



To empower or not: The 2023 *Barbie* movie's impact on feminist perceptions among young women

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ABSTRACT

The 2023 *Barbie* movie has sparked widespread discussion on feminism and empowerment, challenging traditional gender roles and promoting modern ideals. This research examines how the female empowerment narrative and themes in the 2023 *Barbie* movie impact young Malaysian women's perceptions of empowerment. Expanding on Ahmad's (2020) analysis of positive *Barbie* portrayals, this study addresses the gap in research concerning the film's impact on Malaysian audiences. It also investigates how cultural and societal factors affect the reception of the movie's feminist messages. Using a qualitative approach, 15 young Malaysian women participated in focus group discussions to explore their lived experiences. Findings reveal that the movie reinforced feminist ideals by challenging stereotypes, though its impact was facilitated by cultural context. Participants appreciated its diverse representation but critiqued its limited inclusivity (e.g., body diversity). The study highlights the need for culturally nuanced feminist media to resonate with non-Western audiences. Nevertheless, the movie's messages of empowerment and breaking gender norms were particularly well received by the participants.

Keywords: ***Female empowerment, feminist perceptions, young women, gender norms, stereotypes***

INTRODUCTION

Research background

Although the iconic *Barbie* doll has long been acknowledged and embodied as a symbol of femininity and beauty, recent high-profile criticisms of its promotion of narrow female goals and unattainable beauty standards are disturbing. As a result, the movie *Barbie* (2023) reimagines Barbie as an empowered figure, tracing her journey of self-discovery and individualism after her exile from *Barbieland*. Given that gender roles and expectations are changing significantly in Malaysia, this change in representation offers a rare chance to investigate how the movie affects young women's views on empowerment.

This study explores how the *Barbie* film influences young Malaysian women's perceptions of femininity and self-empowerment. Film is a powerful tool for shaping societal views, especially among youth, and media portrayals of empowered women can challenge stereotypes and reshape self-image (Dittmar et al., 2006; Gogoi, 2022; Kord & Krimmer, 2011). Directed by Greta Gerwig, *Barbie* highlights themes of empowerment, career ambition, and self-discovery, making it a relevant case for examining media's role in redefining gender norms (Leuven, 2023).

In Malaysia's changing social landscape, where more women seek education and careers beyond traditional roles, the film provides insight into media's influence on shifting gender attitudes. The research utilised Gerbner's cultivation theory, which posits that frequent media exposure influences viewers' attitudes, and Hofstede's cultural dimensions, which offer a framework for comprehending the impact of cultural values on media reception. This research explores how young Malaysian women seeking empowerment and self-discovery perceive the film's messages within a culture that balances traditional values with modern aspirations ("Deeper than expected", 2023).

Additionally, in Malaysia's diverse media landscape, young women are exposed to multiple narratives on empowerment. The *Barbie* movie (2023) provides a distinct opportunity to explore female empowerment through a redefined narrative of self-discovery. Based on Ahmad's (2020) research on *Barbie*'s positive depictions, this study examines how cultural and societal factors influence Malaysian viewers' reception of the *Barbie* movie and its themes of female empowerment. According to Ningtyas (2021), *Barbie* films demonstrate a new femininity, promote gender role reversal, and emphasise feminism.

While media's role in shaping empowerment beliefs has been extensively studied in gender media research, very few studies have explored the specific impact of the *Barbie* movie (2023) on young Malaysian women's perceptions of empowerment. This study seeks to fill this gap by addressing two key objectives: (i) to explore how the female empowerment narrative and themes in the 2023 *Barbie* movie impact young Malaysian women's perceptions of empowerment, and (ii) to investigate how cultural and societal factors influence the reception of the movie's feminist messages. This study highlights how media representations shape young women's self-perceptions and societal expectations.

