



*International Journal of Humanity Studies*  
<https://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/IJHS>  
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

## EXPLORING GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN GRETA GERWIG'S *BARBIE* (2023): BARBIE LAND VS. REAL WORLD

Christian Loid Valenzuela<sup>1\*</sup>, Arjay D. Guinto<sup>2</sup>, Hannah Lettice M.  
Collantes<sup>3</sup>, Marzhadel S. Aquino<sup>4</sup>, Angeline Barbero<sup>5</sup>, Jacqueline Givero<sup>6</sup>,  
Brent Cedric Ambasa<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1-7</sup>Gordon College, Philippines

valenzuela.christianloid@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>, arjayguinto8@gmail.com<sup>2</sup>,  
hannahlettice10@gmail.com<sup>3</sup>, aquinomarzhadel@gmail.com<sup>4</sup>,  
angelineabrebero60@gmail.com<sup>5</sup>, giveroj09@gmail.com<sup>6</sup>,  
cedricambasa13@gmail.com<sup>7</sup>

\*correspondence: valenzuela.christianloid@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.24071/ijhs.v9i2.56>

received 4 November 2025; accepted 30 March 2026

### Abstract

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) presents contrasting worlds—Barbie Land and the Real World—that examine gender, identity, and societal expectations. This study analyzes how these spatial narratives shape Barbie's identity and feminist awareness through Judith Butler's (1990) Gender Performativity Theory. A qualitative content analysis was conducted, focusing on key scenes in both Barbie Land and the Real World. Emergent coding identified patterns related to gender performance, identity construction, and agency. Findings show that Barbie Land reinforces idealized, performative femininity, while the Real World exposes patriarchal systems, objectification, and social constraints. Barbie's journey illustrates feminist awakening, embodied resistance, and identity redefinition, confirming that gender is performative rather than biological. The study highlights mainstream media as a site of ideological resistance and gender discourse. Barbie's transformation from an idealized figure to a self-authored identity demonstrates the fluidity of gender roles and the emergence of feminist consciousness. This research provides a nuanced interpretation of Barbie as both a cultural artifact and a medium to explore gender, power, and identity.

**Keywords:** Barbie, Barbie Land, feminist awakening, gender performativity, Real World, spatial analysis

### Introduction

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) presents a complex interplay between two contrasting spaces—Barbie Land and the Real World—that frame the negotiation of gender, identity, and agency. The film has been widely celebrated for its visual appeal and commercial success, yet its academic significance lies in exploring how performative gender norms are enacted, resisted, and internalized in mainstream media (Butler, 1990; Verdonschot, 2024). Previous research highlights that gender is socially constructed and performed through repeated acts and social interactions,



but few studies analyze how these dynamics operate within the spatialized narratives of mainstream films (Abdedaim, 2024; Abdelwahed, 2025). Feminist geography asserts that spaces are inherently gendered, shaping identity formation and social hierarchies (Massey, 1994; Siwach, 2020; Alazzam & Mukattash, 2025), while media studies emphasize that visual narratives can reinforce, destabilize, or critique social norms (Shaw, 2024; Timothy, 2024). Despite these insights, scholarship on Barbie has largely focused on aesthetic and marketing analyses, overlooking how movement between contrasting worlds fosters identity negotiation and feminist consciousness (McShane, 2021; Conlin et al., 2020). The current study addresses this gap by employing Butler's Gender Performativity Theory to examine Barbie's enactment, subversion, and transformation of gender norms across space. It investigates how performative acts, interactions, and environmental cues influence Barbie's development of feminist consciousness and self-authored identity. Integrating cultural studies, feminist film analysis, and spatial theory, this research aims to reveal how mainstream media can serve as a site of ideological reflection. By focusing on both Barbie Land and the Real World, the study seeks to illuminate the fluidity, negotiation, and contestation inherent in gender performance, highlighting the pedagogical and analytical potential of cinematic texts.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

