

## Everything Barbie all at Once: “A Marketing Campaign for the Ages”

[Regina Luttrell, Ph.D.\\*](#), & [Carrie Welch](#)

Newhouse School of Public Communications

Syracuse University

### Abstract

The Barbie brand has long been a paradoxical symbol of imagination, comfort, sexism, objectification, feminism, and conflicted cultural influence, challenging and entrancing both children and adults for generations. In the years since 2015, the iconic doll has undergone a transformation, redefining her place in contemporary society. The marketing and public relations efforts associated with the Barbie brand over time have been widely documented. However, no campaign - Barbie or otherwise, according to industry experts - has come close to the size, magnitude, complexity, and intentionality of the campaign to promote the 2023 Barbie movie. This case study examines the scope and impact of this integrated marketing and public relations campaign through its strategy and tactics, while also retracing the history of the promotional history of the Barbie brand and contextually situating its relationship to feminism. Barbie's intricate connection with feminism holds significant influence over her place in American society; a still-developing theme as the film and campaign further cement her enigmatic position within the cultural discourse.

**Keywords:** Barbie; marketing; public relations; integrated campaign; feminism, agenda-setting theory

\*Corresponding author: Dr. Regina Luttrell, [rmluttre@syr.edu](mailto:rmluttre@syr.edu)

### Overview

“Barbie combines what is conceivable but impossible with what is accessible but far from ordinary.” (Rogers, 1999; p. 89). The Barbie brand has long been a paradoxical symbol of imagination, comfort, sexism, objectification, feminism, and conflicted cultural influence, challenging and entrancing both children and adults for generations. In the years since 2015, the

iconic doll has undergone a long term transformation, redefining her place in contemporary society. The marketing and public relations efforts associated with each Barbie brand shift are important case studies for practitioners and scholars in themselves. However, no campaign - Barbie or otherwise, according to industry experts - has come close to the size, magnitude, complexity, and intentionality of the campaign to promote the 2023 Barbie movie, written and directed by Greta Gerwig (McClintock, 2023; Gerwig, 2023). This case study examines the scope and impact of this integrated marketing and public relations campaign through its strategy and tactics, while also retracing the promotional history of the Barbie brand and contextually situating its relationship to feminism.

Mattel took a risk with the most recent Barbie movie. A calculated risk in which the company previously known for managing the Barbie brand with an iron fist vowed to become “comfortable with being uncomfortable” (Carroll, 2023). Producer and actor Margo Robbie acquired the film rights to Barbie from Mattel in 2018 and set out to make a movie when many others had failed (Kile, 2023). She enlisted Greta Gerwig, best known for her indie style and as writer/director of the films *Lady Bird* and *Little Women*, to write (with husband Noah Baumbach) and direct the film. Robbie and Gerwig set off on a Sisyphean quest to create a Barbie movie in their vision. In a virtually unheard of move by any brand, Mattel ceded full control to Gerwig (Paskin, 2023). Requests for script changes were rejected out of hand. Once in progress though, the Mattel team knew they had a hit on their hands (Beckett, 2023). Accordingly, the brand teams for Mattel and Warner Bros. (distributor of the film) carefully and discretely planned “a marketing campaign for the ages,” one that matched the level of film Gerwig delivered, but that functioned as a bit of a disguise, never quite revealing what the movie was about (McClintock, 2023). Following years of accumulated pandemic-related stress and post-Roe v. Wade concerns, the world, it seemed, was ready for Barbie. Cloaked in the secrecy of the campaign, and anticipated as a fun, pink romp, what awaited audiences was so much more.

In promoting the movie, the brand’s objective, as stated by Lisa McKnight, Mattel CEO, was to “be ubiquitous” during the summer of 2023 (Stewart, 2023; Hawkins, 2023). Part of the inescapability goal was to re-engage fans, including the 20-something crowd and older enthusiasts who may have once engaged with Barbie but drifted away as they grew older. This ambitious, intergenerational strategy spanned all major media platforms, social media, paid advertising, product integrations, experiential events, earned media placements, and a show stopping press tour. The marketing efforts have since been hailed as one of the most extensive and impressive in recent memory (McClintock, 2023; Beckett, 2023). In the year leading up to the film’s release, Barbie had once again become a cultural touchstone, as CNN states, “‘Barbie’ has become everything from a relationship litmus test to a celebration of womanhood for people who may have come for the hot-pink outfits and stayed for the film’s existential questions” (Rothenberg, 2023).