Understanding how Malaysian audiences perceive the *Barbie* movie's empowerment messages requires examining the country's rich cultural and societal backdrop. While media influence theories provide useful frameworks, their interaction in this context remains unclear. This research aims to fill the gap by investigating how changing gender norms and religious influences affect cinema reception and interpretation. Ultimately, this study

seeks to assess the *Barbie* movie's influence on young Malaysian women's empowerment beliefs and its potential role in shaping gender norms and societal transformation.

While previous studies have explored *Barbie's* feminist evolution, they primarily focus on Western audiences (Ningtyas, 2021). There is limited research on how non-Western viewers, particularly young Malaysian women, interpret these messages within their cultural and societal contexts. By addressing this gap, this study examines how the *Barbie* movie (2023) influences young Malaysian women's perceptions of empowerment. Furthermore, while Gerbner's cultivation theory explains how repeated media exposure influences perception, it does not fully account for how cultural values moderate this effect (Gerbner et al., 1994). Similarly, Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide a lens for understanding media reception in different societies (Hofstede, 1984), but their application to feminist media narratives in Malaysia remains underexplored. By addressing this gap, this study offers insights into how young Malaysian women internalise and respond to global feminist narratives within the context of their evolving gender norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Barbie movie and feminism

The *Barbie* movie franchise has long explored themes of empowerment and individuality, often challenging traditional gender norms through its portrayal of strong female characters (Manzoor et al., 2016). These representations influence younger viewers by promoting progressive gender roles and sparking discussions on feminism (Goh et al., 2021). In Malaysia, where cultural, religious, and societal factors shape the feminist discourse, the reception of international feminist media like *Barbie* is particularly significant (Veldmeijer, 2023).

Mattel's shift from reinforcing beauty ideals to promoting diversity and empowerment reflects evolving global feminist values. Recent films, including Greta Gerwig's 2023 adaptation, feature *Barbie* in roles like astronaut and environmental activist, using media to inspire young audiences (Vered & Maizonniaux, 2016; Veldmeijer, 2023). These portrayals contribute to broader conversations on gender equality in Malaysia, where media plays a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes (Goh et al., 2021).

By integrating feminist themes into accessible narratives, *Barbie* fosters media literacy and encourages critical thinking, particularly among Malaysian youth. As the local feminist movement gains momentum, such media can help challenge patriarchal norms and promote inclusivity. Ultimately, *Barbie* exemplifies how feminist media can drive social change across cultural boundaries (Vered & Maizonniaux, 2016; Veldmeijer, 2023).

Media influence on societal and cultural perception

Movies and television shows are powerful cultural artefacts that reflect and shape societal norms, values, and individual perceptions. Past research has explored various facets of feminism in media, including how media can empower voices through feminist ethics (Chenxi, 2023). Marshall McLuhan's assertion, "the medium is the message," underscores the transformative role of media, influencing not only the content consumed but also how audiences interpret it (McLuhan, 1964). Further, Tomaigă (2019) highlighted that

viewers often incorporate elements of film and television characters into their own lives, demonstrating how media blurs the lines between fiction and reality. This phenomenon reveals the complex interplay between media narratives and personal identity, significantly influencing societal perceptions across diverse cultural contexts.

Cultural differences play a crucial role in shaping how media messages are received and internalised (Arias, 2019). For instance, themes of female empowerment in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) may resonate differently with young women in Malaysia compared to those in Western countries. Factors such as traditional family structures, societal expectations, and cultural values uniquely influence how empowerment is understood and practised (Zhang, 2017). This highlights the dynamic relationship between media content and audience interpretation, as cultural filters shape the ways in which global narratives are localised.

Mass media serves as a central force in cultural production, interweaving identities, values, and behaviours into its narratives (Zhang, 2017). Research demonstrates that media functions as a tool for navigating societal changes, with audiences using films and other forms of entertainment to adapt to evolving cultural landscapes (Poepsel, 2021). Thus, in the Malaysian context, young women negotiating traditional and modern values may engage with media messages differently than audiences in other cultural settings (Jogezai, 2020).

