightweight led many to defend it as a serious, feminised cultural product. At the same time, Greta Gerwig's involvement, the cast, and Mattel's self-awareness allowed participants to view the film's feminism as both meaningful and strategically constructed. In this sense, the Barbie phenomenon demonstrates how brand communities can transform feminist marketing into a shared cultural experience. However, this community was still shaped by consumption, meaning that belonging was made visible through market-mediated rituals rather than collective political action.

Further, participants recognised that the film's feminist message was most legible to white, Western, relatively privileged, and already feminist-identifying audiences. Therefore, its satirical framing of gender hierarchy could read as exclusionary rather than critical depending on the viewer's existing relationship to feminism. This points to a structural tension within femvertising that the literature has not fully addressed, as the commercial imperative to reach mass audiences may be fundamentally incompatible with the political imperative to challenge the assumptions of those audiences. The findings further complicate a purely critical

understanding of commodity feminism. Barbie shows that commodification does not necessarily erase feminist meaning, but it does shape the conditions under which that meaning becomes accessible. Feminist ideas became visible, emotionally engaging, and widely shareable partly because they were attached to a powerful brand, a blockbuster film, and a highly aestheticised marketing campaign.

Nostalgia emerged as a theoretically significant finding that existing femvertising and commodity feminism frameworks do not sufficiently account for. Prior emotional attachment to the Barbie brand shaped the conditions under which the feminist messages were received, making it feel personally relevant before any political evaluation had taken place. Nostalgia functioned as softening the political edges of the messages while simultaneously anchoring them in brand loyalty. This suggests that the effectiveness of feminist marketing cannot be understood solely through the lens of message content or brand strategy, but must also attend to the emotional histories consumers bring to their encounters with brands.

This thesis advances femvertising research by showing that the gap between brand messaging and corporate practice is not lost on feminist-identifying consumers, who evaluate commercial feminism against feminist standards rather than simply absorbing it. It extends commodity feminism theory by demonstrating that depoliticisation and genuine meaning-making are not mutually exclusive. Furthermore, consumers can be fully aware that feminism has been commodified and still find recognition, conversation, and community within it. Finally, it contributes to brand community theory by showing that the communities formed around feminist media events are temporary, internally contested, and critically reflexive, rather than the unified, brand-loyal formations that much of the existing literature describes.

Ultimately, brands cannot rely on empowerment aesthetics alone. Gen Z feminist consumers value meaningful representation but are critical of superficial inclusivity and visible profit motives. The case of Barbie demonstrated that commodified feminism should not be understood as either empty or transformative, but as a contested space where feminist meanings are negotiated between brands, consumers, and cultural discourse, and whether the terms of that negotiation matter.

5.2 Limitations

While this research contributes to rich insights into femvertising, commodification of feminism, and brand communities, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Starting with the use of purposive and convenience sampling, while appropriate for exploratory research, means that the samples cannot be considered representative of the broader consumer population. All respondents identified as feminists and had watched the Barbie (2023) movie, which ensured relevance to the research questions but also introduced a degree of selection bias. Participants who are already sympathetic to feminist ideas are likely to engage with the film's messaging differently from those who are not, meaning that more critical or resistant receptions are underrepresented in the data.

Second, the study focused exclusively on Generation Z interviewees, which, while theoretically justified given the generation's centrality to digital consumer culture and feminist discourse, limits the transferability of findings across other age groups. Older generations who also engaged with the Barbie phenomenon, either through nostalgia, parenting, or broader cultural interest, fall outside the scope of this study. Additionally, the sample was geographically and culturally concentrated, with participants located in Europe. As several interviewees noted, Barbie's feminist message is rooted in Western cultural assumptions, and the findings of this study reflected that same limitation. The acceptance of the movie and its marketing among audiences in non-Western contexts would likely yield different, and perhaps, more critical insights. There is also room for further consideration of how factors such as race, class, sexuality, and disability may shape different audience experiences. A more extensive intersectional perspective could therefore provide additional nuance by showing how empowerment messaging may be experienced differently depending on consumers' social and cultural positions. This would further strengthen the discussion of how seemingly universal feminist messages can be interpreted in varied ways by different audiences.