The culmination of these efforts resulted in tremendous success, with the film grossing \$162 million in its opening weekend (Rubin, 2023a). Greta Gerwig became the first woman director with a film grossing over \$1 billion (Rothenberg, 2023). The viral growth of the Barbie campaign contributed to this, turning the movie and surrounding promotion into a self-sustaining phenomenon, surpassing the expectations of even the most skilled marketing teams (McClintock, 2023). Negotiating over 100 strategic marketing partnerships, team Barbie proved it is not

merely a toy brand, but an influential force that resonates across generations (Beckett, 2023). As marketing and PR professionals seek to create impactful campaigns, the case of the marketing of the Barbie movie stands as an inspirational model.

This case study examines the film's campaign from the release of the first trailer in late 2022 to the full launch of the film's promotional campaign in summer 2023. Four main themes emerged that played a pivotal role in defining the success of this campaign: Barbie's relationship to feminism; Barbie's bigger tent; intergenerational fun; and campaigning with confidence, each of which will be described in the sections to follow.

## **Background**

"There are people who adore Barbie, people who hate Barbie—but the bottom line is everyone knows Barbie," commented Margot Robbie, Barbie producer (Barasch, 2023). Barbieland's omnipresence in 2023 begs the question: how did Barbie get her groove back? The last decade has witnessed the brand's transformation, fueled by key factors such as intersectionality, diversity, equity, and inclusion. These elements collectively shaped Barbie's current journey, expanding the audiences who identify with her, propelling her back into the cultural spotlight and making her more relevant than ever before.

The journey toward inclusivity began in 2015, when Mattel's Barbie brand team faced a critical choice - maintain the status quo with Barbie's singular vision, or pivot and expand what Barbie can be (Carroll, 2023). With nerves and ambition, they launched a total rebrand, introducing a more inclusive line featuring different body types, racial diversity, and a modern look and feel (Tiny Shoulders, 2018). The success of this pivot not only boosted sales but also transformed Barbie into a symbol of inclusivity and empowerment. Coupled with her role as a virtual influencer during the pandemic where she attracted Millennial and Generation Z audiences, Barbie became cool again (Rajagopal, 2021). This evolution established a fresh framework, allowing the new, more inclusive Barbie to not only complement a blockbuster movie but also continue to mirror the evolving facets of our society.

The transformation within the Barbie brand, along with its changes in marketing and public disclosure strategies, serves as a prime illustration of the agenda-setting theory in action. This theory, originally advanced by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, advances the argument that the media's selection of coverage informs what the public thinks about or deems important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the 2023 post-pivot, post-pandemic, pre-SAG/AFTRA strike news cycle team Barbie found themselves in, the opportunity was ripe for the promotional team to roll out a mega-campaign, years in the making that would dominate every content platform possible (McClintock, 2023). The Barbie brand controlled the media narrative and the agenda particularly through the months of May-August 2023, influencing what was written and produced by news and social media alike, determining what was important and ultimately shaping opinions and attitudes about the film and Barbie herself.

While she may be enjoying a positive moment in the spotlight, in her iconic status through generations of marketing, Barbie straddles the paradoxical line of embodying and promoting the best and worst versions of women in society (Rogers, 1999). As *The New Yorker* describes, "Barbie" is somehow simultaneously a critique of corporate feminism, a love letter to

a doll that has been a lightning rod for more than half a century, and a sendup of the company that actively participated in the adaptation” (Barasch, 2023).

## Research

### Feminist Barbie

Historically Barbie’s relationship with feminism has been fraught, famously marked by controversy, reflecting changing cultural views of women and the feminist movement. It is with great irony then that Gerwig chose feminism as a major theme of the film, flipping long-held perceptions, and shaping the subtlety with which this campaign was crafted.

Barbie was created in 1959 by Ruth Handler, an entrepreneur and mother who saw a market opportunity for girls to play with grown-up woman dolls instead of baby dolls. She overcame resistance from male engineers and toy buyers and introduced the mature-looking doll that was meant to inspire what girls could be (Lord, 2004; Sheppard, 2021; Lord, 2004; Rogers, 1999). Barbie’s popularity soared, becoming the best-selling doll of all time and a sales leader for Mattel for decades (Rogers, 1999; Sheppard, 2021). While the brand enjoyed popularity in the 1950s and early 1960s, Barbie faced criticism in later decades for embodying traditional gender roles, creating an unrealistic beauty standard, and engendering negative body image effects in girls and women (Frank, 2000; Sheppard, 2021). As such, we examine how the brand’s evolution parallels the cultural expectations of women and the ongoing feminist movement to situate how Barbie ended up a box office success touting the benefits of feminism and treachery of patriarchy.

