



Feminist Perspectives in Multi-Modal Discourse Analysis: The Case of the Barbie Film Poster

Lulu Chen

School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Email: cll10191019@163.com

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Abstract

Movie posters are designed to be short, clear, and attention-grabbing, with visual elements like movie scenes taking precedence. The meaning of a poster is conveyed primarily through these visuals. This analysis of the Barbie poster aims to understand the rationale behind its design elements. The study concludes that the Barbie movie poster uses visual elements to emphasize Barbie as the central, empowered figure, aligning with the film's feminist themes. The strategic use of color, positioning, and interaction reinforces the redefinition of traditional gender roles, presenting Barbie as a multifaceted, autonomous character.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Visual Grammar, Barbie, Feminism

1. Introduction

As society advances and technology continues to evolve, communication has transitioned from a predominantly text-based medium to one that integrates multiple modes, including images, sounds, and text. This evolution highlights the importance of studying discourse in a multimodal context, where elements such as images, sounds, and colors play a crucial role in conveying meaning beyond the written word [1]. Multimodal discourse analysis thus extends its focus from mere textual analysis to include a broad spectrum of social semiotic systems, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of discourse. As an eye-catching medium, posters are often used in the context of sales as the most effective tool for promoting products [2].

The Barbie movie, a cultural phenomenon that intersects with feminist dis-

course, offers a rich subject for such an analysis. The film reinterprets the iconic doll, which has been historically criticized for promoting unrealistic beauty standards, through a feminist lens, challenging traditional gender roles, and advocating for empowerment. This paper conducts a multimodal discourse analysis of the Barbie movie poster, utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Halliday's systemic functional grammar and Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar. The analysis focuses on representational, interactional, and compositional meanings within the poster to explore how various modes—such as imagery, text, and color—collaborate to construct complex meanings.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Systemic Functional Grammar

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) conceptualizes language as a system of meanings, interconnected with other systems, such as forms and expressions, which collectively serve the purpose of conveying meaning.

Within this framework, Halliday's systemic functional grammar regards language as a social symbol. He proposed three meta-functions of language: the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function. The ideational function relates to how language expresses various experiences of people in the real world, including internal experiences, as well as the logical relationships between different meaning units. The interpersonal function involves language's ability to convey the speaker's identity, judgments, attitudes, and motivations, along with their inferences, judgments, and evaluations of situations. Finally, the textual function refers to the role of language in organizing components into coherent discourse.

2.2. Visual Grammar

Kress and Van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar is fundamentally based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. Hasan argued that language functions as a form of social semiotics; however, beyond language, other forms of meaning expression exist, including artistic mediums such as painting and music [3]. Drawing from Halliday's concept of the three meta-functions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—Kress and Van Leeuwen extended these functions to the realm of visual symbols, thereby developing the theory of visual grammar.

They posited that visual symbols, like language, perform three meta-functions: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. In their seminal work, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Kress and Van Leeuwen advanced the theory of visual grammar, proposing a multimodal approach to visual analysis. They argued that what is conveyed through linguistic choices—such as word selection and semantic structures—can similarly be expressed through visual elements like line, color, and perspective.

Moreover, they introduced the concepts of narrative and conceptual representations as manifestations of representational meaning, paralleling the transitivity

system in language. Elements that convey interpersonal meaning include factors such as gaze, angle, and distance, while those reflecting compositional meaning encompass aspects like information value, salience, and framing.

3. Studies on Posters and Barbie

The poster, as the earliest form of advertising media, began its development as a visual communication tool in the early 19th century [4]. Over time, posters became a popular medium in communication design, naturally drawing a wide audience. Their ability to visually capture attention makes them an effective tool for promoting products, particularly in sales context [2]. Movie posters, specifically, convey a wealth of information through visual elements such as text, illustrations, and photographs [5].

As a globally iconic doll released by Mattel, Barbie has long been the subject of cultural and symbolic interpretation by scholars. Sociology professor Mary Rogers, in her book *Barbie Culture*, explores Barbie's multifaceted role in contemporary society. According to Rogers, Barbie is more than a toy; she is a symbol of popular culture. However, the doll has also been the center of numerous debates, criticized for promoting unrealistic female body standards and for overemphasizing sexuality within American culture [6]. Feminists have long condemned Barbie's negative image, with many highlighting her role in perpetuating distorted female ideals [7].

