

Challenges in the spread of feminism on social media: A case study on *Barbie's* dissemination and promotion on Rotten Tomatoes

Yunying Chen¹, Xinyuan Huang², Zhaoyi Li³, and Tianruo Wang^{4*}

¹Wuhan Foreign Languages School, 430021 Wuhan, China

²Joint College of Birmingham-Jinan University, Jinan University, 510000 Guangzhou, China

³Chongqing Nankai Middle School, 400030 Chongqing, China

⁴College of Management, University of Liverpool, L693BX Liverpool, UK

Abstract. This study investigates the challenges of disseminating feminist messages on social media, focusing on the film *Barbie* as an example. Feminism has gained significant academic attention, intersecting with various social, political, and economic domains. The study utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct a comprehensive analysis of social media reactions and feedback from platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The findings reveal a complex landscape where *Barbie* is both praised for its progressive portrayal of female empowerment and criticized for superficial engagement with deeper feminist issues. Utilizing word clouds to identify dominant themes, the research provides a detailed understanding of public perceptions. The study highlights the evolving nature of feminist discourse in the digital age and underscores the critical role of media in shaping public perceptions of gender equality.

1 Introduction

The significance of feminism has increasingly gained attention in academic circles, particularly as it intersects with various social, political, and economic domains. Recent studies underscore the heightened academic focus on gender issues, suggesting that feminism's relevance extends beyond social justice to influence global policies and cultural shifts. Expanding on this theme, Mohammed, in her work, *The Pedagogy of Difference: Co-producing Feminist Consciousness across Borders*, examines the evolution of feminist consciousness within a fragmented global landscape. She argues that recognizing and

* Corresponding author: Tianruo.Wang22@student.xjtlu.edu.cn

embracing the diversity of feminist experiences across different cultural and geographic contexts can enhance our understanding of feminist issues and fortify the global feminist movement [1].

Feminism has developed through several waves, each addressing different facets of gender inequality. The current, fourth wave leverages digital platforms to highlight and combat gender inequalities, harnessing the power of social media for global outreach and activism. This wave's close association with digital media underscores the increasing topicality, public engagement, and scholarly attention that such studies command [2].

Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have revolutionized the way feminist movements communicate, offering unprecedented opportunities for global outreach and activism. These platforms enable rapid dissemination of information and the mobilization of supporters, making them essential tools for modern feminist advocacy. Campaigns such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have demonstrated the power of social media to bring attention to issues of gender inequality and mobilize collective action. This digital engagement not only amplifies feminist voices but also facilitates the exchange of diverse perspectives, enriching the global dialogue on gender issues.

Concurrently, films play a significant role in shaping and reflecting societal views on gender. As a powerful form of popular culture, films can influence public perceptions and contribute to the discourse on gender equality. While there has been progress in the representation of women in films, challenges persist in accurately portraying feminist ideals and avoiding stereotypes. The interaction between social media and films further amplifies these discussions, providing a multifaceted approach to understanding and advocating for gender equality.

Despite the potential of social media and films to advance feminist discourse, significant challenges remain in effectively spreading feminist messages. Existing literature highlights the evolving relationship between feminism and communication technologies, as well as the impact of media on public perceptions of gender. For instance, studies have shown how digital platforms facilitate the building of intersectional feminist communities, enabling the sharing of information and mobilization for offline actions [3-5]. Additionally, research indicates that media representations can either reinforce or challenge societal norms about gender, influencing public perceptions and contributing to the feminist discourse [6-7]. However, there is a gap in understanding the specific obstacles feminist movements encounter on social media and the role films play in these challenges.

These gaps include issues such as algorithmic biases that prioritize sensational content over meaningful feminist discourse, the persistent online harassment that deters participation, and the struggle to accurately represent diverse feminist perspectives without reinforcing stereotypes. There is also a need for more comprehensive research addressing how intersecting identities (such as race, class, and sexuality) are represented and discussed within feminist movements on social media. Furthermore, understanding the depth of engagement and the effectiveness of social media campaigns in driving real-world change remains an area requiring further exploration.

