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# ‘Barbie,’ a feminist film about toxic masculinity and gender equality, is marketed as politics-free pink fluff

*Opinion by Quentin Fottrell* • Yesterday 9:38 AM



‘Barbie,’ a feminist film about toxic masculinity and gender equality, is marketed as politics-free pink fluff© MarketWatch photo illustration/iStockphoto

Barbie built her dream marketing campaign.

On Friday evening, as Barbie fever took over movie theaters across America — and the world — one scene struck me as romantic, poignant and sort of beautiful. But it wasn’t a scene from the feel-good movie, which was designed to

lift spirits while actually dealing with issues of social injustice and gender inequality.

Joanne's Trattoria, a small Italian restaurant on New York's Upper West Side owned by Lady Gaga's family, had gotten in on the Barbie buzz by offering \$5 glasses of rosé. Sitting at the bar on Friday evening was a twentysomething woman dressed in head-to-toe pink. She had already seen "Oppenheimer," the three-hour biopic about Robert J. Oppenheimer, known as the father of the atomic bomb, and was on her way to see "Barbie" at the local AMC theater.

It felt like a scene from a rom-com. The outside world faded away, giving us an opportunity to forget about rising prices and interest rates, the red-vs.-blue political divide, the [possibility of recession](#), and whatever else is troubling Americans.

Movies ask us to suspend disbelief, but, with the help of the color pink as a "Barbie" uniform, fans managed to do that before the opening credits even rolled. And although this fan was attending solo, she was joining in a national, even global, experience — one that feels welcome more than three years after the start of the pandemic, her generation's most traumatic collective experience.

*Movies ask us to suspend our disbelief, but many 'Barbie' fans had managed to do that before the opening credits even rolled. It felt like Halloween, when people get to dress up and forget their troubles.*

What she may not have realized while sipping her rosé: "Barbie" is just as political as "Oppenheimer." The former just comes wrapped in a big, pink bow. Despite the fluffy, global marketing campaign, "Barbie" explores serious themes around

toxic masculinity; the pressures put upon women in society; and, yes, the failings of the patriarchy. So why was the marketing of the movie so saccharine?

“Barbie is designed to appeal to a huge audience across many cultures, and it seems to have achieved that,” said Adam Alter, a professor of marketing at NYU Stern School of Business. “Campaigns that achieve such widespread appeal usually tap into very basic human motives — and the motive to be happy, to party, to have fun is evergreen and particularly resonant at the moment.”

Variety said that Warner Bros. has pulled off the marketing campaign of the year with “Barbie.” But it was even more than that, a campaign of “Star Wars” proportions that found its way into every aspect of American life. Airbnb listed an actual [Barbie Dreamhouse](#) for rent. Microsoft released a custom [Barbie Xbox Series S](#). Dressed in pink, the rosé drinker was now part of this cultural phenomenon.

“Barbie,” directed by Greta Gerwig, reached No. 1 last weekend with \$162 million in ticket sales at North American theaters, making it the biggest movie debut of the year and setting a first-weekend record for a movie directed by a woman. For context: Marvel’s “Black Panther,” [the first mainstream Black superhero movie](#), earned more than \$200 million in its opening weekend in 2018. The fact that “Barbie” managed to bring in more than two-thirds of that revenue is no small feat.

*‘Coca Cola’s longstanding dominance is in some ways similar. If you can tap into those very basic motives effectively, you stand a good chance of appealing to a big audience.’ — Adam Alter, NYU*

The reviews for “Barbie” were mostly positive, with some describing it as a “[miracle](#),” although one male reviewer was [not quite so enthusiastic](#), and did not enjoy being surprised by the political themes. What accounts for the fact that [65% of the opening-weekend audience](#) was female? Barbie is a doll, but she is also emblematic of a different time. Community can create nostalgia, [psychologists and social scientists say](#), but nostalgia can also create community.

And yet 35% of the audience were men. What gives? “The current level of uncertainty and turbulence and anxiety accounts for part of that crossover among genders,” said Nancy Wong, a professor of consumer science at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. “People associate ‘Barbie’ with a more comfortable, simple and stable time in their lives.”

What other campaigns have achieved such success? “Coca Cola’s longstanding dominance is in some ways similar,” Alter said. “Coke has always done an excellent job of appealing to similar basic motives — happiness, togetherness, spending time with family and friends. If you can tap into those very basic motives effectively, you stand a good chance of appealing to a big audience.”

## A ‘goodwill’ double-bill

Even Comcast Universal’s “Oppenheimer” — which opened to \$80 million in ticket sales last weekend — couldn’t stop Barbie in her tracks. In fact, the unlikely “Barbenheimer” double-bill phenomenon only added buzz to a historic weekend for the movie industry. Gerwig and “Barbie” star Margot Robbie embraced the #Barbenheimer hashtag and [posed in front of a poster for the rival movie](#), holding their tickets aloft. Was this part of the marketing campaign, too?

It doesn’t matter. Gerwig and Warner Bros. did something that few other moviemakers or studios do: lean into the competition and say it’s OK to see another film as well. When was the last time you saw such a message of peace

and goodwill from corporate America? The opening weekend is usually cutthroat for studios, and trade publications feverishly report on which movie makes it to No. 1.

“The marketing for ‘Barbie’ has been insane,” said Kristina Durante, a professor of marketing and a department chair at Rutgers University’s business school. It was a months-long blitz, she said, but it was also very clever.

