

# *The Evolution of Feminism in Chick Flicks from the Early 21st Century to the Present*

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**Abstract:** With *Barbie* making a strong comeback, chick movies, a commercial film genre that primarily concentrates on female characters, have recently become more popular in people's eyes. The feminist underpinnings of this genre have also been well shown. However, there is still a research gap in the connection between feminism and the development of chick flicks from the early 21st century to the present. Therefore, this article uses feminist theory to analyze how feminism has evolved in chick flicks throughout this period as well as how typical chick flicks have developed during this time. According to the research, the development of chick flicks has gone through three stages: the peak period, the bottleneck period, and the return to the golden period. Meanwhile, feminism has evolved from focusing just on the rights and status of women to achieving gender equality and women's intellectual awakening. Conclusions can be drawn based on the analysis of this article given that chick movies are primarily about women and focus on women's issues: the evolution of feminism in chick flicks from the early 21st century to the present tends to appear in a better situation with the development of social feminism.

**Keywords:** chick flick, feminism, feminist film, 21st century

## 1. Introduction

In the summer of 2023, the film *Barbie* has been widely circulated the world, sparking a wave of public opinion. It describes a story of a doll called Barbie and her friends in the real world experiencing various difficulties, restoring the feminist Barbie world that is brainwashed by patriarchy to its original state, and pursuing equality with a happy ending. While sharply criticizing patriarchy and the male gaze, the increasingly powerful female power and feminism once again emerge in people's vision. *Barbie* is a typical example of chick flicks, which presents the new golden return period of chick flicks. A chick flick is a fashionable and relaxing film genre that focuses on female characters and men play supporting roles in it. Chick flicks are not completely equal to feminist films. This article only uses feminist theory to analyze typical chick flicks and also uses the development of chick flicks to analyze the development of feminism. Feminism is a common kernel that frequently appears in chick flicks. In recent years, especially since the beginning of the 21st century, with the rapid development of Internet technology and the emergence of more and more feminists, feminist power and feminism have often been active in people's perspectives. This is a scene that has never appeared in the last century, and this change is very vital. Accordingly, the chick flicks that have been produced since the start of the 21st century, which richly embodies feminism,

have become a highly worthy carrier for studying the evolution of feminism over the past 20 years. In general, there is a large amount of research on feminist films, and at the same time, there is insufficient research on chick flicks. According to Review of “chick flick” since 1990’s, since the 1930s and 1940s, women’s films such as *Women* (1939), *Sabrina* (1954), and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), which recognized as the first chick flick, have appeared frequently and have undergone twists and turns until now, and are still in the ascendant [1]. Most of the existing research is based on the origin of chick flicks to a certain point in time, without systematically elaborating on the changes in feminism in the new era of development over the past 20 years since the beginning of the 21st century. Therefore, this article uses several typical chick flicks from the early 21st century to the present to analyze the evolution of feminism in society. The author hopes this study can make up for the lack of particular analysis during this period and attract more attention to feminist topics.

## 2. The Definition of Chick Flicks

A Chick flick is a subtype between a romantic and a comedy film. The plot in it is majorly relaxing and romantic. Most chick flicks focus on female roles, with men acting as supporting roles. Several typical chick flicks present the ups and downs of women who are either ignorant, youthful, or mature, which are often fashionable and with urban love as the theme. The plot generally starts with the female protagonist feeling frustrated and unlucky first and then acquires the man’s love with her confidence and self-reliance. Ultimately, it leads to a happy ending—the two eventually get married.

