Plastic Feminism: The Barbie Movie and the Commodification of Feminist Discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines the commodification of feminist discourse in the neoliberal era, using the *Barbie* movie as a case study to explore how feminism is resignified and repackaged for mass consumption. While feminism is traditionally a critique of systemic inequality, neoliberalism absorbs its dissent, reframing feminist ideals to align with market logic. This occurs on two levels: first, by commodifying feminist ideals like empowerment into individualized, consumer-driven goals; second, by commodifying feminist activism through communicative capitalism and interpassivity, where activism is reduced to product consumption and symbolic engagement. These processes shift the responsibility for social change from grassroots movements to corporations, ultimately depoliticizing feminism and undermining its transformative potential. The paper argues that such commodification neutralizes feminism's radical critique, particularly by excluding capitalism as a target of intervention. Reclaiming feminism's disruptive force, therefore, requires resisting its absorption into consumer culture and reasserting its foundational commitment to collective emancipation and structural change.

Keywords

Neoliberal feminism, Commodification, Resignifcation, Communicative capitalism, Interpassivity

Introduction

Feminism and neoliberal ideology are intuitively incompatible, as many feminists have argued before (Fraser, 2009; Arruzza et al., 2019; McRobbie, 2009; Crispin, 2017; Brown, 2015). This incompatibility becomes clear when feminism is understood as a critical and disruptive force, and neoliberalism is understood, in the pejorative sense, as a dominant ideology that serves "to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical" (Thompson, as cited in Shelby, 2003, p. 162). Yet much of contemporary feminist discourse carries within its neoliberal ideological conceptions. The neoliberal co-optation of feminist discourse poses several implications, with the ultimate implication being the undermining of the transformative potential of feminism. This leads to my central research question: *How does the commodification of feminist discourse undermine its transformative potential?* As a young woman who lived through the "summer of *Barbie*[1]" in 2023 (Gerwig, 2023) when the entirety of public feminist discourse seemed to be consumed by endless debates over whether the Greta Gerwig movie's portrayal of feminism was good or bad, I had often found myself asking: Why do we expect a movie to

[1] Hereafter referred to as the Barbie movie

encapsulate the feminist struggle? Why do we dwell on whether *Barbie* is a true feminist icon? Why is it that the *Barbie* movie seems to be the only way I can engage my friends in feminist discourse without them tuning out? These questions, I realize through this paper, reflect a deeper frustration with the commodification of feminism.

After contemplating on these questions about *Barbie* and the commodification of feminism, I begin by examining how capitalism absorbs feminist dissent to sustain itself and I then conceptualize resignification and commodification within this framework. Specifically, I focus on two levels of feminist commodification: first, the commodification of feminist ideals, and second, the commodification of feminist activism. On the first level, I explain how feminist ideals like empowerment are co-opted by neoliberalism and resignified to align with consumer-driven self-empowerment. I then connect the commodification of feminist ideals to the commodification of feminist activism by demonstrating that this process operates through a significant phenomenological shift. I continue by deconstructing it in two key dimensions: communicative capitalism, which reduces activism to product purchases and the confines of market-driven choices, and interpassivity, which reveals how activism becomes ultimately ineffective by allowing products or media to take on the activist role on behalf of individuals. Afterwards, I outline three key ways this commodification of feminism undermines its transformative potential, showing how commodity fetishism enables the exclusion of capitalism as a target of critique. Finally, I address potential objections, particularly those that argue feminist commodification makes activism more accessible to a broader audience.

Capitalist Absorption of Feminist Dissent as a Survival Tactic

Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) explain how capitalism absorbs critiques from social movements, including feminism, to renew and legitimize itself. Capitalist neoliberal ideology recognizes feminist dissent, and in order to sustain itself it strategically absorbs dissent, neutralizing feminism's radical potential by resignifying feminism in ways that sustain the status quo (Fraser, 2009). By absorbing oppositional forces like feminism, it commodifies and marketizes emancipatory aims. Critical movements become depoliticized, making them more palatable for mass consumption. In this way, capitalism appears to be progressive and inclusive, while in reality sabotaging any genuine attempts at social justice. Resignification here refers to the process by which existing terms, symbols, or ideas are reinterpreted or given new meaning, in ways that shift their original connotations. It is through this resignification that feminism gets commodified. This manifests not only as assigning an idea with an exchange value but also a phenomenological shift in how feminism is perceived (Repo, 2020). I argue that neoliberal ideology commodifies feminism on two levels: commodification of feminist ideals and commodification of feminist activism. I first demonstrate how resignification occurs on these two levels, and later how this resignification leads to commodification. My contention is that it is precisely the commodification of feminism that implicates its transformative potential.

