



Semiotic Analysis in the Film Barbie (2023): Representation of Patriarchal Culture

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Abstract

The research aims to meticulously explore and analyze the manifestation of patriarchal culture depicted in the film "Barbie Live Action 2023". It employs a qualitative approach, focusing on scenes that vividly and deeply illustrate how patriarchal norms reflect within the presented gender context. Through meticulous data analysis, the identification of symbols, dialogues, and character interactions becomes the spotlight, highlighting and illustrating the reinforcement of strong patriarchal gender norms portrayed in the film. The study yields a profound understanding of how the film reinforces and portrays gender stereotypes both visually and narratively, unmistakably showcasing the conflict between two worlds, each reinforcing established gender paradigms. Within the framework of liberal feminism theory, this analysis provides clear insights into the construction of gender in visual media and the urgency for a shift in evolving gender perspectives within society. From the perspective of gender equality, "Barbie Live Action" serves not only as a complex elucidation of patriarchal culture but also as a call for a change in gender perspectives within society. The semiotic analysis and application of liberal feminist theory in this study offer profound insights into the messages of gender equality conveyed by the film and its broader impact on gender awareness within society.

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Introduction

The development of mass media and digital technology has made film one of the most popular forms of media accessible to all levels of society (Fiske J, 1987). Film functions not only as a means of entertainment but also as a medium of communication that conveys specific messages, values, and ideologies through visual and narrative representation. The various scenes depicted, ranging from social relations and symbolic violence to the construction of gender identity, shape a media reality that can influence the viewer's perspective on the social world (Hall, 1997).

As a cultural product, film constructs meaning through an interconnected system of signs. This meaning is not always conveyed explicitly, but often appears in the form of implicit messages hidden behind symbols, dialogue, gestures, and narrative structures (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Therefore, semiotic analysis is a relevant approach to studying film, as it enables researchers to understand how signs work to shape meaning and represent certain social realities (Barthes, 1977; Peirce, 1958). In contemporary popular culture, live-action adaptations of animated films have attracted widespread attention, not only among children but also among teenagers and adults. One prominent example is the film *Barbie* (2023), which, although marketed as light entertainment, possesses complex ideological content. This film has the potential to shape and reproduce perceptions of gender, power relations, and the positions of women and men within a social structure still influenced by patriarchal culture.

Previous research has shown that films often represent women through a patriarchal lens, both as visual objects and through restrictive social and professional roles (Mulvey, 1975; Gill, 2007). Other studies have also confirmed that popular media plays a significant role in shaping gender norms and maintaining inequality between men and women through symbols and narratives that appear normal or natural (Lauzen, 2018; Carter & Steiner, 2004). However, most of this research has focused on mainstream films in general, and not much has examined the live-action *Barbie* film as a cultural text that semiotically represents patriarchal dynamics. Based on these conditions, this study aims to analyze how representations of patriarchal culture are constructed in the film *Barbie* (2023) through a semiotic approach. This study uses visual and narrative sign analysis—including symbols, images, dialogue, and storyline to uncover hidden meanings that represent gender relations.

The method used is descriptive qualitative with a semiotic analysis approach by Charles Sanders Peirce, which emphasizes the relationship between signs, objects, and interpretants. The novelty of this research lies in combining film semiotic analysis with a liberal feminist perspective to reread the *Barbie* film as a popular cultural text that not only represents women but also renegotiates gender power relations in modern society. Thus, this study is expected to fill gaps in previous research and provide theoretical contributions to the study of media, gender, and popular culture. This study uses Liberal Feminist Theory as its primary analytical framework. Liberal feminism stems from the view that women and men fundamentally possess equal rational capacities, therefore both should have the same opportunities, rights, and freedoms in both the public and private spheres (Gill, 2016). Gender inequality is seen as arising not solely due to biological differences, but rather due to social construction and structural restrictions that hinder women's access to education, employment and decision-making (Tong, 2009).

In contemporary popular culture, live-action adaptations of animated films have attracted widespread attention, not only among children but also among teenagers and adults. One prominent example is the film *Barbie* (2023), which, although marketed as light entertainment, possesses complex ideological content. This film has the potential to shape and reproduce perceptions of gender, power

relations, and the positions of women and men within a social structure still influenced by patriarchal culture. Previous research has shown that films often represent women through a patriarchal lens, both as visual objects and through restrictive social and professional roles (Mulvey, 1975; Gill, 2007). Other studies have also confirmed that popular media plays a significant role in shaping gender norms and maintaining inequality between men and women through symbols and narratives that appear normal or natural (Lauzen, 2018; Carter & Steiner, 2004). However, most of this research has focused on mainstream films in general, and not much has examined the live-action Barbie film as a cultural text that semiotically represents patriarchal dynamics.