Feminist thinking questions existing gender roles and norms held by society (hooks, 2015). This relates to Barbie as throughout her existence she has been viewed as a vehicle or a mirror for how American culture views women at a given moment. The lens of feminism asks us to think through how and why these expectations are assigned to women, and how that influences their value in society (hooks, 2015; Smith, 1987; McPhail, 2003). What is intriguing about the campaign is how feminism, womanhood, and sense of self, all themes represented in the movie are not in the campaign. Barbie’s fraught relationship continues; she cannot overtly say, “come see my feminist film.” Instead, the campaign promotes the fun and hints at something more. This is a game Barbie is used to playing. As M.J. Lord, author of *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll* said in a 2021 Yahoo! article, ““Barbie both reflects and shapes the marketplace...” (Sheppard, 2021).

As women’s liberation and feminism rose and evolved, the Barbie brand shifted and changed. During the second wave of feminism, which spanned the 1960s to the 1980s, Barbie experienced significant milestones that reflected the changing roles of women in society, including career-themed dolls, showcasing possibilities beyond traditional gender roles. In addition, the second wave advocated for workplace equality and reproductive rights. Important milestones, such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title IX in 1972, contributed to the pursuit of gender equality in various areas, creating an ideological tug of war with Barbie’s endeavors to inspire young girls to envision limitless possibilities for their futures with the realities of sexism, misogyny and marginalization the feminists were battling against (Gale, n.d.). As Gloria Steinem



put it, “Barbie was pretty much everything the feminist movement was trying to escape from” (Tiny Shoulders, 2018). Third wave feminism emphasized the deconstruction of gender and bodily autonomy (Mann & Huffman, 2005). These ideals stand in stark contrast to the traditional image of Barbie, a doll characterized by her blonde hair, blue eyes, and slim physique.

In spite of the disparity, as the third wave of feminism came into being in the 1990s and early 2000s, Barbie was still enjoying sales success. The dolls launched during this time embodied the “stereotypical Barbie” and included the all time best seller, Totally Hair Barbie, as well as the highly criticized Teen Talk Barbie, who famously said, “Math class is tough” (The New York Times, 1992). Mattel came under fire as the third wave of feminism embraced the Riot Grrrl movement, engaged in online activism, and empowered women in music, arts, and social justice causes (Gillis & Munford, 2004). Change was afoot and, for the first time, Barbie was falling behind.

Third wave feminism gave way to the fourth wave, defined by the #MeToo movement which shed light on sexual harassment and assault, prompting crucial conversations about consent and gender equality (Grady, 2018; Luttrell, 2022). The Women's March of 2016 furthered advocacy for women's rights and social justice issues (Grady, 2018; Berry & Chenoweth, 2018). Amidst this shifting environment that called out sexism and inequality more overtly, Barbie became viewed as outdated. Disney's princess brand dominated the cultural landscape in 2013 with its runaway hit *Frozen*, and Elsa dolls were the first product line to challenge Barbie in decades (Sheppard, 2021). Barbie brand sales were down year after year, culminating in the brand pivot of 2015, and the launch of racially diverse dolls with different body types in 2016 (Tighe, 2023). The Barbie that emerged challenged conventional beauty standards and promoted body positivity, tangibly recommitting the brand to empowering girls and breaking stereotypes.

The brand leaned in further. Collaborating with influential women and organizations, the brand launched the Barbie Global Role Models series, honoring women who shattered glass ceilings in various fields. Mattel also introduced the “Sheroes” collection, honoring inspirational women from history, which included the first Barbie in hijab (Mangan, 2017). Subsequent Barbies have included those with disabilities, vitiligo, Down syndrome, and a line inspired by Covid front line workers (DeVault, 2022; Kavilanz, 2023; Mattel, 2021). In responding to ongoing criticisms and evolving perceptions, the Barbie brand held steady in its dedication to addressing concerns surrounding body image and stereotypes, aligning with the fourth wave's emphasis on intersectionality and continued advocacy for equality and representation (CBC Kids News, 2019). In an authentic intersectional shift, more women could see themselves in Barbie. The Barbie tent got much bigger.

The combination of the Barbie movie and its promotional campaign represents an updated and amalgamated feminism that spans these waves. It serves as a crash course in feminist ideals and offers a sense of ultimate self-reclamation. Through the movie and marketing efforts, the Barbie team empowers women, men, and the queer community alike to embrace self-acceptance. It provides an intersectional message that one's identity is their own, beyond societal judgments or expectations.

## Intersectional Barbie

Intersectionality is a concept often invoked in feminism, but rarely included in a campaign such as the one for Barbie. Developed by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, this framework describes how societal oppression and discrimination are not experienced in isolation, but rather as interconnected and overlapping factors. The elements that comprise an individual's identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, intersect and interact, shaping their experiences and opportunities (Crenshaw, 1989; Kanai, 2020). This is an essential lens in looking at the Barbie marketing and public relations campaign as the movie and its promotions employed intersectionality by featuring characters, actors, messages, and music representing diverse racial and sexual identities, and as the interlocking systems of oppression are more widely understood, it is a lens that is of increasing importance in evaluating promotional campaigns (Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010). While Robbie as Barbie remains a white woman, the film and its promotional efforts de-center her often, opening the Barbie tent to highlight trans and queer actors as well as actors of color who portray Barbie and Ken characters. The push toward recognizing and incorporating intersectionality that began with the brand's 2015 pivot is realized through the movie's messages and marketing efforts engaging with diverse groups.