Studies such as Kustiawan et al. (2022) emphasise the reciprocal relationship between global media and local culture. The cultural frameworks of its audiences can both influence and reshape media, leading to distinctive interpretations of universal themes like empowerment. Analysing the reception of the *Barbie* movie within the Malaysian context offers insight into how global media interacts with local cultural factors, ultimately shaping young women's understanding of empowerment and agency. This underscores the need for culturally nuanced approaches to studying media influence in diverse societies.

Influence of prominent figures on media

Barbie's evolution from a fashion-centric doll to a diverse icon, taking on roles like astronaut, Olympic athlete, and the lead in Greta Gerwig's live-action film, underscores the significant influence that iconic media figures wield in shaping the perceptions and aspirations of young women (Yakali, 2023). This evolution illustrates *Barbie's* impact on questioning conventional gender roles and fostering conversations regarding femininity. Yakali (2023) argues that *Barbie* redefines societal norms by altering the ways in which young girls perceive and interact with the notion of empowerment. Her narratives have emerged as a notable cultural influence, prompting audiences to re-evaluate conventional notions of womanhood. In addition, the movie's messages contribute to a dialogue on gender equality, aligning with discussions on how female leadership communication styles can navigate and influence perceptions in professional contexts (Cheah Lynn-Sze, 2021).

Barbie's influence can be compared to that of other significant figures, whether they are fictional or real. Characters such as Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter* and Disney's Raya in *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) have transformed the portrayal of female strength and independence in media (Ambarwati, 2022). In Malaysia, figures like Tan Sri Michelle Yeoh and Pandelega Rinong exemplify the significant impact that role models can have on societal transformation. Qing (2023) presented these women as exemplars of ambition and competence, illustrating how their accomplishments in global

cinema and the Olympics serve as inspiration for young Malaysians to overcome obstacles. The narratives presented not only confront patriarchal stereotypes, but also create opportunities for a new generation of empowered women, especially within culturally diverse settings such as Malaysia (Ambarwati, 2022).

Furthermore, Disney's *Raya* serves as a compelling illustration of how media can promote empowerment by featuring relatable, multidimensional characters. Young audiences looking for role models who defy conventional gender stereotypes will find *Raya's* portrayal as a leader to be particularly appealing (Ambarwati, 2022). These representations motivate Malaysian youths to adopt courage and creativity in their endeavours, illustrating the potential of media to confront established societal norms. The influence of these figures enables media to reshape the aspirations of women worldwide, simultaneously honouring cultural diversity and resilience (Qing, 2023; Yakali, 2023).

Gerbner's cultivation theory and Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Gerbner's cultivation theory suggests that extended exposure to media affects viewers' understanding of reality, influencing societal norms and personal perspectives (Morgan et al., 2017). This is evident in characters like *Barbie*, who evolved from a fashion doll to a symbol of empowerment. Repeated portrayals of strong female lead, such as *Barbie* and Disney's *Raya*, can normalise traits like resilience among young women (Fikkers et al., 2021). However, cultural factors moderate this influence. As Balakrishnan (2022) notes, ethnic and societal norms shape how media portrayals are internalised.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework helps explain these differences, especially in collectivist societies like Malaysia, where empowerment is often viewed through the lens of family and community rather than individual ambition (Hofstede et al., 2019). Qing (2023) found that Malaysian youth interpret the success of icons like *Barbie* or Michelle Yeoh as collective achievements. Balakrishnan (2022) further stresses that ethnicity significantly influences intercultural communication and media interpretation.