Third, as acknowledged in the methodology section, showing participants specific promotional posters during the interviews may have primed them to focus on particular dimensions of the campaign, such as its visual and commercial aspects, potentially at the expense of other interpretations they might have reached independently. Stimulus-based

interviewing offers consistency and comparability, but also shapes the conversation in ways that are difficult to fully account for.

Finally, the study examined a single cultural case, the Barbie (2023) live-action movie and its marketing campaign. While this focus allowed for in-depth analysis, it also limits the extent to which findings can be generalised to femvertising or commodity feminism more broadly. As with most qualitative research, the aim was not statistical generalisation but rather transferability. The objective was to provide analytical richness and create theoretical understandings that could connect with comparable situations.

5.3 Further Research

This study opens several paths for future research that could build on and extend its findings. First, and most directly, future studies could examine the reception of femvertising campaigns beyond a Generation Z and European sample. As participants noted, Barbie's feminist message was shaped by specific cultural assumptions, and its resonance among audiences in non-Western or more politically conservative contexts remains largely unexplored. Cross-cultural comparative studies would offer a more complete picture of how commodity feminism transforms across different social and political landscapes. Future research could also focus on the perspectives of older generations, who did not grow up with widely circulated and accessible feminist discourse.

In addition, this study focused on a single, exceptionally large-scale cultural phenomenon. While the Barbie (2023) campaign offered an unusually rich case for examining the intersection of feminism, nostalgia, brand community, and commercial culture, its scale and cultural saturation make it somewhat exceptional. Further research could apply a similar framework to other media cases that carry feminist ambitions within commercial formats, such as films, television series, music albums, or theatrical productions, to examine whether the same tensions between empowerment and commodification are reproduced across different media forms and cultural contexts. Comparing how feminist messages land across various types of media would also shed light on whether the participatory and community-forming dynamics observed around Barbie are unique to blockbuster cinema or characteristic of large-scale feminist media events more broadly.

Furthermore, an important but underexplored dimension concerns the role of the company behind a feminist media product in shaping how audiences perceive its feminist credentials. Several interviewees in this study expressed scepticism about Mattel's motives, and their awareness of the company's historically problematic relationship with female representation affected how they evaluated the film's feminist message. Future research could investigate more systematically how corporate reputation, ownership structure, and the brand's track record on gender issues influence consumer trust in femvertising. This is particularly relevant in cases where the company producing a feminist cultural product has a history that sits uneasily alongside the values it is communicating, raising questions about whether corporate behaviour outside the campaign itself affects the perceived authenticity of feminist brand messaging.

Lastly, this study captured participants' reflections at a particular moment in time, some time after the film's release. This study could offer valuable insights into whether engagement with feminist brand campaigns produces any lasting shifts in attitudes, consumption behaviour, or political awareness, or whether the emotional resonance fades alongside the cultural moment that produces it.

Ultimately, this study does not conclude that feminism loses all meaning when it enters commercial spaces. Rather, it shows that commercial feminism should be understood as a contested site where feminist meaning is produced, limited, and negotiated. Barbie (2023) demonstrated that feminist marketing can generate recognition, emotional connection, and collective participation, while still reproducing the exclusions and simplifications of commodified feminism. The significance of participants' mixed feelings is therefore not that they were uncertain, but that their ambivalence reveals how contemporary feminist marketing works: through the simultaneous production of pleasure and critique, belonging and exclusion, and empowerment and consumption. Even in a commodified world, there remains space for feminist meaning, but that meaning is always shaped by the market conditions through which it becomes visible.