The values and significance of intersectionality is important, but also imperfect. In the campaign, diversity is presented, but subtly rather than called out. Mattel and Warner Bros. took a less obvious approach, presenting the diverse cast, with Black, Latina, and trans actors represented. By showcasing a talented ensemble that included actors of color such as Issa Rae and America Ferrara in more visible roles, the film and its marketing underscored the significance of inclusivity. This strategic casting decision resonated with audiences of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, providing them with a meaningful representation (Blavity, 2023). In doing so, the movie highlighted the centrality of intersectionality to its marketing approach, emphasizing the importance of embracing diversity across all facets of media and advertising (Blavity, 2023). In addition, much like in the brand's past marketing efforts, each Barbie in the movie's promotional campaign is presented with her occupation (i.e. "This Barbie is President). The occupations are all leadership positions - Nobel Prize winner, doctor - showcasing the roles women can play.

While still reading white with the focus on Robbie and Gosling, an important concept the campaign and film convey in terms of intersectionality is a shared feeling of collective action in response to oppression. In *Barbieland*, being a woman is a collective effort, as evidenced by the feelings evoked by America Ferrera's monologue in the film, "It is literally impossible to be a woman," which quickly went viral on TikTok and Instagram as the film launched (Caldwell, 2023). One woman's happiness (or lack thereof) impacts the others. The Barbies, with their intersecting identities, lift each other up and celebrate each other's achievements. This togetherness and strength in community is reflected in the promotional trailers and movie posters, which present the Barbies as a united front, ready to problem-solve and take on the world together.

A second way the brand engaged in an intersectional approach is the campaign's engagement with the queer community. One of the brand's first campaign activations included floats and pop ups at LGBTQ+ Pride events around the U.S. in June 2023 (McClintock, 2023). By engaging the queer community early, the brand showed up authentically with this group, and was rewarded with their support at the box office (McClintock, 2023). The movie's success and virality on social media specifically lies in its ability to create a connection that spans generations and philosophies, offering a message of empowerment and acceptance: You can be yourself unapologetically, and all expressions of self are valid and celebrated. This resonated with LGBTQ+ audiences, as Josh Goldstine, president of worldwide marketing at Warner Bros said, "...this story about a doll is making a tremendous number of people feel understood" (Beckett, 2023).



Figure 1. A Barbie activation at the Washington, DC Pride parade in June 2023 (Issacian, 2023).

Finally, the intentional diversity of the movie's soundtrack and the significant role played by the music in the film itself exemplify a successful implementation of the intersectional approach in the promotional campaign. Through the music, the intersectional representation of multiple races, gender identities, and perspectives were foregrounded. The soundtrack comprised a mini-campaign unto itself, with the artists announced in advance of the movie in May 2023 (Kaplan, 2023). Produced by Mark Ronson, the soundtrack featured music from diverse racial and sexual identities, with artists such as Lizzo, Nikki Minaj and Sam Smith included (Kaplan, 2023). Several of the artists were shown approximately 20 minutes of the movie and some wrote and produced songs specifically for the movie, this creativity contributing to the success of this campaign ((Kaplan, 2023). The shift from controlling Mattel to creative collaborator is palpable in the song, "Barbie World (with Aqua)" by Minaj and Ice Spice. Just two decades ago, Mattel

sued the band Aqua over the song, “I’m a Barbie Girl” in 1997, which is now heavily sampled in this track collaboration (Hassan, 2023).

## **Strategy**

### **Barbie is for Everyone**

In the realm of marketing and public relations, few campaigns have achieved the unprecedented success and widespread impact seen in the case of Barbie's recent endeavors (McClintock, 2023). The strategic collaboration between Warner Bros. and Mattel on the Barbie movie became a game-changer, leading to a staggering 100 partnerships estimated to be worth \$70 million (Beckett, 2023). Mattel loosened up and brought out their biggest guns for their biggest gamble. And even though her tent of potential audiences was much bigger, a campaign of this size and scope is not new for Barbie (Rogers, 1999). As Lisa McKnight, Executive Vice President and Global Head of Barbie and Dolls for Mattel said, “Our full-time job is to ensure that Barbie endures and that she continues to stay relevant” (Carroll, 2023).