This research aims to explore these dynamics by examining the reception of the film "*Barbie*" on social media and analyzing how such media forms contribute to and challenge feminist discourse. The study aims to address these gaps by exploring the complex interactions between social media, films, and feminist advocacy. Through an analysis of the film *Barbie* and its reception on social media, this research seeks to provide a deeper insight into the obstacles and opportunities within contemporary feminist movements, ultimately contributing to more effective strategies for feminist advocacy in the digital age.

2 Methodology

2.1 Mixed-method analysis

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate the research issues thoroughly. Qualitative analysis methods such as textual analysis of literature are used, and the specific case study object is the movie *Barbie*, with data support provided by word cloud analysis, theme analysis, and text emotion analysis. Unlike understanding and explaining, this strategy can disclose hidden information and provide insight into events. In addition, to collect quantitative data for film reviews, various data processing techniques such as 'CONNECTEDPAPERS' and ERNIE Bot are applied for content analysis and causal reasoning. This increases accuracy, generalizability, and confidence. People can use effective data analysis methods to transfer huge amounts of data to computers. In this way, the data and information analysis mode can be changed to reduce their own workload, improve work efficiency, and ensure high accuracy of cultural content [8].

2.2 Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis from the three perspectives of text content, emotion expression, and the theme itself is helpful for the in-depth study of the topic. First of all, through text content analysis, using the case of *Barbie* movies, the study examines the complexity and contradictions of modern women. Secondly, through emotion analysis, the audience's attitude and sensitivity to feminist communication are obtained. In addition, starting from the theme, it reflects that the spread of feminism is not common and finds the limitations of feminist-related communication on social media.

2.3 Quantitative Analysis

Data on comments from major social platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, is collected in bulk. Data collection was conducted using 'CONNECTEDPAPERS', which is an online tool for processing large amounts of relevant literature data. 493 renowned cinema critics' reviews were analyzed to determine their perspectives on the feminist concepts promoted by the movie. A large number of relevant film reviews on the Rotten Tomatoes platform are processed in bulk and subjected to keyword generalization and word cloud analysis. View the male-to-female ratio as a bar chart.

2.4 Research Hypothesis

Based on literature analysis, this study assumes that, from a gender viewpoint, more female users will pay greater attention to the propagation of feminism on social media, and feminist material given by these social media will have a positive impact on the development of modern thinking. The gathering of multi-platform film review data shows that feminist cinema and television works continue to pique the public's interest and spark discourse. People have varying opinions on the efficiency of films in propagating feminist ideals, and different audiences have different interpretations, resulting in the propagation of

various feminist notions.

3 Case study

3.1 Selection Criteria for the Film *Barbie*

The film *Barbie* was chosen as the subject of this case study due to several compelling reasons that make it an ideal candidate for examining contemporary feminist discourse on social media. The selection criteria are outlined as follows.

3.1.1 Cultural Relevance and Popularity

Barbie, a widely recognized brand and cultural icon, has had a notable influence on popular culture for decades. The release of a film centered around this character naturally draws widespread attention, making it a rich subject for analysis. The film's broad appeal ensures a diverse audience, thus providing a wide range of perspectives on social media.

3.1.2 Themes of Feminism and Empowerment

The film explicitly addresses themes of identity, empowerment, and gender equality. By portraying Barbie in various empowering roles, the movie attempts to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and promote feminist ideals. This thematic focus aligns with the objectives of this study, which seeks to explore how feminist messages are received and interpreted on digital platforms.

3.1.3 Engagement on social media

The release of the *Barbie* film generated substantial activity on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Hashtags like #BarbieMovie and #BarbieEmpowerment trended for extended periods, indicating high levels of public engagement and discussion. This provides a wealth of data for quantitative and qualitative analysis, enabling a comprehensive examination of the film's impact.