References

- Arvidsson, A. (2005). Brands: A Critical Perspective, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(2), pp.235–258, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540505053093>
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). Postfeminism and Popular Feminism, *Feminist Media Histories*, 4(2), pp.152–156, <https://repository.upenn.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/576b0200-eb3b-4d01-96b7-d985325499f2/content>
- Becker-Herby, E. (2016). The rise of femvertising: Authentically reaching female consumers, The Rise of Femvertising: Authentically Reaching Female Consumers, Master's thesis, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota, <https://conservancy.umn.edu/items/1e7b9cad-6eb8-4b61-9be8-10995236dc1e>
- Berlingieri, F., Casabianca, E., Nurminen, M., Smullenbroek, O. & Zuluaga, P. (2025). Gender Attitudes in the EU: Uneven Progress and Partial Polarisation, *JRC Publications Repository*, <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC141299>
- Beresford Research. (n.d.). Age Range by Generation, <https://www.beresfordresearch.com/age-range-by-generation/> [Accessed 2 April 2026]
- Bernt, J. (2009). Ad Women: How They Impact What We Need, Want, and Buy, *Journalism History*, 35(3), pp.177–178, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=99baaf07-fd0a-3ff1-8940-d997b591859b>
- Billah, I. H. & Anzari, P. P. (2025). Femvertising Strategies in Contemporary Advertising: an Analysis of the Commodification of Feminism and Its Impact on Gender Representation in Mass Media, *Cakra Communico Journal of Communication Science*, 2(1):18-25, doi:[10.17977/um087v2i1202518-25](https://doi.org/10.17977/um087v2i1202518-25)
- Brammer, R. (2026). From Doll-Hood to Humanity: The Role of Music in the Narrative and Marketing of Barbie. Barbenheimer Syndrome: The Creation of Cultural Spectacle at the Box Office, p.227,

https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Wh-oEQAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA227&dq=Brammer,+R.,+2026.+From+Doll-Hood+to+Humanity:+The+Role+of+Music+in+the+Narrative+and+Marketing+of+Barbie.+Barbenheimer+Syndrome:+The+Creation+of+Cultural+Spectacle+at+the+Box+Office.+p.227.+&ots=nAPXqvzO0U&sig=Js7SEqIBikudd-AP9qDMEPGB_8

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp.77–101, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1191/1478088706QP063OA>

Brodie, R.J., Ilic, A., Juric, B. & Hollebeek, L. (2013). Consumer Engagement in a Virtual Brand community: an Exploratory Analysis, *Journal of Business Research*, 66(1), pp.105–114, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232957437_Consumer_Engagement_in_a_Virtual_Brand_Community_An_Exploratory_Analysis

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2015). *Business Research Methods*. n.p.: Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, cop. 2015.

Burn-Murdoch, J. (2024). A New Global Gender Divide Is Emerging, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/29fd9b5c-2f35-41bf-9d4c-994db4e12998> [Accessed 1 May 2026]

Byrnes, A., Loreck, J., & May, N. (2024). “She’s everything”: feminism and the Barbie movie, *Feminist Media Studies*, 25(3), pp.760–766, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2024.2381254>

Canavarro, A. & Imamović, I. (2024). Exploring the Impact of Barbie’s 360° Marketing Communications Campaign: a Qualitative Study, *Management in Review*, 2(1), pp.29–47, doi:<https://doi.org/10.61282/mir.v2i1.10>

Chakraborty, U. & Biswal, S. K. (2024). The Barbie Movie: The emergence of a new era for branding, *Sage Business Cases*, doi:<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071942161>

Champlin, S., Sterbenk, Y., Windels, K. & Poteet, M. (2019). How brand-cause fit shapes real-world advertising messages: a qualitative exploration of ‘femvertising’,

International Journal of Advertising, 38(8), pp.1240–1263,
doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2019.1615294>

Coghlan, J. & Piatti-Farnell, L. (2025). Barbie–What Was She Made For?–The Changing Face of Barbie in Popular Culture, In *The Barbie Phenomenon*, vol. 1, pp.20–30, Routledge

Costanza, D. P., Rudolph, C. W., & Zacher, H. (2023). Are generations a useful concept?, *Acta Psychologica*, vol. 241, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2023.104059>

Cova, B. (1997). Community and consumption: Towards a definition of the “linking value” of products or services, *European Journal of Marketing*, 31(3/4), pp.297–316, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/03090569710162380>

Cova, B., Shankar, A. & Coffin, J. (2023). *Consumer Culture Theory*, Chapter 5, pp.97-110

Dowsett, J. E. (2014). Feminism for sale: commodity feminism, femininity, and subjectivity, Ph.D dissertation, York University, <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/88af9827-f1b0-41b5-8c62-5786e79800cf/content>

