ANALYSIS OF GENDER REPRESENTATION AND FEMINIST DISCOURSE IN *BARBIE* AND *WONDER WOMAN* THROUGH STUART HALL'S REPRESENTATION THEORY

Roro Meifi Pitaloka,[1]* Yoga Pratama,[2]

[1] Master of English Education Program Indraprasta PGRI University, Jakarta, Indonesia
[2] Darma Persada University, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: yogatoshi.15@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore how gender is constructed and represented through feminism in the films Barbie and Wonder Woman, using Stuart Hall's representation theory, particularly his constructionist approach. Hall's theory emphasizes that 'meaning' is not just a passive reflection; it's actively shaped by culture, language, symbols, and the interpretation of social contexts. By employing a qualitative research methodology, this study embraces a constructivist paradigm, which aligns with Hall's (1997) view that media representations are crafted rather than simply mirroring reality. This perspective highlights how cultural and social contexts play a crucial role in shaping the meanings of media texts. The research focuses on how filmmakers encode meaning in their works and how audiences decode it. The findings reveal that this approach enables a critical engagement with the films' content, allowing for the identification of how they interact with societal ideologies. Both films promote feminist themes by showcasing strong female characters who defy social norms and expectations placed on women, highlighting the importance of critically examining gendered expectations, and illustrating how media can positively influence societal views on gender equality.

Keywords: *Gender; Representation; Feminist; Discourse; Film*

INTRODUCTION

Gender representation and feminist discourse within media, specifically film, is one of the most critical areas of study within cultural and gender studies as they play a fundamental theoretical role in shaping societal ideologies. Media is not just a mirror reflecting the society but it also acts as an agent in producing the meanings, contributing to the ways in which we come to perceive and enact gender roles, identities and norms (Hall, 1997).

Films, becoming one of the most popular kinds of media, function as a cultural mirror, reflecting and shaping societal ideals (Hall, 1997; Hooks, 1996). In recent years, the discourse about feminist narratives in cinema has gained popularity, with an increasing number of films featuring female protagonists and tackling gender inequality (Mulvey, 1975; Tasker & Negra, 2007). This trend is consistent with wider feminist media study, which questions traditional gender representations and demands for more inclusive narrative (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Among these, *Barbie* (2023) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) stand out as cultural milestones, offering distinct yet equally significant approaches to gender representation and feminist discourse.

As contemporary blockbusters, *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* transcend their roles as mere entertainment. They delve into critical issues of patriarchy, empowerment, and societal expectations, presenting narratives that place women at the center of action and ideological debates. *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig, employs a satirical lens to critique the unrealistic and often oppressive standards imposed on women. Though conceptually different, both films represent what Hall (1997) calls "cultural struggle" sites: Barbie through sarcastic deconstruction of commercial feminism (Sobande, 2020), and Wonder Woman through mythic reappropriation of warrior femininity (Cocca, 2016). Their complementary methods echo Tasker and Negra's (2007) observation that mainstream feminist media must both entertain and politicize.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of how mainstream media represents gender and feminism. While feminist films are often lauded for their progressive narratives, their effectiveness in genuinely challenging patriarchal ideologies remains a subject of debate. Scholars such as Jenkins (2017) argue that these films serve as cultural interventions, introducing new paradigms of empowerment and agency. However, others, like Banet-Weiser (2018), critique the commodification of feminism in mainstream media, where feminist ideals are repackaged for profit rather than societal transformation. Additionally, there are diverging perspectives on whether these films succeed in offering intersectional representations of feminism. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework underscores the importance of addressing overlapping systems of oppression, such as race, class, and gender. These theoretical debates highlight the need for a critical analysis of *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* to assess their contributions to feminist discourse and their alignment with intersectional principles.

Stuart Hall (1997), a cultural theorist, is renowned for his work on the theory of representation, which examines how meaning is produced and communicated through language, symbols, and images in media. His theory focuses on how these representations influence the way we understand the world and shape our cultural, social, and political perceptions. Hall's ideas are foundational to the study of media, culture, and identity, particularly in understanding how societal norms are constructed and reinforced through various forms of media.