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Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with the perspective of Theodor Adorno's critical theory and Barthes's semiotics research method. The central object of Adorno's critical theory is the interplay between the contradictions within society as a whole and the concrete forms of life of the subjects within society. Critical theory is oriented towards the idea of society as a subject, with the individual at the center. A theory becomes "critical" by negating the injustice, egoism, and alienation produced by social conditions under a capitalist economy (Arnold in Hamson, 2020). The subjects of this research were stills from the 2023 Barbie Live Action film. Data processing was carried out through data reduction, which involved collecting and sorting scenes from the film deemed to depict patriarchal culture. The collected scenes were then compiled and analyzed. This involved reading and observation, with the researcher directly analyzing the film's content. Because this research was semiotic, the research location differed from that of fieldwork. Semiotic analysis involves analyzing the signs contained in question marks. The time required was approximately three months, with the possibility of additional research time. The data collection technique in this study uses two techniques, namely the observation technique by deepening the research object through the Barbie 2023 film. Then analyzing the data that has been obtained, which focuses on the role of men who want to be superior to women to the point of taking away all women's rights in the Barbie 2023 film. Semiotics is a form of analysis that focuses on signs or symbols as research objects and how researchers can understand what motif symbols exist in the Barbie 2023 film. The next data collection technique is to use literature studies to support the text analysis process in this study.

Results and Discussions

The data presentation in this study examines how the characters in the film are portrayed following the film's plot. This research focuses on the representation of patriarchal culture in the 2023 Barbie Live Action film. The depiction of this representation in the film is analyzed through text and visual scenes that most dominantly reflect patriarchal culture.

Table 1. Key Scenes and Representations of Patriarchy in the Barbie Film

Time	Pics	Explanation
00:36:14		<p>Mattel's CEO sees Barbie dolls as a glittering representation of feminist stereotypes.</p>
00:41:44		<p>Ken took a book about patriarchy in the library, and there was a horse symbol in the book, which was a symbol of a man.</p>



00:42:2
9



There is a conversation between Ken and a male worker who says that nowadays men do not practice patriarchy openly.

00:43:2
2



Ken monologues that he will try to start a patriarchal culture in Barbie Land

00:43:4
5



The position of women is always placed as an object for men

00:57:4
0



01:01:0
6

The Barbies willingly and happily serve Ken.

01:01:1
4



Aku tahu. Bukankah Itu bagus?



Aku suka menjadi seorang dekorasi yang bermanfaat.

00:58:1
7



01:03:1
3

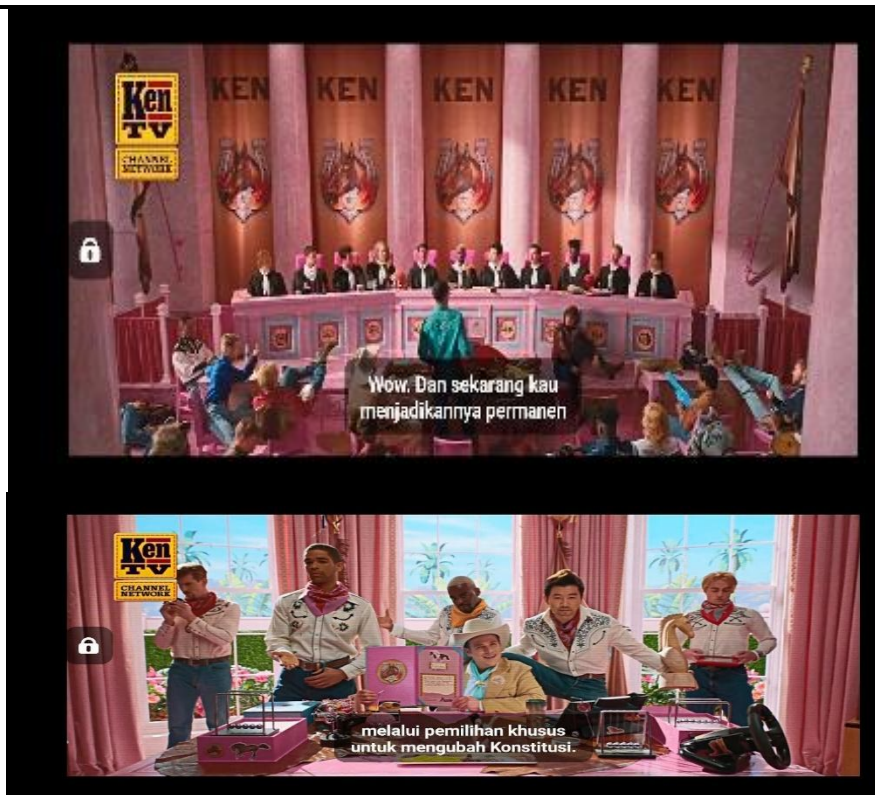
01:03:2
4

01:03:2
8



Mari kita rekam semua perubahan

The horse is depicted as a masculine symbol, seen as a ruler who controls all aspects of life. It is depicted with President Ken wearing a horse-shaped scarf ring, numerous flags featuring horse images, horse-shaped trophies, and Ken's horse-shaped necklace.



