# Barbie & Ken's Struggle for Self-Discovery as Seen in the Film Barbie (2023)

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**Abstract:** This research is titled "Barbie & Ken's Struggle for Self-Discovery as Seen in the Film Barbie (2023)" and focuses on the identity crisis and social expectations experienced by the characters Barbie and Ken in Barbie (2023). The research aims to understand how the characters face social pressure and struggle to find their true selves in a world full of gender stereotypes. However, a socially dynamic environment can cause a person to experience a crisis of self-confidence or an identity crisis, affecting their presence in public spaces. The research employ's identity theory and Barbie Culture by Mary Rogers, which highlights the influence of the real world on perceptions of identity and gender roles. The qualitative analysis method applied includes direct observation of the narrative, dialogue, and visual elements in the film. The results reveal that Barbie and Ken undergo a complex identity journey, grappling with internal and external conflicts, including societal pressures that influence their self-perception. This research concludes by emphasizing the importance of more inclusive narratives in popular media to reflect the complexity of human identity and broaden understanding of how popular culture shapes views on gender and identity.

**Keywords:** Barbie, Ken, Identity Crisis, Social Expectations, Barbie Culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Identity is a fundamental aspect of human life that shapes how individuals perceive themselves and their role in society. It is influenced by personal experiences as well as cultural symbols and societal expectations. In popular culture, characters like Barbie have long served as powerful symbols of gender identity and societal ideals. Since her creation in 1959, Barbie has been celebrated as an icon of female empowerment, yet she has also been criticized for promoting unrealistic beauty standards and rigid gender roles (Rogers, 1999). This duality makes Barbie an interesting subject for identity studies, as she embodies the aspirations and contradictions of modern femininity.

The 2023 film Barbie, directed by Greta Gerwig, offers a new perspective on this iconic character by exploring the identity struggles Barbie and Ken face. The film depicts their journey of self-discovery as they confront societal expectations and internal conflicts, reflecting the complex nature of identity formation. Using identity theory and Barbie culture

as conceptual frameworks, this study aims to answer the following research questions: How do the main characters, Barbie and Ken, experience and represent an identity crisis in Barbie (2023)? And How does Barbie (2023) criticize the beauty standards and gender stereotypes that influence Barbie and Ken's identity development?

According to Tajfel and Turner's identity theory, social categorization plays a crucial role in shaping self-concept and group affiliation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to this theory, individuals define themselves based on their membership in various social groups. This can lead to internal conflict when personal identity clashes with social expectations. Meanwhile, Mary Rogers's Barbie culture concept examines how cultural icons, such as Barbie, influence perceptions of femininity and identity by reflecting society's ideals and contradictions (Rogers, 1999). These theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for understanding the representation of identity crises and the critique of beauty standards and gender stereotypes in Barbie (2023).

Barbie and Ken's identity struggles are characterized by internal and external conflicts. Barbie experiences existential doubt when she confronts the imperfections and mortality that challenge her formerly perfect life in Barbie Land. Ken, who was initially dependent on Barbie's validation, experiences a crisis of masculinity when he explores power dynamics and patriarchal ideals in the real world. He realizes that these ideals do not fulfill his quest for identity. Externally, both characters face societal expectations and stereotypes that shape and limit their self-perceptions. Barbie faces objectification and restrictive beauty standards, while Ken grapples with traditional masculine roles imposed by society. These conflicts drive the film's narrative and provide a critical lens through which to view how gender norms influence identity formation in contemporary culture.

This study uses a qualitative textual analysis of the film, focusing on narrative elements, character development, and visual symbolism, to answer these questions. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of how popular culture shapes perceptions of gender identity and roles. It provides insight into the broader cultural narratives that influence self-perception (Rogers, 1999). The study explores how Barbie and Ken's journey reflects the challenges of defining one's identity in a complex and often contradictory social landscape and offers a critical reflection on the impact of popular culture on self-identity.

## METHOD

This study uses qualitative research with a textual analysis approach, focusing on the film Barbie (2023) as the main data source. Qualitative research was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena, such as identity formation and cultural symbolism, without relying on numerical data. The main subject of this research is the film Barbie (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, which provides a rich source of data to analyze identity crisis and social expectations. The analysis focused on selected scenes, dialogues, and cinematic techniques that reflect the internal and external conflicts faced by the main characters, Barbie and Ken.

The research was conducted from the time of the film's release in 2023 until the completion of the dissertation in 2025. Data collection involved repeated screenings of the film, supported by desk research to collect secondary data from academic articles, books, and critical essays on identity theory and Barbie culture. The primary research instrument was the researcher, who acted as the primary data collector and interpreter, using notes, thematic coding, and scene analysis to effectively organize and interpret the data.