This study employed a qualitative content analysis design to investigate how gender performativity is enacted and negotiated in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023). Qualitative content analysis was selected because it allows systematic examination of textual, visual, and narrative elements to uncover patterns, themes, and underlying meanings (Krippendorff, 2018). The design was applied by treating the film as a cultural text, analyzing Barbie's behaviors, dialogues, and spatial movements across Barbie Land and the Real World. Scenes were repeatedly viewed, transcribed, and organized according to emergent themes such as identity construction, agency, and performative gender, ensuring a detailed understanding of how gender norms are enacted and contested. The approach emphasizes inductive reasoning, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data rather than imposing pre-existing frameworks, which aligns with the exploratory goals of this study. It was particularly suitable for investigating Barbie Land as a hyper-feminine, idealized space and the Real World as a patriarchal, restrictive context, because the contrast illuminates how gendered behaviors adapt to different social environments (Massey, 1994; Siwach, 2020). The design also facilitated a focus on both micro-level acts, such as Barbie's routines and gestures, and macro-level structures, such as spatial organization and cultural symbolism, providing a comprehensive view of performativity. Prior research highlights that content analysis of media texts captures subtleties in representation, making it effective for studies of gender, space, and identity (Verdonschot, 2024; Shaw, 2024). By emphasizing both what is performed and how it is represented spatially, the design ensures the study addresses the core research questions on gender enactment, identity negotiation, and feminist consciousness. Ultimately, qualitative content analysis provided the flexibility, depth, and rigor required to explore the complex interplay of gender, space, and narrative in mainstream media.

The design was applied by first identifying key scenes representing Barbie's transition between worlds and moments of identity negotiation. Barbie Land scenes were examined for visual cues, role adherence, and interactions that exemplify socially constructed femininity, while Real World scenes were analyzed for encounters with social constraints, objectification, and resistance. Coding focused on patterns of performance, deviation, and self-reflection, documenting how Barbie enacts, resists, and negotiates gender norms. Each scene was interpreted in the context of social expectations, spatial arrangements, and narrative significance, ensuring that findings reflected both the actions of characters and the symbolic meaning embedded in the film. The iterative process of viewing, transcription, and coding allowed for verification of patterns and refinement of categories, enhancing reliability and depth of analysis. The design also enabled integration of feminist and cultural theory, situating observed behaviors within broader discourses on gender, power, and media representation (Butler, 1990; Conlin et al., 2020). Additionally, the use of comparative spatial analysis—between Barbie Land and the Real World—highlighted the influence of environment on performativity and identity, reinforcing the relevance of feminist geography to media studies. This approach ensured that the research captured both the overt and subtle enactments of gender. By applying content analysis systematically, the study could draw robust conclusions about how performativity is scripted, resisted, and transformed across contrasting worlds. The design thus effectively connects method with research objectives, theory, and broader scholarly discourse.

The rationale for using qualitative content analysis lies in its ability to address the research gap concerning the interaction of spatiality, narrative, and gender performativity in mainstream media. Unlike quantitative approaches, which measure frequency or prevalence, qualitative content analysis captures meaning, context, and interpretive nuance, making it suitable for a film with complex symbolic and cultural elements. It supports the study's goal of understanding not only what gender norms are portrayed but how characters navigate and challenge them, reflecting Butler's (1990) theory of performativity. The design also accommodates analysis of contradictions and tensions, such as Barbie's simultaneous embodiment of idealized femininity and self-authored identity, revealing both compliance and resistance to societal norms. By focusing on specific, contrasting spaces, the design clarifies the impact of the environment on behavior, demonstrating how narrative and spatial cues guide audience perception. Previous studies indicate that content analysis of media enables examination of social constructs while maintaining sensitivity to cultural and visual subtleties (Verdonschot, 2024; Bobaru, 2024). Furthermore, the method allows for iterative interpretation, aligning analytic categories with emerging patterns rather than forcing artificial structures. It integrates the visual, narrative, and symbolic layers of the film, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of identity and performativity. Overall, the design's flexibility, depth, and interpretive power make it ideal for exploring gender and spatial dynamics in media. This method situates Barbie as both a character and cultural artifact, facilitating insights into the negotiation of gender and agency across narrative contexts.