Hall argued that representation is a constructive process that is built through language, symbols, and culture, which can create specific meanings

and interpretations for audiences. This is highly relevant when analyzing gender representations in films like *Barbie* (2023) and *Wonder Woman* (2017).

Stuart Hall's (1997) groundbreaking work outlines three key approaches to representation that are especially relevant when we look at Barbie (Gerwig, 2023) and Wonder Woman (Jenkins, 2017).

1. Reflective Approach: At first glance, the storylines of these films seem to mirror social gender dynamics Barbie highlights the contradictions of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2009), while Wonder Woman illustrates the historical context of patriarchy (Cocca, 2016).

2. Intentional Approach: Gerwig's witty critique of commercial feminism (Sobande, 2020) and Jenkins' purposeful challenge to the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) reveal the directors' intended ideological messages.

3. The Constructionist Approach: Both films exemplify Hall's idea of representation as a cultural process. Barbie presents femininity in a tongue-in-cheek manner (Butler, 1990), while Wonder Woman redefines what it means to be a hero through Diana's complex identity (Cocca, 2016). This aligns with Hall's assertion that meaning is created through discourse rather than mere reflection.

Taking this viewpoint, we can see how Barbie breaks down traditional gender norms through hyperreality, while Wonder Woman rebuilds them through mythic storytelling, showcasing what Tasker and Negra (2007) refer to as the dual role of "popular feminism" in both supporting and challenging societal power structures. Hall's constructionist view on representation suggests that media portrayals aren't just mirrors of reality; they're actively shaped by media creators and interpreted by audiences. In this framework, meaning comes to life through the encoding done by media producers and the decoding performed by viewers, who each bring their own social backgrounds and experiences to the table. Hall also points out that these representations are closely tied to power dynamics, social ideologies, and cultural contexts, indicating that they can either reinforce or contest prevailing societal norms.

In the context of gender representation, Hall's theory helps to understand how films like *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* construct and communicate meanings about femininity, masculinity, and feminist ideals. These films encode gendered messages, and audiences decode these messages through their unique social lenses. The representation of gender and feminist discourse in both films can be seen as a site where these power relations, ideologies, and challenges to gender norms are played out.

Hall's (1997) encoding/decoding model and constructionist theories provide a valuable lens for examining how gender is represented in these films through four interconnected dimensions:

1. Encoding and Decoding Gender Representations
    a. Encoding: In Gerwig's Barbie, the vibrant production design (Dargis, 2023) and clever dialogue (like "Patriarchy isn't about men") serve to critique the commodification of postfeminism (Gill, 2017). Meanwhile, Jenkins' Wonder Woman showcases feminist resilience through its slow-motion battle scenes and the stark

contrast between costume designs (Themyscira vs. WWI London) (Cocca, 2016).

    b. Decoding: Audience responses vary widely, from TikTok discussions about Barbie's take on feminism (Romano, 2023) to military women expressing their support for Wonder Woman (Brown, 2017). These reactions highlight the diverse interpretations shaped by viewers' own gendered experiences (Hall, 1980).

2. Ideology and Power Dynamics in Gender Representation

    a. Both films engage in a struggle over ideology: Barbie reveals the contradictions within neoliberal feminism through Ken's patriarchal takeover (Rottenberg, 2018), while Wonder Woman challenges militarized masculinity with Diana's pacifist approach to heroism (Cocca, 2016).

3. Gender Norms and Feminist Ideals

    a. Barbie takes apart the cultural codes surrounding femininity, as seen in Stereotypical Barbie's existential crisis, which echoes Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity.

    b. Wonder Woman redefines what it means to be "strong" by promoting empathetic leadership (Ely & Meyerson, 2000), pushing back against traditional superhero masculinity (Brown, 2017).

4. Power of Feminist Discourse in Media Representations

    a. The climax of Barbie, with the line "I'm Kenough," challenges Hall's (1997) idea of a "preferred reading" by rejecting any resolution that upholds patriarchy.

    b. Wonder Woman's iconic "No Man's Land" scene has become a powerful feminist symbol (Cocca, 2018), illustrating Hall's (1982) concept of "counter-hegemonic representation."

