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# Gender Inequality In The Barbie Movie: Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis

# By

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#### Abstract

Research Objective: This study aims to analyze gender inequality in the Barbie movie through Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis.

Research method: This study uses Stuart Hall's Reception Theory with a constructivist paradigm. The data collection techniques used in this research are the observation of the Barbie movie, produced by Heyday Film, released in 2023; interviews conducted with informants who have watched the Barbie movie, as well as documentation and source triangulation for data validity.

Findings: The results of this study show that the gender inequality present in this film is very clearly depicted through Barbie and Ken. In this film, women are depicted as being able to do anything in the Barbie world but not being free when entering the real world. In addition, there are also themes of sexual harassment and the struggle for equal rights in education and employment. In this film, women are also not presented merely as weak objects or in need of help from men. But on the contrary, Barbie and other female characters in this film are portrayed as heroes who are capable of overcoming various obstacles and achieving their own dreams. This study found that, out of 5 informants, 1 informant was categorized as Dominant-Hegemonic Position, 2 informants were categorized as Negotiated Position, and 2 informants were categorized as Oppositional Position.

Research Novelty: This research focuses on the gender inequality present in the Barbie movie using Reception Theory.

Keywords: Barbie, Gender Inequality, Reception Theory, Stuart Hall

# Introduction

Etymologically, the word communication comes from the English word "communication," which was developed in the United States and originates from the element of journalism. In addition, communication can also be derived from Latin, namely communicare which means to participate or inform, communis which means common or applicable everywhere, cammunico which means to make common, and communicatio which is derived from the word communis meaning the same. Here, "sama" means the same meaning. (Roudhonah, 2019) Mass media is one of the means of communication in conveying information or messages that the communicator wants to deliver to the public.

Mass media is also used as a means of obtaining information, entertainment, and promotional tools. According to (Effendy, 2017), the mass media commonly used in daily life are newspapers, radio, television, and films that operate in the fields of information, education, and recreation, or in other terms, enlightenment, education, and entertainment.

The process of modernization is always dynamically moving in creating structural changes in the socio-cultural society and the systems within it. This results in a surge of communication and information flow. Where one of the communication media is film, which according to Rozario (2021), states that film has entered the stage of modernization, giving birth to various film producers and directors, each with their own style and methods (Rozario, 2021). Film, as a popular mass media and frequently used by the public alongside television, has thus become a part of daily life. The story in a film is packaged in such a way that the message conveyed can be delivered to the audience. The messages or values contained in a film can influence the audience cognitively, affectively, and conatively. Graeme Turner (Sobur, 2013) refuses to see films as reflections of society. For Turner, the meaning of film as a representation of societal reality is different from film merely as a reflection of reality. As a reflection of reality, film merely transfers reality to the screen without altering that reality. Meanwhile, as a representation of reality, film shapes and presents reality based on the codes, conventions, and ideologies of culture.

In patriarchal culture, there are still many stereotypes that women are more suited to managing the household, cooking, and taking care of children, so many of them eventually fall into these stereotypes and feel that working is no longer their responsibility. Based on the various issues that occur, feminism emerges as a movement to advocate for women's rights and achieve gender equality. Feminism is often identified with the patriarchal system, where this patriarchal system is a form in which women are considered unsuitable for leadership and men are placed at the top tier as holders of power. (Rokhamsyah, 2014) states that "feminism aims to shape the identity of women that has long been obscured by the hegemony of patriarchy." We often encounter films, novels, newspapers, and news articles that present feminist issues. Through various media, feminism seeks to inspire courage in women to fight against the injustices that occur and to eliminate the stigma of weakness associated with women.

However, a perspective developed in England in the 1970s and influential in feminist film theory argues that representation is not merely a reflection of reality, whether true or deviant, but rather a product of an active process of selecting and presenting, arranging and shaping, creating things that signify meaning, thus referred to as the practice of signification (Jackson & Jones, 2009). This practice of signification is related to the image of women in a film, which indeed functions as a sign, but a sign whose meaning is derived not from the reality of women's lives, but from men's desires and fantasies (Jackson & Jones, 2009). Based on this, it is not surprising that women can only function as narrative objects and signify passivity; in fact, women also function as the main erotic objects in films.

The involvement of women in Hollywood films is indeed small and often depicted as figures who only showcase physical beauty. However, this can serve as motivation for women to take active roles behind the scenes and create films that portray strong and resilient women. As shown by Margot Robbie in her film titled Barbie (2023). In the movie Barbie, Margot Robbie plays the main character, Barbie. The character Barbie is depicted as an active and cheerful woman.