### ***Data collection***

The data for this study were derived from Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023), focusing on key scenes in both Barbie Land and the Real World to examine how gender, identity, and agency are performed across contrasting spaces. Data collection was guided by the study's objective to analyze performative acts, spatial dynamics, and narrative cues that illustrate gendered experiences. Prior studies highlight that media texts function as both reflective and constitutive cultural artifacts, shaping societal norms while providing insight into identity negotiation (Verdonschot, 2024; Conlin et al., 2020). The collection process prioritized scenes demonstrating character transitions, identity shifts, or moments of ideological contradiction, capturing both overt and subtle performances of gender. Visual and narrative data, including dialogue, gestures, spatial positioning, and mise-en-scène, were systematically documented to support subsequent coding and analysis. The study emphasized repeated viewings to ensure comprehensive observation of both explicit actions and implicit social cues, reflecting the iterative nature of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). By situating data collection within a theory-informed framework, the study ensured that the observed behaviors were relevant to understanding performativity and feminist consciousness. Integrating previous literature on media representation and spatiality further contextualized the selection of scenes, highlighting how social norms are enacted and challenged in cinematic spaces (Massey, 1994; Siwach, 2020). The approach allowed for triangulation of visual, auditory, and narrative elements, ensuring robustness and reliability in capturing gendered enactments. Ultimately, the data collection strategy was designed to balance systematic observation with interpretive flexibility, aligning with the study's qualitative and analytical goals.

The collection process began with multiple close viewings of *Barbie* (2023), during which scenes were transcribed and summarized to identify moments reflecting gender performance, spatial interaction, and identity development. Scenes were coded for contextual relevance, capturing behaviors, dialogue, and environmental cues that aligned with Butler's Gender Performativity Theory (1990). In Barbie Land, attention was given to daily routines, role performances, and deviations from idealized femininity, while in the Real World, focus shifted to social constraints, objectification, and emergent agency (McShane, 2021; Sadjadi & Hozhabri, 2019). The iterative process allowed for refinement of scene selection, ensuring that critical moments of identity negotiation and performative disruption were included (Shaw, 2024). Researchers noted character interactions, spatial transitions, and symbolic props, integrating these observations with theoretical constructs to provide a comprehensive dataset. Previous research demonstrates that combining narrative, visual, and spatial analysis enhances understanding of media's role in shaping and contesting gender norms (Verdonschot, 2024; Conlin et al., 2020). The selection of scenes was guided by both theoretical relevance and narrative significance, ensuring alignment with the study's analytical framework. Close attention to cinematic techniques, such as camera angles, lighting, and mise-en-scène, allowed for the interpretation of how visual storytelling contributes to performative meaning (DiCaglio, 2024). This approach ensured that data were rich, contextually grounded, and theoretically informed, providing a solid foundation for inductive coding. By integrating systematic observation with interpretive

flexibility, the study captured the complexity of Barbie's gendered performances across contrasting worlds.

### ***Analytical framework***

This study employs Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory (1990) as its primary analytical framework, which conceptualizes gender not as a fixed identity but as a series of repeated performative acts shaped by social norms. The framework is particularly suited to analyzing Barbie because it allows the researchers to explore how behaviors, gestures, speech, and spatial navigation constitute gender in both Barbie Land and the Real World. Prior research emphasizes that media representations serve as sites for social learning and cultural reinforcement of gender norms, making Butler's theory relevant for examining performativity in film narratives (Verdonschot, 2024; Conlin et al., 2020). The framework also supports exploration of resistance and subversion, highlighting moments where characters challenge prescriptive roles, which is central to understanding Barbie's feminist consciousness. By applying Butler's lens, the study examines how identity, agency, and societal expectations are enacted, contested, and transformed within contrasting spatial contexts. Gender performativity theory complements insights from feminist geography, which argues that spaces are socially constructed and influence behavior (Massey, 1994; Siwach, 2020). This approach allows for a nuanced investigation of the interplay between character action, environment, and narrative structure. Ultimately, Butler's theory provides both conceptual clarity and analytical flexibility, guiding the study in interpreting performative acts and emergent feminist agency. The framework also informs coding strategies, helping categorize behaviors as compliant, resistant, or transformative in relation to gender norms. By integrating performativity theory with spatial and cultural analysis, the framework situates Barbie as both a media text and a lens through which social constructions of gender can be critically examined.