In addition, this study's primary objective is to analyze how gender representation and feminist discourse are constructed in *Barbie* (2023) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) using Stuart Hall's representation theory. Hall's constructionist approach emphasizes that representation is not a passive reflection of reality but an active process of meaning-making shaped by cultural codes and ideologies (Hall, 1997). By applying this theoretical framework, the study seeks to uncover how these films negotiate gender norms, challenge or reinforce patriarchal ideologies, and communicate feminist ideals to diverse audiences. Moreover, the study addresses a crucial question: Do these films merely reflect existing societal norms, or do they actively reshape them to foster new understandings of gender and empowerment?

The findings of this study aim to illuminate the nuanced interplay between media, culture, and ideology. *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* offer distinct methodologies for engaging with feminist discourse, *Barbie* employs satire and humor to dismantle traditional femininity, while *Wonder Woman* utilizes the heroism of its protagonist to demonstrate female empowerment and moral clarity. These contrasting approaches provide a comprehensive lens through which to evaluate how media contributes to the evolving narrative of gender representation. As Hall (1997) posits, representation is a

dynamic process that not only reflects but also constructs reality, making it an essential tool for analyzing the ideological functions of popular culture.

In brief, this research contributes to the broader conversation about the role of media in shaping societal narratives about gender. By critically engaging with popular culture, this study underscores the importance of understanding media's capacity to both challenge and reinforce existing power structures. In doing so, it highlights the potential of films like *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* to serve as agents of cultural change in the ongoing discourse on feminism and gender equality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The examination of gender representation and feminist discourse in films like *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* is supported by various theoretical and empirical studies. These studies provide a foundation for understanding how gender and feminism are constructed in media and how audiences interpret these constructions. This section synthesizes previous research relevant to the topic and connects it to Stuart Hall's representation theory, emphasizing the encoding and decoding processes in media analysis.

Banet-Weiser (2018) critically analyzes the commodification of feminism in popular culture, arguing that feminist ideals are often repackaged for commercial purposes, thus diluting their political impact. Using examples from advertisements, social media campaigns, and films, Banet-Weiser highlights the tension between feminist messaging and the commercial interests of the media industry. The study raises questions about the sincerity of feminist discourse in films that operate within capitalist frameworks, a theme that aligns with Hall's (1997) assertion that media messages are encoded with specific ideologies that audiences may decode differently based on their socio-cultural contexts.

Gill (2016) explores the elements of postfeminist media culture, focusing on the portrayal of women as empowered individuals while often neglecting structural inequalities. Her analysis of advertisements, television shows, and films reveals a recurring narrative that emphasizes personal empowerment over collective action against systemic oppression. This critique is applicable to both *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman*, as these films celebrate the individual achievements of their protagonists without fully addressing the larger socio-political structures of patriarchy. Gill's argument resonates with Hall's concept of hegemonic and oppositional readings, as audiences may either accept the dominant narrative of empowerment or critically question its limitations.

Another critical study by Mulvey (1975) introduces the concept of the "male gaze," demonstrating how women in mainstream cinema are often depicted as objects of male desire. Using visual analysis of Hollywood films, Mulvey reveals how gender representation reflects patriarchal power dynamics. This theory is significant for analyzing *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman*, as both films attempt to challenge traditional gender roles. *Barbie* critiques the societal expectations placed on women, while *Wonder Woman* portrays a female hero who actively drives the narrative. However, Mulvey's framework

prompts a deeper investigation into whether these films fully subvert the male gaze or continue to operate within its constraints.

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory offers another layer of analysis, emphasizing how overlapping identities such as race, gender, and class shape experiences of oppression. This framework is crucial for understanding how *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* address the complexities of identity in their feminist narratives. While both films highlight gender issues, Crenshaw's work encourages a broader examination of how intersecting identities are represented or marginalized within these stories. For instance, an intersectional analysis could reveal how *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* engage with issues of race and class in their portrayal of feminist discourses.