With the release of Greta Gerwig's Barbie movie, however, the doll's connotation has been revitalized, gaining new cultural significance. Scholars have analyzed the film's feminist themes and its redefinition of female values. Yakalı [8] argues that the film humorously and ironically deconstructs patriarchal symbols through a feminist deconstructionist lens. Pohan [9] applies discourse analysis to the motivational dialogue in Barbie, concluding that it effectively resonates with audiences by focusing on themes of female empowerment, self-discovery, and ambition. Similarly, Rengganis [10] examines the film's script and world-building, interpreting the movie as promoting the concept of female superiority, where women can transcend limitations imposed by male authority.

4. Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Barbie's Poster

Barbie was released in the United States on July 21, 2023, and quickly became a topic of widespread discussion and debate, particularly due to its feminist themes. It grossed an impressive \$162 million in North America during its first three days, making it the highest domestic opening weekend box office for any film in U.S [11] history. It also set a record as the highest domestic opening for a film directed solely by a female director.

Over the years, the icon of Barbie has attracted considerable academic interest, resulting in numerous scholarly works that examine its impact on children's development [12], gender roles, body image [13], and societal values [14]. Throughout this time, Barbie has also faced criticism for being depicted as a symbol of

objectified sexuality. Viewed through a feminist lens, Barbie is seen as a tool that reinforces and perpetuates a male-dominated consumer culture [15]. She has been criticized for promoting unrealistically slender and disproportionate body standards associated with emphasized femininity, which are linked to various issues among teenage girls and young women [16].

The emergence of this Barbie movie (See **Figure 1**) presents a fresh interpretation of the iconic character. The film *Barbie* follows the journey of its titular character, who lives in a seemingly perfect, yet highly controlled, world of Barbieland. However, when Barbie begins to question her existence and experiences a crisis of identity, she embarks on a journey to the real world. This narrative serves as a vehicle to challenge traditional gender roles and explore themes of self-empowerment, individuality, and the critique of societal expectations imposed on women. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the poster visually communicates these complex feminist ideas.



Figure 1. The Barbie movie poster.

4.1. Representational Meaning

Representational meaning in functional grammar corresponds to the ideational function of language. Kress and Van Leeuwen define representational meaning as comprising two processes: the narrative process and the conceptual process [4]. The key distinction between these two lies in the presence of a “vector.” A vector is typically formed by the eyeline or the direction of the gaze of one or more participants depicted in the image. In the narrative process, when a vector connects the represented participants, it indicates that they are engaged in some form of interaction or activity. Vectors can be created through elements such as lines, outstretched arms, arrows, or tools.

Kress and Van Leeuwen suggested that “narrative processes serve to present

unfolding actions and events, processes of change, or transitory spatial arrangements.” These processes can be further categorized into action processes, reaction processes, and verbal and mental processes. In the reaction process, there are two key elements: the reactor and the phenomenon. The reactor is the participant who observes what is occurring in the image, while the phenomenon is what is being observed by the reactor.

The narrative process in the poster is conveyed through the action and interaction between the characters. Barbie (portrayed by Margot Robbie) is driving a pink convertible, with Ken (played by Ryan Gosling) sitting in the passenger seat. Barbie’s hand is raised in a wave, suggesting an active role and confidence. The direction of Barbie’s gaze and smile toward the audience creates a direct interaction, making the viewer a participant in the scene. This interaction conveys a sense of openness and approachability, aligning with the character’s persona. Ken’s gaze is directed towards Barbie, not outward to the viewer. This creates a subtle narrative where Ken’s attention and focus are on Barbie, further emphasizing her as the central figure. The lack of direct engagement with the viewer on Ken’s part contrasts with Barbie’s direct wave and smile, highlighting the difference in their roles within the narrative structure of the poster.

The conceptual process is evident in how the characters are represented in the poster. Barbie is positioned in the driver’s seat, which symbolically reinforces her role as the central, empowered figure in the narrative. Ken’s relaxed posture, with his arm draped over the car, complements the tagline, “She’s everything. He’s just Ken.” This juxtaposition emphasizes the film’s feminist theme by highlighting Barbie’s agency and Ken’s secondary role.

The poster employs vibrant, pastel colors, particularly pink, which are traditionally associated with femininity. Pink has long been associated with femininity, particularly in Western cultures, where it is often seen as a color that signifies softness, gentleness, and traditionally “feminine” qualities. This association has been reinforced over decades, partly through marketing strategies that target girls with pink toys, clothes, and other products, effectively coding the color as a marker of gender. This reinforces the film’s connection to its iconic brand while also challenging and reinterpreting these associations through its feminist lens. Instead of pink symbolizing passivity or submissiveness, it is used here to convey strength, control, and independence. Barbie is not merely a passive doll but an active protagonist, driving her own journey and making her own choices. The film uses the color pink, which has been historically seen as limiting, to broaden the narrative of what it means to be feminine. Moreover, the tagline “She’s everything” juxtaposed with the color emphasizes that Barbie, while embodying traditional feminine aesthetics, is multifaceted and powerful—she is “everything,” not limited by the stereotypes that pink might traditionally imply. The poster thus reclaims the color pink, presenting it as a symbol of modern femininity that is strong, complex, and self-determined.