The earliest chick flick can be traced back to *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1962), which describes the story of a gold digger and an inefficient man who stumble and stumble when searching for happiness, eventually understanding the true meaning of happiness. After 60 years, some scriptwriters still use this kind of story template for reference. This film genre, which existed in the 1980s and was positioned somewhere between romance and comedy, emphasized urban women as the main characters, romantic love as the overarching narrative, and hilarious fashion as the preferred aesthetic. It developed a strong female audience following at the box office and emerged as a Hollywood film industry dark horse that should not be dismissed [1]. However, in 1991, when chick flicks were still widely popular, the term “chick flick” was first used to describe a new film genre that primarily focuses on female characters [1]. The term “female flick” was used by several media outlets at the time to describe this type of film [1]. Nevertheless, Hollywood cinema and fashion publications have started to use “chick flick” to refer to a series of movies because a girl was being described using American language and the term had become too deeply ingrained in people’s hearts [1]. After entering the 21st century, the chick film *Bridget Jones’s Diary*’s appearance earned a high box office, Hollywood filmmakers took advantage of the heat to create many chick flicks for women in different age groups. Nevertheless, when chick movies continued to be prevalent, some critics appeared and began to discuss and criticize the problems in their film production, such as the insufficient plot depth, which suppressed the creators’ plans and passion. As a consequence, chick flicks in 2010-2018 became depressing and entered a bottleneck period. This year, the film *Barbie* appeared and contributed to a global uproar once again, which symbolizes a new golden period. The success of chick flicks stems from the creator’s sensitive grasp of the social environment and precise market positioning.

As time goes by, more and more feminists appear and begin to question patriarchal society. Women’s self-awareness and strength are also actively discussed by them. Feminists work to liberate the perception of long-exploited women and create a theoretical sense of “absence” in female listeners [2]. Accordingly, the dramatists of chick flicks have started to use feminist power to construct their core, which is often shown by the female awareness and the road of struggle. Feminism has become a significant kernel in chick flicks, especially since the beginning of the 21st century.

### 3. The Evolution of Chick Flicks from the Early 21st Century and Feminism in Them

The development of chick flicks starting from the 21st can be divided into three stages. At the beginning of the 21st century, the emergence of *Miss Congeniality*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Legally Blonde* and *The Princess Diaries* attracted global attention. Among them, *Bridget Jones's Diary* pulled off the incredible feat of recouping \$280 million in the worldwide box office at a mere \$26 million in production costs, ushering in the heyday of chick flicks. In these chick movies, most of the plot revolves around the female protagonist, who is initially ignorant and weak, and undergoes a significant transformation as a result of her efforts and stimulation or support from the outside environment. This kind of female protagonist usually has “the protagonist aura destined for ultimate success”, and the plot carries a cliché struggle style transformation. Take the female protagonist Elle in *Legally Blonde* as an example. She works hard because her ex-boyfriend doesn't like her because she lacks intelligence and has only a pretty face. After entering Harvard Law School, she encounters various difficulties but is not discouraged and uses her wisdom to handle difficult cases, eventually overthrowing her ex-boyfriend and winning true love. The common plot of female protagonist cultivation can resonate with women at that time. Compared to the long-term situation in the 20th century, the status of women in the early 21st century had relatively improved. Nevertheless, the stereotypes about women were still strong, and their status was still relatively low. Feminism at that time was described as changing present situation the by excavating own strengths.

From 2010-2017, with the advancement of online social media, more people found out about chick flicks and had discussions. The romantic and casual perspective was reversed, and the shortcomings of chick movies, such as lack of originality and shallow content, gradually came to light. Indeed, chick flicks during this period exposed problems of these aspects. One work, two works, and eventually the audience will grow tired of it all demonstrates this [3]. The narrative is repeated numerous times, and based on previous readings, the audience may be able to guess the outcome [3]. It is hard for the viewer to have an unexpected experience because the plot lacks freshness [3]. Due to aesthetic fatigue and the plot's “accustomed to” nature, the audience lacks originality in the film, and the box office is not guaranteed [3]. For instance, the popular magical chick flick *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn*, once highly anticipated by investors, underperformed for a variety of reasons. As a commercial movie, the shooting cost of a chick flick is not high. Also, it has a clear and relatively fixed target audience and often gets good returns, making it a low-cost and high-yield investment. As the author mentions above, some scriptwriters lived on the fat of previous excellent chick flicks for revision, actually followed their writing style, and hired some celebrities with huge fan bases to attract audiences. Therefore, the quality and depth of the script were less significant. Secondly, at that time, some audiences, influenced by earlier chick flicks, tended towards luxury, counterattack, and other presentations in their plots, which reduced the need for depth of content. Accordingly, the creators were unwilling to spend large amounts of cost upgrading the depth of their plots. Some film critics posted the criticism of these problems in chick flicks and formed great influence on the Internet, which to some extent suppressed the development of chick flicks. Gradually, viewers became aware of these various issues and sought chick flicks of higher standards. In addition, the protagonist image of chick films at that time was also very single and focused mainly on young urban women, and true feminism was not aimed at a specific group of women but included women of all ages, backgrounds, and social statuses. Thus, the long-term image of the female protagonist had also created a bottleneck for chick films. At this point, feminism in chick flicks is still trying to explore and innovate.

