

Strategy Analysis Based on Word-of-Mouth Marketing to Address Consumer Perception in the Rebranding of the Barbie Movie

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Abstract:

This study explores how the Barbie movie played a pivotal role in the brand's rebranding strategy, utilizing film as an effective tool to address long-standing challenges. The research examines how the Barbie brand, through narrative and marketing strategies, tackled issues such as gender stereotypes, unrealistic body image standards, limited career perceptions for girls, and declining market competitiveness. By adopting the PESO model and STEPPS principles, the study delves into the deconstruction of gender roles, the reconstruction of Barbie's brand image, and the enhancement of brand influence through word-of-mouth communication. The findings reveal that the movie successfully rebuilt the brand's image and reinforced its social responsibility, thereby improving consumer perception. Additionally, the film medium proved highly effective in elevating Barbie's competitiveness in the modern market by helping it break free from traditional image constraints. This analysis provides valuable insights for brands seeking to leverage film as a medium for rebranding and enhancing market presence.

Keywords: Barbie movie; Brand rebranding; Word-of-mouth marketing.

1. Introduction

The success of the Barbie movie has garnered significant attention in the media and marketing fields, with its innovative marketing strategy and extensive media coverage generating strong cultural resonance and widespread discussion. While numerous studies have explored the movie's success from a media and marketing perspective, there has been limited in-depth analysis of how the rebranding has addressed

longstanding issues within the Barbie brand, such as gender stereotypes, the negative impact of unrealistic body standards on young girls, and the brand's declining market influence. These issues are crucial to Barbie's rebranding efforts, yet they have not been fully examined in existing research.

This study fills that gap by focusing on how the Barbie movie can be used as a strategic tool for rebranding to effectively tackle these longstanding challenges. Through an exploration of the film's various

marketing communication strategies, the article analyzes how it redefines and optimizes Barbie's brand image, eliminates gender bias and negative perceptions, and further enhances its market competitiveness. Therefore, this paper not only highlights the pivotal role of the Barbie movie in rebranding but also provides an important reference for future research on brand marketing—particularly regarding how film as a medium can drive rebranding and word-of-mouth communication. This study offers valuable insights for brands aiming to create lasting influence through word-of-mouth marketing.

2. Case description

Barbie was introduced by Mattel, Inc. in 1959, inspired by the observations of Ruth Handler, one of the founders, as she watched her daughter Barbara play with paper dolls. Ruth hoped that by creating a three-dimensional doll, she would encourage girls to believe they could be anything they wanted. Since then, Barbie has become an iconic Mattel product and holds an important position in the toy industry [1]. More than just a doll, Barbie represents a style and cultural icon that has influenced countless girls and women worldwide. In addition to its core identity as a toy, the Barbie line has successfully expanded into media and entertainment, including animation, movies, music albums, and even video games. However, although Barbie's image has evolved many times in line with social trends, it still struggles to fully escape the shackles of gender stereotypes [2].

2.1 Challenge 1: Gender stereotypes

The biggest challenge Barbie faces is consumer prejudice. Since its launch, Barbie has repeatedly aligned with social trends but has never fully broken free from the constraints of gender stereotypes. Mattel has introduced a range of professional Barbie dolls, such as astronauts and doctors, to showcase women's abilities in various fields. However, Barbie's predominant image remains that of a glamorous, fashion-forward model. Despite efforts to promote equality by launching Barbies of different races and backgrounds, including African-American Barbie, the mainstream market continues to uphold the blonde, blue-eyed Barbie as the ideal.

This image, perpetuated through Barbie's global sales, has deeply shaped the perceptions of beauty and gender for countless young girls. The beauty standards conveyed by Barbie dolls are appearance-focused, reinforcing a narrow vision of femininity. This portrayal contradicts the values of female independence and equality promoted in today's society, making it difficult for Barbie to escape the enduring shadow of gender stereotypes [3].

2.2 Challenge 2: Body dissatisfaction

The entrenched image can have a broader negative impact on young girls' body satisfaction and self-perception. Barbie's body proportions are far removed from those of the average woman. For the typical American adult woman to match Barbie's physique, she would need to be 2 feet taller, have a neck 3 inches longer, a bust 4 inches larger, and a waist 6 inches smaller. These unrealistic body standards further intensify girls' dissatisfaction with their bodies, and exposure to the "sexualized messages" associated with Barbie often leads to increased self-objectification, heightening the psychological stress they experience as they grow up [4]. The pressure to conform to these ideals can negatively affect both their long-term physical satisfaction and mental well-being. As a cultural icon, Barbie has inadvertently contributed to the perpetuation of these unrealistic beauty norms.

2.3 Challenge 3: Restrictions on girls' occupational perceptions

In addition to the impact on body satisfaction, Barbie's sexualized image also limits girls' career perceptions. Studies have found that, despite Barbie's tagline that she can do anything, girls who play with Barbie perceive themselves as having fewer career options in the future compared to those who play with non-sexualized dolls. Additionally, they believe that boys have more opportunities in their career choices [4]. This contradiction weakens the positive image Barbie aims to convey, suggesting that Barbie may inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes. Playing with Barbie dolls could diminish girls' confidence in their abilities and career prospects, ultimately affecting their future plans and self-expectations.