The application of Butler's theory involved analyzing Barbie's behaviors, speech, gestures, and interactions in both worlds, emphasizing the performance of femininity and masculinity. In Barbie Land, behaviors such as precise routines, idealized appearances, and role flexibility illustrate socially prescribed femininity, while "malfunctions" like emotional breakdowns reveal the fragility and constructed nature of gender (McShane, 2021; Sadjadi & Hozhabri, 2019). Similarly, Ken's exaggerated performances highlight the dependency of masculinity on social recognition (Wehrle, 2021). In the Real World, performative acts are complicated by external social constraints, objectification, and patriarchal expectations, revealing how gender norms are both enforced and resisted (Mulvey, 1975; Gale, 2024). The framework guided attention to moments where Barbie deviates from normative scripts, such as asserting autonomy, challenging male aggression, or engaging in reflective self-awareness, illustrating the transformative potential of performativity (DiCaglio, 2024). Scenes were coded based on whether behaviors reinforced, subverted, or reconstructed normative gender roles, providing a structured yet flexible way to analyze the data. Previous studies demonstrate that this dual focus on compliance and resistance is essential for understanding identity negotiation in media texts (Shaw, 2024; Bobaru, 2024). The framework also allowed the researcher to interpret spatial dynamics, including how environments

like Barbie Land and the Real World shape performative acts, reinforcing the link between space, behavior, and social norms. By integrating narrative, visual, and spatial cues, Butler's theory enabled a holistic analysis of how gender is enacted, contested, and redefined. This analytic lens provided the foundation for systematic coding, interpretation, and synthesis of patterns in Barbie's journey toward feminist consciousness.

The rationale for adopting Butler's Gender Performativity Theory is anchored in its conceptual alignment with the study's objectives and its capacity to address gaps in the literature on media, gender, and spatiality. Unlike traditional gender theories that treat identity as static, Butler's lens emphasizes process, repetition, and context, capturing the fluidity and negotiability of gender in film narratives. The theory accommodates both overt acts, such as Barbie's speech and gestures, and subtle cues, such as spatial positioning and relational dynamics, allowing for comprehensive analysis. By combining performativity theory with insights from feminist media studies, the research addresses how mainstream films can simultaneously reinforce and critique gender norms (Verdonschot, 2024; Conlin et al., 2020). It also provides a framework for understanding feminist consciousness as emerging through reflective acts of agency and resistance within socially structured spaces (Massey, 1994; Siwach, 2020). The framework supports the identification of patterns in both compliance and subversion, offering insight into how cultural texts negotiate ideology and identity. Moreover, it allows the study to move beyond surface-level interpretations of empowerment, focusing instead on the interplay of performance, space, and societal expectation. Prior scholarship underscores the usefulness of Butler's theory for analyzing media, highlighting its explanatory power in connecting character behavior to social critique (Shaw, 2024; Bobaru, 2024). Overall, the theory provides a robust lens for linking narrative analysis, spatial context, and gender performance, ensuring findings are both theoretically grounded and analytically rigorous. By applying this framework, the study situates Barbie as a site of performative negotiation, cultural commentary, and feminist exploration.

### **Data analysis**

The data analysis in this study employed emergent and inductive coding to examine patterns of gender performance, identity construction, and agency across Barbie Land and the Real World. The goal was to allow themes to arise organically from the film's visual and narrative elements, rather than imposing pre-existing categories, ensuring a close alignment with the qualitative content analysis approach (Krippendorff, 2018). Analysis focused on three main areas: representations of gendered spaces, Barbie's evolving identity, and the negotiation of agency within social constraints. Previous research emphasizes that coding visual and narrative data enables researchers to identify recurring motifs, contradictions, and deviations from normative gender roles, providing insight into both explicit and symbolic meanings (Verdonschot, 2024; Conlin et al., 2020). The study integrated theoretical guidance from Butler's Gender Performativity Theory (1990) to interpret acts, gestures, and behaviors as performative, socially constructed, and context-dependent. Through systematic observation and coding, the analysis sought to understand how mainstream media can communicate, challenge, and reshape cultural norms. The process also considered the interplay between narrative,

dialogue, and spatial positioning to illuminate how environments influence identity negotiation. Prior scholarship highlights that combining visual, narrative, and spatial coding provides a robust framework for interpreting complex media texts (Massey, 1994; DiCaglio, 2024). The coding process was iterative, revisited across multiple viewings, and cross-checked for consistency, ensuring reliability and analytical rigor. Ultimately, the approach allowed the study to connect observed behaviors and cinematic elements with broader discussions on gender performativity, identity, and feminist consciousness.