Additionally, Schmid and Klimmt (2011) provide insights into audience reception, showing how cultural and social contexts influence interpretations of media texts. Their study on parasocial relationships demonstrates that viewers' interactions with fictional characters are shaped by their personal and cultural backgrounds. This research underscores the importance of audience diversity in decoding the feminist messages of *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman*. The variability in audience interpretations aligns with Hall's encoding/decoding model, highlighting the active role of viewers in constructing meaning from media representations.

Negra and Tasker (2014) examine how films and media respond to societal crises by depicting women as symbols of resilience or victims of systemic pressures. Their analysis reveals that media representations often reflect broader socio-political dynamics, such as economic instability or cultural shifts. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman*, which emerged in different socio-political contexts but share a common focus on female empowerment. Negra and Tasker's work suggests that these films not only engage with feminist discourse but also reflect the tensions and contradictions of their cultural moments.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the representation of gender and feminist discourse in *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman*. A qualitative method is particularly suitable for this research as it enables an in-depth exploration of how these films construct and convey meanings related to gender and feminism. By applying Stuart Hall's representation theory, this study seeks to uncover the cultural and ideological underpinnings embedded in the films' narratives, characters, and visual elements.

The research adopts a constructivist paradigm, which aligns with Hall's (1997) assertion that media representations are actively constructed and not mere reflections of reality. This approach emphasizes the role of cultural and social contexts in shaping the meaning of media texts. The study is interpretative in nature, focusing on how meaning is encoded in the films by their creators and decoded by audiences. This perspective allows the researcher to critically engage with the films' content and identify the ways in which they engage with societal ideologies. Data were collected through

literary analysis by examining the films' narratives, dialogues, cinematography, and character interactions to decode their embedded meanings. Its included reviewing secondary sources, such as critical reviews, to contextualize the films within broader cultural and ideological frameworks. This combination of primary and secondary data provided a robust foundation for analyzing the films' representations of gender and feminism.

The subjects of this study are the films *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig, and *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins. These films were selected for their cultural significance and their explicit engagement with themes of gender and feminism. The analysis focuses on key scenes, dialogues, character arcs, and visual representations that contribute to the construction of gender and feminist narratives. Both films provide rich, contrasting examples of how popular media can address feminist discourse and challenge traditional gender norms.

The research procedure consists of several key stages. First, the films were watched multiple times to identify recurring themes and representations related to gender and feminism. Second, key scenes that prominently address feminist discourse and gender representation were selected for detailed analysis. Third, Hall's representation theory was applied to decode the cultural and ideological messages conveyed in the films, with a focus on the encoding/decoding process, symbolic meanings, and ideological implications. Finally, a representation analysis was conducted to highlight similarities and differences in the two films' approaches to feminist discourse.

The primary materials for this study are the films *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman*. Secondary materials include, film reviews, scholarly articles, and theoretical texts on representation and feminist media studies. Analytical tools such as thematic coding and discourse analysis were employed to examine both the films and their broader cultural contexts. This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of the films' ideological frameworks.

The data analysis followed a thematic coding approach, guided by Hall's representation theory. This involved identifying and categorizing themes related to gender representation and feminist discourse, such as empowerment, patriarchy, intersectionality, and societal critique. Each theme was analyzed for its symbolic and ideological significance within the films. The findings were then compared and contrasted to determine how the two films address gender and feminism differently. This analysis sheds light on the extent to which *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* align with or diverge from broader feminist ideals and cultural narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Encoding and Decoding Gender Representations and Feminist Discourse in Barbie and Wonder Woman

The encoding-decoding framework in accordance to Hall's (1980) theory offers valuable insights into how gender representations and feminist discourse in *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* are constructed and interpreted. Both films encode gendered and feminist messages through visual symbols,

dialogue, character actions, and narrative structures. The way these messages are decoded by audiences, however, varies depending on social, cultural, and ideological contexts.

1. Encoding in *Barbie: Gender Norms and Feminine Perfection*

Barbie encodes gender representations primarily through its portrayal of the Barbie doll character, who traditionally symbolizes stereotypical femininity, beauty, and perfection. The film encodes gender representations in several ways:

- Visual Symbols

Barbie's appearance, with her signature pink attire and meticulously styled hair, represents the societal ideal of feminine beauty.