3.1.4 Controversy and Diverse Reactions

The film has elicited mixed reactions, with some praising its progressive portrayal of women and others criticizing it for not going far enough in challenging gender norms. This controversy highlights the complexity of feminist discourse and provides an opportunity to study the spectrum of public opinion on social media.

3.2 Analysis of Feminist Messages in *Barbie*

3.2.1 Challenging and Reverting Stereotypes

The film *Barbie* challenges traditional gender stereotypes by portraying the titular character

in diverse and empowering roles, such as scientist, politician, and entrepreneur. This representation contrasts with the historically narrow image of *Barbie* as merely a fashion doll and aims to inspire young girls and women to see themselves in a wide range of careers. Additionally, the film defies conventional gender roles by showing male characters supporting feminist ideals and collaborating with female characters. This approach breaks down the binary view of gender roles, emphasizing the importance of allyship and cooperation in the feminist movement, thereby promoting a more inclusive vision of gender equality.

3.2.2 Themes of Empowerment and Equality

Barbie communicates strong messages of empowerment and gender equality. The film emphasizes the importance of self-discovery and personal growth, encouraging viewers to embrace their unique identities and talents. By highlighting *Barbie's* journey of self-realization and her fight against societal expectations, the film promotes the idea that true empowerment comes from within and that women should not be confined by traditional gender roles.

3.2.3 Intersectionality and Diversity

The film also attempts to address issues of intersectionality by including characters from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This inclusion aims to reflect the diversity of the real world and to promote a more inclusive vision of feminism. However, while the film makes strides in representation, it has also faced criticism for not fully addressing the complexities of intersectional feminism and for sometimes falling into tokenism.

3.3 Social Media Reactions and Feedback

The reception of the film *Barbie* on social media has been varied and complex, reflecting diverse audience perspectives. This study analyzes the reactions and feedback from Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to understand the film's impact on contemporary feminist discourse. The study's analysis was based on a comprehensive collection of reviews and comments, systematically examined to identify key themes and trends. The researchers employed quantitative and qualitative methods, utilizing word clouds to highlight the most frequently mentioned terms, providing a clear and detailed understanding of the film's reception.

3.3.1 Positive Responses

Many social media users praised the film for its progressive portrayal of female empowerment and its attempt to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. Positive feedback highlighted the film's ability to inspire young girls and promote a positive image of women in diverse roles. As Figure 1 illustrates, the word cloud map of film reviews, reveals that the approach to tackling themes of self-discovery and personal progress was well received by many spectators, who valued the emphasis on uniqueness and breaking free from society's expectations.



Fig. 1. Cloud map for *Barbie* film reviews on Rotten Tomatoes. (Photo credit: Original)

3.3.2 Critical Responses

Conversely, some users criticized the film for not going far enough in addressing systemic gender inequalities or for perpetuating certain stereotypes. According to Figure 2 and Figure 3, the *Barbie*'s movie lines and newspaper reviews cloud map, critics argued that while the film aimed to promote feminist ideals, it sometimes did so in a superficial manner, focusing more on marketability than on substantial discourse. The film's association with the traditionally problematic Barbie brand also led to skepticism about its feminist messages.



Fig. 2. *Barbie* movie lines cloud map. (Photo credit: Original)



Fig. 3. Cloud map for *Barbie* film reviews in newspapers. (Photo credit: Original)

3.3.3 Mixed Reactions

Some social media users had mixed feelings about the film. While they appreciated the film's intentions and some of its messages, they also noted areas where it could have been more effective. These users acknowledged the film's ambitious themes but felt that it occasionally fell short in execution, particularly in addressing deeper issues of intersectionality and systemic inequality.

4 Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Key Challenges of Feminist Course on Social Media

Through the integration of multi-platform data collection, the challenges of advocating feminism on social media were uncovered. First of all, the spread of feminism is mostly distorted by the media, which leads to the deepening of the stereotype of the public. There are endless misunderstandings and prejudices about feminism on social media, which makes it difficult for feminism to spread positively. Movies and television works like *Barbie* have positively promoted feminism, and more groups have begun to pay attention to

feminism, which has promoted the effective communication of feminism on social media to a certain extent. However, due to the defects of the plot of the film itself and the commercialization of the communication concept, many feminist activists have also been dissatisfied. A considerable number of feminists believe that the ultimate ideas expressed in her films are too shallow and have little practical significance.