Barbie is a doll produced by the American company, Mattel, and was introduced in March 1959. Ruth Handler, the creator of this doll, was inspired by a German doll called Bild Lilli. As time went on, Barbie dolls became increasingly popular

among children, and Ruth Handler eventually decided to produce an animated Barbie movie in 2001. Until now, Barbie's popularity has never faded, prompting a director named Greta Gerwig to decide to adapt it into a feature film titled Barbie The Movie, starring Margot Robbie as Barbie and Ryan Gosling as Ken, which was released on July 21, 2023

This research analyzes the gender inequality present in the Barbie movie. The researchers' reason is that Barbie is widely adored and considered a doll that transcends gender limitations and is embraced by various professions. This research examines gender inequality in the film, using Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding Theory.

# **Literature Review**

## Analysis of Stuart Hall's Theory: Encoding-Decoding

Stuart Hall developed the Reception Theory, known as Audience Theory or reader reception theory, in 1973 (Tan,S & Aladdin, YA, 2018). Hall's essay on 'Encoding and Decoding Television Discourse' focuses on the encoding and decoding of content provided to audiences through media such as magazines/newspapers, television/radio, and games. Currently, theorists who conduct media analysis through reception theory often derive results from audience experiences created by watching movies, playing games, or reading books (Tan, S & Aladdin, YA, 2018).

Reception Theory posits that films, books, or games do not have fixed meanings; rather, these meanings are shaped by the audience experiencing them (Balqis and Samatan, 2021). It is the audience or readers who give meaning to the events depicted in the text or visuals presented. Reception analysis explains how the audience interprets a show when watching it. A symbol, message, and sign are interpreted as the preferred reading or primary meaning of a scene or show. The common thread of the reception theory is that the audience plays an active role in interpreting a show or message they are receiving. Reception analysis is the process of meaningmaking (decoding) carried out by the audience when they "come into contact" with media content/messages. The process of reception of the message content is carried out by the audience automatically to interpret the message conveyed by the media (McQuail in Nugroho, 2017: 15).

In reception analysis, the audience is considered part of the interpretive community (Hall, in Balqis and Samatan, 2021), which is always actively involved in the process of interpreting messages and forming meanings from the media. The audience does not merely act as passive recipients of the meanings produced by mass media; rather, they can use various categories they possess to decode the message. Therefore, the audience often assigns meanings that differ from what the message creator intended, resulting in interpretations that can diverge from the original intent of the message sender.

The Encoding-Decoding Theory (in Balqis and Samatan, 2021) states that the audience interprets the message through three possible positions:

## 1) Dominant-Hegemonic Position

This position, explained by Hall (in Balqis and Samatan, 2021), allows the audience to fully and accurately understand the meaning or content of the message. The audience processes the messages in sync with the code formed by the sender. This is an ideal example of direct communication/message delivery, and it is on target because the audience's response is considered in line with the sender's expectations.

#### 2) Negotiated Position

This position is a form of a combination of audience meaning reception. On one hand, the audience can accept the dominant code presented, but on the other hand, they have differing opinions. In other words, the audience actively selects the messages they receive, according to a certain logic they possess. The audience does not simply accept the code given by the sender.

#### 3) Oppositional Position

Like the negotiation position, the audience in the opposition position also actually understands the meaning of the dominant codes given. However, the audience decontextualizes the entire coded message. The audience chooses to replace it with alternative references that they consider more relevant. The core of reception analysis is to understand the comprehension and meaning-making carried out by the audience. Media messages are considered very broad and polysemous, and can be interpreted according to the audience's context, culture, and social situation. The audience in this case does not have to accept what is given by the sender of the message. Because the received message can potentially be denied or redefined. The audience can also resist the influence of ideology through oppositional interpretation based on their own experiences and perspectives. This condition can be interpreted as a 'differential decoding' (McQuail, 2011:80).

# **Research Methodology**

This research uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a type of research that focuses on descriptive and interpretive aspects using descriptive analysis (Samatan, 2018). This method is used to obtain data in a more in-depth manner. According to Sugiyono (2014), Degdo (2024) Qualitative research is research used to study objects in their natural conditions, conducted in a combined manner, with data analysis being inductive in nature and the results of qualitative research emphasizing meaning and being partial rather than general (Samatan, 2017). This research also focuses on audience reception analysis, using Stuart Hall's Theory.

