2

FEMINISM AND CONSUMERISM IN *SEX AND THE CITY* AND *BARBIE*

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Introduction

Barbie (2023) is a colorful film that nearly goes overboard in the use of the color pink, resulting in the pink Barbiecore viral fashion trend in 2023 (Caruso 2023). The film captures the joys of childhood play and the significant roles Barbie dolls occupied in Western societies in the 20th century. It is also quite remarkable to see such a popular mainstream cultural phenomenon having a strong feminist message, inspired by the feminist wave of the last decade often referred to as the fourth wave of feminism. Indeed, as La Porte and Cavusoglu claim, "Greta Gerwig's directing is an earnest attempt to tap into the cultural zeitgeist of a post #MeToo movement and spark overdue discourse on female subjugation disguised as cultural norms" (La Porte and Cavusoglu 2023). But as anyone who has dwelled for a second in "feminist-land" knows, feminism is anything but one single phenomenon. So, the question remains: what kind of feminism does *Barbie* promote?

In this chapter I will attempt to answer this question by examining the intersections of feminism and consumerism in *Barbie* by contrasting the film with another historically significant cultural phenomenon frequently noted in the analysis of feminism and consumerism: *Sex and the City (SATC*, 1998–2004, 2008, 2010). Not only is *SATC* multi-layered when it comes to the question of consumerism, but it is furthermore often considered a signpost of the third wave of feminism. Accordingly, these two cultural phenomena can be viewed as products of different waves of feminism, or at least inspired by predominant discussions concerning feminism, femininity, and consumerism during two different historical periods.

The reason consumerism is a vital concept when it comes to analysing the differences and similarities of the kinds of feminism we find in *SATC* and *Barbie*, is due to the way it exposes one of the fundamental dilemmas in contemporary feminism, namely, the constant tension between the individual and

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the collective; to what extent feminism revolves around women's individual choices, and to what extent it is about a collective battle within social movements to better the status of all women, especially the more marginalized.

An important element when analysing consumerism is femininity. The doll that *Barbie* is based on first came to the market in 1959, which is significant, given the film's centering of the doll's contested status as a role model for girls, as it clearly serves to perpetuate a certain female beauty image, namely that of a white, blonde, tall and thin woman (La Porte and Cavusoglu 2023). Similarly, the four girlfriends of *SATC*, Carrie, Charlotte, Miranda, and Samantha, neatly fall within these beauty parameters in addition to belonging to an affluent New York city class. These ill-attainable beauty standards can be said to produce a lack within women's self-image or identity; a lack easily exploited within consumerist culture that offers a range of the right products that promise to correct one's image (Arthurs 2003).

The height of the third wave of feminism took place (approximately) during the 1990s, characterized by each woman's freedom to make her choices concerning partnership, family, and consumption—which also happened to be the main characteristics of neoliberalism that peaked during the same period. *Sex and the City* is considered characteristic of this era, even to the extent that the wave is called "the era of *Sex and the City*" (Sternadori 2020). At the same time, the importance of friendship in *SATC* complicates the picture, and perhaps introduces a new form of collectivity via friendship. Although consumerism appears to have been prevalent during this period thirty years ago, this is also the time in which critiques of consumerism were more prevalent, as seen in the popularity of, for example, Naomi Klein's *No Logo* (2000).

After the 2008 global recession, the hegemonic status of neoliberalism was in crisis, and the second decade of the 21st century witnessed a number of global protest movements, such as the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring, the climate change movement, #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter. Hence, between *SATC* and *Barbie*, a decade of social unrest took place while feminism was entering its fourth wave. Thus, while the third wave was primarily concerned with women's individual choices, the fourth wave emphasised the structural injustices women face, especially concerning sexual violence.