Drake, V. E. (2017). The impact of female empowerment in advertising (femvertising). *Journal of Research in Marketing*, 7(3), pp.593–599, https://dlwqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/62203681/femvertising20200226-7941-17ayvf0-libre.pdf?1582724981=&response-content-disposition=inline%3B+filename%3DThe_Impact_of_Female_Empowerment_in_Adve.pdf&Expires=1775837169&Signature=D~omsiYb5IJF6B3SuNmow9N034fRtdHLHgyPqwx8fhhCXh5X3yXrD8re3lfy1veFf k5O-u48NMmI7Z3BEo4VxZ8TvN5IBmGuj~8t0nP7Mq4h4LNhgoj~AeTPtV-tca8T OHnHV-zhlruaI~cypZbLzscZo9wWazga1rY~lmBUdK291fJUIWXIV2IFK3L~T-PI TuGly6oblE87arDQyyQIxXJ~8Yv4yJmUK5bMP0-C-Y8BcVxHjDfQKb7o05vy0~zH ihw1qPixiw52hL~TK9Db1v5Cc0qU3xSVpjuMpSRsstxv2ubsAx9ZYvoPRET75eo-h XVBasgZPS4pQxho7PjQ_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA

Easterby-Smith, M., Jaspersen, L.J., Thorpe, R. & Valizade, D. (2021). Management and business research, 7th ed, London: Sage

- Enworo, O.C. (2023). Application of Guba and Lincoln's Parallel Criteria to Assess Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research on Indigenous Social Protection Systems, *Qualitative Research Journal*, 23(4), pp.372–384, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/qrij-08-2022-0116>
- Fraser, K. (2023). Billie Eilish's 'What Was I Made For' Is the Most Streamed Song From 'Barbie's' Soundtrack After Movie Premiere, *WWD*, <https://wwd.com/pop-culture/celebrity-news/billie-eilish-what-was-i-made-for-barbie-soundtrack-1235757666/> [Accessed 1 May 2026]
- Ferguson, S. & Freri, M. (2023). 'Some People Have a Lot of Problems with Barbie': Margot Robbie on How Barbie Became a Feminist Film, *ABC News*, 11 Jul, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-11/margot-robbie-greta-gerwig-barbie-and-feminism-730/102565304> [Accessed 19 May 2026]
- Gambetti, R.C. & Graffigna, G. (2014). Value co-creation between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of a Company, *Marketing Theory*, 15(2), pp.155–178, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593114545004>
- Gao, Z. (2024). Analysing the Impact of Barbie Movie on the Barbie Brand, *Advances in Economics Management and Political Sciences*, 102(1), pp.1–7, doi:<https://doi.org/10.54254/2754-1169/102/2024ed0054>
- Gaviria, A. (2024). Mattel: History, products and marketing, *The Pink Pages Prelude*, p.16
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251319362_Postfeminist_media_culture_Elements_of_a_sensibility
- Gill, R. & Gill R. C. (2007). *Gender and the Media*. Polity
- Gill, S.L. (2024). Qualitative data collection: Photo elicitation, *Journal of Human Lactation*, 40(4), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344241273863>
- Goldman, R., Heath, D. & Smith, S.L. (1991). Commodity feminism, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8(3), pp.333–351, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039109366801>

- Goldsmith, J. (2023). 'Barbenheimer' Was "Delightful Surprise" To Warner Bros; "At The Outset, People Wanted To Pit The Two Films Against Each Other," Studio Marketer Tells Ad Confab, *Deadline*, 18 Oct, <https://deadline.com/2023/10/barbenheimer-barbie-warner-bros-pictures-advertising-week-1235576849/>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability, *Field Methods*, 18(1), pp.59–82, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Hearn, J. & Hein, W. (2015). Reframing Gender and Feminist Knowledge Construction in Marketing and Consumer Research: Missing Feminisms and the Case of Men and Masculinities, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(15-16), pp.1626–1651, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2015.1068835>
- Hsu, C.-K.J. (2018). Femvertising: State of the art, *Journal of Brand Strategy*, <https://hstalks.com/article/974/download/?business> [Accessed 20 May 2026]
- Hudgins, R. (2023). Barbie Posters Have Become the Internet's New Favorite Meme, *TODAY*, 5 Apr, <https://www.today.com/popculture/movies/barbie-posters-internets-new-favorite-meme-rcna78348> [Accessed 3 April 2026]
- Iglesias, O. & Ind, N. (2020). Towards a Theory of Conscientious Corporate Brand co-creation: the next Key Challenge in Brand Management, *Journal of Brand Management*, 27(6), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41262-020-00205-7>
- IMDb. (n.d.). Barbie (2023) - Plot, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1517268/plotsummary/?ref_=tt_ov_pl [Accessed 11 April 2026]
- Irawan, A. & Cheng, J.M.-S. (2025). Elevating Customer Brand Advocacy through Owned Social Media Content, *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 20(1), p.10, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer20010010>
- Klang AI. (n.d.). Security, <https://klang.ai/security/> [Accessed 11 May 2026]