Together, Gerbner's and Hofstede's theories highlight how cultural context shapes the reception of empowerment messages. While the cultivation theory explains media's long-term influence, Hofstede's dimensions reveal the cultural filters that mediate this effect. Characters like *Raya* resonate in Malaysia by aligning leadership with harmony and cooperation (Ambarwati, 2022). Overall, these perspectives underscore the need to account for local cultural nuances when analysing global feminist media.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection method

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore how young Malaysian women perceive women's empowerment after viewing the *Barbie* movie (2023). Unlike quantitative research, which relies on numerical data, qualitative research focuses on the lived experiences, attitudes, and emotions associated with a phenomenon (Tenny et al., 2022). This approach is particularly suited for complex human behaviours, as it captures the how and why behind participants' perceptions.

Tenny et al. (2022) highlighted the value of qualitative research in understanding personal experiences as they occur in real-world contexts. Under the qualitative

orientation, phenomenological studies reside within the framework that focuses on the lived and everyday experience. Neubauer et al. (2019) further emphasised the importance of analysing experiences as they are lived, allowing researchers to gain new understandings and appreciations of the subjective realities of participants.

Research sample and size

The study employed non-probability sampling. According to Naderifar et al. (2017), non-probability sampling involves researcher-selected samples. Purposive sampling was used to identify and interview young Malaysian women who saw *Barbie* in cinemas. This method ensured that participants had first-hand exposure to the film's themes, making them suitable for the study.

Hennink and Kaiser (2022) recommended 9 to 17 qualitative research interviews, depending on data saturation. This study conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs), with a total of 15 participants, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. Each focus group provided in-depth discussions and critical insights on how the *Barbie* movie (2023) influenced their views on female empowerment. The interactive nature of focus groups allowed participants to engage in dynamic discussions, validating George's (2021) assertion that this method is effective in capturing complex viewpoints.

Participants were also asked about their favourite movie genres as part of the discussion to contextualise their media preferences and viewing habits. This data provides a richer understanding of how their general film consumption habits may shape their interpretation of the *Barbie* movie (2023). However, the analysis of favourite movie genres is not included in this section, as it forms part of the data analysis and findings in later sections. The participants' profiles are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of participants

| Participant | Age | Exposure to <i>Barbie</i> Movies | Favourite Movie Genres |
|-------------|-----|---|---|
| I1 | 24 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and all <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Horror |
| I2 | 20 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and all <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Horror & Action |
| I3 | 22 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and one <i>Barbie</i> flick | Slice of Life |
| I4 | 22 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and most of the <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Anything except horror or thriller |
| I5 | 21 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and a few of the <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Historical Fiction |
| I6 | 21 | Only watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023). | Horror, Action & Romance |
| I7 | 24 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and some <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Action, Thriller, Adventure, Dystopian & Sci-Fi |
| I8 | 31 | Only watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023) | Horror & Thriller |
| I9 | 23 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and some <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Romance |
| I10 | 29 | Only watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023) | Romance, True Stories & Animated |
| I11 | 27 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and most of the <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Romance |

Table 1. (con't)

| Participant | Age | Exposure to <i>Barbie</i> Movies | Favourite Movie Genres |
|-------------|-----|---|--------------------------------|
| I12 | 22 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and all <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Fantasy & Romance |
| I13 | 25 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and some <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Romance & Horror |
| I14 | 24 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and some <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Horror & Fantasy |
| I15 | 23 | Watched the new <i>Barbie</i> movie (2023), and some <i>Barbie</i> flicks | Sci-Fi, Fiction & True Stories |

The participants' profile which shows young Malaysian women's *Barbie* film exposure and preferred movie genres, helps us understand cultural and individual aspects that impact women's empowerment beliefs. All participants watched the 2023 *Barbie* movie, demonstrating its mainstream appeal. However, participants' experience with prior *Barbie* films varied greatly. Some had seen most of the franchise, while others had only seen the latest. The level of understanding about *Barbie's* evolving depictions of femininity and empowerment varied.