The analysis began with a first-level coding of scenes, transcriptions, and visual cues to identify recurring patterns and notable deviations in gender performance. In *Barbie Land*, codes captured idealized femininity, ritualized behaviors, and performative routines that aligned with cultural expectations, alongside disruptions introduced by *Weird Barbie* and *Ken's* exaggerated masculinity (McShane, 2021; Wehrle, 2021). In the *Real World*, coding emphasized social constraints, objectification, and the negotiation of autonomy, highlighting moments where *Barbie* asserts agency or encounters patriarchal resistance (Shaw, 2024; Gale, 2024). Codes also documented spatial and narrative transitions, such as movement between *Barbie Land* and Los Angeles, to examine how environments shape performative acts. A second-level coding process grouped initial codes into themes, revealing patterns in identity development, feminist consciousness, and gender negotiation across contrasting spaces. Observations of *mise-en-scène*, dialogue, and character interaction were linked to these themes to ensure that visual storytelling was fully integrated into the analysis (Sadjadi & Hozhabri, 2019). Triangulation across narrative, visual, and spatial codes enhanced interpretive depth and reliability, aligning with best practices in qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). The coding framework remained flexible, allowing for emergent insights while maintaining theoretical relevance to performativity and feminist theory. Each theme was contextualized within prior literature, bridging media analysis with gender studies and cultural critique (Verdonschot, 2024; Conlin et al., 2020). Through this structured yet adaptive approach, the analysis captured both explicit enactments of gender and subtle performative disruptions.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### ***Barbie Land: Constructed femininity, subverted norms, and emergent feminist consciousness***

The analysis of *Barbie Land* reveals a hyper-feminized space where gender roles are performed, enforced, and occasionally disrupted, providing insight into the social construction of identity and agency. This environment demonstrates Butler's (1990) assertion that gender is not inherent but enacted through repeated behaviors, rituals, and social expectations. *Barbie's* daily routines—meticulous grooming, precise movements, and role fulfillment—reinforce culturally prescribed femininity, yet they also expose the psychological and emotional costs of performing perfection (McShane, 2021; Sadjadi & Hozhabri, 2019). Existing literature underscores the importance of spatial and social contexts in shaping identity, highlighting that even idealized environments reflect and reproduce normative expectations (Massey, 1994; Siwach, 2020). *Barbie Land* allows for the observation of conformity, resistance, and the potential for feminist consciousness to emerge through disruption. Male characters, particularly *Ken*, illustrate the

fragility and performative nature of masculinity, as his exaggerated attempts at dominance rely on social validation (Wehrle, 2021). The presence of Weird Barbie disrupts normative femininity, exemplifying Butler's "failure of the act" and prompting Barbie's self-reflection and identity negotiation. Shifting power dynamics between Barbies and Kens demonstrate the instability of gender hierarchies, emphasizing that performance, rather than biology, underpins social authority (Yakali, 2024; Conlin et al., 2020). Barbie's bodily "malfunctions," such as burnt toast or cellulite anxiety, symbolize the emotional and cognitive toll of maintaining idealized norms (Sadjadi & Hozhabri, 2019). Overall, Barbie Land exemplifies a performative space where gender, identity, and agency are socially mediated, negotiated, and contested.