- Knoll, S., Eisend, M. & Steinhagen, J. (2011). Gender Roles in Advertising, *International Journal of Advertising*, 30(5), pp.867–888, doi:<https://doi.org/10.2501/ija-30-5-867-888>
- Kowal, S. & O’Connell, D.C. (2014). Transcription as a crucial step of data analysis, *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*, 7(5), pp.64–79
- Krowinska, A. & Dineva, D. (2025). The Role and Forms of Social Media Branded Content Driving Active Customer Engagement Behaviours, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 41(9-10), pp.1–31, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2025.2544808>
- Last, A. (2025). *Barbie and Feminism: An Analysis of On-Screen Representations of Barbie*, https://is.muni.cz/th/dxa91/Barbie_and_Feminism_-_An_Analysis_of_On-Screen_Representations_of_Barbie.pdf [Accessed 2 April 2026]
- Lowe, L. (2024). The Meaning of Billie Eilish’s ‘What Was I Made For’, Explained by Eilish Herself, *TODAY*, 10 Mar <https://www.today.com/popculture/music/billie-eilish-what-was-i-made-for-song-meaning-lyrics-rcna136724> [Accessed 25 April 2026]
- Martínez-Aguirre, A., Cavazos-Arroyo, J. & Carrillo-Durán, M.V. (2025). How Feminist knowledge affects attitude towards brand femvertising: The mediating effects of authenticity and credibility, *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, vol. 11, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2025.101501>
- McArthur, L., & Resko, B. (1975). The portrayal of men and women in American television commercials, *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 97(2), pp.209–220, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00224545.1975.9923340>
- McKinsey & Company (2020). How diversity, equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) Matter, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters#/> [Accessed 3 May 2026]
- McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and Popular Culture, *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3), pp.255–264, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937>

- Modleski, T. (2014). *Feminism without women: Culture and criticism in a "postfeminist" age*, Routledge,
<https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/books/mono/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9780203699379&type=googlepdf>
- Mrabet, I. (2024). *Barbie Beyond Pink: Intersections of Brand Activism, Femvertising and Purple-Washing in Contemporary Film Marketing*, Master's thesis, Department of Philosophy and Letters, University of Valladolid,
<https://uvadoc.uva.es/handle/10324/72694>
- Muñiz Jr., A.M. & O'Guinn, T.C. (2001). Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 27(4), pp.412–432. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1086/319618>
- Murray, C. (2023). 'Barbie' Largely Praised for Feminist Themes—But Draws Anger from the Anti-Woke, *Forbes*, 21 Jul,
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2023/07/21/barbie-largely-praised-for-feminist-themes-but-draws-anger-from-the-anti-woke/> [Accessed 2 May 2026]
- Murray, D. (2013). Branding “Real” Social Change in Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, *Feminist Media Studies*, 13(1), doi:10.1080/14680777.2011.647963,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263420082_Branding_Real_Social_Change_in_Dove's_Campaign_for_Real_Beauty
- Ogilvy. (2026). Ogilvy on Live: Brand Devotion — Radically Reimagining the Consumer-Brand Relationship,
<https://www.ogilvy.com/ideas/ogilvy-live-brand-devotion-radically-reimagining-consumer-brand-relationship> [Accessed 5 April 2026]
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed-method implementation research, *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), pp.533–544, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>