From 2018 until now, the popularity of chick flicks has gradually rebounded. During this period, chick flicks have drawn on previous experiences and improved the originality and depth of the script content. The most significant impact is the film *Barbie* in the summer of 2023, which released a trailer early and was often ridiculed by people at the time because they considered it was just a children's

film. Nevertheless, after the official release of the movie, *Barbie* has received enormous interest and enthusiasm all around the world, sweeping the world with its unique “pink energy”, and many companies have competed to co-brand the Barbie IP. It is worth mentioning that *Barbie* also has attracted some male audiences. *Barbie* and many chick flicks from the same period fit into the neo-feminist trend, deeply grasping the ideological bias of modern women and sparking a mild revolution with female consciousness. Online feminism, which predominantly propels the fourth wave known as neo-feminist has a particularly significant and far-reaching impact on hashtag feminism [4]. Contemporary neo-feminists are mainly active on the Internet, using the Internet as a more convenient and wide-influential tool to promote feminism and express their appeal. One important point they advocate is gender equality, rejecting stereotypical labels and shackles. In the chick flicks of this period, creators cater to the needs of online feminists by concentrating on breaking down stereotypes about women. At the same time, the chick flicks of this period have also taken into account the diversity of the audience and began to feature different types of women. The female protagonist is no longer just a damsel in distress or another fixed type, but has a vivid image and personal characteristics in reality, which resonates more with the audiences. Furthermore, the male gaze, a common subject of talk about feminism, is widely mentioned in chick flicks of this period. The chick flicks give plenty of opportunity for the female gaze in the plot because it emphasizes women as its primary audience and pays more attention to their viewing experiences [5]. Men are now being watched, while women are the focus of attention [5]. Women have gained the right to gaze in chick flicks, which affects the innate status of men, which is a magnification of feminist writing.

#### 4. Evolution of Feminism in the Early 21st Century to Present: Implications for Chick Flicks

Looking back on the early 21st century, feminism has undergone a great transformation. From the start of the 21st century to 2012, feminism was still in a period of post-feminism. The propagation of post-feminism could be originated from Susan Bolotin’s voices from the Post-Feminist Generation. Post-feminism suggests that women’s accomplishments from earlier generations have thoroughly permeated all facets of our society, making it unseemly and unreasonable to continue talking about women as victims [4]. Due to the peak of chick flicks in this period, some people define chick flicks as a product of post-feminism. During this period, post-feminists developed the goal and idea of promoting women’s social status based on the rights they had gained from the previous struggle. This thought has been frequently mentioned in chick flicks over the past decade or so. Chick flicks in this period mostly portrayed the female protagonists’ efforts to get status and power, which was dominated by men at that time. This is also what feminists have always expected to transform women from marginalization to importance.