*‘ “Barbie” is taking issues about equity, body image, inclusion, diversity, intersectionality, politics and the patriarchy, all of the stuff we’re dealing with in such a divided country.’ — Kristina Durante, Rutgers University*

The marketing campaign did two critical things: It kept the plot of the movie a mystery and kept its feminist message tightly wrapped, while simultaneously bombarding the world with pink, partnering with brands and letting social media and millions of people around the world do the rest. In other words, it allowed people to connect with Barbie and with each other in a safe way, regardless of their political or social views.

“ ‘Barbie’ is taking issues about equity, body image, inclusion, diversity, intersectionality, politics and the patriarchy, all of the stuff we’re dealing with in such a divided country — the state of the world today is very negative — and addressing it,” Durante said. “It adds a little bit of levity around the weight of these issues that we are facing.”

Durante cites a concept in psychology called the “[contrast effect](#).” That’s when something goes from almost zero visibility to such an enormous boost in visibility that people will say, “I remember that!” It makes the end result so much more

powerful. In simple terms, if you put a lighter-colored (let's say pink, in this case) object in front of a dark object, the lighter-colored object will seem more vibrant. Similarly, Barbie may have appealed to people all the more when contrasted with an "Oppenheimer." And the fluffy marketing may also have made its serious themes all the more impactful.

## The power of pink

It's also a movie of contrasts, said Kathleen Vohs, professor of marketing at the Carlson School of Management in Minnesota's Twin Cities. "It acknowledges two states of the world that you might think are contradictory: escapism and reality, funny and serious, idealistic and somewhat pessimistic. It had a lot more nuance than people expected." The movie's tagline, "If you love Barbie, this movie is for you. If you hate Barbie, this movie is for you," sums up this dichotomy, Vohs said.

Barbie loves pink and, in this way, Warner Bros. got lucky. Color psychologists regard pink as a sign of hope, according to Bergh Consulting, a company that specializes in branding and web design for small businesses and nonprofits. "The color pink is well-known to represent nurturing, compassion and love. It gives us feelings of understanding, acceptance, giving and receiving," [the company states on its website](#).

It's a powerful yet intimate color that has proved to be a reassuring symbol for everything from LGBTQ+ rights to breast-cancer awareness. "When we think of the color pink, things like breast-cancer awareness, femininity or Barbie may come to mind," Bergh Consulting says. "This is because of the feminine, empowering effect this color has on us psychologically."

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*understanding, acceptance, giving and receiving. It's a powerful yet intimate color.' — Bergh Consulting*

Brands like Barbie T-Mobile and Victoria's Secret take advantage of that power, Bergh Consulting notes. "The deeper the color of pink, the more powerful the energy it exudes. Softer pinks tend to have the opposite effect. A lighter shade of pink can give off feelings of romance, affection, thoughtfulness and caring."

On a more practical level, pink also provided the studio's marketing campaign with consistency and instant recognizability, especially as retail outlets like Target Gap Inc. Hot Topic, Forever 21, BooHoo and ASOS all sold pink Barbie merchandise, said Ron Hill, a professor of marketing in the Kogod School of Business at the American University in Washington, D.C.

"What I find most interesting is that we live in a society that has moved away from strict gender identity, allowing a fluidity across traditional boundaries between males and females," he said. The film appeals to people who may feel unmoored by such cultural shifts and confused about pronouns, Hill added, yet also attracts those who are more likely to enjoy plot twists about toxic masculinity and gender equality in the script written by Gerwig and her partner Noah Baumbach.

*Pink is a color that is increasingly politicized, particularly by women's causes, and it's also a soft, nonthreatening color to market a movie with messages about toxic masculinity and gender politics.*

Pink, while often regarded as soft and feminine, also happens to be a color that is increasingly politicized, particularly by and for women's causes, and perhaps a



nonthreatening color to market a movie with messages about gender politics, the benefits of having all-women Supreme Court and a [female president](#) (called President Barbie), and [the failings of the patriarchy](#).

The color, it should be noted, was not always associated with women and female causes. “Pink in fashion, decorative arts and interior design was popularized during the 18th century and worn by both men and women of the European bourgeoisie,” according to [this history of the color](#) in art, literature and fashion by Winsor & Newton, a London-based manufacturer of fine-art products.

“Wealthy and influential noblemen, such as those in Louis XVI’s French court, wore rose-coloured embroidered silk coats, and Louis XVI’s mistress Madame de Pompadour had her own tint of pink named after her called ‘rose pompadour’. In literature, French author Xavier de Maistre put forward the idea in his 1794 book ‘A Journey Around My Room’ that pink and white bedrooms decorated for men would lighten their moods.” (That, alas, did not happen in the actual “Barbie” movie, when a beer-swilling, disenfranchised Ken forcibly occupies Barbie’s Dreamhouse.)

Still, the “Barbie” movie’s pink-coated hard sell appears to have worked. Among the self-generated marketing content on Facebook Instagram and Twitter were images of moviegoers posing inside a giant pink Barbie box. Even dads posed in these boxes. Maybe some were encouraged to do so by their kids. Either way, they didn’t always look so comfortable standing in Barbie’s place. [Such images](#) personify the success of the feel-good marketing.

This trend encapsulated the interactiveness of the Barbie Dreamworld campaign, and also how game people have been to step out of their everyday lives, leave their worries behind and — temporarily, at least — play along. The final irony, of course, is that the movie was all about real-world problems.