Commodification of Feminist Ideals

As Fraser argues, “aspirations that had a clear emancipatory thrust in the context of state-organized capitalism assumed a far more ambiguous meaning in the neoliberal era” (Fraser, 2009, p. 108). On this first level of commodification, feminist ideals like empowerment and emancipation get reframed by neoliberal ideology. The resignified, commodified versions of feminist ideals rely on neoliberal conceptions of self-empowerment and self-management. According to Foucault (2008, p. 242), neoliberalism functions as a political rationality that applies

market logic to all areas of social life. It redefines human subjectivity through the figure of *homo economicus,* where individuals are seen as entrepreneurs responsible for managing and optimizing their own lives. This has particular implications for women, who are led to believe that self-confidence, happiness, and fulfillment can be achieved through consumer-driven self-empowerment (Repo & Yrjola, 2015, p. 744). Thus, empowerment becomes something individuals can achieve through personal efforts like self-improvement, career success, and effective self-management, promoting individual solutions such as confidence and professional advancement as the primary paths to empowerment.

To illustrate further how resignification occurs, consider how the Barbie brand has long been associated with patriarchal ideals, symbolizing unrealistic beauty standards and promoting narrow roles for women, centered on appearance and consumerism. However, in the *Barbie* movie, this previously oppressive figure is rebranded as a feminist icon. This shift reflects what Lazar (2006, p. 508) describes as neoliberalism's ability to "reclaim signifiers of femininity, such as makeup or fashion", by transforming them into symbols of self-empowerment. Suddenly, as we joyfully wear pretty pink outfits to watch the movie, we forget how some of us have faced real struggles with being forced into gender norms, like the pressure to wear pink in a gender-essentialist society. Indeed, resignification of the color pink here could be seen in a positive light, particularly from a Butlerian understanding of resignification, which carries positive connotations (Fraser et al., 1995). For Butler, resignification demonstrates the capacity for individuals to subvert traditional meanings and reclaim agency through performative acts. In this view, wearing pink, embracing femininity, or engaging with traditionally feminine symbols like makeup can be seen as empowering because they challenge and reinterpret the oppressive connotations historically associated with these symbols. Reclamation here functions as a form of emancipation by allowing individuals to redefine their meanings and assert agency over their identity. However, following Fraser's critique the problem lies in how these previously criticized symbols like pink, femininity, and consumerism are rebranded within a capitalist framework. What begins as an act of reclaiming quickly loses its emancipatory potential when appropriated for profit[2]. Commodification of feminism requires that its threatening attributes, including its critiques of gender-essentialist society, capitalist exploitation, and systemic inequality, be neutralized. For feminism to be sellable, it must be "rebranded" to appeal to mainstream consumers (Favaro, 2017, p. 294), distancing itself from negative stereotypes of feminists as angry or unfeminine. Instead, it adopts more palatable traits, embracing traditional ideals of female likability and beauty. As Repo puts it, "this hollowed-out feminism, presented as already-radical, therefore does not challenge women to interrogate the power relations that condition their existence as women" (Repo, 2020, p. 224).

Furthermore, in the idealized, fictional world of Barbieland for instance, Barbies are portrayed as empowered by showing Barbies in leadership roles, coming from diverse backgrounds. Bhattacharya aptly asks: "amid the perfectly proportioned Black President Barbies, and superbly manicured surgeon Barbies, one wonders who cleans the Dream House, who wipes down the counters, who struggles with minimum-wage jobs. And does the Black President Barbie order drone strikes on the Middle East?" (Bhattacharya, 2023). The neoliberal focus on individual

[2] During the release of the *Barbie* movie, numerous fashion and beauty brands collaborated with Mattel to introduce Barbie-themed collections. For a detailed list of these, see Wightman-Stone, 2023.

success strips feminist ideals like empowerment and emancipation of their crucial collective dimension. By emphasizing personal sources of power, it (deliberately) overlooks the systemic causes of collective disempowerment and obscures the need to tackle the root causes of patriarchy (Bröckling, 2016). Neoliberal resignification turns what should be collective resistance into individualized, depoliticized efforts that fail to address the broader structures of oppression. The shift away from collective struggle weakens the foundations of feminist activism. As the writers of Feminism for the 99 percent put it, "the links between forms of oppression must be revealed politically– that is, through conscious efforts to build solidarity" (Arruzza et al., 2019, p. 46).