Within Barbie Land, the enactment of gender is simultaneously prescriptive and malleable. Barbie's adherence to routines initially enforces traditional norms, yet the narrative punctuates these patterns with moments of disruption and self-reflection. Weird Barbie functions as a catalyst for questioning pre-assigned roles, revealing the socially constructed and performative nature of gender. Emotional and physical breakdowns highlight the fragility of these performances, emphasizing that identity is actively negotiated rather than fixed. Ken's trajectory further illuminates the socially contingent construction of masculinity, as his exaggerated behaviors collapse without recognition, underscoring performative dependency (Wehrle, 2021). The fluidity of dominance between Barbies and Kens demonstrates that hierarchy is contextually produced and negotiable (Yakali, 2024). Spatial analysis of Barbie Land suggests that hyper-feminine environments, while idealized, can incubate both conformity and emergent feminist awareness (Conlin et al., 2020). Coding and narrative examination indicate that performative failures function as mechanisms for critical consciousness, enabling characters to reflect, resist, and redefine social norms. Barbie's evolution from cultural icon to self-aware agent exemplifies the negotiation of gendered identity and agency within controlled social spaces. The space of Barbie Land, therefore, operates as both a site of normative reinforcement and transformative potential.

Synthesizing Barbie Land's dynamics, the findings demonstrate that performativity, spatiality, and emergent consciousness are intertwined. Gender roles are enacted through daily routines, social recognition, and adherence to cultural scripts, yet disruption allows for negotiation and reflection (Butler, 1990; McShane, 2021). The presence of counter-normative characters and narrative breakdowns underscores that identity is relational, socially mediated, and contingent upon context (Sadjadi & Hozhabri, 2019). Barbie's self-reflection and engagement with spatial and social cues illustrate the performative negotiation of femininity, while Ken's vulnerability exemplifies the social construction of masculinity (Wehrle, 2021; Yakali, 2024). The duality of reinforcement and disruption positions Barbie Land as a critical site for understanding how media narratives model both compliance with and resistance to gender norms (Conlin et al., 2020). The interplay between social expectations and personal agency demonstrates that feminist consciousness emerges from both reflection and engagement with the environment. Visual, narrative, and spatial analyses collectively reveal that hyper-feminine spaces, despite their idealization, can provide opportunities for identity exploration, critique, and self-authorship. Barbie Land thus exemplifies the social negotiation of gender, where norms are both

enacted and contested. These insights contribute to broader discussions of media, performativity, and feminist agency within mainstream cultural texts.

***Real World: Patriarchy, objectification, and embodied feminist agency***

Barbie's transition to the Real World introduces a contrasting environment in which patriarchal structures, objectification, and social constraints dominate, revealing the fragility and contingency of performative gender. The muted setting of Los Angeles juxtaposes the vibrancy of Barbie Land, emphasizing how spatial and cultural contexts shape identity and agency (Massey, 1994; Verdonshot, 2024). Encounters with the male gaze, sexualized scrutiny, and systemic limitations illustrate the barriers women face when navigating social hierarchies (Mulvey, 1975; Gale, 2024). Within this context, Barbie's emergent feminist consciousness becomes visible as she negotiates, resists, and reclaims agency through performative acts that challenge normative expectations (Butler, 1990; DiCaglio, 2024). Literature on spatiality and gender underscores the importance of context in shaping how individuals perform and experience identity, emphasizing that agency is relational and situational (Siwach, 2020; Shaw, 2024). Barbie's confrontations with patriarchal norms, including defending herself against aggression, demonstrate that performativity is a site for both constraint and empowerment. Male characters function as mirrors of societal expectation, highlighting the contingency of gendered authority and its reliance on recognition and compliance (Wehrle, 2021). Coding and thematic analysis reveal that Barbie's journey is punctuated by moments of negotiation, reflection, and assertion, illustrating that identity is continuously enacted and reconstructed. The Real World foregrounds the spatial and social dimensions of performative gender, highlighting that feminist consciousness is cultivated through active engagement with restrictive structures. Overall, Barbie's experience in the Real World reveals the necessity of self-directed agency to navigate patriarchal constraints, extending Butler's framework to spatially mediated identity.