The primary vector in the image is created by Barbie’s eyeline and wave, leading

the viewer's attention towards her as the focal point. This vector emphasizes Barbie's role as the protagonist and suggests a dynamic, forward-moving action, both literally (as she drives) and metaphorically (in terms of her character's journey).

The representational meaning of the poster is constructed through the interplay of these visual elements. It reflects the film's feminist themes by positioning Barbie as the central, active figure, while Ken plays a supportive, less significant role. The use of color, posture, and direct engagement with the viewer all contribute to conveying the film's message of female empowerment and the redefinition of traditional gender roles.

4.2. Interactive Meaning

The concept of interactive meaning encompasses the relationship between the image's creator and its audience. In this context, images involve two distinct categories of participants: represented participants and interactive participants. Represented participants are the individuals, objects, and settings depicted within the image itself, while interactive participants are those who engage in communication and express their perspectives through the image. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, interactive meaning is constituted by several key components: contact, social distance, attitude, and modality.

Contact refers to how the participants in the image interact with the viewer. This is most often established through gaze. In the Barbie poster, Barbie directly gazes at the viewer with a smile, creating what is known as a "demand" image. This type of image actively engages the viewer, establishing a direct communicative relationship. Barbie's gaze invites the audience into the narrative, creating a sense of interaction where the viewer feels personally addressed. Ken's gaze, on the other hand, is directed at Barbie, indicating that he is part of the scene but does not engage directly with the audience. This contrast further emphasizes Barbie's role as the focal point of engagement.

Social distance in visual grammar refers to the perceived distance between the represented participants and the viewer, which can indicate different levels of intimacy or formality. The poster uses a medium shot, showing Barbie and Ken from the waist up. This distance suggests a social relationship where the viewer is close enough to engage with the characters but not so close as to invade their personal space. The medium shot implies familiarity and accessibility, making the characters approachable yet maintaining their iconic status. It reflects a balance between inviting the audience into Barbie's world and maintaining a respectful, slightly idealized distance.

The attitude is conveyed through the angle of the shot, which determines the relationship of power and involvement between the represented participants and the viewer. The Barbie poster uses a frontal, eye-level angle, which creates a sense of involvement and equality. This positioning suggests that the viewer is on the same level as Barbie and Ken, fostering a sense of connection and participation. The frontal angle invites the audience to engage with the narrative as equals, re-

enforcing the idea that Barbie's story is one that the viewer can relate to and be a part of. The eye-level, straight-on angle also conveys neutrality in terms of power dynamics. There is no sense of the viewer looking up or down at the characters, which suggests that the audience is neither dominant over nor subordinate to the characters. This neutral angle supports the film's message of equality and empowerment, where the viewer is invited to see Barbie as a peer rather than a distant or unattainable figure.

Modality refers to the degree of realism in the image, which is communicated through color, detail, and depth. In the Barbie poster, the bright, pastel colors—especially the vibrant pink—are somewhat stylized, reflecting a playful, idealized version of reality. This use of color aligns with the film's aesthetic and thematic approach, which mixes fantasy with modern social commentary. The color on the poster has a very important role, namely to be able to represent the information on the poster and provide a visual effect that can spoil the eyes of those who see it [17]. The high saturation and the exaggeratedly cheerful tone suggest a world that is both familiar and fantastical, which is in line with the Barbie brand's identity. While the image is not hyper-realistic, its high modality in terms of color and clarity makes it clear and easy to interpret, creating a convincing, immersive world for the audience. The combination of realistic depictions (like the detailed renderings of Barbie and Ken) with stylized elements (like the bright, almost surreal colors) gives the image a dual sense of reality and fantasy. This mixture allows the viewer to engage with the poster on different levels—recognizing the characters as both real and as part of a constructed, idealized narrative. The high modality of the poster does not depict an exact, everyday reality but rather a heightened, more symbolic reality that aligns with the film's exploration of gender roles and identity.