Mattel's extensive history of cultivating partnerships spanning several decades, ranging from licensing agreements to traditional media collaborations, played a pivotal role in the campaign's success. Leveraging this rich network, the company harnessed its array of alliances for the execution of the campaign. Driven by an intergenerational strategy, the campaign was carefully developed and refined over the course of several years, with certain deals strategically initiated one to two years prior, all of which appealed to multiple age cohorts (Beckett, 2023). The intergenerational fun theme was strategically designed to resonate with individuals of all ages who have been influenced by Barbie, spanning from the Baby Boomer generation to Generation Z. Its purpose was to create a sense of inclusivity and engagement, ensuring that each demographic could find something tailored to their interests and experiences. To accomplish this, the brand team focused on the “cool and fun factor” rather than nostalgia, according to industry executives (McClintock, 2023).

### **Campaigning with Confidence: “Breadcrumb Strategy”**

Central to the approach was subtlety, which required campaigning with confidence. The Barbie team knew they had a hit on their hands and operated discreetly behind the scenes. They purposefully engaged in a “breadcrumb strategy” where small bites of content were released one at a time. Audiences experienced the feeling of discovery with each content release, which led to increased engagement with the campaign (McLaren, 2023). This endeavor aimed not only to redefine the positioning of the Barbie brand as a valuable intellectual property but also to chart a new trajectory for Mattel as a whole, alongside its diverse portfolio of toy brands. In doing so, it sought to establish a significant foothold in the realm of integrated movie campaigns, underscoring the company's intent to be a contender in the evolving pre-awareness IP landscape.

This case study examines the strategies and tactics implemented in this campaign via the PESO model, originally developed by Gini Dietrich (2014). The PESO model is a framework for structuring campaign strategies, encompassing four distinct media types: Paid, Earned, Shared,

and Owned. Paid media involves promotional efforts through advertising or sponsored content; Earned media encompasses coverage gained through media relations and word-of-mouth; Shared media refers to engagement on social platforms and user-generated content; Owned media involves content created and controlled by the organization on its own channels. This integrated approach enables practitioners to holistically address communication goals by leveraging various media avenues for optimal reach, impact, and engagement, which is what the Barbie brand team expertly did in this case (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2022).

### **Tactics: “...this Barbie is all about securing brand deals”**

#### **Paid Media**

The Barbie movie first generated excitement with a teaser trailer in 2022, parodying 2001: A Space Odyssey which replaced the monolith with Margot Robbie (Beckett, 2023; Rubin, 2023; Warner Bros. Pictures, 2022). The studio team wanted to let audiences know this Barbie was not just for kids; this was a film and campaign that was going to be totally unexpected and cut through the noise. This is another way the promotional team kept their secret close to the vest; this first trailer was a parody of another recognizable film. This gave audiences substance and, for some, a frame of reference, but did not give away the plot or any real details of the Barbie film itself. The playful but mysterious tone continued in the official trailer, which went viral five months later, featuring only a moment of Robbie's arched foot stepping out of pink heels (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2023).



Figure 2. The initial Barbie movie trailer, released in 2022, played before Avatar (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2022).

An additional paid media strategy was the utilization of billboards. This out-of-home medium is a traditional tactic in many film campaigns. The Barbie team flipped the script again, including just the color pink associated with the brand and the movie's launch date (McLaren, 2023). This exemplifies the idea of campaigning with confidence; the brand knew what it had, and knew the way to begin to introduce it to audiences was with a less is more approach.



Figure 3. An example of the pink teaser Barbie billboard (Because of Marketing, 2023).

As the paid campaign unfolded, team Barbie launched the key poster art for the film, with the tagline, “She’s everything. He’s just Ken” (Richardson, 2023). A theme in the success of this campaign is that as each element of the breadcrumb strategy debuted, most of them went viral. In this case, the internet exploded with over 35 memes featuring the tagline applied to famous celebrities (Buzzfeed, 2023). The Barbie message was still subtle yet already resonating as fans applied the campaign perspective to their own.





Figure 4. Fans created numerous memes with the “She’s everything. He’s just Ken.” tagline (Buzzfeed, 2023).

The second tagline unveiled alongside the film's second teaser trailer captured both the brand's self-awareness and the overarching theme of Barbie's expanded influence. The tagline read: “If you love Barbie, this movie is for you. If you hate Barbie, this movie is for you” (Rubin, 2023). Warner Bros. took a risk using the word “hate,” which is not often used in campaigns as it can put some audiences off (Rubin, 2023). In this case, they employed it as they felt it aptly described the overall feeling of Barbie in 2023, and took another subtle risk that paid off as audiences referenced the tagline as a campaign tactic that drew them in (Rubin, 2023). The tent expanded even more.