Figure 1. Barbie's visual as the symbol of feminine beauty where Barbie still lives in Barbieland. The figure source is Vogue Singapore and Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures. © 2023 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.
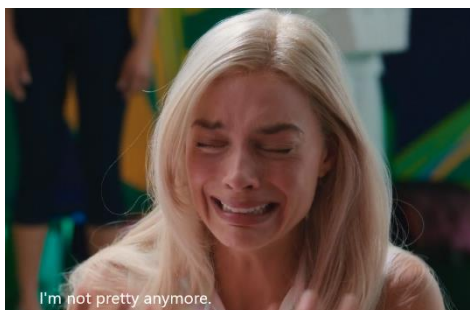

Figure 2. Barbie's visual after returning back from the Real World indicates her consciousness of inner growth and symbolized her rejection of perfection. The figure Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures. © 2023 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.

As the narrative progresses, however, Barbie's visual presentation undergoes noticeable changes that parallel her internal journey of self-discovery and emancipation from these rigid societal constructs. Through figure 2, Barbie's vibrant pinks and meticulously coordinated outfits gradually give way to simpler, less stylized clothing choices, signaling her rejection of perfection as a measure of worth. Similarly, subtle shifts in her hairstyle and demeanor reflect a growing acceptance of her individuality and humanity.

- Narrative Structure

The journey of Barbie from the idealized Barbie Land to the Ideal "Real World" serves as a compelling narrative device that encapsulates the complexities of gender representation and societal expectations. Barbie Land, depicted as a utopia where women occupy every position of power from presidents to scientists is a symbolic microcosm of an idealized feminist vision. In addition, the Real World is a poignant narrative device that underscores the broader commentary on societal expectations of women.

Table 1. Different Narrative Structure example in *Barbieland* and *the Real World.*

Narrative Structure	
Barbieland	Real World
p.2, HELEN MIRREN (V.O.) She has her own money, her own house, her own car, her own career. Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything. p.2, HELEN MIRREN (V.O.) Girls can grow into women who can achieve everything and anything they set their mind to.	p.29, BARBIE MARGOT Wow! The Real World! BARBIE MARGOT Mine very much has an undertone of violence.

- Character Actions and Dialogue

Barbie's actions and conversations in the film bring out the tension between society's expectations and the reality of personal identity. When Barbie enters the Real World, she's faced with challenges that force her to confront societal norms about beauty, success, and womanhood. One of the iconic act and dialogues present in Barbie is the conversation between Barbie and Shasha:

p.46, **BARBIE MARGOT**
Whoa hang on you're describing something stereotypical. Barbie is so much more than that.
SASHA
Look at yourself!
BARBIE MARGOT
(she has a point)
Well, I am, actually, Stereotypical Barbie.
(Gerwig & Baumbach, n.d., p.46)

2. Decoding *Barbie*: When decoding Barbie, audiences understand the film's diverse critique of gender norms through a variety of ideological lenses, influenced by their own experiences, cultural backgrounds, and knowledge with feminist ideology. Stuart Hall's constructionist theory emphasizes that meaning is negotiated by audiences through their

unique social positioning, which explains the wide range of interpretations of Barbie's feminist teachings.

● Feminist Interpretation

Many viewers may decode Barbie's journey as a feminist awakening. The film's emphasis on breaking free from societal expectations and discovering one's authentic self-aligns with feminist principles of autonomy, self-definition, and rejecting traditional gender roles.

● Critique of Beauty Standards

Audiences may decode the film's satire of the Barbie doll's association with unattainable beauty standards as a critique of commercialized femininity.

● Subversion of Stereotypes

For some viewers, the film may be interpreted as an attempt to deconstruct stereotypical femininity, suggesting that women should not be confined to one-dimensional representations of beauty or perfection.

3. Encoding in *Wonder Woman:* Heroism and Feminine Strength

In *Wonder Woman*, gender representations are encoded through Diana's character, who embodies both traditionally masculine traits (strength, combat ability) and traditionally feminine qualities (compassion, empathy). The encoding of gender in Wonder Woman includes:

● Visual Symbols

Figure 3. Diana's warrior costume, complete with armor, shields, and swords, encodes a traditionally masculine image of a warrior. The figure Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures. © 2017 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Diana's portrayal goes beyond this traditionally masculine coding. Her facial expressions, body language, and actions reveal a deeply feminine side rooted in compassion, love, and moral clarity.