Although *SATC* and *Barbie* embrace consumerism to a great extent, we also find in both a self-conscious engagement with consumerist critique. The awareness of people's desire for expensive, and often unnecessary products, is at play in both *Barbie* and *SATC*, and serves as the foundation of many of the plots of *SATC* episodes. These phenomena are thus both products of consumerism and a cultural engagement with that particular ism. This means that there remains an awareness of the downside of consumerism, such as exploitative labor conditions, and the kind of marketing that seeks to produce certain kinds of consumers engaged in ironic consumption signalling meanings that contradict the nature of the products one purchases (Warren and Mohr 2019). For example, one might be wearing conventional feminine outfits with a

mocking or witty attitude. This analysis of the consumerism of the 1990s also describes how *Barbie* addresses the audience, and how her words work in playful and ironic ways of addressing consumerism, assuming that the viewers are also versed in consumer critique.

In order to make the comparison between *Barbie* and *SATC*, I will first examine the third and fourth waves of feminism in relation to both cultural phenomena. Then, I will look at consumerism in relation to ideas about women and consumer culture more generally. After that, I will give an account of the decade of social unrest (2010–2020) in order to locate *Barbie* in a unique historical period. Lastly, I will dig deeper into both feminism and consumerism in *Barbie* in order to show that its consumerist side suggests that a more radical feminist narrative is lacking, and is needed. I argue that, without a doubt, it will be female relationships that will secure *Barbie* a status as a cultural phenomenon akin to the status *SATC* has already acquired. The question that remains is whether these very relationships and identifications with femininity indeed perpetuate our status as willing, yet ironic, participants in contemporary consumer culture.

The Third Wave of Feminism and Independent Girlfriends

One of the innovative elements of *SATC* was how accepting it was of the lives of single women who were not necessarily looking for romance, marriage, or even a partner. It is their active single sex lives with different (mostly heterosexual) partners that is of interest in the TV show, being the central topic of the girlfriend group at a restaurant in New York. Not only are these women enjoying buying expensive outfits, cocktails, and fine dining—they are also enjoying the perks of each new partner's sexual and romantic and sexual peculiarities. Each episode of *SATC* has a single theme narrated through the voice of Carrie. A common move is to twist the conventional, romantic narratives typically presented to women (such as in romance novels). During the six seasons of *SATC*, the lives of the main characters certainly change, but the focus on sex and relationship remains constant. While the many contradictory demands women face every day—especially independent single women—are a common theme in *SATC*, they are rarely addressed in relation to structural problems of society. The girlfriends (other than Charlotte) simply do not yearn for traditional female roles as mothers and wives, though to different degrees.

In a similar manner, the nuclear family is absent in Barbieland as the Barbies enjoy living life independently and having fun with their girlfriends. They love their lives, their Dreamhouses, their clothes, their beds, their toasts—and they adore their fellow Barbie girlfriends (every night is a girls' night), sincerely participating in affirming and supportive friendships by complimenting each other all the time. Of course, Barbieland seems rather static next to New York City, but from where does the emphasis on independent women so evident in both worlds stem?

Although it is not always easy to distinguish historic periods with similar characteristics, when feminist thought and action is examined, the "wave"

narrative has become the norm in feminist scholarship (Chamberlain 2017). The third wave of feminism is considered to have taken place in the 1990s—a period of time in which women in Western countries had gained more financial independence than earlier generations at the same time as they enjoyed the liberation from traditional heteronormative roles. A large part of this liberation was the product of the "free love" movement of the 1960s–1970s (Allyn 2001) and of second-wave feminism. The third wave is often considered a response to the second wave of feminism of the 1970s with its emphasis on the radical and the political, sometimes viewed as "victim-feminism" with the result being that women's own agency was not at its forefront (Sternadori 2020).[1] As distinct from this, during the third wave, the emphasis shifted towards women having agency over their own lives, allowing them to choose whichever role suited them—including what kind of consumers they wanted to be.

One of the founding discourses associated with the third wave is that of postfeminism, *SATC* being a common example (Adriaens and Van Bauwel 2014). Stillion-Southard points out that not only is postfeminism a loaded concept, but also that it is used to refer to the depoliticization of second-wave feminism and its emphasis on collectivity. This shift, she argues, produces a comfortable and "empowering" version of feminism, easily digested by young women (Stillion-Southard 2008, 151). Although the definitions of postfeminism are many and varied, most of them revolve around the idea that gender equality has already been reached and women can now enjoy their equal status and financial independence, and make their own choices concerning which kinds of lives they want to lead. However, new forms of gender essentialism were also on the rise in the 1990s, presenting women and men as distinctly different, and sexiness being an essential part of women's being. Some of the most prominent critics of postfeminism, such as Angela McRobbie (2009) and Rosalind Gill (2008), are self-proclaimed feminists, trying to capture ideological changes within gendered or female subjectivities in Western countries around the millennium:

> In the media culture of the time, celebrations of "girl power" and female success sat alongside the intense hostile scrutiny of women in the public eye; pronouncements about gender equality were juxtaposed with the growing misogyny of "lad culture"; assertions about the redundancy of feminism were paired with an intensified interest in sexual difference, and with the repeated assertion that any remaining inequalities were not the result of sexism but of natural differences and/or of women's own choices.
>
> (Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenberg 2020, 4–5)

Gill coined the term "postfeminist sensibility," suggesting a certain way of being in which women are content with sexual objectification as long as they themselves are in charge of it (Gill 2008). Being sexually attractive, thus, becomes a power strategy they can use to make men do what they want. The emphasis on individual choice comes together with the fact that people no longer identify with

political movements. Each individual is their own agent of change, while the need to organize a movement around a cause is not viewed as important.

However, the emphasis on friendship in *SATC* means that the franchise is not as individualistic as one could have assumed (Stillion-Southard 2008). The four girlfriends have built up a supportive and meaningful friendship. Friendship understood as family is in many ways representative of the transformation of kinship relations in modern, liberal welfare states (Brown 1995). At the same time, having "friends" or "networking" is of high importance within many career paths central to personal advancement in neoliberal work-structures. Therefore, I would not say that friendship is necessarily a category of "collectivity" as it sometimes only focuses on self-centered purposes.

However, in *SATC*, the presentation of friendship is more complicated and nuanced. The four girlfriends are an actual, supportive kinship network for each other, and while their conversations are often confrontational, there is always a return to their love for each other. Thus, in many ways their friendship may turn out to be aspirational for the audience, offering moral guidelines for how best to interact and deal with conflicts among close friends.

Although the supportive girl friendships of the Barbies are cheerful and fun, they do not reach the same depth as those in *SATC*. However, another female relationship in *Barbie* perhaps does, capturing the audience: that of the mother Gloria (America Ferrera) and her daughter Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt). The very reason the stereotypical Barbie commences the journey to the Real World is due to the way Gloria is playing with Sasha's Barbie, the morbid playing motivated by the estrangement she experiences between herself and her daughter. What is apparent in the estrangement, amongst other things, is a generational gap between the millennial mother and gen-z daughter. While Gloria came of age during the third wave of feminism, Sasha is the product of the fourth wave, and the decade of social unrest during 2010–2020. At the same time, their eventual reconciliation can also be interpreted as one between generations, given that what characterizes the fourth wave is the coming together of different generations of feminists from several movements (Sternadori 2020).

Within consumer culture, in which almost anything can be commodified, these relationships show that meaningful friendships amongst people are found beyond consumption and commodification—and are exactly why we continue watching *SATC* and why we have embraced *Barbie*. However, even though these female relationships add an important nuance and depth to both *SATC* and *Barbie*, both *cultural phenomena* have another layer of meaning, deeply grounded in the acceptance of consumerism.

Women in Consumer Culture

Sex and the City's image of the four girlfriends, especially Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker), is something one frequently comes across within public spaces and the media worldwide. In fact, *SATC* has acquired an iconic status, with Parker

becoming one of the fashion icons of modern times. At first glance, one would think that the show focuses on a character of the same socioeconomic status as Parker herself—a Hollywood actress with unearthly privilege. But Carrie is a writer of a weekly column in New York City—a struggling writer with a maxed-out credit card and relatively insignificant savings. How does she afford Manolo Blahnik shoes and a nice apartment in Manhattan? The pilot (1998) *almost* tells a convincing story of a struggling writer: Carrie is shown in an unimpressive flat, and her narrative of the lives of single people in New York is cynical to the extreme, not indicative of any kind of privileged "happily ever after." Thus, although *SATC* was celebrated as empowering for (certain) women (Stillion-Southard 2008), one of the main criticisms is concerned with how real life measured up to the deeply consumerist life as portrayed in the show (Swarbrick, 2002), especially as it concerns the great purchasing power of the struggling writer.[2]