00:58:4
1



Ken sees horses as a symbol that men should be positioned as those who have the right to power and as leaders above women.

00:58:5
9



Ken wants to increase the presence of men so that patriarchy continues and continues to grow.

01:00:4
0



Ken makes Barbie an offer, if she wants to live back in his house, Barbie must be Ken's wife or girlfriend who doesn't want to commit and is long term.

01:14:0
2



Gloria explains to Barbie that women are always faced with difficult choices. They must shoulder the burden of men's unreasonable mistakes, yet if they try to defend themselves, they are always blamed.



Women are always expected to remain calm, no matter how difficult it is. They are also expected to be beautiful, but not too beautiful, as this can be seen as a way to seduce men.

Women are always in a situation that refers to mental conflict; patriarchal culture makes women always in the wrong place. Even though it is painful, women cannot do anything.

01:16:3
5

The film *Barbie* (2023) is a live-action adaptation of Mattel's legendary doll character, featuring a fictional world called Barbie Land as the primary social space. In Barbie Land, nearly all strategic positions and public jobs are filled by Barbie characters, from presidents and government officials to doctors and construction workers. Meanwhile, Ken is largely depicted in marginalized positions, such

as lifeguards, or simply relaxing while waiting for Barbie. Denotatively, this social structure appears to represent a world that has achieved gender equality or even female dominance. However, connotatively, this role reversal serves as a narrative strategy to critique the patriarchal system by first presenting it in reverse (Gill, 2007). The film's narrative begins to show the influx of patriarchal culture when Barbie must journey into the real world due to an existential crisis she experiences. This crisis is triggered by changes in the behavior of children who begin to abandon Barbie toys, causing the Barbie character to lose her symbolic perfection. This journey is a crucial transitional moment, especially for Ken, who participates in and experiences drastic changes in social relations. In the real world, Ken experiences respect and recognition as a man, something he doesn't receive in Barbie Land. This experience represents how patriarchy operates as a social system that confers gender-based privilege (Connell, 2005).

Ken's fascination with patriarchy is reinforced through a scene where he reads books themed around male dominance in a library. Denotatively, this scene simply depicts the act of reading. However, connotatively, the book covers and the recurring horse symbol function as patriarchal myths. Within Barthes's (1977) semiotic framework, horses represent masculinity, power, and control, which are then naturalized as symbols of male leadership. This finding aligns with the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which explains how male dominance is legitimized through cultural symbols and social narratives (Connell, 2005). Ken's dialogue with a real-life man, who states that patriarchy is "just better hidden now," reinforces this study's finding that modern patriarchy is not always explicitly visible. This statement reflects a shift in patriarchal forms from overt domination to more subtle practices, such as marginalization, women's double burdens, and contradictory gender standards. This finding is consistent with Bourdieu's (2001) view of symbolic violence, namely domination that is accepted as normal because it is embedded in social structures and collective consciousness.

The representation of female objectification is also evident in the scene of the Mattel CEO meeting, attended entirely by men. The question about "sparkle" connotatively represents women as visual objects valued for their aesthetic appeal. This aligns with the male gaze theory proposed by Mulvey (1975), which states that women in films are often positioned as objects of the gaze, rather than active subjects. This finding is further reinforced by Lauzen's (2018) research, which demonstrates the dominance of male perspectives in the mainstream film industry. Barbie's awareness of being stared at "as if she were an object" represents the experience of sexual objectification experienced by women in a patriarchal culture. This scene illustrates women's frustration with judgments based solely on their bodies and appearance. This aligns with the objectification theory proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), which explains that objectification results in psychological distress and limits women's agency.

The implementation of patriarchy in Barbie Land after Ken's return demonstrates a significant shift in power relations. The scenes of the Barbies serving Ken, from providing food to serving as decoration, are denotatively seen as voluntary acts. However, connotatively, this scene demonstrates the internalization of female subordination. Women are depicted as accepting a serving role as normal, reflecting the reality of patriarchy in real society (Bourdieu, 2001). The horse symbol is further reinforced through the hill statue and President Ken's attributes, which represent male dominance over women. Several scenes also depict Ken's romantic commitment to Barbie as frivolous and short-term. Connotatively, this represents how women are often positioned as emotional gratifiers or status symbols, rather than as equal subjects of relationships. This finding aligns with feminist critiques of romantic relationships in patriarchal cultures, which tend to disadvantage women (Carter & Steiner, 2004).