Online harassment and phishing also occur frequently. Through literature reading, it can be known that a certain proportion of women have suffered speech harassment and money fraud by men on the Internet under the pretext of women's issues [9]. The latter part of *Barbie's* film, with its group portraits of studio executives, mirrors the real world.

In addition, algorithmic bias is a challenge to the distribution of feminist content. At present, the push mechanism of social platforms for communication content is too personalized, and the push object is precise, which is easy to lead to information cocoon. This leads to limited transmission routes.

Public perception and backlash are also important considerations in the process of feminist broadcasting, with some believing that the film is propagating gender inequality, while others believe that the plot is propagating the limitations of misogyny. Many male audience members reject and do not accept the attitude, most of the cognition of gender issues is in a very immature stage, which also shows that the road to liberation of people's minds is difficult.

4.2 Role of *Barbie* in These Challenges

In terms of the film's feminist themes, *Barbie's* advantage over other feminist films is clear, and the film explicitly discusses themes of identity, empowerment, and gender equality. Compared with other films that show feminist ideas in obscure ways, it is easier for the public to understand and empathize with them. However, this direct and simple plot also leads to the one-sidedness of feminist content dissemination, and the core content of feminism is difficult to be fully and profoundly expressed and transmitted.

Based on audience feedback on social media platforms, the positive impact is the promotion of dissemination and discussion of feminist topics to some extent. The film has sparked interest in and exploration of feminist issues among some individuals, as well as broadened the understanding of feminism, particularly among Southeast Asian women. This has constructive significance in the realm of social media communication.

However, the mass release of the film also brought some negative effects. The film magnified the potential negative stereotype of feminists, and many media outlets also took advantage of it to discuss negative topics, resulting in the intensification of "male-female confrontation" in some countries and regions.

5 Suggestions

Based on the above debate, the study attempts to give recommendations to cinema and television professionals, social media workers, and the national government in terms of increasing the beneficial impact of feminist communication. First and foremost, the film production crew must establish a strategy for accurately providing feminist material in films and television shows, including the development of story settings and actor performance styles while avoiding stereotypes and misleading descriptions. Furthermore, film and television production teams can use collaborative techniques with social feminist organizations to improve the content of film and television works as well as the efficacy of

expressive notions from a female perspective. It promotes the spread of more authentic feminism.

Social media marketing strategies also need to be improved. First, using algorithms to facilitate active engagement in optimizing content, enhancing algorithmic friendliness, and increasing the visibility of feminist content on social media. Secondly, creating a community on social media that supports feminist causes and enhancing the impact of feminist content through community interaction is also a good strategy. In addition, social media platforms can also use hashtags and campaigns to promote the spread of gender equality.

Finally, it is suggested that anti-harassment policies be reinforced. The structural reality has proved to be intimately related to normative and legal requirements [10]. The government should prioritize anti-harassment regulations, and improving anti-harassment systems on social media platforms can help protect feminist campaigners from online abuse. To address gender imbalance in the workplace, Spain implements equality programs. These initiatives were introduced by Organic Act 3/2007 for effective equality between men and women are based on two European regulations. This law strengthened the concepts of reality and effectiveness, as well as the transversality of the equality principle, emphasizing the importance of acting not only in public, but also in private [11]. Furthermore, governments should work together to promote diversity in the tech and media industries, enhance gender representation in these fields, and encourage women to participate in social media communication and technology development through regulatory initiatives.