While the "birth" of the Barbie doll in 1959 takes place during the first decades of growing American consumerism, when people's purchasing power was, for the first time, considerable and mass-produced goods were new, *SATC* represents a time when consumerism is no longer new, but rather the norm. More sophisticated subcategories of consuming were emerging that served to express people's different identities—or, perhaps, rather their identity-as-class status. Arthurs has analysed the girlfriends as bourgeois bohemians (2003), a specific class formation that took place in the 1990s. During the last decades of the 20th century, specific kinds of feminine identities were being formed via the advertisement industry and especially through women's magazines: "… [T]he modern woman is represented as a superwoman, enjoying the skills and pleasures of consumption, not in a passive way, but by actively appropriating and reworking commodities to construct a lifestyle that expresses her individuality." (Lury 2011, 124.) The independence gained by earlier fights for women's rights is interpreted as women's increasing purchasing power. Buying is presented as another form of liberation (Lury 2011). Participating in consumer culture requires a creative skill used to produce one's own individualized "look" and one's own distinct lifestyle (Winship 1983). Women's magazines encouraged women to develop their own "unique" sense of style via mass-produced commodities just as today's social media influencers encourage women to engage in self-care via product mass-production. Similar to today's make-up routines that dominate social media's algorithms targeted at women, the women's magazines proposed the notion that women's beauty was not a given, but achievable with the right products (Winship 1983, Lury 2011).

Although the 1990s arguably witnessed a peak of this form of woman-targeting consumerism, the decade also saw a nuanced critique of consumer culture and a fierce opposition to the ever-increasing commodification of different spheres of society. In her influential book, *Consumer Culture* originally published in 1996, Celia Lury points out how, although consumption has always been part of the lives of human beings, consumer culture is a distinct

phenomenon of the 20th century when identifying as a certain kind of consumer through the products one buys became increasingly prevalent in Western countries (Lury 2011). At the same time, most US fashion brands were closing their domestic manufacturing facilities and moving their factories offshore to countries such as China, Vietnam, and Indonesia (Hiller Connell 2019). Stories about horrible labor conditions, born of the need for cheap labor given mass consumerism, started to receive attention in Western media (Hiller Connell 2019). Accordingly, even though identification via consumerism was prevalent, a critical awareness of the downside of that same consumerism was also expanding.

The contradictions stemming from identifying through consumerism and having a critical awareness of the exploitation of people and the planet due to its demands may very well form the reasons behind the ironic tone that is especially apparent in the first seasons of *SATC* (although consumerism is not addressed in that way in the series).[3] As Lury notes,

> An important part of this calculating hedonism is an emotional and cognitive distancing on the part of the individual since it is this distance which introduces the possibility of reflection on consumption and facilitates the adoption of playful and ironic ways of consuming.
>
> (Lury 2011, 54)

Yet the well-informed consumers that play with predominant cultural norms in ironic ways nevertheless go on consuming and enjoying the comforts and luxuries of their choices. This is similar to what has been called "ironic consumption" (Warren and Mohr 2019): You might e.g. dress as a Barbie doll going to the cinema to see *Barbie*, yet intend to ironically signal a different cultural meaning than the sincere belief inherent in the original doll that women performing conventional femininity can do everything they want. Or, as Arthurs notes, in *SATC*, there is an emphasis on the body as a bearer of sensation, which means that you're allowed to sincerely enjoy the pleasure of your consumption (Arthurs 2003), at the same time as the comedy in *SATC* "depends on verbal wit and ironic distancing" (2003, 92).