In the Real World, Barbie actively contests social norms through embodied and cognitive engagement with her environment. She confronts objectification, navigates male dominance, and negotiates identity within a system of power that differs significantly from the controlled hyper-feminine setting of Barbie Land. These experiences exemplify Butler's (1990) argument that gender is performative and socially constituted, with the capacity for both reinforcement and disruption. Barbie's development illustrates that feminist consciousness is relational, arising through interactions with others and spatialized power structures (Shaw, 2024). The spatial contrast between Barbie Land and Los Angeles amplifies the tension between idealized enactment and lived reality, highlighting the role of environment in shaping identity and agency (Massey, 1994). Barbie's assertive responses to patriarchal pressures underscore that self-authorship and performative resistance are integral to identity formation. Male characters' responses reinforce the socially contingent nature of dominance and masculinity, showing how recognition and compliance maintain or destabilize power hierarchies (Wehrle, 2021). Narrative analysis indicates that moments of reflection, confrontation, and assertion serve as mechanisms for cultivating feminist awareness. Barbie's navigation of these spaces demonstrates that agency is not intrinsic but developed through active engagement

with restrictive social systems. Thus, the Real World exemplifies how spatial and cultural contexts mediate gender performance and the emergence of consciousness.

Synthesizing Barbie's Real World experience, the findings show that identity, agency, and feminist consciousness are socially and spatially contingent. The contrast with Barbie Land emphasizes that gender norms are enacted differently depending on context, highlighting the flexibility and performativity of social roles (Butler, 1990; Massey, 1994). Barbie's negotiation of objectification, patriarchal expectations, and social scrutiny illustrates the relational construction of agency (DiCaglio, 2024; Gale, 2024). Male characters serve as both obstacles and mirrors, demonstrating the socially reinforced nature of dominance (Wehrle, 2021). Emergent feminist consciousness arises from active resistance, reflection, and engagement with structural constraints, illustrating that agency is performative and constructed. Narrative and spatial analysis collectively reveal that media can model identity negotiation and empowerment, showing audiences that self-directed agency is achievable even in restrictive environments (Shaw, 2024; Verdonschot, 2024). Barbie's journey underscores that gender is not fixed, but fluid and socially enacted, contingent on both internal reflection and external conditions. The interplay of social, spatial, and narrative factors highlights the mechanisms by which feminist consciousness develops. Overall, Barbie functions as both a reflective and transformative cultural text, illustrating the negotiation of gender, identity, and agency across contrasting environments.

### **Conclusions**

This study examined gender performativity in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* by analyzing the contrasting worlds of Barbie Land and the Real World through Judith Butler's theoretical lens. The film demonstrates that gender is socially constructed and performed, rather than biologically inherent, and that identity, agency, and consciousness emerge through repeated enactment, reflection, and negotiation. Barbie Land presents an idealized, hyper-feminized environment where roles, routines, and appearances enforce social norms, yet disruptions—such as the introduction of Weird Barbie—allow moments of self-awareness and critique. The Real World situates Barbie in patriarchal and objectified contexts, highlighting the constraints of societal expectations and emphasizing the relational and situational nature of agency. Across both spaces, Barbie's evolution from a scripted icon to a self-directed, reflective character illustrates the fluidity of gender and the potential for feminist consciousness to emerge through engagement with social and spatial norms. Male characters, particularly Ken, reveal that masculinity, like femininity, is contingent on social recognition and performative enactment, emphasizing that gender roles are relational and negotiated. The study also connects spatial narratives with identity construction, showing that the environment influences the enactment, reinforcement, or disruption of gender norms. The findings extend previous literature on media, spatiality, and feminist theory, demonstrating that mainstream films can serve as sites for both ideological critique and reflection on performativity (McShane, 2021; Shaw, 2024; Conlin et al., 2020). Limitations include the focus on a single film and the qualitative approach, which may not capture audience reception or broader cultural interpretations. Nevertheless, the research provides a nuanced understanding of how popular media represent, critique, and transform gendered expectations and performative practices.