Strategic partnerships with companies like Progressive and General Motors resulted in custom television ads (paid media), which not only revitalized Barbie's image but also set new industry benchmarks for success, showcasing the power of creativity and collaboration in modern marketing endeavors (McClintock, 2023). Additionally, non-franchise partners like Progressive Insurance and General Motors have even created custom Barbie ads, with Progressive's Flo attending the premiere (McClintock, 2023). The brand team also placed the pink billboards, as well as slews of paid television, digital and social media advertising (McClintock, 2023; Rubin, 2023).

A final strategy the brand team implemented on the paid front was one that kept visibility high and marketing costs efficient: utilizing media properties under Warner Bros. Discovery (WBD) ownership. The “Barbie in the Real World” campaign showcased various WBD divisions, including a competition series where HGTV talent redesigned a Barbie Dreamhome with Barbie-inspired rooms from different decades, a summer baking championship on Food Network, and over 15 networks across WBD showcasing pink logos and Barbie-themed on-air graphics (McClintock, 2023).

## Partnerships

While not paid in the traditional sense, the brand enacted numerous retail and product-driven partnerships, many of which were licensing deals where the licensee paid Mattel a royalty fee to use the Barbie brand (Hawkins, 2023). Highlights include the Barbie x Crocs collaboration, which was so popular it quickly sold out online. Ruggable x Barbie offered rugs inspired by the Barbie Dream House as portrayed in the movie. Bloomingdale's NYC store featured a Barbie DreamHouse display, while Target and Walmart displayed Barbie-themed products. Fashion brands Gap, Forever 21, Boohoo, and Zara all produced licensed merchandise (Mann, 2023).

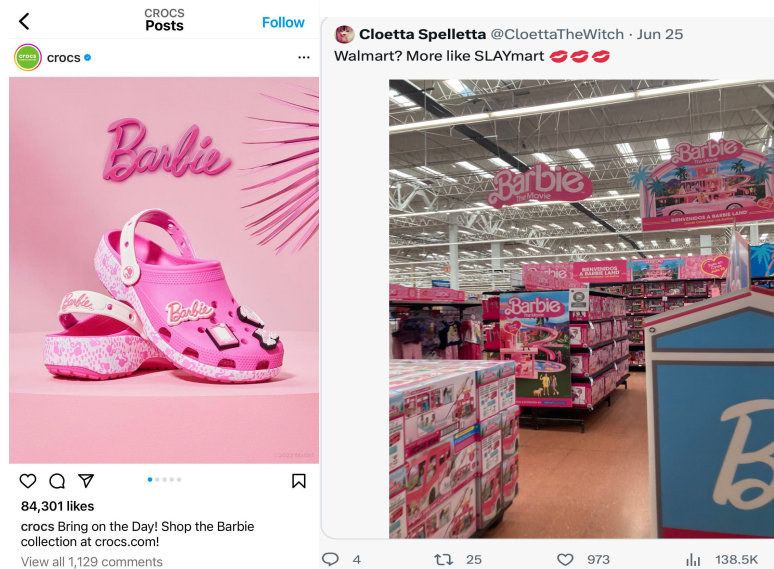


Figure 5. Examples of the Barbie x Crocs collaboration and a Barbie display at Walmart (Crocs, 2023; Spelletta, 2023).

In more out-of-the-box digital collaborations, Roku had partnered with Warner Bros. to feature the Barbie Dream House, complete with a dance floor, hot pink slide, and extensive shoe closet, on the streaming platform's screensaver. This engaging campaign further incorporated a Barbie-themed placement on the home screen and offered viewers the opportunity to watch the movie trailer and purchase tickets instantly through a QR code scan (Kemp, 2023). An exclusive Barbie Dreamhouse Xbox was released to attract younger fans. The campaign ventured into the metaverse, with a partnership with Forever 21 for clothing in both their physical stores and the virtual world of Roblox. Google partnered to offer a feature that when users conduct Google searches for the film's stars and director Greta Gerwig trigger pink light bursts (Kemp, 2023).

These paid and partnership efforts showcased Barbie's ability to adapt to modern marketing landscapes, connecting with various audiences and solidifying its place as a cultural phenomenon beyond its iconic doll status (Dias, 2023).

### Earned Media

Barbie's public relations efforts generated immeasurable earned media coverage across various media, from local TV to national outlets like The New Yorker, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, CNN, and the BBC. Half a million articles were written about Barbie between January and June 2023, demonstrating the exact planning and execution of the agenda-setting control of the brand PR team (Hawkins, 2023). The chemistry between the movie's stars, Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling, sparked interest in the media, leading to features in magazines like GQ, where Gosling's portrayal of Ken was highlighted. Coverage included art media to industry, with Art Net News detailing the creative set design and run on pink paint, to People and Entertainment Tonight interviewing the stars for behind-the-scenes secrets.