The Barbie poster, through its interactive meaning, effectively bridges the gap between the viewer and the represented participants (Barbie and Ken). Through direct contact via Barbie's gaze, a medium social distance, an equal and inviting attitude, and a high modality that blends realism with fantasy, the poster creates a welcoming, engaging, and empowering interaction. This design approach reflects the film's themes of modern femininity and empowerment, inviting the viewer to see themselves in Barbie's journey while also enjoying the playful, stylized world she inhabits.

4.3. Compositional Meaning

Within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), image composition, much like linguistic texts, conveys meaning that extends beyond its immediate visual appearance. The analysis of images, particularly in the context of posters or other forms of visual media, requires an understanding of the interaction between various visual elements that collectively contribute to the overall message. Three central concepts in this analysis are information value, salience, and framing, each of which is essential in shaping the meaning conveyed by the image.

In Western visual cultures, the left side of an image is often associated with

“Given” information—what the audience is assumed to know or accept—and the right side with “New” information—what is being introduced or emphasized. In this poster, Barbie is positioned on the left side of the image, which aligns with the “Given” side. This positioning suggests that Barbie, as an iconic character, is something familiar to the audience. The viewer is expected to already know or recognize Barbie and what she represents. Ken, on the right, is in the “New” position, which may signify that his role or portrayal in the film might offer something different or unexpected. This arrangement hints that while Barbie remains the central, familiar figure, there’s something novel about Ken’s character or his relationship with Barbie that the film will explore.

The top part of the poster, where the text and title “Barbie” is located, can be associated with the “Ideal,” which in visual grammar represents the aspirational or symbolic aspects. The bright, playful font and the title at the top suggest that the film is aiming to engage with idealized concepts—relating to beauty, femininity, and empowerment. The bottom part of the poster, which shows Barbie and Ken in the car, represents the “Real,” indicating what is tangible and concrete. This placement suggests that while the film plays with idealized themes, it is grounded in the characters and their interactions, making the narrative both aspirational and accessible.

Salience refers to how certain elements in an image are made to stand out and attract attention. In this poster, Barbie is the most salient element. Her positioning in the foreground, the use of bright pink, and her direct gaze all contribute to making her the focal point. The car and Barbie’s pink outfit further enhance her visibility, drawing the viewer’s eye immediately to her figure. The use of vibrant pink not only reinforces the association with the Barbie brand but also makes Barbie herself stand out against the lighter blue background. Pink is a highly salient color in this context, immediately attracting attention and reinforcing Barbie’s centrality in the image. Ideas like women’s rights and the upending of patriarchy are here part of the narrative, so clear as to be accessible—and enjoyable—to the everyman at the multiplex [18].

Framing refers to how elements are connected or separated within an image, affecting how they are perceived as part of a whole or as distinct units. In this poster, Barbie and Ken are placed together in the car, with no visual elements separating them. This framing creates a sense of unity between the characters, indicating that they are part of the same narrative or world. The composition is relatively open, with no strong borders or frames dividing different parts of the image. This openness allows the viewer’s eye to move freely across the image, from the title to the characters to the tagline. The lack of harsh framing elements creates a fluid and cohesive visual experience, making the whole poster feel like a single, unified message. The blue sky in the background serves as a neutral, open space that doesn’t distract from the main elements of Barbie, Ken, and the car. This spaciousness in the background helps to keep the focus on the central figures while also giving a sense of freedom and expansiveness, which aligns with the film’s themes of self-

discovery and empowerment.

The compositional meaning of the Barbie movie poster, when viewed through a feminist lens, reveals a deliberate effort to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles. Barbie's central, salient position, combined with the strategic use of color and text, asserts her as an empowered figure, challenging the stereotypical portrayals of femininity. The poster's design aligns with feminist principles, promoting a narrative where the female character is not just central but also multifaceted and autonomous. The open, inclusive framing further reinforces the idea of breaking free from societal limitations, embodying the feminist ideals of empowerment, equality, and the redefinition of womanhood.

5. Conclusion

“Barbie, you're beautiful.....Someday, I'm gonna be exactly like you. Till then, I know just what I'll do. Barbie, beautiful Barbie, I'll make believe that I am you.” This was the advertisement for the Barbie doll in 1959, when beauty was considered as the most attractive point of Barbie. The movie Barbie is definitely a fight against such thoughts. By presenting Barbie as a multifaceted, empowered character, the poster aligns with contemporary feminist discourse and contributes to the ongoing redefinition of femininity in popular culture. This study underscores the importance of multimodal discourse analysis in understanding how images can be used to convey and promote complex social and cultural ideas, particularly in relation to gender and feminism.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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