- Patton, M. Q. (2002). Two Decades of Developments in Qualitative Inquiry: A Personal, Experiential Perspective, *Qualitative Social Work*, 1(3), pp.261–283, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325002001003636>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th edn, Sage Publications
- Powell, R. (2014). How ads that empower women are boosting sales and bettering the industry, <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/how-ads-empower-women-are-boosting-sales-and-bettering-industry-160539> [Accessed 3 May 2026]
- Pulver, A. (2023). Greta Gerwig named jury president of the Cannes film festival 2024, *The Guardian*, 14 Dec, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/dec/14/greta-gerwig-named-jury-president-for-the-cannes-film-festival-2024>
- Ramazanoglu, C. (1989). *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression*, Routledge, doi:<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203404287>
- Repo, J. (2020). Feminist Commodity Activism: the New Political Economy of Feminist Protest, *International Political Sociology*, 14(2), pp.215–232, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olz033>
- Rubin. (2023). Inside ‘Barbie’s’ Pink Publicity Machine: How Warner Bros. Pulled Off the Marketing Campaign of the Year, *Variety*, 23 Jul, <https://variety.com/2023/film/box-office/barbie-marketing-campaign-explained-warner-bros-1235677922/> [Accessed 31 March 2026]
- Scott, L. (2000). Market Feminism: The Case for a Paradigm Shift, *Advertising & Society Review*, 7(2), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236799908_Market_Feminism_The_Case_for_a_Paradigm_Shift
- Sharf, Z. (2023). ‘Barbie’ Posters Unveil Every Barbie and Ken Actor in Margot Robbie’s Film: Dua Lipa, Simu Liu and More, *Variety*, 4 Apr,

- <https://variety.com/gallery/barbie-movie-posters-cast/fs3whn8akaajf08/> [Accessed 2 April 2026]
- Sharifzadehsaraei, Z. (2023). Selling empowerment: Understanding femvertising in the sport market, PhD thesis, Texas A&M University
- Sterbenk, Y., Champlin, S., Windels, K., & Shelton, S. (2022). Is femvertising the new greenwashing? Examining corporate commitment to gender equality, *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 177, pp.491–505, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04755-x>
- Stevenson, G. (2023). ‘Barbie’ Tagline Goes Viral as Meme about Famous Couples, *Business Insider*, 8 Apr, <https://www.businessinsider.com/barbie-tagline-goes-viral-as-meme-about-famous-couples-2023-4> [Accessed 2 April 2026]
- Temple University. (2023). Barbie’s world: Why the Story and Marketing of ‘Barbie’ Matters, <https://www.temple.edu/news/2023/07/barbies-world-why-story-marketing-barbie-matters> [Accessed 27 April 2026]
- Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A. & Kemper, J.A. (2020). Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(4), pp.444–460, doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/27384384>
- Windels, K., Champlin, S., Shelton, S., Sterbenk, Y. & Poteet, M. (2020). Selling feminism: How Female Empowerment Campaigns Employ Postfeminist Discourses, *Journal of Advertising*, 49(1), pp.18–33, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2019.1681035>
- Wright, J. L. (2021). *Athena to Barbie: Bodies, Archetypes, and Women's Search for Self*, Fortress Press
- Wu, K.J. (2020). Meet the New Wave of More ‘Diverse’ Barbie Dolls, *Smithsonian Magazine*, 30 Jan, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/mattel-releases-another-wave-more-diverse-barbie-dolls-180974086/> [Accessed 20 April 2026]

- Yakalı, D. (2024). 'He Is Just Ken.' Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity in Barbie (2023 Movie), *Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 9, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1320774>
- Yoon, H.J. & Lee, M. (2021). A Femvertising Campaign Always #LikeAGirl: Video Responses and Audience Interactions on YouTube, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 32(5), pp.1–12. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.2012135>
- Åkestam, N., Rosengren, S., & Dahmén, M. (2017). Advertising “like a girl”: Toward a better understanding of femvertising and its effects, *Psychology & Marketing*, vol. 34, pp.795–806, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21023>

Appendix

Appendix A – Interview Guide

A. Introductory questions

- Do you agree to this conversation being recorded?
- Do you agree with what you said being used in our thesis?
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- Do you identify as a feminist?
- Have you seen the Barbie (2023) movie and seen its marketing campaign?

B. Barbie – Experience

- How did you find out about the Barbie (2023) movie?
- Why did you choose to go see the movie, and when? If after, why?
- Did you see it in the cinema or at home?
- Who did you see it with?
 - How did that affect your experience?
- Why did you see it?
 - Any marketing material that stood out to you?
 - Did the campaign influence your decision to watch the movie?
- Did Greta Gerwig being the director affect your thoughts on the Barbie movie?
(Before, an indicator of trust, feminist, female director)
- How was the day you saw it?
- Could you describe how the Barbie movie experience was for you?
 - What were the preparations?
- Have you performed any ritual before going to see the movie (ex. dressing up)?
 - What motivated those choices?
- How did these activities make you feel?
- Did you share the experience on social media or discuss it with others?