Experiential event activations with earned media legs included Ryan Gosling, portraying Ken, making a splash at CinemaCon 2023 in a pink blazer alongside Robbie, where they introduced the term "Ken-ergy" as a buzzword. In June, a real-life Barbie Dreamhouse was unveiled in Los Angeles, complete with all of the pink Barbie details and available for rent on Airbnb (Mann, 2023). In the weeks leading up to the movie's premiere, Airbnb changed the host from Barbie to Ken to reflect a plot twist in the film (Airbnb, n.d.). Additionally, Robbie's tour of the Dreamhouse, covered by Architectural Digest, further fueled excitement for the movie (Malle, 2023).



Figure 6. The real life Barbie/Ken Dreamhouse in California (@Barbiethemovie, 2023).

The Barbie movie premiere itself was a PR spectacle, with Robbie making headlines for her press tour, attending premieres dressed in Barbie-inspired outfits that engaged fans and the media (Mann, 2023). The Los Angeles premiere, for example, featured a vibrant 'pink carpet' setting, complete with a fake swimming pool, inflatable flamingo, and a lifeguard tower, all of which garnered extensive media coverage and contributed to the movie's buzz and cultural impact. Barbie's public relations efforts effectively elevated the brand's presence and cemented its place as a beloved and influential cultural icon (Kemp, 2023).



Figure 7. Margot Robbie’s press tour outfits won praise from media and fans alike (Entertainment Tonight, 2023).

### Shared Media

The Barbie campaign heavily leveraged all major social media platforms in the most sophisticated ways reflecting current industry best practices. One tactic that stood out early on, and went extremely viral, was the Selfie Generator. This AI tool allowed users to generate their own Barbie memes, immediately inspiring overwhelming user-generated content. The generator, developed by Warner Bros. and PhotoRoom, exemplifies marketers' growing interest in harnessing AI to captivate consumers, potentially setting a precedent for Hollywood peers exploring similar strategies (Baar, 2023).

The interactive selfie tool allowed users to seamlessly integrate their own images into the Barbie film's promotional poster. The filter's widespread recognition, predominantly through social media sharing, hinged on its utilization of visual AI. PhotoRoom executed the implementation of the tool in less than an hour, implying the feasibility of similar initiatives for others. Cameron Curtis, Warner Bros.' Executive Vice President of Worldwide Digital Marketing, emphasizes the potential of generative AI in upcoming campaigns, “Its potential to create captivating and personalized experiences is truly remarkable, opening doors to innovative storytelling and audience engagement that were once unimaginable” (Baar, 2023). The tool attracted 13 million users including celebrities such as Rihanna and Pedro Pascal (Baar, 2023).



Figure 8. A local news anchor used the Barbie Selfie Generator AI tool (Bitler, 2023).

### Owned Media

Both Warner Bros. and Mattel maximized all owned properties to promote the Barbie film. This included a standalone website for the film that pulls up local movie times in an individual's area. The Barbie Movie Official Website also includes the Selfie Generator as well as Mattel's charitable project to help girls succeed through the Barbie Dream Gap project and Save the Children (Barbie-themovie.com, n.d.). On Mattel's website, Barbie and Ken dolls inspired by the movie are for sale, as well as "I am Ken-ough" merchandise and other products inspired by the film (Mattel Shop, n.d.). In addition, the Barbie movie was represented on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok in discrete movie based accounts, each with content adjusted to the platform.

### Evaluation

#### Successful Barbie

"The devil works hard, but @Barbie's marketing team is INSANE," brand strategist Moshe Isaacian summed it up in a viral Twitter thread (Isaacian, 2023). The success of the campaign and the film itself has been widely covered across mainstream and social media, with coverage and memes ongoing. Barbie has shattered box office records, grossing over \$1 billion at the box office worldwide (Rothenberg, 2023). Gerwig is the first female director to cross the \$1 billion mark (Rothenberg, 2023). Even "I'm Just Ken" hit the Billboard Hot 100 hit song list (Zellner, 2023).

In terms of evaluating the campaign through data, according to TV outcomes company EDO, Barbie's creatives have exceeded the category's average ad performance by an impressive 146 percent (Kemp, 2023). Moreover, Barbie has reached a level beyond social media sensation, as the use of the #Barbie hashtag across TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram Reels surged by 145

percent in the first half of 2023 compared to the previous year (Kemp, 2023). On TikTok alone, videos featuring the #Barbie hashtag amassed a staggering 9 billion views this year, as reported by global content studio Snack Content (Kemp, 2023). Finally, according to internal Pinterest data, “Barbiecore” and “Barbie moodboard” searches are up 980 percent this year (Kemp, 2023).

