

**Get Your Sparkle On: How #barbiecore users' express identity collectively online using
aestheticism from the early 2000s Barbie movies**

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COMM 3010: Communication Perspectives

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December 14, 2022

Final Proposal

Communication and media researchers (Sobande & Osek, 2020; Suwinyattichaiorn, 2016; Arastoopour Irgens, 2022; McInroy, et al., 2022) have studied the use of social media as a medium for expression and collective identity. The scholars have found that social media can be an effective tool for self-expression and a place where many share a collective identity. Sobande & Osek (2020) discovered through examining posts on a web series, that online communities' foster spaces for people to express themselves through fashion or beauty related content. Similarly, Suwinyattichaiorn (2016) found that students will express identity online through content that aligns with the student's gender. They also discovered that Facebook allows, but also filters content based on gender and sexual orientation.

Other scholars (Akal, 2018; Zaslow, 2012; Lunceford, 2012) have researched how fashion and media can be used to perform gender. One study (Zaslow, E. (2012) found that female students' perception of Barbie influenced how they behaved and perceived themselves. Additionally, Akal (2018) discovered that transgender representation in film through fashion influenced transgender viewers' perceptions and acceptance of themselves. Many of these studies were limited to only media sources like Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace. The studies conducted, apart from Akal (2018), also tended to examine gender norms from a heterosexual, cisgendered lens. None of the studies focused solely on Barbie movies as a form of media influence on self-expression or on the #barbiecore phenomenon, an online community who dresses and lives a lifestyle inspired and aligned with Barbie aestheticism.

Research Questions

Zaslow (2012) conducted research through in-class activity to understand how Barbie affected the students' perceptions of gender norms and expectations. Additionally, Zaslow (2012) had the students watch a documentary about Barbie that included testimonials from others about their perceptions and the effects Barbie has had on their life. This study provides some insight into the effect that Barbie has on identity but does not examine in depth how Barbie, specifically the Barbie movies, may have fashion and gender expression. Arastoopour (2022) studied the use of #blackgirlmagic through a data software that allowed the researcher to filter post that included the hashtag. This study is useful in providing insight into how to study an online community. However, it only used Twitter as a source for collecting data and not Instagram where the hashtag is present as well. I propose conducting a study that examines #barbiecore as an online collective community through TikTok and Instagram that is influenced by the Barbie movies display of fashion and gender.

RQ1: Did the Barbie movies of the early 2000s affect the ways in which members of the #barbiecore online community perceive themselves and chose to express their personal identity through fashion?

RQ2: How have the Barbie movies shaped and created the online community *Barbiecore* on TikTok and Instagram?

RQ3: Have the Barbie movies had a significant influence on the development of one's sexuality and gender?

Literature Review

The screen lights up pink. The picture is flecked with glitter and the reflection blurs across the photo. The editing gives the effect of the picture being taken on a disposable camera. The pink glitter miniskirt and matching crop top are nostalgically familiar. The caption below reads, “Pretty in pink” followed by #barbiecore. #Barbiecore is an online community categorized by the subscriber's outward appearance or aesthetic. Fashion Historian Mina Le (2022) categorizes this aesthetic by neon clothes, scrunchies, jumpsuits, leotards, pink, and glitter. Although Barbie as a cultural and fashion icon has been studied in the past, the #barbiecore community has not yet been studied closely by communication scholars. Other researchers have looked at Barbie as a text for personal influence but not as an aesthetic form of expression.

It is important to research this online niche because expressions, specifically gendered expressions, have changed much due to the rise of social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. These platforms have a major effect on personal expression and how we group ourselves based on what aesthetic a person falls into. Hyperfeminism, the embracement and use of all things exaggeratedly feminine, (Murnen & Byrne, 1991) is a broader area of expression into which #barbiecore falls into. It highlights the importance of women's freedom of expression. The Barbie movies from the early 2000s have inspired an online collective identity called, *Barbiecore*, which gives women and certain members of the LGBTQ+ community and place to express themselves online.

Through Cultural Feminism and Collective identity, I will propose a study to identify why this online aesthetic is formed and how it is put into practice. I will utilize past scholarly articles and studies and my analysis of the aesthetic online.

How Barbie Affects the Way People Perceive Themselves and Barbies Cultural Impact

Alice Echols defines Cultural Feminism as expression, attitudes, and ways of thinking that are inherently feminine and can survive and exist within a patriarchal society (p.36, 1983). These ideas and attitudes allow for empowerment and choice for many women who live within a patriarchy. Mina Le theorizes that #barbiecore exists as a reclamation of something hyperfeminine from the highly misogynistic time of the early 2000s (Le, 2022). Barbie as a cultural feminist icon has been studied often throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Whitney, 2013; Tulinski, 2017; (El Jurdi & Smith, 2018; Driessen, 2016).