At the film's conclusion, Gloria's dialogue about the experience of being a woman under patriarchy culminates in critical reflection. The assertion that women must always be responsible for men's behavior, must not complain, and must meet contradictory beauty standards illustrates the double burden women experience. This finding aligns with liberal feminism, which highlights structural injustices against women in modern social systems (Tong, 2009). Gloria's statement also reinforces Wolf's (1993) idea that women are under conflicting normative pressures, making the freedom promised by modern patriarchy illusory. The results of this study indicate that the film *Barbie* (2023) represents patriarchal culture through visual symbols, narratives, and power relations between characters that operate denotatively and connotatively. This finding aligns with previous research stating that film as a cultural medium is never neutral but rather becomes a space for the production of ideological meanings that shape society's perspectives on gender and social relations (Hall, 1997; Gill, 2007). Using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach, this study strengthens the argument that patriarchy in popular media is often disguised through symbols and myths, making it appear natural and difficult to question.

The depiction of gender role reversal in *Barbie Land* at the beginning of the film echoes Gill's (2007) findings, which suggest that contemporary media often employs irony and satire as strategies for social critique. While superficially, *Barbie Land* appears to be an egalitarian space dominated by women, this research demonstrates that this structure serves as a mirror to highlight patriarchal inequalities in the real world. This expands on the findings of Carter and Steiner (2004), who stated that gender representation in media is not merely descriptive but also reflective and ideological. The finding regarding the internalization of patriarchy in Ken's character after entering the real world supports Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Male dominance does not arise naturally but is learned and legitimized through social experiences and cultural symbols. The recurring symbol of the horse in the film functions as a myth of masculinity, as explained by Barthes (1977), which naturalizes male power as something natural and historical. This is consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of symbols in reproducing gender dominance in visual media.

Furthermore, scenes of female objectification, both through the dialogue of the Mattel CEO and Barbie's real-life experiences, reinforce Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory. Lauzen's (2018) research also shows that the mainstream film industry is still dominated by a male perspective, resulting in women being portrayed as visual objects rather than autonomous subjects. The findings of this study not only confirm these findings but also demonstrate how objectification persists in the context of films that explicitly address gender equality. Furthermore, the scenes of the Barbies serving Ken after patriarchy is implemented in *Barbie Land* reflect symbolic violence as described by Bourdieu (2001). Women's subordination is accepted as normal because it has been internalized within the social structure. This finding aligns with feminist research that highlights how modern patriarchy operates subtly and covertly, not through physical coercion, but through the normalization of gender roles. Gloria's dialogue about the contradictions of being a woman reinforces liberal feminist findings that highlight the double burden and normative pressures on women (Tong, 2009). This statement also aligns with Wolf's (1993) notion of social pressures that hold women to conflicting standards. Thus, this study not only confirms previous research but also provides a new contribution by integrating semiotic analysis and liberal feminism in reading the *Barbie* film as a popular cultural text that reflects contemporary patriarchy.

Conclusion

This study aims to analyze the representation of patriarchal culture in the film *Barbie* (2023) using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach with a liberal feminist perspective. Based on the research results

and discussion, it can be concluded that the film *Barbie* represents patriarchy through visual symbols, narratives, and power relations between characters, operating at both denotative and connotative levels. Patriarchal culture in the film is not always explicitly depicted but rather appears in the form of myths, the objectification of women, symbols of masculinity, and the normalization of female subordination. These findings indicate that film, as a product of popular culture, plays an active role in shaping and reproducing social meanings related to gender.

The results also show that the film *Barbie* not only represents patriarchy but also critiques gender inequality through the experiences of Barbie and Gloria. The film emphasizes the importance of individual awareness, critical reflection, and dialogue as efforts to address gender injustice. Within a liberal feminist framework, the film *Barbie* promotes the idea of equal opportunity and individual freedom without positioning men as the primary enemy but rather as part of a social structure that is also influenced by patriarchal constructions. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that further research examine gender representation in *Barbie* films or other popular films using different feminist perspectives, such as radical feminism or postfeminism, to enrich the analytical perspective. Furthermore, further research could develop audience reception studies to understand how messages of patriarchy and gender equality are interpreted by audiences from diverse social backgrounds. For media practitioners and filmmakers, the results of this study are expected to provide material for reflection in presenting fairer and more unbiased gender representation in the film industry.

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