Thus, although the friendships in *SATC* are nuanced and "feel real," they also serve to (ironically, perhaps) create certain kinds of consumers. As Stillion Southard argues, the narrating voice of Carrie "is a vehicle for creating identification and relating common experiences" (Stillion-Southard 2008, 153). It is important to note, however, that your lived experiences need to stand in close enough proximity to that of one of the girlfriends in *SATC* in order for the identification to work—and this most certainly is easier for white, affluent heterosexual women than for poorer women, women of color, or queer people. At the same time, this identification helps form certain kinds of consumers, e.g. young girls who unironically obsess over shoes. Even the main "object of study" within the show—heterosexual men—are treated as branded goods (Arthurs 2003, Adriaens and Van Bauwel 2014). While we (sometimes) see more diverse and complicated heterosexual

relationships in *SATC,* they are oddly commodified, and (mostly) do not reach the depths that are shown in the friendships of the four women.

The issues described above—friendship, ironic consumption, the body as a bearer of sensation, and men treated as branded goods—can also be detected in *Barbie*. The Barbies are admittedly anything but ironic consumers. Of course, one of the biggest differences between *SATC* and *Barbie* is the complete lack of sex in the latter. Nevertheless, there are strangely similar themes, especially as they concern men and consumption. For instance, the Kens are accessories in Barbieworld—not anything necessary, but something pleasant in the same way as a new outfit or a Dreamhouse. In the pre-#MeToo world of 1990s New York, the men in *SATC* also serve as (patriarchal, neoliberal), relatively (physically) harmless side-shows to the four friends' love for each other—and for shopping. Perhaps this may be the most unrealistic aspect of *SATC*, and what securely positions the show in a pre-#MeToo era.

A Decade of Social Unrest and a New Wave of Feminism

New ideological waves and winds were blowing in the years following the 2008 global recession. Various social movements were born resisting the status quo—especially in terms of the neoliberal free market ideology that motivated the earlier decades' consumerism. Stahl has referred to the decade after the recession as "non-hegemonic times" (Stahl 2019), during which the acceptance of neoliberalism was only passive, and new and emerging ideologies that centered equality and better standards of living, beyond mere consumer culture could possibly gain hegemonic status. During these non-hegemonic times, a new kind of feminism sprang into life, not in its postfeminist version, but in a critical, self-proclaimed feminist form, with an emphasis on intersectionality, arguing that gender equality, and other kinds of social justice, were far from being achieved in any part of the world. In 2011, "slutwalks" originated in Canada, and other protest movements, many of which sought inspiration from the second, more radical, wave of feminism spread out all over the world. In 2017, #MeToo brought focus to sexual violence, and mass demonstrations, such as the *Global Women's Strike*, and other kinds of grassroots activism began to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism (Banet-Weiser, Gill, Rottenburg 2020).

However, as Rottenberg points out, even though the hegemony of neoliberalism was in crisis, a new kind of feminist neoliberalism simultaneously flourished (Banet-Weister, Gill, Rottenburg 2020). A corporate-friendly feminism, calling for more female CEOs and film directors–calling to women at the peak of their career-ladder, making women more visible—emerged. Anne-Marie Slaughter's (2012) "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" and Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013) are but two examples:

> Part of this visibility means being accessible to a large, popular audience. And this popularity and accessibility are measured in and through their

> ability to increase that visibility; popular feminism engages in a feedback loop, where it is more popular when it is more visible, which then authorises it to create ever-increasing visibility. Visibility is not a static thing; it has to be in a constant state of growth. But, as we also know, in a media context in which most circuits of visibility are driven by profit, competition and consumers, simply becoming visible does not guarantee that identity categories will somehow be transformed, or will deeply challenge hegemonic power relations.
>
> (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020, 12)

This is a version of feminism which is positive and happy; it is about uplift "that is decidedly not about being what Sara Ahmed (2010) has called being a justice-oriented 'feminist killjoy'"(Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenburg 2020). It is a feminism that goes perfectly well with selfie-culture and the rise of the influencers on social media—the "revolution" is not only televised, but appears instantly on Instagram. Thus, despite the reappearance of social movements and political consciousness emerging amongst different generations of people, despite the awareness of grave issues of climate change stemming from over-consumption, consumerism is far from experiencing its death throes. As borders between private lives and product advertisement become increasingly blurred, it just might be profitable to be a feminist in this more "uplifting" way. Burning bras hardly sells products.