6 Conclusion

The research was conducted through a comprehensive analysis of social media reactions and feedback from platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The analysis revealed that while the film was praised for its progressive portrayal of female empowerment and its attempt to challenge traditional gender stereotypes, it also faced criticism for not going far enough in addressing systemic gender inequalities and for perpetuating certain stereotypes. Positive responses highlighted the film's ability to inspire and promote a positive image of women in diverse roles, while critical responses pointed out the film's commercial nature and its association with the traditionally problematic Barbie brand, which led to skepticism about its feminist messages. Mixed reactions were also noted, with some users appreciating the film's intentions but feeling that it occasionally fell short in execution, particularly in addressing deeper issues of intersectionality and systemic inequality.

The significance of this research lies in its detailed examination of how feminist messages are received and interpreted in the context of contemporary media. By focusing on *Barbie*, a film that intersects traditional media and digital platforms, this study highlights the evolving nature of feminist discourse and the critical role that media plays in shaping public perceptions of gender equality. The analysis underscores the importance of media representations in promoting feminist ideals and the challenges that arise in balancing commercial success with substantial feminist discourse.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of the interplay between media and feminism, offering insights into how digital platforms facilitate and complicate the dissemination of feminist messages. It also emphasizes the need for more nuanced and comprehensive portrayals of feminist themes in mainstream media, acknowledging the complexity and diversity of women's experiences.

This study highlights several areas for future research. One critical area is the need for more in-depth exploration of intersectionality in media representations. Future research

should focus on how media can more authentically represent the varied experiences of marginalized groups within the feminist discourse. Another important direction is examining the impact of algorithmic biases on the visibility of feminist content on digital platforms, informing strategies to counteract these biases and ensure equitable representation of feminist voices. Additionally, investigating the long-term impact of feminist films and social media campaigns on societal attitudes towards gender equality is essential. Lastly, exploring the role of male allies in feminist movements and their portrayal in media can provide a more holistic understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary society. This study underscores the pivotal role of media in shaping feminist discourse and highlights the ongoing challenges and opportunities in promoting gender equality through media representations.

In conclusion, this study underscores the pivotal role of media in shaping feminist discourse and highlights the ongoing challenges and opportunities in promoting gender equality through media representations. By continuing to critically engage with media and expanding research into these key areas, people can work towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

Authors Contribution

Tianruo Wang: Contributed to the writing of the Methodology, Analysis and Discussion, and Suggestions sections; conducted literature review; adjusted the format and text of the paper.

Xinyuan Huang: Contributed to the writing of the Abstract, Introduction, Case Study, and Conclusion sections; conducted literature review.

Yunying Chen: Collected and processed data; conducted literature review.

Zhaoyi Li: Collected and processed data; adjusted the format and text of the paper.

References

1. P. Mohammed, *The Pedagogy of Difference: Co-producing Feminist Consciousness across Borders* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
2. UN Women. *New feminist activism, waves, and generations* (UN Women, 2021).
3. A.S. Dobson, Postfeminism, girls and young women and digital media, in P.T. Clough & R.D. Egan (Eds.), *Postfeminist digital cultures: Femininity, social media, and self-representation* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015).
4. S. Jackson, Young feminists, feminism and digital media. *Fem. Psychol.* **28(1)**, 32-49 (2018).
5. J. Jouët, Digital feminism: Questioning the renewal of activism. *Journal of Research in Gender studies* **8(1)**, 133-157 (2018).
6. K. Crenshaw, Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Rev.* **43(6)**, 1241-1299 (1991).
7. D. Harp, S. Harlow, J. Loke, The symbolic annihilation of women in globalization discourse: The same old story in Us newsmagazines. *Atl. J. Commun.* **21**, 263-277 (2013).
8. H. Lu, Y. Zhang, On copyright protection in the era of big data. *J. Zhengzhou Univ.* **3(08)**, 23-26 (2015) (in Chinese)

9. A. Levendowski, 'Defragging Feminist Cyberlaw', Berkeley Technology Law Journal, **38(2)**, 797-864 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38KD1QM62>
10. C.J. Suk, "Gender Parity and State Legitimacy: From Public Office to Corporate Boards". Int. J. Const. Law **10(2)**, 449-464 (2012).
11. BOE, For effective equality between women and men. Spanish Official State Gazette, 12611-12645 (2007).