● Narrative Structure

Table 2. Different Narrative Structure example in *Themyscira* and *the Outside World* in *Wonder Woman.*

Narrative Structure	
Themyscira (The Island of the Amazons)	Outside World (No Man's Land)

 Figure 4. The Themyscira setting in *Wonder Woman* The figure Courtesy Warner Bros. Pictures. © 2017 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved.	 Figure 5. The No Man's Land setting in the scene 1:14:07. Pictures. © 2017 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved
--and a young Diana, Princess of Themyscira watches it all from the edge of the field. Her eyes blazed in admiration. (Heinberg et al., n.d., p.2, scene 4)	**Diana** No, it can't be…everything I saw? They were killing each other. Killing people they can't even see… killing children. Like it was nothing…it had to be him! It can't be them! (Heinberg et al., n.d., p.110, scene 101)

- Character Actions and Dialogue

Diana's interactions with other characters, particularly Steve Trevor, demonstrate a blend of power and compassion as it shows below:

STEVE
Diana! I have to go.
DIANA
What are you saying? Steve, whatever it is, I can do it. Let me do it --
STEVE
No. It has to be me. I can save today; you can save the world.
(beat) I wish we had more time.
STEVE
It's not about whether they deserve it or not. It's about what you believe. You think I don't get it? All I've seen out there? I wish I could tell you that there was one 'bad guy' to blame. Maybe we're all to blame. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to do better. (beat) And if you believe this war should stop, Diana, if you want to stop it, then help me stop it. Now.
(Heinberg et al., n.d., p132)

4. Decoding *Wonder Woman*: Audience Interpretation of Empowerment

In decoding *Wonder Woman*, audiences interpret Diana's character and the feminist messages encoded in the film based on their social context and understanding of gender and power.

- Feminist Interpretation

Many viewers may decode Diana's character as a feminist symbol of strength and autonomy.

- Empowerment and Female Heroism

Diana's role as a warrior challenges the notion that heroism is inherently masculine.

- Complexity of Feminist Representation

Some viewers may decode the narrative as still reinforcing certain gender dynamics.

Discussions

The findings show using Stuart Hall's constructionist approach to representation, both films encode and decode gender representations, power dynamics, and feminist discourse. First, both films encode gender representations by using visual symbols, narrative structures, and character actions that communicate specific ideas about gender roles. In *Barbie*, the encoding of gender begins with the portrayal of the Barbie doll as a perfect symbol of femininity, beauty, and societal expectations of women. The narrative follows Barbie's transition from her flawless world in Barbie Land to the harsh, more patriarchal Real World, where she faces the challenges imposed by societal gender norms. The visual symbols, such as her iconic pink attire and her evolution throughout the story, encode the critique of unattainable beauty standards and the pressure placed on women to embody perfection (Mackie, 2023). This encoding of perfection is subverted as Barbie embarks on a journey to redefine herself, signaling a feminist message about breaking free from societal expectations (Czajka, 2023).

In *Wonder Woman*, the encoding of gender is evident in Diana Prince's embodiment of both masculine and feminine traits. She is portrayed as a strong warrior, which contrasts with the traditional depiction of femininity, but also retains compassion and empathy, qualities often associated with women. Through visual symbols such as her warrior attire and the narrative structure that places her in a male-dominated world, the film encodes a message of feminist empowerment that challenges traditional gender roles (Smith, 2017). Diana's ability to navigate through a world dominated by male heroes while maintaining her femininity provides a nuanced representation of gender, encoding feminist ideals of equality and autonomy (Doane, 2017).