- Did you engage with others sharing their experience, or look for that content online?
- Did the experience start any conversations? What were they about?
- Did you find any particular marketing material engaging or thought-provoking?
- Why do you think it became a movement?
 - Did you personally feel engaged with the film? If so, why?
 - Nostalgia?
- How do you think the marketing of the movie mobilised this movement? (Press tour, interviews, posters, trailers, photos from production, branded products, social media, photo props in the cinema...)
- How would you characterise the movement?
 - For example, did it use social movements to engage with its audience?
- Did you experience a sense of community or shared identity during the experience?
- Was Barbenheimer a factor? Did you feel like you wanted to choose a side?
- How did others around you (friends, audience) shape your experience?
- Looking back, what stands out most about your experience?
- How did you interpret the film's message about gender and feminism?
 - How do you interpret the way women vs. men were portrayed?
 - Centring women?
- How do you feel about pink being used so much in the movie and the marketing?
 - Could it be problematic to tie feminism to pink? Is it reclaiming the colour?

C. Examples of Barbie marketing material

- Have you seen this material?
- How do you feel about it?
 - Why do you think they did this kind of marketing?
- How do you feel the material represented women versus men?
- What themes would you say the material and the whole marketing campaign had?
 - What stood out to you?
 - Did those themes resonate with you?
- Do you think this material represents female empowerment?
 - What type of feminism? Genuine? Postfeminist?
- Why do you think it resonated/engaged with you/the public?

D. Barbie – Feminism

- What were your thoughts on the marketing after viewing the movie?
- Do you think this type of campaign can be considered feminist?
- Have you seen feminism used in this way before? How do you feel about it?
- How do you think it contributes to the goals of feminism?
- Do you think people were persuaded by the movie's feminist message?
- What do you consider the biggest risk when addressing such a subject? Pros?
- What were the key factors and critical events that led to its success?
- Do you think the film or its marketing used feminism in an authentic way?
- Do you think this kind of marketing helps or harms feminism?
- Were there parts you found problematic or contradictory based on what was promoted?
- Did it change how you think about feminism in media or marketing?
- Barbie and Mattel have faced criticism for their lack of diversity and for contributing to gender stereotypes. How do you think the movie addressed this or handled diversity?
 - How do you feel about the movie being “self-aware” with some of these topics? (ex. Mattel’s all-male board in the movie, the narrator saying that Margot Robbie calling herself not perfect is ridiculous)
 - Why do you think they addressed some of the criticism?
 - Do you think it positively or negatively influenced the view of Barbie/Mattel?
- How do you think Mattel benefited from the themes of the marketing, experience, and movie?
- How do you think things have changed in a “post-Barbie” world?
 - Similar campaigns? Dressing up for events? Branded products? Movie campaigns? (ex. The Eras Tour, Wicked)

E. Feminism

- What does feminism mean to you?
- Do you usually pay attention to advertisements?
- What do you think about the portrayal of women in the advertisements you have seen recently? Do you think it has been changing over the years? If yes, how?

- As a feminist, what is your opinion about marketing using themes of female empowerment or feminism? What is the role of these types of advertisements in the feminist movement?
- Would you say feminism influences your consumption choices? How?
- Does a sense of community influence your consumption choices? Does nostalgia?
- Why do you think companies use feminism in their campaigns?
- Do you see any downsides of feminism being used to sell a product? What are the positives?

Appendix B – Declaration of Use of AI

The AI tool ChatGPT was used for tailoring interview questions, however the questions were developed by the authors. The tool was also used to get feedback on the structure of the text. Grammarly was used for improving grammar, detecting spelling errors, and enhancing the fluency of the sentences. All suggestions were manually reviewed and selectively implemented to maintain the original meaning and tone. Additionally, the AI tool Klang was used to transcribe the interviews, a tool which operates entirely under European GDPR to keep the data secure (Klang AI, n.d.). All transcriptions were reviewed manually to detect potential errors or inaccuracies.

We want to emphasise that AI was not used to replace our own writing, ideas, or creative process. At no point in the work was AI used to determine the choice of topic, conduct the analysis, or draw conclusions. All work is the authors' own.