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wealth creation (Pirson, 2019). We feel that organizational scholars are well positioned to clarify the responsibility of firms to protect human dignity in an era of increasing algorithmic governance.

In closing, *Your Boss Is an Algorithm: Artificial Intelligence, Platform Work and Labour* is a well-written call to avoid complacency as digital platforms transform traditional forms of management. The future of work is ever changing and unpredictable, but it is within our control to change. Aloisi and De Stefano offer an important contribution to prevent the displacement of labor and prioritize the well-being of the worker in an era of rapid technological change.

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Media Review: Barbie and Ken—Staging Paradoxes to Bridge Polarization

Greta Gerwig

Barbie

USA, UK: Warner Bros., Heyday Films, LuckyChap Entertainment, NB/GG Pictures, Mattel Films, 2023

Reviewed by: Angela Greco , Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands; Ferran Torres, Erasmus University, The Netherlands; Eriselda Danaj, Macquarie University, Australia and Wendy Smith, University of Delaware, USA

‘Things can be both/and. . . I’m doing the thing and subverting the thing’

Greta Gerwig, Barbie movie Director

Barbie is a polarizing cultural icon. Over the last 60 years, the doll represented feminism’s greatest advances and worst challenges. Fans lauded Barbie for inspiring creativity and opportunity

among generations of young girls, while foes criticized her unattainable, sexualized body, dependency on male attention, and excessive consumerist inspiration. Greta Gerwig inherited this ongoing controversy when agreeing to write and direct the *Barbie* movie. Would Gerwig animate admirers or succumb to foes?

Ultimately, Gerwig did both. As the opening quote states, she surfaced paradoxes and leaned into both/and approaches to harness Barbie's controversy. By making salient these paradoxical tensions, Gerwig intrigued and entertained the audience while expounding upon society's inherent complexity. Drawing on this both/and strategy enabled the movie to elicit praise from the most skeptical critics, contributing to its success as the highest-grossing film in 2023 and, within only one year, coming close to the top 10 highest-grossing films of all time.

In this review, we draw on paradox theory to explore how the *Barbie* movie accomplishes the contradictory task of utilizing a divisive symbol to bridge polarization. We show how the movie portrays key insights by (1) drawing on paradox to depict core challenges, (2) leveraging opposing constructionist and realist ontologies to unpack complexity, and (3) exploring the dynamics of vicious and virtuous cycles. The movie offers poignant examples to organizational scholars about how to engage with paradoxical tensions while also inviting the expansion of theoretical insights.

Drawing on Paradox to Depict Core Challenges

Paradoxes are “contradictory, yet interdependent elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 381). The *Barbie* movie makes salient gender paradoxes and, in doing so, depicts the core challenges of gender equity. In a *New York Times* review, author Willa Paskin (2023) states, “Barbie is a potent, complicated, contradictory symbol that stands near the center of a decades-long and still-running argument about how to be a woman.” Rather than adopting a position on the conflicting perspectives associated with the doll, Gerwig uses the movie to surface competing perspectives humorously and poignantly, advancing social commentary on gender equity complexities. In “Barbieland,” Barbie doll US President and Nobel Prize-winners lead, while all men are named Ken and are bland, nondescript characters, unable to do much beyond accessorizing Barbie. These scenes juxtapose a “real world” patriarchal all-male Mattel executive team. The movie narrator tells us, “Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything,” yet “real world” teenager Sasha later denounces Barbie:

You've been making girls feel bad about themselves since you were invented. You represent everything that is wrong with our culture—sexualized capitalism [. . .] You set the feminist movement back 50 years. [. . .] And you are killing the planet with your glorification of rampant consumerism.

Gerwig further depicts the persistent interwoven nature of these opposing tensions when Barbie's idealized perfection becomes the cause of her downfall. The movie launches when Barbie shifts from the idyllic feeling that “This is the best day ever, and so is yesterday and so is tomorrow”; to suddenly experiencing dark thoughts, wondering, “Do you guys ever think about dying?” She notices other unsettling imperfections, such as flat feet and cellulitis. Confused by these experiences, Barbie finds knowledge and insights from her rough and tumble counterpart, “Weird Barbie,” the doll filled with paint and mangled hair from being played with too much.

In a central scene, Weird Barbie poses a dilemma to Barbie between continuing in the blissful fantasy ignorance represented by a pink high-heel pump, and knowing the truth about reality, symbolized by a flat Birkenstock sandal. Barbie chooses bliss, yet Weird Barbie tells her that that option is not available: “I just gave you a choice so that you can feel some sense of control.”

As Barbie enters the real world, her idealized beauty, which was a source of strength in Barbieland, provokes groping and objectification. Her leadership in Barbieland came alongside

male subjugation, which triggered a revolt once male Ken doll encountered opportunities from real-world patriarchy. These awakened realities initially sparked tensions yet eventually enabled new possibilities.

Through these scenes, Gerwig suggests that paradoxes become salient through inevitable knowledge and experiences. By making salient multiple paradoxes, the movie acknowledges the interdependence of opposites as a new way of seeing (Smith & Lewis, 2011). It further positions knowledge as dual-edged, triggering paradoxes' salience, which increases wisdom while provoking difficult emotions. In turn, this is an invitation to scholars to explore further the dual-edged role of knowledge and, in particular, the motivation to remain blissfully ignorant.

Leveraging Opposing Constructivist and Realist Ontologies to Reflect Complexity

The *Barbie* movie embraces and expands a core tension in paradox theory—the juxtaposition of realist and constructivist ontologies. Realist ontologies depict the world as inherently existing, irrespective of agentic sensemaking. In contrast, constructivist ontologies emphasize how individual interactions construct and reconstruct the social world. Paradox theory embraces both perspectives while articulating how reality defines and constrains social construction, which then informs realities (Hahn & Knight, 2021).