Validation in this research is data source triangulation (Samatan, 2018), namely the confirmation of data from expert informants regarding the Barbie film that represents gender inequality, which then serves as a reference for expert informants in providing their views on the Barbie film in accordance with the theme currently being researched.

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### The Issue of Gender Inequality in the Barbie Movie

The issue of gender inequality in the Barbie movie. becomes a topic that attracts the attention of many viewers, especially because this film highlights aspects that are often overlooked in popular media. Through its complex narrative and characterization, this film not only entertains but also challenges our thinking about gender roles in society. Therefore, it is important to consider how this film influences your views on gender inequality, especially in the context of daily life and broader social perceptions. The film "Barbie" successfully raised the issue of gender inequality in a way that is relevant and easily understood by various audiences. The portrayal of inequality in this film not only depicts the injustices faced by female characters but also invites viewers to reflect on gender roles in society.

## The Issue of Gender Stereotypes in the Barbie Movie

The issue of gender stereotypes in the film "Barbie" becomes the focus of critical analysis regarding how the film depicts gender roles. Through its characters and narrative, this film provides space for viewers to reflect on how traditional stereotypes are presented or perhaps transformed.

# The Barbie Movie and the Content or Issues of Gender Inequality

The film "Barbie" is not just mere entertainment, but also incorporates themes or issues about gender inequality that are relevant to social realities. In various scenes and character portrayals, viewers are invited to reflect on how gender inequality can manifest in different forms, both subtly and explicitly. The question that arises from the audience is: are there scenes or characters in the film that you think demonstrate gender inequality? This question opens up space for critical analysis of the film, delving deeper into how gender issues are represented and what their implications are for the audience.

#### **Encoding Gender Messages in the Barbie Movie**

The encoding of gender messages in the Barbie movie. is an important aspect that influences how viewers understand and interpret the gender representations presented. These messages can vary in intensity and form, depending on how the narrative and characters are constructed. However, the way each generation interprets these messages can differ, considering the different social, cultural, and experiential backgrounds. How do generational differences affect the way gender messages in the Barbie movie are watched and decoded? This question invites reflection on how the values and gender perspectives held by different generations can shape their interpretations of the film. but, as well as its impact on their understanding of gender issues.

Audience Reception Analysis of the Barbie Movie. Analysis of audience reception towards the film Barbie. provides a diverse picture of how viewers interpret the messages conveyed, especially regarding gender inequality issues. Viewpoints and reactions from viewers can vary depending on their background, experiences, and understanding of gender issues.

#### **Public Reception of the Barbie Movie**

Audience reception of the Barbie film varies, with many viewers interested in how the film addresses social issues, including gender inequality. This reaction reflects a variety of views and interpretations regarding the messages conveyed in the film.

#### Gender Representation in the Barbie Movie

Gender representation in the Barbie movie has become one of the most interesting aspects to analyze, especially considering Barbie's long history as a symbol in popular culture (Weissman, 1999). This film attempts to present various characters with diverse roles and traits, but it still sparks discussions about how gender is represented and whether any biases emerge.

Based on Ideological Differences The acceptance of ideology towards the Barbie movie. can vary depending on the differences in ideology and cultural background of the viewers. This film, which may carry certain values, can be interpreted differently by viewers with diverse ideologies or cultures.

# Public Reception of the Gender Inequality Message in the Barbie Movie

The audience's reception of the gender inequality message in the film "Barbie" is very varied, with many viewers questioning how the film conveys this issue. Audience reactions highlight the importance of fair and equal representation in media, especially in films with significant influence like "Barbie."

# **Discussion**

During the research on gender inequality in the Barbie movie, the researcher had diverse receptions (responses) according to the experiences and knowledge of each interviewed informant. This is evidenced by the results of the interviews conducted by the researcher with the six informants. In this case, the researcher uses Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory, because this theory explains the process of message delivery to the audience, which means the reception of the sixth source as the audience of the Barbie film. can be analyzed using this theory. This is also based on communication, which is a process where a message is sent and then received by the audience, resulting in a certain effect for the media audience. Then, the effect of this creates a diverse response due to the different backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge of media users.

The final result of this process is the determination of codes from social phenomena into a message or referred to as a meaning structure. The structure of meaning at this stage is dominated and interpreted from the perspective of production as the sender of the message. The next stage is the delivery of the message that has been packaged in the form of a Barbie movie. In other words, the film is a realization of the previously processed idea. The audience does not directly receive the structure of meaning from the production, but rather from the visuals presented in the film. Moreover, at this stage, the existence of the message sender is no longer visible

because language and visualization in the broadcast become the dominant elements. Therefore, when this message is broadcast, its content can be assured to be very diverse and entirely dependent on the viewer as the recipient of the message.

