

The Impact of the Barbie Movie on Adolescent Self-Identity and Mental Health

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Abstract. The Barbie movie, directed by Greta Gerwig, sparked global discussions on gender roles and self-identity, offering a unique lens to examine media's impact on adolescent mental health. With rising mental health concerns among teenagers, 1 in 7 experience disorders, and media's documented role in body dissatisfaction, this paper explores how the film influences self-identity formation. Through a literature review of 15 peer-reviewed studies, the paper analyzes four key scenes (Barbie's perfection, self-doubt, Ken's crisis, and diversity themes) and critiques conflicting research on idealized versus diverse media representations. Findings indicate that while the film's "perfection" imagery risks reinforcing harmful social comparisons, its later deconstruction of norms and inclusive messaging fosters self-acceptance. The study underscores the need for media literacy programs and responsible content creation to mitigate negative impacts.

Keywords: Barbie movie, adolescent self-identity, mental health, media influence

1. Introduction

In 2023, Barbie, directed by Greta Gerwig, became a global cultural phenomenon, grossing over \$1.4 billion worldwide. While superficially a comedy, the film deconstructs the idealized imagery historically associated with the Barbie, directly addressing issues such as gender roles, self-identity, and mental health—themes highly relevant to adolescent audiences.

Adolescent mental health has emerged as a critical public health concern. According to the World Health Organization, 1 in 7 adolescents aged 10–19 globally experiences mental disorders, with depression and anxiety accounting for 40% of cases [1]. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this crisis, with studies showing a 25% increase in self-harm attempts among teenagers [2]. Media consumption, particularly exposure to idealized body standards such as Barbie's traditional "perfect" image, is linked to body dissatisfaction, which is highly relevant with low self-identity and negative mental health.

Given its subversion of these norms, Barbie presents a compelling case study for analyzing media's impact on adolescent self-identity. The movie, which is 114 minutes long, describes the story of Barbie, who lives a perfect life in Barbieland but suddenly finds herself surrounded by a series of imperfect events. She realizes an existential crisis and attempts to find the truth in the real world. The movie primarily targets adolescents and young adults, a critical age group for the development of self-identity.

Self-identity refers to how individuals perceive themselves, including their roles, values, and beliefs. According to Erikson's self-identity theory, adolescence is a key stage in the formation of self-identity, during which individuals establish self-identity by exploring different roles and identities [3]. Adolescence is a critical period for self-identity formation, and a negative or weak self-identity can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.

This paper examines the impact of Barbie on teenage self-identity and mental health through three key sections: an analysis of pivotal scenes, a critical review of relevant research, and an exploration of the film's broader implications.

2. Key scenes analysis

The Barbie movie presents four key scenes that illustrate its impact on adolescent self-identity and mental health: Barbie's perfect image, Barbie's self-doubt, Ken's identity crisis, and diversity and inclusion.

2.1. Barbie's "perfect" image

At the beginning of the movie, Barbie lives in Barbieland, where everything is flawless. Her house, car, and appearance all show an ideal way of living. Everyone in Barbieland loves and admires her, making her the center of this perfect world. This portrayal aligns with the Social Comparison Theory, which posits that individuals, especially adolescents, evaluate their self-worth by comparing themselves to others which often are upward comparisons with the idealized figures like Barbie [4].

According to Grabe, Ward, and Hyde, prolonged exposure to such idealized images among adolescents can lead to body dissatisfaction and lowered self-esteem [5]. Research further indicates that girls aged 12–18 who frequently compare themselves to unattainable beauty standards are 2.5 times more likely to experience depressive symptoms [6]. While this "perfect" image may initially reinforce harmful social comparisons, the film later deconstructs this ideal, challenging unrealistic beauty standards and encouraging a more nuanced perspective on self-worth.

2.2. Barbie's self-doubt

As the movie progresses, Barbie begins to question the meaning of her existence and falls into confusion and unease. She faces societal expectations that present contradictory demands: "You're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the time. You have to be a career woman, but also always be looking out for other people." This contradiction leaves her feeling lost and uncertain about her identity.

This struggle reflects the self-doubt commonly experienced by adolescents as they navigate personal and societal expectations. Erikson's theory of self-identity development highlights adolescence as a period of identity exploration, where individuals encounter uncertainty before establishing a coherent sense of self [3]. By portraying Barbie's existential crisis, the film resonates with teenage viewers, validating their struggles and reinforcing the idea that identity formation is an evolving, multifaceted process.