In 2012 to 2017, even though chick flicks entered a decline phase, the evolution of feminism did not stop, laying a significant ideological foundation for the development of chick flicks after 2017. Post-feminism began to transform into neo-feminism, which almost started in 2012. Neo-feminism shows a new direction: gender equality requires male participation [4]. Distinctive from previous feminism, individualization, youthfulness, globalization, de-historicity, depoliticization, and de-theorization are all becoming more and more important themes in neo-feminism [4]. Having effectively raised the status of women to a certain level, the feminists of this period began to put their hands on gender equality at an ideological and cognitive level. This ideology has awakened the consciousness of many women in society. Due to the improvement of women’s status in the previous period, women started to engage in many jobs that were not considered to be suitable for women in the last century, such as directing. The concept of gender equality deeply moved female filmmakers at that time and resonated with a great number of female creators of chick flicks. As a consequence, although this idea was only in its embryonic form at this stage, it was often mentioned in the gradually

reviving chick movies that followed. The subsequent chick films place more emphasis on the female than the male identity, with women rising from underrepresented to dominant roles [6]. Many of the movie's female characters are shown as "successful individuals" who work in managerial roles and oversee teams that include men [6]. In a patriarchal society, ideal masculinity is characterized by self-assurance, effectiveness, autonomy, self-reliance, and the capacity to regulate emotions; all of these traits are equally represented in female characters [6]. During this period, the creators of chick flicks combined with public advice and the new evolution of feminism to reschedule the amelioration and innovation of chick flick production.

Since 2018, with the gradual improvement of the social economic level and the popularization of the Internet, feminism has been widely spread on the Internet. Also, feminists use the Internet as a medium to publicize neo-feminism. Neo-feminism emphasizes more on network usage and intersectionality [4]. Intersectionality means that chick flicks in the new era pay more attention to women from various groups while connecting feminism with new dimensions such as the economy. After 2018, "Her Economy", a unique economic circle and phenomenon centered around women's financial consumption, emerged as their economic and social status improved. Feminists state that "Her Economy" is a reflection of the rise of women's consumption ability and one of the manifestations of women's self-awareness. Gender is an economic category, and the understanding of gender in each period is closely linked with the socioeconomic structure of that period. In this phase, people are pursuing "gender equality", which is also the concept that consumers in "Her Economy" have always upheld. During this time, chick flicks likewise embraced the "Her Economy" idea and fostered its growth. Chick flicks have begun to elevate women's ideological consciousness to the same level as men. The patriarchal mindset has been greatly undermined in chick flicks, instead, feminism, which emphasizes the power of women's self-strength, is often mentioned. Male gaze and stereotype are also the areas that feminists struggle with during this period, while the creators of chick flicks seized on the sensitive issues raised by these feminists and firmly upheld their feminist stance in their creations. A chick movie, which gives female characters the right and chance to view male characters and their naked bodies, is also a movie that objectifies males [6]. Meanwhile, chick flicks have also begun to give men stereotypes to satirize, such as being tall and strong, which are perfect stereotypes of male strength, which have launched a counterattack that shatters the stereotypes of women. Many of the ideas of neo-feminism in this period were brilliantly portrayed in chick flicks, achieving the role of pungent irony and clear guidance.

## **5. The Impact of Chick Flicks on Feminism from the Early 21st Century to the Present**

With its genre paradigm, "chick movies" will express a mainstream theology in addition to being a basic "comedy" [7]. Chick flick is not only a reflection and practice of feminism, but also a refeeding and sublimation of this theory.

At the beginning of the 21st century, chick flicks mostly reflected the true vision of women at that time by portraying positive and courageous female protagonists: gaining power and status. Meanwhile, chick flicks often told incentive stories, giving women who did not hold high positions at the time hope for a better future life, encouraging them to work hard and explore their female strength. Back then, chick flicks had a great influence on women, opening up their minds and perspectives, and allowing more women to fight for their equal rights. Chick flicks further made feminist power-grabbing activities easier.