Commodification of Feminist Activism

Watching a movie about a plastic doll that has long upheld unrealistic beauty standards might make a feminist uneasy. However, watching a film that presents this doll as self-aware by acknowledging its problematic implications with humor, with lines such as "White Savior Barbie" or "Stereotypical Barbie", and even poking fun at itself, is perceived as a feminist act. But how exactly do we "feel" like a feminist when we choose to watch movies like *Barbie*? This brings me to the second level, the commodification of feminist activism.

Subversion of Feminist Activism Through Communicative Capitalism

The current commodification of feminism reflects the continuation of commodity activism (Repo, 2020). Commodity activism refers to the practice where organizations and corporations promote the idea that purchasing their products can help make the world more just, equal, and habitable (Littler, 2009). Within the neoliberal era, the economic sphere increasingly invades the social and political realms, to the point where the marketplace is presented as the ideal venue for democratic participation (Brown, 2005). The concept of communicative capitalism helps further elucidate this phenomenon in late-stage capitalism, where political engagement is absorbed into market dynamics, transforming activism into a form of consumption (Dean, 2009). By "capturing our political interventions, formatting them as contributions to its circuits of affect and entertainment", communicative capitalism makes us feel "political, involved, like contributors who really matter" (p. 49). Communication is essential in feminist commodity activism, from promoting feminist concepts, images, and slogans to portraying oneself as a feminist by consuming 'feminist products' on social media. This focus on consumption and aesthetics resignifies objects long criticized by feminism, such as fashion, beauty, and even the male gaze. While catchy, amusing slogans on products circulate widely, they fail to function as strategic political actions that demand real change. The feminist brand offers the appearance of active participation in feminist praxis by emphasizing self-expression in market choices (Repo, 2020). This shift implies that consumer choices, rather than collective political action, are framed as the primary means of achieving social change (Brown, 2005). Thus, neoliberal ideology creates a new phenomenological consumer/product relationship in which consumption choice and commodified ideals become the default mode of feminist activism. With its individualized perspective, neoliberalism "frames choice itself as the location of feminist freedom" (Repo, 2020, p. 220). Importantly, "this choice-making subject is not just a female subject, but a feminist subject".

Subversion of Feminist Activism Through Interpassivity

The aforementioned phenomenological shift ensures that individuals feel politically engaged by consuming a product that appears ethically aligned with feminist values. I contend that the subversion of activism assumes an even

more intriguing form here. Beyond the idea that activism now consists of simply choosing to watch a feminist movie, the movie itself takes on the role of doing the activism for you, through its fictional plot where Barbie attempts to address patriarchal issues. Here, *interpassivity* comes into play: products (like the *Barbie* movie) stand in for activism. Here, I apply Oenen's reworking of Zizek's concept of *interpassivity* to feminist commodity activism. As Zizek explains, *interpassivity* refers to a form of "false activity", where you "think you are active, while your true position, as it is embodied in the fetish, is passive" (Zizek, 1998, p. 10). Oenen's reinterpretation of Zizek, however, suggests that we should characterize interpassivity as the delegation of activity rather than passivity, since this delegation is driven by an acute sense of being overwhelmed by interactive engagements and obligations (Oenen, 2016). Interpassive subjects believe they are actively engaging in something, but in reality, they are passive because the action is delegated to an object or system. The external object or medium (the *Barbie* movie) performs the action (feminist activism) for the person, giving them the illusion of participation while masking their inaction. In this way, the movie takes on the activist role for the viewer. Oenen explains that the interpassive subject "indicates that she feels overburdened by the demands of (inter)activity, yet cannot, or does not want to, sever or disengage herself entirely from this relation". As neoliberal ideology becomes more dominant, the radical demands of feminism, demands that require genuine activity, increasingly overwhelm her. Despite this, she still desires to be recognized as a feminist. Interpassivity reveals how neoliberalism resignifies feminist activism into (inter)passive consumption, where individuals no longer need to engage in meaningful political resistance because their activism is effectively "done" by the commodities they purchase. Thus, this further dimension of the commodification of activism severely undermines feminism's transformative potential.