Gerwig advances the *Barbie* plot by intertwining these opposing ontologies. The movie juggles between the constructed fantasy of Barbieland and the inherent fated nature of the “real” world. Barbieland is a socially constructed place based on the collective imaginaries of yesteryear’s youth, created by the people playing with the dolls in real life. As Gerwig depicts, Barbieland has women running the world because girls have introduced that power into their dolls. Yet the fantasy world can also inform the real world by creating limitations, as idealized Barbie can restrict real-world possibilities. In the transition from childhood to adulthood, the kids who played with Barbies realize the harsh limitations of the real world. The idealized world becomes a lightning rod of unattained hope and broken dreams, depicted by teenage Sasha’s rejection of her own youthful optimism. As a key plotline of the movie, Barbie’s challenges in Barbieland start to occur when Gloria, a Mattel employee in the “real” world, plays with her daughter’s cast-away dolls and introduces existential crises into the constructed world.

Amid this juxtaposition, Gerwig further engages with how Barbie as a toy and the movie as a story are constructed through and informed by our real experiences. As Gerwig explained, she was intrigued to take on the challenge of the *Barbie* movie in part because of the interaction between reality and construction. As she said in a *New York Times* interview, “We create them [the dolls and the stories], and they create us, and we recreate them, and they recreate us. We are in constant conversation with inanimate objects” (Paskin, 2023). The distinction and complex connection between the wonders of Barbieland and the hardships of the real world underscores the layered and dynamic ontology of paradox that encompasses both social construction and realism (Hahn & Knight, 2021). By traveling from Barbieland to the “real” world, Barbie, Ken, and the audience go from yesterday’s idealized either/or to the nuanced understandings of both/and. The movie invites us to unpack this juxtaposition in our own realities further.

Exploring the Dynamics of Vicious and Virtuous Cycles

Finally, *Barbie* offers insight into the cyclical nature of competing demands (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). Barbie and Ken travel from Barbieland to the “real” world, and back, each growing and changing in the process. Barbie initially finds disappointment in the disempowered role of women.

Ken finds glory in the possibility of patriarchy. He returns to Barbieland and takes over Barbie's house, transforming it into his "Mojo Dojo Casa House," a male-centric residence decorated by horse-themed pictures and furniture. There are no Nobel-Prize winners or President Barbies in Kendom. All Barbies are submissive servants to Kens, who managed to import patriarchy from the real world to Barbieland and to brainwash all Barbies.

Barbie experiences her own existential crisis: "I am not pretty anymore [. . .] I am not smart enough to be interesting [. . .] I can't do brain surgery. I am not the president." At this point, Gloria offers a monologue to Barbie highlighting the contradictory demands on women: "You have to have money, but you can't ask for money because that's crass. You have to be a boss, but you can't be mean. You have to lead but can't squash other people's ideas. [. . .] it's too hard, it's too contradictory."

This monologue proved to be the antidote to the spell cast on patriarchy-brainwashed Barbies. Surfacing all contradictions and making paradox salient makes the cognitive dissonance of being a woman in society apparent and robs the spell of its power. The Barbies become aware that they can defeat patriarchy. However, Barbie realizes that things cannot return to how they used to be: "Not every night had to be girls' night." Barbie is not in love with Ken, but Ken cannot picture himself without Barbie: "There is no 'just Ken'." For Ken, there is only Barbie and Ken. This duality locked them in a vicious cycle, in which the very moment one pole was neglected, it rippled with stronger effects (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017). Unfazed and with care, Barbie replies, "Maybe it is Barbie, and it is Ken"—no longer a duality, but a dualism. In this moment of learning, Barbie and Ken move from a stage of convergence—where they were constantly oscillating between extremes, to a stage of divergence, where they transcend previous understandings and gain a new lease on life (Raisch, Hargrave, & Van De Ven, 2018). Barbie realizes that neither perfection nor imperfection is in a sustainable balance: it is no longer perfection vs. imperfection, but perfection through imperfection, and Ken becomes "Kenough."

When all the imbalances are exposed, Barbie's inventor, Ruth Handler, appears in the movie, warning Barbie about human suffering and finite life length, juxtaposing it to the immortality of Barbie, an idea that, instead, can last forever. Barbie decides to embrace life and death virtuously; she wants "to make"; she does not want "to be made." "She left behind the pastels and plastic of Barbieland for the pastels and plastic of Los Angeles." She walks out of the car with her flat (Birkenstock) sandals and excitedly goes to see her gynecologist—for the first time. Gerwig reminds us of the ongoing cyclicity of competing demands while inviting us to explore the opportunities for surfacing and sharing paradoxes.

Conclusion

Polar opposites are spelled out clearly throughout *Barbie* the movie: the ideal and the real, patriarchy and misandry, perfect and imperfect, stereotypical Barbie and weird Barbie, high heels and no heels, reality and social construction. Through the vivid depiction of hyperbolized poles, the audience experiences a journey of tensions, making the movie a compelling illustration of fundamental concepts within paradox theory.

Gerwig leans into the power of humor and emotions as tools to shape how individuals experience, construct, and respond to paradoxes (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Pradies, 2023). These allow the audience to relate to hilarious yet confronting movie scenes, regardless of whether they are purposefully or unconsciously pro and/or against patriarchy. Acknowledging the heterogeneity of previously held beliefs and providing ample opportunities for everyone to realize the need for diverging perspectives—hereby transcending polarization—are testaments to seeing and embracing their complexity.

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