In the late 21st century, the appearance of neo-feminism has led women to pursue more gender equality in terms of ideology and understanding, even though they have already acquired rights and status to a certain extent. Men and women do not strive for a deliberate distinction between high and low status, but rather for a complementary and mutually beneficial concept of equality. However, some long-standing stereotypical roles assigned to women as well as patriarchal rules and a culture



under patriarchy also cause resentment and dissatisfaction among feminists and many women. Phenomena such as the “stereotype” and “male gaze” still exist and have become a topic often discussed on the Internet in contemporary society. Although being a commercial film, chick flicks have a feminist core and a distinctly female audience. They respond sensitively to these points and express their dissatisfaction through various means such as irony in their creations, calling on more groups of people to pay more attention to this social issue. Also, the “Chick flicks”’s neo-feminist attitude primarily displays affirmation of female characteristics and self-worth, confronts female desires head-on, and pursues novel forms of gender relationships [8]. Chick flicks of this period have subtly conveyed many of the ideas of neo-feminism and also have sparked women to think about feminism and their own needs and interests, thus raising their awareness. At the same time, chick flicks have also attracted more women from different social groups to join, causing a stir in society and attracting attention and consideration from men. This has changed the social atmosphere to some extent and laid the foundation for the next stage of feminist future development.

## **6. Evolution and Success Factors in 21st Century Chick Flicks, with Recommendations for Creating Compelling Content**

Since the burn of the 21st century, numerous great chick flicks have generated a lot of buzz and attracted widespread attention and discussion at different times. Since the original counterattack routine, the chick flick’s content has gradually diversified and improved in width and breadth. Chick flicks have also altered from focusing on a certain group of women in the workplace in the beginning to now involving multiple groups of women, which has resonated with a wider female audience and gained better recognition in society. To a certain extent, chick flicks have become more accepted and disseminated by the film industry, reducing the pressure of public opinion that may inhibit their development. Meanwhile, with the rapid development of society and the changes in feminism, chick flicks have captured the constantly changing feminist perspective and carried out the core expression of feminism which conforms to the trend of the times. It is one of the important media to promote the spread of feminist ideas. In summary, the evolution of chick movies from the early 21st century to the present is meaningful, and the changes in their feminist core are also of great research value. Additionally, from the perspective of the creative thinking framework of chick flicks, the portrayals of female protagonists can be more realistic, ordinary, and imperfect, while broadening the horizons, such as middle-aged and elderly women, underage girls, etc., to include women in real life to present and gain greater resonance and publicity. Also, it will be excellent to search for the diversity of female identity and female subjectivity, which is a good way to develop new genre theories and enhance the genre of Hollywood movies [9]. Besides, chick films should escape the internal control of patriarchy when framing their thinking. It can be better to utilize feminism as the internal background and structure because female characters under the control of patriarchy find it difficult to fully reflect the power of feminism. Women intentionally make their body acts appear submissive, even in seemingly unrestricted activities, internalizing the potential demands of patriarchal culture on their bodies [10]. These inequities are concealed under the subject’s identity [10]. Despite being a commercial film, the value of female empowerment conveyed in chick flicks far outweighs the economic benefits they bring. The author hopes that the creation of chick flicks can be more innovative and fully demonstrate the feminism that lives within them.

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on the typical chick flicks from the beginning of the 21st century to the present, the study analyzes chick movies by adopting feminist theory. According to the analysis results, the development of chick flicks over the past 20 years can be divided into three stages—early 21st century:

the peak development period; 2010-2017: the depression bottleneck period; 2018-2023: the return to the golden period. Feminism has also undergone an evolution in these three phases, from the struggle for equal rights and status in reality to the struggle for gender equality and the awakening of women to the level of ideological understanding. Among them, the evolution of feminism in chick flicks is closely linked to the social changes taking place there. This means that chick flicks fit perfectly into the development trend of feminism, contribute to the advancement of feminism, and, to a certain extent complement and mutually benefit feminism, thereby awakening female power and self-awareness. This article focuses on chick flicks from the early 21st century to the present, using a detailed and diverse research perspective and approach that benefits readers by providing a specific understanding of chick flicks during this period and the evolution of feminism. It also helps deepen the reader's understanding of the relationship between feminism and chick flicks. The author is primarily restricted to using feminist theory to analyze chick flicks of this period, without incorporating professional film knowledge for research. It is hoped that future research will employ some different perspectives and theories to conduct detailed research on chick flicks of this period.

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