Furthermore, Decoding the gender representations in these films really hinges on how audiences interpret them, which is influenced by their own social, cultural, and personal backgrounds. For instance, many viewers see Barbie as a feminist critique of beauty standards and the societal roles that are often thrust upon women. On the other hand, some might interpret it as a celebration of authenticity and individuality (Mackie, 2023). Similarly, Wonder Woman is often viewed as a strong feminist statement, with Diana embodying female strength and independence. Yet, some critics argue that even though the film challenges traditional gender roles, it still emphasizes Diana's relationship with Steve Trevor, which could imply that female empowerment is still tied to male characters (Smith, 2017). This variety of audience reactions aligns with Stuart Hall's theory that media texts are polysemic—meaning they can be interpreted in many ways—and that how we decode them depends on our own ideological perspectives. Consequently, both films serve as battlegrounds where feminist ideals are either negotiated,

embraced, or resisted, depending on how the audience engages with the conversation around gender.

Second, the power dynamics in *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* reflect the ways gender is constructed within both narratives. In *Barbie*, the film begins by flipping power dynamics, presenting a matriarchal society where women hold all the key roles. This is used as a satirical critique of patriarchal ideologies that place men in positions of power in the real world. The reversal of these gender norms exposes how deeply ingrained the patriarchal structure is in the audience's understanding of power. The power dynamics in *Wonder Woman* also reflect a feminist discourse, as Diana enters a male-dominated world and becomes a figure of resistance and strength, not only through her combat skills but through her moral clarity (Doane, 2017). Both films highlight the way women can subvert or challenge established power structures, but they also reflect the tension between gender equality and the still-prevalent patriarchal framework.

Third, both films offer a critical representation of traditional gender norms. In *Barbie*, the narrative criticizes the unrealistic beauty standards women are often expected to meet, exposing how these norms are constructed and perpetuated by society. Barbie's evolution throughout the story represents a feminist rejection of these norms, advocating for women to embrace their true selves instead of adhering to society's idealized versions of womanhood (Czajka, 2023).

Contrast from *Wonder Woman* who presents a more balanced approach to gender roles. Diana embodies both traditionally masculine qualities like physical strength and courage, and traditionally feminine traits like care and empathy. This blend challenges the rigid binary of masculinity and femininity, suggesting that gender traits are not fixed and can be fluid. Diana's leadership and independence are shown not as a rejection of femininity but as an evolution of it, representing feminist ideals of equality and strength. The film ultimately asks the audience to reconsider what makes a woman powerful, portraying empowerment as both internal strength and the ability to challenge external forces (Doane, 2017).

While Barbie and Wonder Woman undeniably advance feminist representation in mainstream cinema, their interventions reveal fundamental tensions within commercial feminist media. Barbie employs ironic hyper commercialism to expose neoliberal feminism's paradoxes the film's pastel critique of patriarchal capitalism becomes commodified through Mattel's Feminist Barbie merchandise, exemplifying Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of empowerment marketing. Similarly, Wonder Woman's mythic revisionism negotiates what Cocca (2018) terms the "superheroine's double bind": Diana must perform hyperfeminine compassion while conforming to masculine-coded heroics to maintain market viability. Both films demonstrate what Hall (1997) identified as representation's ideological struggle they simultaneously challenge gender norms through Barbie's deconstruction of beauty standards and Wonder Woman's battlefield feminism, while remaining constrained by corporate imperatives that dilute radical potential. Their most significant achievement lies not in perfect feminist representation, but in creating mainstream spaces where, as McRobbie (2020) argues, feminist questions

become discussable even if their answers remain compromised by commercial logics.

Additionally, both films demonstrate the power of feminist discourse in reshaping media representations of women. In *Barbie*, the film directly critiques the commercialization of femininity, using the Barbie doll as a symbol of unrealistic beauty standards. By challenging these standards and offering a narrative about personal growth and self-acceptance, *Barbie* serves as an example of feminist discourse can critique and resist patriarchal and capitalist forces (Mackie, 2023). Similarly, *Wonder Woman* uses feminist discourse to redefine heroism. Diana, as a female warrior, challenges the traditional gendered expectations of heroism, which often equates strength with masculinity. By positioning Diana as both strong and empathetic, the film presents a broader, more inclusive definition of heroism that aligns with feminist ideals of equality and power (Smith, 2017).