### Intangible Barbie

In marketing and PR, every campaign holds intangible elements, and the Barbie marketing campaign was no exception. As the movie gained momentum during the summer of 2023, it encountered a unique phenomenon known as "Barbenheimer." This unexpected twist emerged when fans of both Barbie and the movie "Oppenheimer," directed by Christopher Nolan, took the internet by storm, comparing the vastly different films set to debut on the same day. "Oppenheimer" chronicles the production of the atomic bomb during World War II, providing the perfect counterpoint to the perception of Barbie as a fun pink romp. Thousands of Barbenheimer memes and images flooded social media feeds, with even prestigious outlets like The New York Times promoting this content, further amplifying promotional efforts for Barbie. Despite initially being perceived as the underdog of the two movies, Barbie defied expectations, smashing box office records in its opening weekend and setting new industry benchmarks for success.

Beyond the tangible success of box office records and analytics, the Barbie marketing campaign achieved something intangible and extraordinary - their goal of total ubiquity. The brand set the media's agenda and its presence was felt everywhere in the summer of 2023, to the extent that the marketing team itself became the subject of press coverage, social media posts, and even memes. The team's ingenuity and creativity captured the attention of the public, inspiring discussions beyond the movie itself. As Vox reported:

The biggest stars of Barbie arguably aren't Margot Robbie as Barbie and Ryan Gosling as Ken but the movie's uncanny marketing team, which has worked overtime to ensure the doll, movie, and brand are inescapable this summer. They've acquired an almost mythic stature, spawning memes and parodies of their terrifying prowess (2023).

## Analysis and Discussion

### Come On Barbie, Let's Go Party

“Barbie shattered the glass ceiling on female IP” (Beckett, 2023). The Barbie movie marketing campaign stands as an unparalleled achievement, earning its place as "one for the ages" through a series of groundbreaking accomplishments (McClintock, 2023). In a strategic move for future ventures, Mattel positioned itself for its next era of intellectual property-based films. This campaign's success was found through the four themes outlined in this case study, each of which fostered a shared connection with its audiences. Exploring those themes—Barbie's connection to feminism, the broadened scope of Barbie, intergenerational enjoyment, and confident campaigning—we observe how the marketing team intertwined these elements into a vibrant pink spectacle, successfully attaining brand omnipresence in the summer of 2023. The

energy and resonance of this campaign has extended beyond the promotional period, into everything from pop culture references to music and film awards season.

The theme of campaigning with confidence was central to the brand's success with the skillful concealment of a well-guarded secret, evoking curiosity and anticipation in a manner that instigated a journey of self-discovery among movie-going audiences. By teasing the film with a confidence grounded in its quality, the campaign nurtured a sense of excitement that culminated in a revelation that exceeded expectations. The intergenerational fun theme gave nods to Gen Z through the Baby Boomers providing connection points that felt fresh and new rather than old and nostalgic. In the expansion of the Barbie tent theme, we saw how Barbie's pivot to diversity and inclusion in 2015 provided a game-changing update by embracing messages of visibility and acceptance that laid the groundwork for the brand to be in a position to receive Gerwig's perspective on Barbie.

The final theme of Barbie's complicated relationship with feminism played an important role, and is still evolving as the film and the campaign extend her enigmatic place in the cultural conversation. As we see in the intersectionality discussion, there are always areas when Barbie can do better. However, the implications brought about by this film and its campaign are far-reaching, potentially opening doors for women directors and providing a greater understanding of the women and girl's life experiences.

For PR and marketing practitioners, the lessons are many but also quite clear: the bar has been raised in terms of an agenda-setting strategy, and new techniques such as the incorporation of AI, heavy brand partnerships, and a less-is-more approach are now all on the table for campaigns to come. What Barbie did well is what she is best at: she takes what is old and makes it new again. She redefines the defined, and that continues to include the intersection of feminism and promotion. Perhaps that nexus is the ongoing allure of Barbie, as Lord states, "Barbie is a direct reflection of the cultural impulses that formed us. Barbie is our reality... Barbie is us." (Lord, 2004; p.30).

### **Discussion Questions**

Q1: How has the Barbie brand managed to maintain its cultural relevance and significance while navigating complex themes such as feminism, objectification, and cultural influence over generations?

Q2: In what ways has the transformation of the Barbie brand since 2015 reflected and contributed to the evolving values and expectations of contemporary society, especially in relation to gender and identity?


Q3: What specific elements of the 2023 Barbie movie campaign made it stand out in terms of size, magnitude, complexity, and intentionality, and how do these aspects contribute to its overall impact on audiences?

Q4: Could the success of the 2023 Barbie movie campaign serve as a blueprint for other marketing and public relations efforts in different industries, or are there unique factors tied to the Barbie brand that played a critical role in its effectiveness?

Q5: How has the historical promotional journey of the Barbie brand intersected with and influenced the broader feminist movement, and what insights can be gained from analyzing this intricate connection in the context of marketing and cultural discourse?

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