Horror, action, romance, fantasy, and historical fiction were among these women's chosen genres, indicating a range of interests and possible interpretive frameworks for media. Horror and romance were the most mentioned genres, suggesting audience choices may differ, juxtaposing resilience and emotional intimacy. Dystopian, sci-fi, and factual stories were popular with the 2023 *Barbie* movie viewers. Conversely, *Barbie* fans preferred romance and fantasy, which fit the franchise's themes. Based on their genre tastes and *Barbie* brand interactions, participants may view the empowering messages in the 2023 film differently.

By examining these media consumption patterns, this study provides a deeper understanding of how different audience segments perceive and internalise the empowerment messages in *Barbie* (2023). The diversity in genre preferences suggests that individual media experiences play a role in shaping how young Malaysian women interpret feminist narratives, making this an important aspect to consider in the analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis

This study utilised thematic analysis to systematically organise interview data into distinct topics, facilitating the analysis and comparison of findings (Favero & Heath, 2012). According to Topi and Tench (2020), this approach identifies patterns and trends, highlighting study gaps and advancing knowledge. The research questions of this study guided the identification of significant themes, with participants' responses serving as evidence.

The transcription data, such as words, phrases, and sentences, were examined, categorised and finalised into themes (Chuan, 2018). This process allowed the study to identify commonalities and distinctions in participants' perspectives. Thematic analysis, as described by Fitch and Third (2014), provides insights into how cultural contexts shape media interpretations, supporting Frame and Ihlen's (2018) argument that cultural settings

influence how individuals process media. By organising key themes, this study unveils shared understandings and contradictions in how young Malaysian women perceive the *Barbie* movie's empowerment messages. Next, the following sections discuss the themes that emerged from the analysis in describing how young Malaysian women feel about the movie's message of empowerment.

Young Malaysian women's perceptions of women's empowerment as portrayed in the Barbie movie (2023)

I think I like the physicist Barbie that won a Nobel Prize. (Interviewee 2)

The movie showed Barbie as intellectual and good in leadership, breaking away from society's traditional expectations. (Interviewee 5)

It didn't change my mind but reinforced my belief that strength lies in being authentic. (Interviewee 7)

The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of how young Malaysian women perceive women's empowerment as portrayed in the *Barbie* movie (2023). From the three focus group discussions, five major themes emerged:

- 1. Positive Role Models and Representation**
- 2. Empowerment and Inspiration**
- 3. Exploration of Gender Roles and Norms**
- 4. Positive Reinforcement of Feminist Ideals**
- 5. Prominent Girl Power Representation.**

Positive role models and representation

Participants consistently highlighted the movie's diverse and strong female characters as relatable and aspirational role models. For example, one participant stated, "*I think I like the physicist Barbie that won a Nobel Prize,*" reflecting an appreciation for the representation of women excelling in non-traditional domains such as STEM. Others praised the movie for breaking away from societal expectations, as seen in the comment, "*The movie showed Barbie as intellectual and good in leadership, breaking away from society's traditional expectations.*" This aligns with Gill and Orgad's (2016) assertion that media plays a vital role in normalising female excellence across various domains, including STEM and leadership roles.

The depiction of Barbie as an intellectual and capable leader challenges traditional gender expectations. One participant noted:

The movie showed Barbie as intellectual and good in leadership, breaking away from society's traditional expectations. (Interviewee 5)

This statement underscores Gerbner's cultivation theory, which posits that repeated exposure to progressive media narratives can shape viewers' perceptions of social roles

(Gerbner et al., 1994). By presenting *Barbie* as a competent and empowered figure, the film contributes to shifting audience expectations regarding women's leadership potential.

Empowerment and inspiration

The movie's emphasis on self-discovery and empowerment inspired many participants. However, while it was praised for reinforcing confidence and ambition, its transformative impact was limited. One participant expressed:

It didn't change my mind but reinforced my belief that strength lies in being authentic.
(Interviewee7)

This sentiment reflects Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), which suggests that media representation alone may not radically alter beliefs but can reinforce existing perspectives. Participants who have already embraced feminist ideals found the film affirming rather than eye-opening. This highlights the varying degrees of media influence, with some viewers internalising messages differently based on prior exposure to feminist narratives.