Barbie as Glorification of Rampant Consumerism

Even though only twenty years separate them, *Barbie* has been created within a very different political landscape than *SATC*. Yet while the last decade was one of political and social unrest, neoliberal attitudes have far from withered away. Thus, we see a peculiar combination of critical feminist movements, informed by social justice, focusing on postcoloniality, trans and queer issues, disability, and class on the one hand, and on the other, we have an enhanced neoliberal rationality that reifies whiteness and class privilege, as well as heteronormativity (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020). An example of the latter from *Barbie* is the adorable song of the Kens that Ryan Gosling sings: "I'm just Ken, everywhere else I'd be a 10." Here, the audience is expected to understand the reference to "out of your league" in relation to sexual attractiveness. Ken is somehow deprived of his status in the real world as a top attractive male that is, *naturally*, supposed to be able to flirt—successfully—with top attractive females. But there is nothing natural about this form of hierarchical thinking about (heteronormative) attractiveness. This is just one example of a particularly contingent phenomenon of contemporary obsession with metrics (sexual and otherwise) which characterize neoliberal rationality (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg 2020).

In a way, Barbieland is a hyper-consumerist world that, at least initially, reminds us how much we continue to adore everything that is shiny, glittering,

in bright colours, uplifting, and positive. This is the perfect, neat consumer world in which you don't even have to physically consume and dirty your body or your perfect dress; you get to enjoy the consumption even though the liquid and the bread are perfectly plastic—where women's actual leaky, imperfect bodies are (mostly) absent (Shildrick 2002). Even though this perfect consumer world is obviously mocking that which it portrays, it is so meticulously well done and so aesthetically pleasing that it is difficult not to be fascinated, even if one takes oneself to be an intelligent consumer, critically aware of the multinational corporation that has produced this socially problematic doll (La Porte and Cavusoglu 2023). Consider that while *Barbie* was not a cheap film to make (Larasati 2024), its marketing was even more expensive than its production (Robinson 2023). Barbie toy sales went up 25% after the film (Kavilanz 2023), and the film partnered with Airbnb, Crocs, Burger King, and many more brands (Docterman 2023). Around the time of its release, the fast fashion trend, Barbiecore, offered tons of pink outfits for the special occasion of going to the cinema for both the sincerely eager as well as for more ironic consumers to see *Barbie*. Accordingly, mocking or not, the film was nothing but the perfection of commodified success, contributing greatly to the fast fashion trends of 2023.

A part of the carefully crafted *Barbie* narrative is to get ahead of the criticism, not only for Mattel (La Porte and Cavusoglu 2023), but for Greta Gerwig and Margot Robbie themselves. Thus, Sasha, the sassy teenager not only serves as the representation of fourth-wave feminism, but also gives voice to the criticism directed at the film. When she gives stereotypical Barbie an edgy speech the first time they meet, she says that "[…] you are killing the planet with your glorification of rampant consumerism" (Gerwig 2023), addressing not only how deeply embedded Barbie (and hence the film) is in capitalism, but also how the consumption of every new product and outfit is in fact having dire consequence for the planet.

SATC peaked during times when there was a lot of discussion about consumerism and "late capitalism" as if we were about to witness the transition towards another economic era, perhaps a more egalitarian one where people found themselves beyond needing endless consumer-goods. Robinson points out in his engagement with *Barbie* that around the millennium, social movements on the left engaged considerably with critiques of consumer culture as has been discussed above. (Robinson 2023). Today, leftist critique has directed its attention more to the conceptions of "production," "reproduction," and "work" with popular (academic) Marxist feminist thinkers such as Kathi Weeks (2011) and Silvia Federici (2021. At the same time, Hollywood is going through the hyper-consumerist trend of "intellectual property movies," in which nostalgic and famous toys are made into films, making profits for production companies and toy companies alike. Indicative of this trend is Robbie's next project—the card game Monopoly (Lee 2024).

Robinson points out that Gerwig believes she is both engaging with the Barbie concept and subverting it at the same time, but that this is in fact a

selective subversion that is careful not to decrease the sale of Barbie dolls (Robinson 2023). The part of the fourth wave of feminism that includes popular neoliberal "you-go-girl" feminism thus makes it possible to rebrand Barbie as a feminist icon so that by purchasing a Barbie doll, you become a part of women's empowerment (Robinson 2023). At the same time, it cannot be emphasized enough that *Barbie* – at least to the extent it addresses adults – assumes the knowing, ironic viewer/consumer, aware of Barbie's problematic past as a role model for girls and women. The film inherits decades of ironic consumerism—the kind of consumer who was perhaps already jaded by the time *SATC* aired.