The research process involved several steps by selecting the film as the primary data source, conducting a detailed scene-by-scene analysis to identify key themes and conflicts, applying identity theory and Barbie culture as a theoretical framework to interpret the character dynamics, cross-referencing the findings with secondary sources to support the

analysis, and synthesizing the findings into a coherent discussion that addresses the research questions. Data analysis involved organizing the collected data into categories based on the research questions. These categories included the internal conflicts, external pressures, and societal expectations that shaped Barbie and Ken's identities. The analysis also considered the broader cultural implications of the findings, reflecting the impact of popular culture on gender.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
### Internal Conflicts

Barbie's internal struggle exemplifies the psychological aspect of an identity crisis, as defined by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This theory states that individuals define themselves through social categorization, group identification, and social comparison. Barbie's identity conflict begins when she has an existential thought: *"Do you guys ever think about dying?"* That question disrupts her role as the embodiment of perfection in Barbie Land, a utopian society where every day is flawless and harmony is idealized. This moment marks a significant psychological shift, as Barbie begins comparing herself not only to her surroundings, but also to broader, more complex real-world standards.

Her growing awareness of imperfection and mortality triggers a profound internal transformation, symbolized by sudden physical changes such as flat feet and cellulite. These visible changes illustrate the collapse of her idealized image and underscore the emotional pressure to uphold unattainable beauty standards. Through this lens, Barbie's internal conflict reflects a transition from a social identity shaped by external expectations to a more autonomous personal identity shaped by introspection and self-acceptance. This aligns with the Barbie Culture theory proposed by Rogers (1999). According to this theory, Barbie representations reflect cultural values and become an arena of conflict in the shaping of gender identity through popular symbolism.

As Barbie continues her journey, she confronts the harsh realities of the real world, where she is criticized for reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards instead of admired. This is illustrated in a scene where a teenage girl tells her, *"You have been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented."* This moment challenges Barbie's self-image and forces her to confront the broader cultural impact of her identity. It leads her to question her place in a world that no longer sees her as perfect.

Meanwhile, Ken struggles with a crisis of masculinity. Initially defined only in relation to Barbie, he seeks validation by adopting patriarchal ideals after visiting the real world. He attempts to redefine his identity by creating a power structure in which men dominate, transforming Barbie Land into "Kendom." However, he ultimately realizes that this model of power does not satisfy his deeper need for self-worth. This is poignantly expressed in the scene where Ken admits, *"I'm just Ken, and that's enough,"* accepting his true self beyond societal expectations. Visually, this shift is symbolized by his transformation from a power-seeking figure to a more self-aware, independent character, which emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance. This moment also reveals the emotional vulnerability beneath his outward confidence, reflecting the complexity of his identity crisis. Barbie also says, *"I want to be part of the people that make meaning, not the thing that is made."* These words mark the culmination of her existential reflection and reinforce the film's theme of self-discovery.

**Table 1. Internal Conflicts of Barbie and Ken**

| Character | Internal Conflict | Dialog Scene | Resolutions |
|-----------|-------------------|--------------|-------------|

| Barbie | Existential crisis, fear of imperfection | Barbie's question disrupts the flawless world, marking the start of her self-awareness of mortality and imperfection.  | Acceptance of flaws and individually |
|--------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Ken | Acceptance of authentic self | Ken's admission reveals his acceptances of himself beyond patriarchal ideals and external validation.  | Embraces individuality and self-acceptance |
| Barbie | Doubt about perfection | Represents her realization that perfection is an unrealistic expectation and a source of internal conflict.  | Rejects superficial ideals, embraces authenticity |
| Ken | Crisis of masculinity, dependency on Barbie | Reflects his deep dependency on Barbie for identity and purpose, highlighting his struggle to define himself. | Realization of self-worth beyond power |