Exploration of gender roles and norms

The movie actively challenges traditional gender norms by depicting *Barbie* as both nurturing and assertive, and *Ken* as questioning his own identity in a male-dominated world. Participants noted that the film broke stereotypes by showing that femininity and ambition are not mutually exclusive.

The movie challenges the idea that women should always be gentle and accommodating. It shows that leadership and emotional depth can coexist.
(Interviewee 8)

This theme aligns with Connell's (2002) concept of gender order, which explains how societal expectations influence gender behaviours. By portraying a reversal of power dynamics in Barbie Land and the struggles of patriarchal influence in the real world, the movie forces audiences to rethink gender roles in everyday life.

Positive reinforcement of feminist ideals

Many participants felt the film did not necessarily introduce new feminist ideas to them but instead reinforced their existing beliefs about gender equality.

The film didn't teach me feminism, but it made me realize how often women have to work twice as hard to be taken seriously.
(Interviewee 6)

This connects with Hooks' (2015) perspective on feminism as a continuous learning process—while some audiences may have discovered feminist concepts through the film, others used it as a means of validating their experiences. The film's subtle critiques of workplace sexism, beauty standards, and the burden of perfection resonated with young Malaysian women, many of whom already engage with feminist discourses online.

Prominent girl power representation

A significant takeaway from the film was its celebration of girl power and collective female strength. Participants particularly enjoyed scenes where women uplift each other rather than compete, which contrasted with many traditional media portrayals of female rivalry.

I liked that the movie wasn't just about one Barbie saving the day—it was about all of them working together. That's real empowerment.

(Interviewee 12)

This aligns with Gill and Orgad's (2016) concept of post-feminism, which suggests that modern feminism in media has evolved to emphasise collective success rather than individual empowerment. The film's representation of women supporting each other stood out as a refreshing alternative to outdated tropes of women competing for male attention or social status.

Cultural and societal factors influence on young Malaysian women's perception of women empowerment in the Barbie movie

Participants also expressed diverse perspectives on how the film's feminist messages align with Malaysian cultural values. The findings revealed four key themes regarding cultural and societal influences:

- 1. Cultural Relevance on Women Empowerment**
- 2. Selective Representation of Gender Challenges and Stereotypes**
- 3. Impact on Gender Perceptions in Malaysia**
- 4. Diverse but Incomplete Representation**

Cultural relevance on women empowerment

Many participants appreciated the progressive messages in the movie but questioned their practicality within Malaysian society, where traditional gender expectations persist.

Young women in Malaysia would appreciate the progressive portrayal of women, but there may be concerns about its relevance to traditional values.

(Interviewee 4)

This highlights the tension between adopting modern feminist ideals and preserving deeply rooted cultural norms. This aligns with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory, which identifies Malaysia as a collectivist society with strong gender role expectations. The results suggest that although global feminist narratives can inspire, their full impact in Malaysia may depend on contextualising these ideals to resonate with local cultural sensibilities.

Selective representation of gender challenges and stereotypes

The theme of selective representation elicited mixed responses. While participants acknowledged that the movie addressed universal gender issues, such as patriarchy, many highlighted its relevance to Malaysia's specific cultural challenges. For example, one participant remarked,

For Malaysian women, serving men is ingrained in our culture. The movie highlighted how this expectation is global, not just Malaysian.

(Interviewee 9)

This observation illustrates how the film's portrayal of gender challenges reflects local realities while simultaneously offering a broader, universal perspective. This finding is consistent with research by Mohd Noor and Leong (2013), who noted that traditional Malaysian gender roles often prioritise familial and societal obligations for women, potentially limiting personal ambitions. The film's ability to address these shared struggles was perceived as both validating and enlightening for participants.