Undermining of Feminism's Transformative Potential

I discuss three ways by which commodification of feminism undermines feminism's transformative potential. First, by making consumption and commodified communication the primary forms of engagement, the responsibility for producing and carrying out feminist activism is shifted onto corporations– the very institutions that embody neoliberal capitalist structures, which are fundamentally opposed to the radical demands of transformative feminism[3]. While corporations assume the responsibility of expressing feminist messages and acts, individuals, as consumers, believe their purchasing power contributes to feminist causes. The collective character of feminist struggle gets harmed by this marketed, individualized type of activism. Feminist engagement becomes a passive, consumer-driven process and the burden of change shifts from political or social movements to market forces. This shift not only depoliticizes feminist action but also reinforces the very capitalist structures that feminism seeks to challenge. Thus, secondly, this commodified activism is devoid of any meaning. Focusing on raising awareness without a larger agenda suggests that feminism can be achieved by simply addressing 'personal prejudices' through 'conversations' and 'calling out' 'unacceptable attitudes' (Repo, 2020). Finally, and arguably most significantly, as anticapitalist dissent is co-opted, commodified feminism shuts down the possibility of critiquing and challenging capitalism directly. As explained before, neoliberal capitalism preempts political dissent by producing new commodities that purportedly address consumers' ethical and political concerns, thereby absorbing acts of rebellion through commodification (Brooks, 2015; Jackson, 2002). Furthermore, capitalism is excluded from becoming a

[3] *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* offers a compelling vision of a justice-aligned transformative feminism. Their final thesis encapsulates this vision: "Feminism for the 99 percent calls on all radical movements to join together in a common anticapitalist insurgency" (Arruzza et al., 2019, p. 54).

target of intervention" in feminist commodity activism due in large part to commodity fetishism. I will go into further detail on this point.

Commodity Fetishism and the Limitations of De-fetishization Attempts

Commodity fetishism, as Marx explains, creates the illusion that commodities have inherent value, obscuring the labor and social relations involved in their production (Repo, 2020). This means that instead of seeing a commodity as the result of human labor and social cooperation, we come to see its value as something intrinsic to the thing itself. Because of this, the workers who actually produce the commodity and the power relations that shape its production process disappear from view. Marx also suggests that consumer desire is driven by aesthetics and narratives, noting that "the need which consumption feels for the object is created by the perception of it" (Marx, 1939, p. 26). When applied to *Barbie*, its symbolic and subjective value is constructed not only through the film itself but also through the cultural spectacle and marketing strategies that frame it. This aesthetic presentation shapes consumer demand by appealing to deeper desires for identity, empowerment, and belonging, masking the capitalist structures behind the product while repackaging feminist ideals for mass consumption. Nevertheless, within the growing trend of ethical consumption, there have been efforts to de-fetishize commodities (Brooks, 2015).

In the case of the *Barbie* movie, there was as emphasis on the women central to its creation, with Greta Gerwig as writer and director, and Margot Robbie as producer and lead actor. This could be interpreted as an attempt to de-fetishize the commodity. By highlighting women's agency in the film's production, it shifts the focus away from the movie as a mere product, and instead draws attention to the people and labor involved in its making, especially the role of women in positions of creative and managerial power. Even with a surface-level examination, the irony of this attempt to showcase women's empowerment becomes apparent. The *Barbie* movie premiered during the SAG-AFTRA mass strikes, highlighting the stark contradictions within Hollywood, an industry notorious for its gender pay gap (SAG-AFTRA, 2023). As in many capitalist industries, it is women, especially women of color, who bear the brunt of systemic inequalities (Deng, 2023). While Barbie is celebrated as the highest-grossing film directed by a woman, there is a striking irony in the fact that Greta Gerwig was paid $12 million for writing and directing a "feminist" movie, while at the same time, fellow female writers were struggling to make ends meet and protesting outside the very studios where *Barbie* was filmed (Okeyo, 2023). Furthermore, the movie was financed by Mattel. The *Barbie* movie positions itself as a feminist reimagining of the doll, but this narrative is compromised by the fact that it ultimately serves the commercial interests of Mattel, the same company that built its empire on promoting harmful gender stereotypes and unrealistic beauty standards. Mattel's role in the film highlights the deep tension between feminist messaging and capitalist objectives, as any empowerment narrative in the movie is, in the end, geared toward driving product sales, that is, "the selling of many many plastic dolls, which is a huge failure for the earth" (Klein, 2023).