It is important to recognize that Barbie has received criticism from many over the years. Whitney (2013) addresses the fact that barbie has been used to promote thinness, whiteness, and ideal American feminine behavior. Jurdi and Smith (2018) support this claim by proposing that the pursuit of beauty is influenced heavily by the media and national identity. However, she also recognizes Barbie's shift from these attitudes into a more inclusive and “real” figure that has allowed Barbie to remain relevant fifty years later. (Whitney, 2013) Similarly, in Driessen’s (2016) study of the evolution of Barbie ideals and stereotypes, the author suggests that Matel's shift in barbie figures to be more inclusive creates small but progressive steps in the perception of Barbie and the companies' ideals. My study needs to examine other Scholar's expressions and opinions of Barbie, especially when #barbiecore is a reclamation of Barbie herself and what it means to be feminine.

In Scholar Hannah Tulinski’s thesis, she acknowledges Barbies' cultural contribution and its evolvement of feminism over the years. Tulinski writes, “At the core of debates surrounding Barbie’s developments is an interaction of different social understandings about what it means to

be a woman in American society” (p. 14, 2017). Her statement is an example of Alice Echols theory of Cultural Feminism, that femineity is what we accept and believe to be feminine.

Looking at past research on Barbie movies has been used to analyze self-expression and perception in the past. For example, Zaslow (2012) conducted research through in-class activity to understand how Barbie affected the student's perception of gender norms and expectations. Additionally, the researcher had the students watch a documentary about Barbie that included testimonials from others about their perceptions and the effects Barbie has had on their life. The students expressed how Barbie has shaped the way they viewed themselves in terms of gender expectations and body image. Zaslow (2012) focused on the perception of Barbie as a whole, which could include the dolls, movies, games, etc. Zaslow (2012) provides some insight into the effect that Barbie has on identity but did not examine in depth how Barbie, specifically the Barbie movies, have made an impact on fashion and gender expression. My study will closely examine the Barbie movies from 2001 to 2012 as a source of inspiration for expression and a medium of Cultural Feminism. The Barbie movies from the early to mid 2000s showcase the design and visuals of the #barbiecore aesthetic.

Past studies have also studied gender in media. Media is a powerful tool for an individual's choices in beauty and expression. For example, in the study gendered aging bodies in popular media culture, The authors examine the Netflix series *Grace and Frankie*. The researchers explored the concepts of gender, aging bodies, and media, specifically the intersectionality of the three concepts. What the authors found is that the media has portrayed the elderly, especially elderly women as undesirable. The authors argue that the perception of women's aging bodies is changing. Many women in media are breaking the stereotypes of aging as a woman.(Tortajada et. Al., 2018). This study can be used to examine how Cultural feminism

applies to media. The reclamation of aging is like how many in the #barbiecore community are using media to reclaim femininity.

Online Communities of Expression and Lack of #Barbiecore Research

With the creation of social media, people became connected in ways we were not before. A common behavioral trend is the formation of groups online. Almost anything that has a following could become an online niche community. These online groups are examples of psychologist Alberto Melucci's (1995) theory of collective identity. Melucci defined collective identity as, "an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with the orientation of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place"(p.44, Melucci, 1995). #Barbiecore has been defined and shared by those who derive expressive inspiration and feminine liberation from Barbie as an aesthetic blueprint. But how have other collective identities been studied in the past?

Collective community in the digital age manifests in the formation of online communities through a multitude of media mediums. One being the #blackgirlmagic users on Twitter. Media and technology researcher Arastoopour (2022) studied the use of #blackgirlmagic through data software that allowed the researcher to filter posts that included the hashtag. The author asked how the hashtag can be used for Black women to navigate a gendered and racially coded society and how the use of the hashtag can help provide suggestions on analyzing data through a feminist lens. This study is useful in providing insight into how to study an online community. However, the author only used Twitter as a source for collecting data and not Instagram where the hashtag is present as well. Similar to how Black women use #blackgirlmagic to navigate femineity, I propose studying how users of #barbiecore use Barbie to explore femineity as well.

In another study conducted by Sobande and Osei (2020) the researchers set out to learn how black women in DC, London, and Accra navigate Ghanaian diasporic fashion identity. The authors recognize how cultural expression through visuals can be transformative. They used previous research to validate their findings and study the posts from a web series, “An African City”. The authors in this study claimed that Black women's outward identity is tied to that of white western media. They claim that there is a mashup-between African and western materiality in the web series. They also claimed that fashion, especially through media communication, has provided space for Black producers (Sobande & Osei, 2020). The researchers work directly with collective identity through this study. Though only online through a blog-like, web series the studies explore fashion and collective identity and the origins of this specific fashion identity. This study can be used to further my proposal that studying collective identity, specifically through #barbiecore, is important to understanding how online communities form and are culturally significant for those in them.

Although many online communities have been studied by researchers not many if at all have studied #barbiecore and its formation closely. Fashion historian Mina Le (2022) provides some history of the online aesthetic. Le claims that #barbiecore emerged in due part to Greta Gerwig's *All about Barbie* movie set to release in 2023, and behind-the-scenes shots which spread around the internet. She also theorizes that the internet's obsession with nostalgia has aided in the formation of online groups, like #barbiecore, dedicated to things from one's childhood (Le, 2022). Le gives necessary background information surrounding #barbiecore but does not discuss why the online phenomenon is culturally significant or how the collective group empowers self-expression.