Impact on gender perceptions in Malaysia

Many participants saw the film as validating rather than reshaping their understanding of gender roles. However, the movie encouraged them to critically examine societal expectations of women in their communities. The movie's portrayal of empowerment resonated deeply, encouraging participants to re-examine traditional gender roles. Some expressed that the film reinforced the belief that women can balance ambition with nurturing qualities.

One participant stated that the movie's optimistic portrayal of empowered women, such as *Barbie* excelling in leadership while breaking stereotypes, served as an aspirational model. This aligns with Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), which underscores the role of media as a powerful tool for modelling behaviour and influencing beliefs. By showcasing diverse examples of women empowerment, the film provided participants with a relatable and motivational blueprint for redefining societal expectations.

Diverse but incomplete representation

Participants generally praised the film's diversity in showcasing women of different backgrounds and abilities, but some felt it still conformed to Western beauty standards.

The representation of characters in wheelchairs and Nobel Prize winners effectively delivered its message of inclusivity and empowerment.

(Interviewee 15)

Additionally, some criticised the lack of body diversity, with one participant observing that:

The movie mainly depicted thin characters, limiting inclusivity. More genuine representation would have been impactful.

(Interviewee 7)

This aligns with Gill and Orgad's (2016) findings that while media plays a crucial role in fostering inclusivity, gaps in representation can perpetuate exclusionary norms. The results suggest that while the film succeeded in promoting gender and ethnic diversity, there is room to improve its portrayal of body inclusivity to ensure a more comprehensive representation of empowerment.

The findings suggest that young Malaysian women generally viewed *Barbie* (2023) as an empowering film, particularly for its portrayal of female leadership, self-discovery,

and gender role challenges. However, its impact was largely affirmational rather than transformative, reinforcing rather than reshaping existing beliefs. The study highlights how media representation interacts with cultural norms, influencing how young women perceive empowerment.

DISCUSSION

The study supports and extends the cultural sensitivity theory (Chen, 2021) by demonstrating that global feminist narratives must be adapted to local cultural values to ensure effective engagement. While *Barbie* (2023) presents Western ideals of empowerment, Malaysian audiences filtered these messages through their own societal norms and expectations, leading to varied interpretations. This reinforces the argument that media and communication practices must incorporate cultural contexts when addressing global issues like gender equality.

Additionally, the findings challenge the universality of Western feminist narratives, particularly their emphasis on individualism and liberation, which may not fully align with the collectivist and familial values of the Malaysian society (Hofstede, 2001). While the film promotes self-empowerment, most participants indicated that Malaysian women's empowerment is often perceived within a communal or familial framework, emphasising harmony over radical independence. This suggests that existing feminist media theories should expand to better account for cultural variations in how empowerment is conceptualised and experienced.

The study also builds upon Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), which highlight media's role in shaping attitudes and behaviours through observational learning. The findings suggest that while *Barbie* (2023) successfully modelled positive female leadership and career representation, its impact was more affirmational than transformational. Participants who already embraced feminist ideals found the film reinforcing, whereas those with more traditional perspectives did not necessarily change their views. This contrasts with previous studies (e.g., Gill & Orgad, 2016), emphasising the transformative potential of feminist media; instead, the present study highlights the selective influence of media based on prior socialisation and cultural positioning.

This research offers several new insights into the role of the global feminist media in diverse cultural settings:

1. Cultural Adaptation of Feminist Media

Previous research (Nakamura, 2018) argues that media content must be tailored to local audiences for effective engagement. This study expands on this by showing that even universally appealing feminist messages require cultural contextualisation. While Malaysian participants acknowledged the film's empowering themes, some felt that certain Western feminist ideals conflicted with traditional Malaysian values, such as family obligations and gender expectations.