Addressing the Accessibility Argument in Feminist Commodification

Finally, it is worth considering that some may argue the *Barbie* movie makes feminist ideas more accessible to a broader audience. They might claim that watching a feminist-leaning movie allows individuals without activist

networks or experience to engage with feminist discourse in an accessible, everyday manner. This argument suggests that by embedding feminist messaging in popular culture, the movie introduces important ideas to those who might not otherwise engage with activism, thus potentially sparking more awareness or interest in feminist issues. However, as Repo points out in relation to feminist commodities, this perspective can be misleading (Repo, 2020). The movie tends to make us conflate "being" a feminist with "looking" or "feeling" empowered. This reinforces the neoliberal resignifications of ideals such as choice and (self)empowerment, rather than promoting collective political action. While *Barbie* might inspire some viewers to explore feminist ideas further, as I have argued, it does so in a way that primarily encourages personal empowerment as a consumer rather than fostering active engagement with structural feminist politics. The movie promotes feminist identity as a desirable, stylish self-image—celebrating confidence, defiance, and empowerment—without challenging the underlying capitalist framework that commodifies these ideas. In the end, while the film's feminist elements might increase visibility, they ultimately function more as a tool for self-branding and consumption rather than an avenue toward meaningful, collective feminist activism. Besides, after the initial surge of feminist discussions surrounding the movie's release, what remains of Barbie's legacy now is largely its mass-produced merchandise and soundtrack songs that have turned into idiotic TikTok sound bites[4]. The deeper conversations about feminism have faded, leaving behind a commodified, surface-level cultural impact.

Conclusion

In the neoliberal era where feminist discourse is increasingly shaped by consumerism, the transformative power of feminism is being hollowed out and repackaged for mass consumption. I have demonstrated this by showing how capitalism absorbs dissent to sustain itself by neutralizing and commodifying movements like feminism. I conceptualize resignification in the context of neoliberalism and interpret it negatively, showing how it strips feminist ideals of their radical potential. I then explore commodification on two levels to demonstrate a phenomenological shift in how feminism is perceived. First, I explain how the resignification of feminist ideals, like empowerment, leads to their commodification, turning them into marketable products. This has significant implications for feminist activism, which I also conceptualize as being commodified. I break down the commodification of feminist activism through two key dimensions: *communicative capitalism*, which limits activism to market-driven choices and restricts it to product purchases, and *interpassivity*, which illustrates how activism becomes passive—and eventually ineffective—when media or products assume the activist role on behalf of people. Through these dynamics, I identified three key ways in which this commodified version of feminism undermines its transformative potential: (1) it shifts responsibility for activism onto corporations, (2) it depoliticizes feminism by focusing on individual empowerment rather than collective action, and (3) it excludes capitalism as a target of critique, as commodity fetishism obscures the capitalist structures behind feminist products. I also discussed the limitations of attempts to defetishize commodities, highlighting how they often fail to escape the logic of neoliberalism. Finally, I addressed objections that suggest the commodification of feminism increases accessibility to activism, showing instead how this often comes at the cost of depoliticizing and weakening feminism's capacity for genuine transformation.

[4] This reaches a truly absurd level. Billie Eilish's heartfelt song "What Was I Made Of?" represents the journey of girlhood, as it also plays in the movie during an emotional and empowering scene. After winning a Grammy however, the song has been reappropriated into an AI generated melancholic cat singing by "meowing". The "meow meow meow" sound has created a TikTok trend with millions of videos featuring it.

Reflection on the contradictions laid out in this essay reveals the deeper stakes of commodification. Feminism cannot realize its emancipatory promise when reduced to a set of personal choices or aesthetic performances; nor can it thrive if it rests passively on the symbolic gestures of corporations and media products. Instead, this analysis points toward a more embodied and politically grounded feminism that insists on collective action, material solidarity, and an honest reckoning with the capitalist logics that so often shape our desires. Moving beyond the comfort of consumer-friendly "empowerment," it is imperative that we recover feminism as a disruptive and collective practice that can challenge systemic injustices and create space for radical political possibilities.

Making feminism something we live, fight for, and create together is necessary if we want it to be genuinely liberating; it cannot be something we buy. This requires both renewed political engagement and deeper critical inquiry. Further investigation into the nuanced ways that commodification alters emancipatory discourses is vital, and it should heavily rely on philosophical and cultural studies perspectives. We can only completely comprehend, and ultimately, oppose the forces that aim to stifle feminism's radical potential by fusing serious theoretical thought with an analysis of everyday cultural practices.

Conflict of Interests

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