Lack of Research That Suggests the Barbie Movies Have a Significant Influence on One's Sexuality and Gender.

One key point in my research will be to find evidence that suggests #barbiecore is a medium for the expression of one's sexuality and gender. Researchers (Akal, 2018; Suwinyattichaiorn, 2018; & Lunceford, 2012) in the past studied how media can be used to inspire or discourage gender expression. Akal (2018) conducted a study looking at transgender representation through fashion. Akal (2018) recognized that fashion is a form of gender expression. They claimed that the binary is a caste system that dictates how individuals dress and choose to express gender. To explore their claim, they looked at films containing drag queens. They claimed that even though the representation was brief and overgeneralized, the display of drag characters has led to a more improved representation of transgender characters. The author concluded that Hollywood and the use of film could be a useful medium to expose others to trans representation and expression (Akal, 2018). Media, especially through television and movies, can influence how people perceive themselves and feel permitted to express themselves in specific ways.

In another study communication scholar, Tara Suwinyattichaiorn (2018) conducted research on students regarding gender expression online. Suwinyattichaiorn (2018) set out to learn how students view their social identities through social media platforms. The author conducted a semester-long experiment where students run a personal Facebook page and post weekly material that is specific to the social groups the students identify with (race, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity, etc...)(Suwinyattichaiorn, 2018). The students were then asked how people responded to posts with their specific identities and if they received any negative comments. This study is important to navigate how expressing gender online can be liberating or

condemning. In my research, I will explore just how expression through #babricore can liberate individuals or if it can cause harm to one's self-image when harmful comments or backlash are present.

In a similar study by a communication teacher Lunceford (2012), students were asked to dress as accurately as possible to their gender identification. The students were also asked why they chose their outfits regarding gender. The class was then asked to rank how masculine, androgynous, or feminine each outfit was. The findings were that most students dressed in what others thought to be traditionally masculine or feminine (Lunceford, 2012). The author showed that clothes are gendered. Thus, concluding that #barbiecore as a style niche is an expression of one's gender. However, it is important to not limit the study of #barbicore as a gender expression to just cis-gendered women, but to all spectrums of sexuality and gender.

Conclusion

Technology has changed how we communicate with others and how we conduct research. Online aesthetic communities are some of the most revealing when it comes to collective identity and self-expression. Our clothes communicate a thousand words of what we stand for and believe in, which is why it is imperative to examine closely aesthetics like #barbiecore.

The research compiled in this review revealed how Barbie as an entity inspired a cultural feminist area of study and how online platforms like Facebook and Twitter can facilitate places where certain collective identities can communicate. Researchers also looked at media as a blueprint for one's sexual and gender expression and how public displays of which can be praised or persecuted. However, none of these studies examined how an online aesthetic can influence

gender and sexuality, provide a space for collective identity, or be an example of cultural feminism.

Rationale

Many communications scholars and researchers (Zaslow, 2012; Whitney, 2013; Tulinski, 2017) have analyzed Barbie as a figure for gender and self-identify. Communication Scholar Zaslow (2012) found that Barbie has affects the ways in which female students view themselves and how male students view female students. They concluded that Barbie has deeply affected the ways in which women are viewed by others in our society. Researchers (Whitney, 2013; &Tulinski, 2017) analyzed Barbie as a reference for women's standard of beauty and feminine behavior. They argued that Barbie has been used for some time as a guideline for women to follow. The researchers (Zaslow, 2012; Whitney, 2013; Tulinski, 2017) have focused their studies primarily on Barbie as a reference for gender encoding and decoding. However, the researchers did not examine the idea of Barbie as a source of chosen gender expression. The researchers also examined Barbie as an entity, not specifically one form of media, for example, the Barbie movies.

Communication scholars (Anatropous, 2022; Sobande & Osei, 2020) have examined collective identity online through data collection and surveys. They have found that platforms like Twitter and blog posts facilitate spaces where people could express, collaborate, and connect through the same shared values and interests. Through these studies the authors examined collective identities on twitter and blog posts but not through Instagram or TikTok. These communication scholars highlight the lack of research in newer media platforms.

Other scholars (Lunceford 2012; Suwinyattichai, 2016) have examined how gender is influenced and can be influenced by media. They found that students will dress in ways they feel aligned with their gender. The researchers also found that social media algorithms generate content based on the social groups and the amount of expressive content interacted with. The

scholars highlight how social media can influence and facilitate one's choice of gender expression. The scholars help pose the question on how media like the Barbie movies can influence and lead to one's expressive identity online, across all spectrums of gender and sexuality. My research will explore how the Barbie movies of the early 2000s have affected collective gender expression, which manifests through the #barbiecore aesthetic.

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