2.3. Ken's identity crisis

Ken also faces an identity crisis, trying to define himself through societal expectations of masculinity. He tries to copy how men in the real world dress, talk, and think, hoping that

conforming to traditional masculinity will grant him a sense of self-worth. However, he ultimately realizes that such imitation does not bring genuine fulfillment.

This plot highlights the complexity of self-identity and conveys an important message: finding and accepting one's true self is the key to inner satisfaction. This narrative may have a positive impact on teenage viewers, encouraging them to explore and embrace their authentic identities during their formative years.

2.4. Diversity and inclusion

By the movie's conclusion, Barbieland transforms into a place of diversity and inclusion, with Barbies and Kens of different body types, skin tones, and personalities. This shift promotes positive self-identity by showing that there is no single "ideal" image and that everyone is unique and valuable.

According to Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, the representation of diverse images in media helps promote positive self-identity among viewers [7]. This plot conveys a message of diversity and inclusive, encouraging teenage audiences to accept and cherish their own uniqueness and diversity. According to Social Cognitive Theory, such representations provide observational learning opportunities, fostering identity coherence [8-9]. Notably, inclusive media exposure is linked to a 23% reduction in body dissatisfaction, showing that the Barbie movie fosters their mental health and self-identity development [10].

3. Critical analysis

Research on the impact of media representation on adolescent self-identity presents both supporting and contradictory findings. While some studies highlight the negative effects of idealized images, others suggest that diverse representations can foster positive self-identity.

3.1. Supported research

According to the study by Grabe, Ward, and Hyde, idealized images in the media have a significant negative impact on adolescents' self-identity and body satisfaction [5]. Through a meta-analysis, the study found that adolescents exposed to idealized body images are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction and low self-esteem.

A real-world example illustrating this phenomenon is the case of a blogger who suffered from an eating disorder, as documented on the social media platform RedNote, Dare to Believe. Standing at 1.7 meters tall but weighing only 27 kg—far below a healthy BMI—she attributed her extreme dieting to the influence of idealized dancer figures on social media. Her blog posts revealed a profound struggle with self-identity and severe body image anxiety, which ultimately led to her passing after 15 years of restrictive dieting.

Although Grabe et al. provide strong evidence that idealized images in the media negatively affect adolescents' self-identity, these studies also have some limitations [5]. First, many studies in this area primarily focus on adolescents from Western cultural backgrounds, particularly in North America and Europe. This limits the generalizability of the findings to adolescents in other cultural contexts, where societal standards and attitudes toward idealized images may differ. Next, the short-term effects also influence the generalization. Most studies focus on the short-term effects of exposure to idealized images, lacking long-term follow-up research. Therefore, it is unclear whether these negative effects diminish or intensify over time. Last but not the least, these study has

uncertainty of causality. While studies suggest a correlation between idealized images and body dissatisfaction, causality cannot be definitively established. Adolescents' body dissatisfaction may also be influenced by other factors, such as family environment and peer pressure.

3.2. Contradictory research

Although most studies indicate that idealized images in the media negatively affect adolescents' self-identity, some research presents different perspectives. For example, Tylka and Wood-Barcalow argue that the portrayal of diverse body images in the media can promote positive self-identity [7]. Their study found that when media presents diverse body types, adolescents are more likely to accept their own bodies and develop a healthier sense of self-worth. Grabe et al. suggest that idealized images—such as the portrayal of Barbie and Ken—may contribute to body dissatisfaction by reinforcing unattainable standards [5]. In contrast, Tylka and Wood-Barcalow's research indicates that diverse representations—including idealized images—can help adolescents form a positive self-identity. The movie promotes self-acceptance and diversity through diverse character designs, helping to alleviate adolescents' pursuit of idealized images. Therefore, the movie presents a complex interaction between positive and negative influences on adolescent self-identity. Future research should further explore how media content can promote adolescents' positive self-identity and mental health.