Source: Research data

**External Pressures**

The external forces acting on Barbie and Ken illustrate how societal expectations can shape and constrain self-perception, pressuring individuals to adhere to limited gender roles. As a long-standing cultural icon, Barbie embodies the paradox described by Mary Rogers (1999): she is both a symbol of female empowerment and a vehicle for promoting unattainable beauty standards. This contradiction reaches its climax when Barbie enters the real world and confronts Sasha, a teenage girl who accuses Barbie of perpetuating harmful ideals: *"You've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented."* This scene is a moment of reckoning, forcing Barbie to confront the contradiction between her aspirational message and the psychological burden she has imposed through idealization. From the perspective of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), this interaction triggers a crisis of identity incongruence. Barbie is no longer validated by her group, Barbie Country, but instead is judged by an outgroup, the real world, which interprets her differently. This shift in intergroup perception forces Barbie to reevaluate her identity, creating emotional and cognitive dissonance. The film highlights the fragile boundary between external validation and internal self-worth, revealing how deeply entrenched cultural norms can distort an individual's identity.
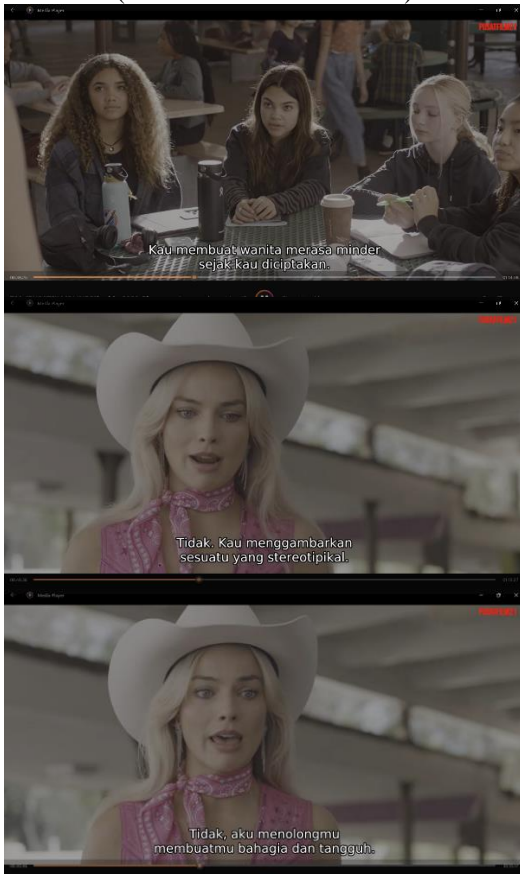
Barbie's transformation begins when she rejects superficial perfection and embraces authenticity and emotional imperfection. Her journey critiques the rigid standards of femininity upheld by the media and consumer culture. This echoes Rogers's assertion that Barbie is not just a toy but also a site for the cultural negotiation of what it means to be a woman.
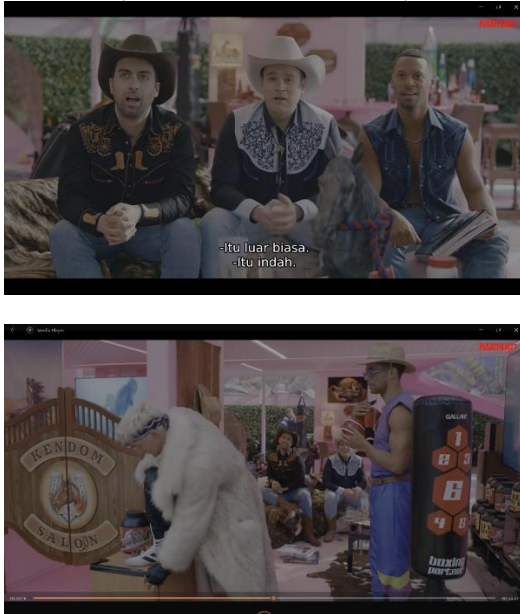
Similarly, Ken's trajectory is shaped by societal expectations of traditional masculinity. Initially marginalized and dependent on Barbie's attention for his sense of worth, Ken

encounters patriarchal structures in the real world and misinterprets them as a blueprint for self-empowerment. He transforms Barbie Land into "Kendom," a hypermasculine society driven by dominance and hierarchy. This transformation reflects social comparison theory (Tajfel & Turner), wherein Ken models his identity on men perceived as having higher status. However, as Ken becomes increasingly disillusioned, the power vacuum of patriarchy is revealed. His realization that *"patriarchy isn't even about horses!"* Though it may sound satirical, the sentence reveals the lack of meaning in the patriarchal system, a symbolic representation of power. This concept aligns with Rogers's theory that cultural symbols often fail to provide genuine existential or emotional fulfillment.

The chaos and collapse of Kendom serve as a metaphor for the unsustainability of rigid gender hierarchies, both personal and social. Instead of achieving fulfillment, Ken's pursuit of control leads to further confusion, reinforcing the idea that dominance is not synonymous with identity. Ultimately, his journey reveals the importance of authentic self-expression over externally imposed ideals. His declaration, *"I'm just Ken, and that's enough,"* signals a rejection of toxic masculinity and an embrace of vulnerability. This echoes contemporary critiques of gender essentialism, advocating for a more inclusive and flexible understanding of male identity.