2.4 Challenge 4: lost market advantage

One challenge Barbie has long faced due to consumer prejudices is being seen as a bad role model for children, as her image contains many female stereotypes that parents do not approve of. Although this criticism has existed for a long time, with increasing competition in the market and the abundance of toys, more and more parents have begun to choose other alternatives for their daughters. Although Mattel's repeated efforts to address these issues by refreshing Barbie such as to announce that Barbie and Ken have broken up, these efforts have failed to stop the continued decline in brand influence and market share. In the early 2000s, with the rise of new brands designed specifically for the 'tweens' market, such as MGA's Bratz doll, Barbie faced unprecedented competitive pressure. Coupled with the popularity of new IPs such as *Frozen* and other electronic toys, Barbie was unable to adapt to

changes in the market, further losing its market advantage [3].

Due to Barbie's long history of conveying sexualized messages, promoting stereotyped images to consumers, and negatively impacting young girls' body image and career perception, these issues have gradually weakened the brand's position in the market. Especially in the face of emerging competitors and market changes, Barbie's image appears increasingly outdated. Addressing these issues is therefore critical to the Barbie brand's survival and growth. Mattel realized that relying solely on traditional product adjustments was no longer sufficient to address consumers' doubts and market pressure, the brand needed to be rebranded to change consumers' perceptions. The release of the Barbie movie marked a successful turning point in this strategy. Barbie began moving toward diversity and inclusion, aiming to break down previous gender stereotypes and address body satisfaction issues. The Barbie movie not only successfully addressed past criticism but also opened up new market prospects for Barbie, providing an opportunity to regain the recognition and trust of their consumers [5].

3. Case Solutions

In response to the long-standing doubts and criticisms of the Barbie brand by consumers, Mattel needs to redefine Barbie's image through a comprehensive rebranding strategy, with the launch of the Barbie movie serving as a key component of this effort. The film Barbie, released in 2023, not only cemented the brand's significant place in culture but also shed light on contemporary society's stereotypes of women. In the film, Barbie initially resides in an idealized feminist world, but later embarks on a journey to the real world because her behavior begins to deviate from 'perfection.' In this patriarchal reality, men are seen as authoritative figures, while women are often marginalized. Confronted with these realities, Barbie is shocked and gradually becomes bound and scrutinized by social stereotypes. Through Barbie's experience, the film vividly illustrates the social expectations and limitations that women face in the real world, prompting viewers to reflect on these culturally embedded gender attitudes. These stereotypes do limit women's development in reality, causing them to gradually accept these labels as part of their destiny [6].

3.1 Solution to gender stereotypes

Mattel skillfully leveraged Barbie's stereotypical image to reposition her from a fashion icon to a symbol of female empowerment, effectively addressing academic critiques of her body image and beauty standards. The film uses

the narrative of gender conflict to satirize and deconstruct male hegemony in a patriarchal society, showcasing Barbie's diverse and independent roles. This narrative not only resonated with audiences but also encouraged them to reassess Barbie as a character. In the movie, Mattel's all-male board of directors symbolizes patriarchal control, and while the company outwardly embraces feminism, it subtly maintains a male-dominated structure. In the battle scenes featuring Ken, unconventional weapons like tennis rackets and gymnastics ribbons are used, satirizing the traditional association of masculinity with warfare. The plot dramatizes societal expectations of gender roles and counters the long-standing academic criticism that Barbie's image is too one-dimensional. In the film, Barbie evolves from a character centered on appearance to one aspiring to be an "ordinary" woman, symbolizing her rejection of imposed identities. The film reinterprets gender roles, emphasizing women's diversity and independence, gradually breaking down the audience's stereotypical view of Barbie and presenting her as an enterprising figure in modern society. The core of the brand strategy is to embed these messages into social media and digital marketing, aligning the brand with contemporary gender conversations and encouraging audiences to rethink and recognize Barbie as she transcends the appearance-focused stereotype to become a symbol of modern progress [4].

3.2 Solution to Body dissatisfaction

Barbie has long been criticized for promoting unrealistic body standards, with her slender, model-like figure significantly influencing the public's perception of female beauty. However, the key to addressing this issue lies in redefining Barbie's image through movies and other media while creating a new brand identity through word-of-mouth marketing. While Mattel has been actively working on this transformation, focusing on promoting a positive image that encourages girls to embrace their unique bodies, the greatest challenge remains in how to effectively communicate this positive message to a wider audience through word of mouth and deeply impact their perception of the Barbie brand.