3.3. Difference between the influence of different movie and social media

Movies and social media all have a profound impact on teenagers' self-identity and character construction. However, they affect the effect and the previous conditions are different. First, the immersive experience brought by the more complete and logical plot of the film may be more lasting than the impact of the fragmented content of social media [5]. However, social media such as TikTok or Instagram often convey instant and fragmented ideal images through short videos, which lacks the logic of role development and is more likely to lead to teenagers' one-sided pursuit of appearance or ability [11]. Secondly, because of its artistry and thematic concentration, movies may trigger value reflection, and subsequent discussions can strengthen the effect. Social media uses algorithmic push and high-frequency contact. For example, teenagers use it for an average of 2-6 hours a day. Its repeated exposure of the "perfect image" will subtly deepen anxiety, and the impact is more hidden and extensive [12]. Therefore, the influence of movies depends more on active participation and reflection, and the fragmented and high-frequency characteristics of social media may make the negative impact on self-identification more direct and extensive. Future research can further quantify the difference in the long-term impact of the two.

3.4. Results and implications

The portrayal of self-identity in the movie has both advantages and disadvantages. The diverse characters convey positive messages, which is conducive to teenagers accepting their own uniqueness. However, "perfect" images still dominate, increasing teenager's dissatisfaction with their appearance and abilities. This analysis paper discusses a crucial period of teenagers' self-identity formation, helping parents guide their children, providing directions for movie creation, and offering a basis for health education. It also provides some suggestions.

4. Recommendations and action

4.1. For parents

Parents play a key role in teenagers' exposure to media content, and can help children build healthy self-identification through the following specific measures. First, parents can watch movies with their children to help adolescents critically analyze the messages they receive. Parents can ask their children guided questions to let them think independently about the values conveyed by the film and their own opinion about the theme of the film, cultivating children's critical-thinking ability. For example, using films like Barbie as a starting point for discussions on self-identity, gender roles, and mental health issues can be beneficial. Second, parents might decline the negative effect of media such as movie by selecting the movies which convey positive value, decreasing the opportunity that children exposure in the negative media. Third, parent can support their children's mental health. If children show appearance anxiety or self-denial, seek psychological counseling services in time, or guide them to accept themselves through books. At the same time, parents can encourage their children to participate in offline activities such as sports and art, and reduce their dependence on virtual images.

4.2. For filmmakers

The film industry can reduce the negative impact on teenagers and convey positive information through more responsible content creation. First, filmmakers can further enhance character diversity, reduce the portrayal of idealized images, and convey more positive messages about self-identity. Second, filmmakers should continue creating content that challenges traditional norms and promotes diversity and cooperating with psychologists to ensure that role development conforms to the laws of adolescent psychological growth, ensuring that messages of authenticity and self-acceptance are clearly communicated to young audiences. Third, filmmakers should transparently produce the film. For example, the director can release behind-the-scenes documentaries, showing the process of character building, explaining the values that the production team wants to convey, and also the metaphors or hints in the film.

4.3. For educators

Schools and educational institutions can help teenagers weaken the negative impact of the media through systematic measures. First of all, the school can invite people in the industry to give lectures, such as film directors or social media ethics experts, as well as psychologists or psychological counselors, to explain the impact of film and mental health, which is conducive to students to establish a scientific theoretical system and form dialectical thinking. Secondly, schools can carry out mental health intervention, regularly screen students' physical satisfaction such as using the "physical self-esteem scale", and provide group counseling for high-risk groups. Third, school can cooperate with parents, setting the homework such as watching the movie together, letting the amount of parents who realize the importance of guiding during the watching to increase.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the movie Barbie provides a fascinating case study to examine the impact of the media on teenagers' self-identification and mental health. Although the film reinforces some traditional ideas, it also strongly criticizes social expectations and emphasizes the importance of

authenticity and self-acceptance. Promoting media literacy and fostering a supportive environment for adolescents in their process of self-identification can help mitigate potential negative influences and enhance positive mental health outcomes.

However, this analysis paper still has some limitation. First, the sample have the variability limitation. The analysis of this article mainly focuses on samples of Western teenagers, which may not fully represent the experiences of teenagers from different cultural backgrounds. Future research should include broader demographic samples, especially those from Asian and African backgrounds, to explore the potential cultural differences in the media effect.

Second, it has the measurement limitation. The current assessment relies to a large extent on self-reporting measures, which may have response bias. Future research can supplement self-reporting data by combining physiological indicators and behavioral observations.

Third, the short-term attention is one of the factors of the limitation. Most studies analyze the direct impact of media exposure. Longitudinal research that tracks the development of audience self-identification in months or years will provide stronger evidence of long-term effects. Addressing these limitations will contribute to a deeper understanding of how films shape adolescent self-identity and mental health, ultimately guiding more effective media interventions.

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