The final stage is when the viewer tries to interpret the content of the Barbie movie. by uncovering the codes from the watched film. For example, the differences in how several people perceive the Barbie movie can be attributed to the variations in their experiences regarding an event. The message successfully captured from the viewers' perspectives is referred to by Hall as a structure of meaning. The results obtained from the four informants provide several conclusions about the gender inequality present in the Barbie film.

#### **Analysis Based on Theory**

The reactions of viewers when watching the Barbie movie are very diverse, reflecting individual differences in how they perceive and respond to a film. Some sources believe that what Barbie does is indeed true, that women can do whatever they want, but some believe that what Barbie does... this is a gender inequality between Barbie and Ken. In this film, the gender inequality that Barbie and Ken impose when they take over Barbie-land is clearly visible. As a result, the audience begins to form their own perceptions of the gender inequality depicted.

# **Analysis Based on Triangulation**

In qualitative research, triangulation is very important to ensure the accuracy and validity of the research conducted by the researcher. In this study, the researcher used data source triangulation to test the credibility of the research data. Data source triangulation is one of the testing processes to examine the credibility of data by checking the data that has been obtained through various sources. This approach ensures that the research results do not depend on a single perspective, but rather reflect the variations in understanding among different informants. The researcher checks the information or data provided by film observers to strengthen the data obtained from interviews with one informant and another informant who are still related to each other and have met the criteria, namely several informants who are viewers of the Barbie movie, to obtain valid data.

One of the effects caused by this film is the increased awareness of viewers about gender issues. 3 informants stated that they became more sensitive to gender inequality after watching this film, especially when reading comments and reflections from others. This response indicates that the film has succeeded in sparking a broader debate about patriarchy and gender stereotypes that have long been entrenched in society. The Barbie movie attempts to challenge these stereotypes by presenting a more diverse and complex narrative, although there are still some moments that reinforce traditional views on gender.

The character Ken, who becomes the center of attention in the film, plays an important role in depicting gender inequality. When Ken tries to impose a patriarchal system in Barbie-land, he creates dissatisfaction among the other characters. This

shows how social norms that support inequality can function, and how men who are given power often do not realize the negative impact of their actions on women. Ken, although he appears as a challenging character, also represents how men can feel strong and powerful simply because of their gender status.

Looking from the generational perspective, there is a significant difference in how Generation Z and Millennials respond to the messages of this film. Generation Z tends to more quickly identify and support messages that challenge traditional gender norms, while Millennials are more likely to accept and view this film as an important representation of the ongoing social changes. This reflects how younger generations are more open to progressive ideas regarding gender equality and more critical of existing stereotypes.

This film also underscores the importance of gender equality and the need to eliminate inequality in various forms. In the context of the film, Barbie, who is often idealized, feels trapped in the expectations and pressures created by society, reflecting how women in the real world are often faced with similar challenges. Through its complex characters, this film attempts to show that both men and women have their own strengths and weaknesses, and that no gender should be superior to the other. Overall, Barbie has succeeded in becoming more than just an entertainment film; it serves as a mirror reflecting the dynamics of gender in society. By depicting more equitable and just gender roles, this film invites viewers to think critically about how we perceive gender and power, and why it is important to fight for equality in all aspects of life. In an effort to create meaningful change, this film shows that we all have a responsibility to address existing stereotypes and norms, in order to create a more just and balanced society.

#### Conclusion

In this research, gender inequality in the Barbie movie is clearly visible through the different roles between male and female characters. Men, especially the character Ken, are often depicted as powerful and dominant figures, while women are frequently placed in weaker positions and pressured by unrealistic standards. This creates a striking portrayal of the dynamics of power between genders, reflecting the social realities in the outside world. The impact of watching this film on viewers regarding gender inequality issues is very significant. Many viewers reported that they became more aware and critical of gender inequality issues, especially after reading comments and reflections from others who also watched the film. This film successfully sparked debates and raised awareness about patriarchy and longstanding gender stereotypes, encouraging viewers to consider how these norms affect daily life. Gender stereotypes in the Barbie movie are also very prominent. Women are often depicted as beautiful and passive figures, while men appear as strong and aggressive characters. Although this film attempts to challenge some of these stereotypes through a more diverse narrative, there are moments that still reinforce traditional views on gender roles. This creates a tension between the effort to represent equality and the reality of existing stereotypes, highlighting the challenges faced in creating a more equitable gender representation.

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