Yet there are differences between the ironic consumerism of *SATC* and *Barbie*. *Barbie* directly addresses the audience as aware of the consumer critique, but presents us with characters that at least in the beginning sincerely enjoy their perfect consumerist world. *SATC* introduces us to the bohemian bourgeois of New York in their thirties, who are already jaded consumers—especially in the way they "consume" the objects of heterosexual desire. While *Barbie* is just one film, perhaps with a single chance to exploit its own craze, *SATC* is a series that evolved as a long-standing brand; the more the audience enjoyed a particular aspect of the show, the more it was featured on screen. This is the case with high fashion and high-end luxury brands that increasingly begin to dominate the show–without any ironic edge to be found. At the same time, the interesting discussions about gender and sex so prevalent earlier in the series become less apparent. In terms of communicating nuanced and critical representations and articulations about feminist issues and consumerist critique, it is *SATC*'s very popularity that in the end turned out to be its betrayal of its feminist leanings.

Conclusion: *SATC, Barbie,* and Feminist Movements

Although *SATC* was never presented under the banner of feminism, it brought many important feminist issues to the forefront through sometimes nuanced discussion of four girlfriends, always also navigating their own relations to each other. One of my favorite examples of this is when Charlotte gets vulvodynia, a chronic pain condition in the vulva which greatly affects women's lives, but is still to this day not well-known and even medically contested. *SATC* was discussing this serious condition in the most accepting way *twenty years ago*. Yet in many ways, *SATC* was also quite postfeminist, especially in the implicit acceptance of consumerism and its emphasis on the joy of individualistic, heteronormative pleasures. The female solidarity extended mostly to their own girlfriend in-group. However, some of the conversation among the girlfriends about what they wanted in their sexual lives presaged prominent themes in the #MeToo movement concerning consent and sexual self-awareness.

What about *Barbie*? Gerwig certainly shows profound awareness of her own cultural history in every little detail in the film, and it is amazing what she manages to accomplish. Yet the feminist message that might be most lacking in

Barbie is the importance of feminism as a *social* movement. Even though the film may spark a feminist fire in a new generation, it is more likely to be closer to neoliberal feminism than its more radical alternatives. With tweens obsessing over skin products in the craze referred to as "Sephora kids" (Kavilanz 2024), it is not very likely that the feminist message of *Barbie* will turn out to be the call for radical feminist alternatives, in line with those discussed by Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg (2020). With the ever-increasing consumption of fast fashion and other products that greatly contribute to climate change, it is more important than ever to establish a powerful feminist, anti-consumerist social movement, centering on the consumeristic lifestyle choices directed at women identifying with conventional, heterosexual femininities. But it often appears as if we have given up and leaned into a jaded, ironic consumption. With Barbiecore, among other things, *Barbie* is more likely to contribute to this form of jaded feminism that accepts, and celebrates, consumerism rather than turning into a more social justice, anti-consumerist-oriented movement. In comparison with *SATC*, perhaps what lessens *Barbie*'s potential damage lies in that it is only going to be one film—not a franchise, consumed by its own popularity.

Notes

1 It is important to note that although intersectionality rather characterizes the fourth wave of feminism, it was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1988 in an attempt to criticise how predominant white women (and their reality) were in the feminist movement (Bohrer 2019). The reason I believe that intersectionality rather characterizes the fourth wave is due to how mainstream the idea is in that wave. Importantly, however, these ideas blossomed in the fourth wave due to the work of Black feminists during the period of the third wave of feminism.
2 This is of course a commonplace critique of TV shows.
3 *SATC* was originally a book by Candace Bushnell (1996) and before that a weekly column. The cynical tone and the death of romance is particularly strong in the book and clearly influences the first season of *SATC* although little by little that tone decreases and the uplifting tone of enjoying the consumerist lifestyles becomes stronger.

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