2. Selective Representation and Gaps in Inclusivity

The study also identifies gaps in representation, particularly regarding body diversity and localised cultural perspectives. While *Barbie* (2023) was praised for its diverse cast and female role models, participants noted that the predominant portrayal of thin, Western beauty standards limited its inclusivity. This supports Gill and Orgad's

(2016) critique of mainstream feminist media still adhering to certain exclusionary beauty norms and highlights the need for more inclusive depictions of empowerment that resonate with broader cultural and body diversity.

3. Empowerment as Affirmation Rather Than Transformation

Unlike some feminist media studies that emphasise film as a catalyst for ideological change, this research suggests that media consumption often reinforces pre-existing beliefs rather than radically altering them. Participants already aligned with feminist ideals found the film validating, while those with more traditional views did not significantly change their stance. This adds nuance to discussions on media effects, suggesting that while feminist films can inspire, they may not necessarily serve as turning points for those deeply embedded in traditional gender norms.

4. Bridging Global and Local Feminist Narratives

Finally, the study contributes to the ongoing discussion on global vs. local feminism by illustrating that women's empowerment is understood differently across cultures. While Western feminist narratives often prioritise individual autonomy, Malaysian participants viewed empowerment as a balance between personal ambition and communal/familial responsibilities. This suggests a need for more intersectional and culturally responsive feminist storytelling in global media.

These findings provide valuable insights for media producers and communicators regarding the need to customise content for culturally specific audiences:

- **Balancing Universal and Local Feminist Messages**
Barbie (2023) received acclaim for depicting women in leadership and unconventional roles, but the variation in Malaysian audience responses suggests that cultural differences shape media reception. Content creators should consider local cultural values when producing feminist narratives to ensure more effective resonance with diverse audiences.
- **Enhancing Inclusivity in Media Representation**
While the film was praised for its gender and professional diversity, limited body diversity was noted as a shortcoming. Media practitioners should broaden their representation to include a wider range of body types and localised cultural elements, ensuring that empowerment narratives are more relatable to global audiences.
- **Recognising the Role of Cultural Context in Feminist Media Impact**
The study suggests that feminist media's influence is not universal; instead, it is filtered through cultural expectations and personal beliefs. Media campaigns promoting gender equality should engage with local cultural discourses, rather than assume that Western feminist ideals will automatically translate into different societal contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical role of cultural context in shaping how global media representations of women's empowerment are perceived. While *Barbie* (2023) delivers a progressive feminist narrative, its impact varies depending on local cultural norms and values. The findings reinforce Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), which suggests that media serves as a behavioural model, but its effectiveness depends on how well it aligns with viewers' social and cultural realities. In collectivist societies like Malaysia,

feminist messages that emphasise individual autonomy may not fully resonate unless they also acknowledge communal and familial values.

The study contributes to the media and feminist theory by demonstrating that Western feminist ideals must be culturally contextualised for global audiences. While the film's empowerment themes were widely appreciated, some participants felt they clashed with traditional Malaysian values, particularly regarding women's familial responsibilities and gender expectations. This aligns with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory, which emphasises how collectivist cultures may interpret empowerment differently than individualist societies. Additionally, the study expands discussions on media inclusivity, supporting Gill and Orgad's (2016) argument that diversity in media should extend beyond ethnicity to include body diversity and different cultural realities.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The small and non-generalisable sample, based on a qualitative approach with a limited number of participants, means the findings may not represent all young Malaysian women. Future research could expand the sample across different regions in Malaysia to provide a broader perspective on how cultural background influences media reception. Comparative studies involving older generations, men, or individuals from various ethnic backgrounds would provide a more holistic view of how feminist media is received. Moreover, examining a wider range of feminist films—both Western and locally produced—could offer deeper insight into the role of cultural context in shaping media reception. Cross-cultural and longitudinal studies could further explore how exposure to feminist narratives may shift gender norms over time. Ultimately, this research emphasises the need for feminist media to be both inclusive and culturally adaptive to achieve meaningful global impact.

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