**Table 2. External Pressures Affecting Barbie and Ken Identities**

| External Pressure | Impact on Identity | Dialog Scene | Resolutions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Unrealistic beauty standards (Barbie) | Leads to self-doubt and identity crisis | Confrontation with teenage girl (Minute 00.35.00-00.45.00)  | Embraces individuality and self-acceptance |

| Traditional masculinity (Ken) | Creates a false sense of power and identity | Transformation of Barbie Land into Kendom (Minute 00.55.00-01.25.00) | Realizes need for authentic self-worth |
|---|---|---|---|
| | |  -Itu luar biasa. -Itu indah.<br><br> | |

Source: Research data

These internal and external conflicts demonstrate how self-identity is shaped by personal desires and powerful cultural forces. As symbolic figures, Barbie and Ken are subject to externally imposed ideals: Barbie to unrealistic beauty standards, and Ken to traditional masculine roles. These ideals initially define and limit their sense of self. However, they ultimately reject these societal constructs. Barbie learns to embrace her imperfections and move away from the restrictive ideals that once governed her existence. Meanwhile, Ken sheds his need for validation through dominance and embraces a more authentic, emotionally grounded identity. Their evolution reflects the tension between social identity and self-actualization and offers a commentary on how cultural narratives, power structures, and symbolic representations continue to shape male and female identities in contemporary society.

At the core of Barbie and Ken's self-discovery process is their journey of facing social pressures and breaking gender stereotypes. Each character reflects a response to social structures and undergoes a transformation toward an authentic identity through self-awareness and acceptance.

**Visual and Symbolic Context**

The transformation of Barbie Land into Kendom offers a spatial metaphor for shifts in gender power and the instability of identity shaped by external validation. Initially, Barbie Land reflects a sanitized feminist utopia: an exaggerated matriarchy rooted in consumerist ideals, as Rogers (1999) explains. However, it is not governed by equality, but by standardized perfection, leaving little room for existential reflection.

When Ken returns from the real world, he imposes patriarchal elements, such as beer, horses, and Western imagery, on this previously female-centered world. This shift represents symbolic domination, where masculine norms overwrite feminine agency. However, the exaggerated symbols in Kendom become unsustainable. Ken's confusion and fatigue reflect the emotional cost of adhering to rigid gender roles, which echoes Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity as a structure that fails even its beneficiaries.

Barbie's confrontation with the real world reveals the complexities of gender performance (Butler, 1990), where visual markers such as appearance and behavior are

interpreted through culturally loaded lenses. Her struggle becomes political, representing every woman who has had to navigate objectification, social surveillance, and contradictory expectations.

In addition to thematic changes, the film's visual transitions play an important role. For example, the colour change from feminine pastel shades to dark, masculine colours in Kendo symbolizes patriarchal dominance. Elements such as horses, gyms, and militarization serve as visual metaphors illustrating the hegemonic masculinity being questioned.

## CONCLUSION

Entitled "Barbie & Ken's Struggle for Self-Discovery as Seen in the Film Barbie (2023)," this research aims to analyze the identity crisis and social pressure faced by the main characters, Barbie and Ken. The study uses the theories of identity and Barbie culture as its main framework. The study found that both characters undergo significant personal transformations as they strive to define themselves beyond societal expectations. Barbie's identity crisis stems from her realization that the idealized, perfect image she has embodied for decades is unattainable and emotionally limiting. This transformation is symbolized by physical changes, such as flat feet and cellulite, representing the inevitable imperfections of real life. Confronted with severe criticism in the real world, Barbie learns to reject unrealistic beauty standards and embrace authenticity, transcending the shallow ideals that have long defined her. This transformation underscores the psychological impact of cultural symbols on self-identity and highlights the importance of challenging established norms to achieve personal growth.

In contrast, Ken grapples with a crisis of masculinity. Initially defined by his relationship with Barbie, he attempts to redefine himself through patriarchal power structures. He transforms Barbie Land into "Kendom" to assert dominance and gain recognition. However, this pursuit of external power proves unsatisfying, leading Ken to a critical turning point where he recognizes his intrinsic worth, regardless of his status or relationship with Barbie. His declaration, *"I'm just Ken, and that's enough,"* signals his acceptance of a balanced, authentic identity. This realization reflects the broader societal need to move beyond rigid gender roles and embrace more nuanced understandings of masculinity and femininity.

Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and rejecting externally imposed ideals. However, this study has some limitations. First, this analysis focuses on only one film as the main data source, which makes it interpretive and prone to subjective bias. Further research could expand this study's focus and scope by examining audience responses, identity representation in other media, or taking a cross-cultural comparative approach. Thus, Barbie and Ken's struggle reflects the complex process of self-discovery amid the dominance of social norms and popular culture. This process underscores the significance of self-reflection in challenging entrenched notions of identity and cultivating a more flexible and inclusive perception of identity.

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