These films show the power of feminist discourse in media by presenting complex female protagonists who reject simplistic gender roles and offer alternative, empowering representations of womanhood. Through their respective narratives, *Barbie* and *Wonder Woman* encourage viewers to rethink societal constructs of gender and power, promoting a more inclusive and diverse representation of women in media.

CONCLUSIONS

This study dives into how gender representation and feminist discourse are portrayed in Barbie and Wonder Woman, using Stuart Hall's constructionist representation theory as a framework. By examining how filmmakers encode meaning and how diverse audiences decode it, the research uncovers that both films serve as cultural texts that challenge conventional gender norms and present alternative narratives of female empowerment.

Barbie takes a critical look at the commercialization of femininity, shedding light on the psychological and social pressures that come with unrealistic beauty standards. With its satirical storytelling and visual symbolism, it conveys a message of liberation from traditional gender roles, encouraging viewers to interpret its feminist undertones as a call for authenticity and independence. On the other hand, Wonder Woman presents a vision of heroic femininity that blends strength with compassion, positioning its lead character as a beacon of moral clarity and resistance in a patriarchal society.

Hall's constructionist perspective emphasizes that media doesn't just mirror reality; it actively shapes cultural perceptions through ideology and power dynamics. The study highlights that the meaning of media texts isn't set in stone; it's constantly negotiated by audiences. Viewers bring their own backgrounds, values, and beliefs to their interpretations, leading to a range of understandings from mainstream to counter-narratives.

In the end, this research shows that Barbie and Wonder Woman are more than just entertainment; they are spaces for discourse where feminist ideas are debated, negotiated, and reimagined. Both films play a significant role in the ongoing conversation about gender in popular culture by providing

rich, nuanced portrayals of women that challenge simplistic stereotypes. They illustrate how media can be a battleground for ideological conflict and a driving force for cultural change towards gender equality.

REFERENCES

Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.

Brown, J. (2017). Wonder Woman's ambivalent feminism. *Journal of Popular Film & Television,* 45(3), 132-141. https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2017.1339235

Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society, 19*(6), 829-859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Cocca, C. (2016). *Superwomen: Gender, power, and representatio*n. Bloomsbury Academic.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), 139-167.

Czajka, S. (2023). *Feminist reimaginings: Barbie's journey toward self-acceptance and identity*. Feminist Media Studies, 19(2), 34-45.

Dargis, M. (2023, July 21). Barbie review: A riotous, candy-colored feminist fable. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/21/movies/barbie-review.html

Doane, M. A. (2017). *Feminist representations in superhero cinema: Diana Prince as a model of empowerment*. Journal of Gender Studies, 21(3), 112-123.

Gerwig, G. (Director). (2023). *Barbie* [Film]. Warner Bros.

Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Polity Press.

Gill, R. (2016). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 10*(2), 147–166. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898

Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Ed.), *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 128–138). Routledge.

Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage.

Hooks, B. (1996). *Reel to real: Race, sex, and class at the movies*. Routledge.

Jenkins, P. (2017). [Director's commentary on Wonder Woman]. Warner Bros.

Jenkins, P. (Director) (2017). *Wonder Woman* [Film]. Warner Bros.

Mackie, R. (2023). *Barbie's break from perfection: Gendered critique through satirical utopia*. Gender and Society, 34(1), 58-73.

McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. SAGE.

Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen, 16*(3), 6-18. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6

Negra, D., & Tasker, Y. (Eds.). (2014). *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*. Duke University Press.

Romano, A. (2023, August 4). The Barbie backlash, explained. Vox.

https://www.vox.com/culture/23818635/barbie-movie-backlash-feminism-explained https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131fr9

Schmid, H., & Klimmt, C. (2011). A magically nice guy: Parasocial relationships with Harry Potter across different cultures. *International Communication Gazette, 73*(3), 252–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048510393658

Smith, L. (2017). Gender, power, and heroism in Wonder Woman: A feminist reading of Diana's journey. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 50(4), 80-92.

Sobande, F. (2020). The digital lives of black women in Britain. Palgrave Macmillan.

Tasker, Y., & Negra, D. (Eds.). (2007). Interrogating postfeminism: Gender and the politics of popular culture. Duke University Press.