### **Recommendations**

Future research should explore mainstream media through diverse feminist, queer, and intersectional frameworks, examining how films shape cultural perceptions of gender, race, class, and other axes of identity. Comparative studies across multiple films or genres could illuminate patterns of performativity and social negotiation across media contexts. Pedagogically, films like Barbie can be incorporated into gender studies, media literacy, or cultural studies curricula to illustrate the performative enactment and contestation of gender roles. Emphasis should be placed on critical reflection, encouraging students to analyze spatial, narrative, and relational dimensions of identity. Filmmakers are encouraged to prioritize multidimensional character development and authentic emotional representation, highlighting the complexity of agency and self-authorship. Media literacy initiatives should foster audience awareness of the relational and socially mediated nature of gender, power, and identity. Scholars and educators should also investigate the influence of globalized and commodified representations on perceptions of femininity, masculinity, and empowerment. Future studies could integrate audience reception data to assess how viewers interpret, internalize, or contest performative gender depictions. Further research should consider the intersection of gender with systemic structures such as capitalism, colonialism, and institutional power to contextualize identity negotiation more comprehensively. Overall, interdisciplinary approaches combining media studies, feminist theory, and spatial analysis will provide a more holistic understanding of how mainstream media mediates gender, agency, and consciousness.

### **References**

- Abdedaim, K. (2024). Beyond the dream house: Unmasking Barbie movies' subversion of patriarchy and stereotypes. *Algerian Scientific Journal Platform*, 10(2), 180–191. <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/239821>
- Abdelwahed, N. K. (2025). Beyond pink and plastic: A critical analysis of *Barbie* (2023) through the lens of gender performativity, intersectionality, and diverse cultural perspectives. <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/urje/vol10/iss1/5>
- Alazzam, A. N., & Mukattash, E. K. (2025). Spaces of resistance and identity: Exploring female spatiality in Susan Abulhawa's *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 15(3), 844–852. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1503.19>
- Bobaru, N. (2024). Reimagining Barbie: A feminist analysis of iconography and consumerism in the age of gender reevaluation. *Gender Studies*, 23(1), 59–80. <https://doi.org/10.2478/genst-2024-0005>
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Conlin, S. E., Douglass, R. P., Moradi, B., & Ouch, S. (2020). Examining feminist and critical consciousness conceptualizations of women's subjective well-being. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 49(3), 391–422. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000020957992>

- DiCaglio, S. (2024). 'First I got one tear, and then I got a whole bunch': Fluidity and plasticine solidity in the world of Barbie. *Feminist Theory*, 25(4), 542–556. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291459>
- Gale, T. M. (2024). *Barbie*. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/10599>
- Gerwig, G. (Director). (2023). *Barbie* [Film]. Warner Bros.
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). Sage Publications. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/content-analysis/book258450>
- Massey, D. (1994). *Space, place, and gender*. University of Minnesota Press.
- McShane, J. (2021). What does it mean to 'decolonise' gender studies?: Theorising the decolonial capacities of gender performativity and intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(2), 62–77. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss2/7>
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
- Sadjadi, B., & Hojabri, S. (2019). Gender, performativity, and agency in Virginia Woolf: A Butlerian reading of *Orlando*. *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 22(4), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.5782/2223-2621.2019.22.4.5>
- Shaw, B. K. (2024). Beyond beauty and dolls: A deconstructive reading of Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*. *Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation*. <http://journaldialogue.org/alt-dialogue/reviews/film-reviews/beyond-beauty-and-dolls-a-deconstructive-reading-of-greta-gerwigs-barbie/>
- Siwach, P. (2020). Mapping gendered spaces and women's mobility: A case study of Mitathal Village, Haryana. *The Oriental Anthropologist: A Bi-annual International Journal of the Science of Man*, 20(1), 33–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972558x20913680>
- Timothy, R. (2024). Barbie Land as cyberfeminist utopia. *Feminist Theory*, 25(4), 635–648. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001241291462>
- Verdonschot, C. P. (2024). Part of the people or apart from the people? A critical note on the liberal feminism of Barbie (2023). *Aesthetic Investigations*, 7(1), 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.58519/ntj68y62>
- Wehrle, M. (2021). 'Bodies (that) matter': The role of habit formation for identity. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 20(2), 365–386. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09703-0>
- Yakali, D. (2024). Is she a feminist icon now? *Barbie* 2023 movie and a critique of postfeminism. *Studies in Media and Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v12i1.6478>