Mattel addressed criticism of Barbie's image with satire in the movie, such as Barbie's reluctance to enter the "real world" due to concerns about developing cellulite. This satire reflects society's unrealistic demands on women's body image and prompts the audience to reflect on these unattainable expectations. Tanya Lee Stone's research highlights that girls' body anxieties are more often driven by external real-life factors than by Barbie itself, which has historically represented a fight for women's rights [7]. To effectively spread this idea, Johan Berger's "STEPPS"

principle can be applied, particularly the element of Emotion. In the context of Johan Berger's "STEPPS" principle (Social Currency, Triggers, Emotion, Public, Practical Value, and Stories), which explains how ideas and products spread through word-of-mouth marketing, Emotion is a powerful driver in this case of sharing, especially when it involves high-arousal emotions such as anger, excitement, or awe [9]. In the Barbie movie, the mother's monologue strongly resonates with the audience, addressing the unrealistic societal expectations placed on women. The line states, "You have to be thin, but not too thin. And you can never say you want to be thin. You have to say you want to be healthy, but also you have to be thin... I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us" [8].

When viewers experience this high-arousal emotion of anger, this emotional resonance can be further amplified through social media and word-of-mouth, positioning Barbie as a symbol that challenges body image biases. This resonance prompts viewers to re-examine issues surrounding female body image, and through the widespread reach of social media and word-of-mouth marketing, it has helped Barbie gradually become a symbol of progress and inclusion in modern society.

3.3 Solution to Restrictions on girls' occupational perceptions

Barbie's slim, fashionable image has long emphasized appearance over professional abilities, causing many girls to unconsciously limit their career aspirations to look-oriented fields. This undermines the message of "empowerment" that the brand aims to convey and may instead reinforce traditional gender role biases. To address this problem, Mattel launched the Barbie Dream Gap Project in 2019 to raise public awareness of the "dream gap." Research has shown that by the age of five, girls begin to doubt their intelligence, while boys do not experience similar self-doubt, leading to the underrepresentation of girls in high-IQ professions. In response, Mattel introduced the "Judge Barbie" doll line to emphasize that any girl can achieve her dreams. Through collaborations with educational institutions, such as UCLA's leadership and career programs, Mattel not only reshaped Barbie's image but also linked the brand to education and the growth of girls [7].

Practical Value is central to this strategy, as it is a key component of the "STEPPS" principle, which aims to drive word-of-mouth by providing useful and relevant information to consumers. People are more inclined to share content that benefits others because it strengthens social connections and offers a sense of personal satisfaction. By delivering practical, actionable value, brands can naturally

encourage consumers to share, thereby expanding their influence and communication reach [9]. Mattel, by offering educational resources that support girls in building confidence and planning careers, delivers this practical value, transforming Barbie from just an entertainment toy into a practical advocate for girls' development and future success. This commitment to practicality enhances the brand's social responsibility, earning recognition from parents and educators alike. By empowering girls, Mattel has successfully repositioned Barbie as a symbol of inspiration, encouraging girls to pursue their dreams and helping the brand gain broader word-of-mouth support.

Mattel should continue to expand the Barbie Dream Gap Project while maintaining its focus on delivering practical value. By offering more resources to help girls build confidence and develop career-planning skills, the brand can further extend its social impact. Developing online career courses and interactive learning platforms tailored specifically for girls would also introduce new educational dimensions to the brand, increasing its value in both family settings and educational institutions.

3.4 A solution to lost market advantage

Faced with the challenge of Barbie's inability to adapt to market changes and the subsequent loss of its market advantage, I analyzed Mattel's rebranding strategy using the PESO model. The PESO model covers four key areas: paid media, earned media, shared media, and owned media, helping Barbie regain market attention [10].

First, owned media is central to Mattel's brand promotion, and the success of the Barbie series is a testament to this strategy. Through these films, Mattel has been able to fully control the narrative, promoting core brand values such as fashion, friendship, and family. Beginning with *Barbie in the Nutcracker* in 2001, Mattel produced and distributed a series of animated films that attracted a wide audience of children and families, successfully shaping Barbie's brand image. The Barbie movies not only helped globalize the brand but also established an entertainment franchise that could be leveraged long-term [2].

Shared media also played a crucial role in spreading the Barbie brand. Through collaborations with more than 100 brands, the pink theme of the Barbie movies permeated various sectors, including fashion, food, and everyday products, inspiring widespread societal engagement and discussion. Audiences spontaneously wore pink, reflecting the film's strong resonance with popular culture [11]. This seamless integration of film content with pop culture naturally promoted the broad dissemination of shared media, generating a word-of-mouth effect.

The "I Can Be" campaign is one of the most successful

examples of paid media. This campaign was heavily advertised on New York City buses, occupying about 45% of the bus ad space, and featured a strategically planned outdoor media campaign around the Javits Center during the New York Toy Fair. These sophisticated outdoor advertisements, such as extended designs on bus windows, effectively captured the attention of a large audience, making Barbie's message highly visible and ubiquitous [12].

Earned media has also played a crucial role in the rebranding process. Mattel's marketing team initially focused on Barbie's mature and loyal fan base. These fans, having grown up with Barbie dolls, animated series, and interactive games since childhood, have formed an emotional connection that spans generations[2]. Through nostalgic marketing, Barbie garnered significant media attention. Following the film's success, the emotional resonance experienced by multiple generations of fans fueled widespread free publicity for the brand, further solidifying Barbie's market position.

Through the strategic combination of these four media channels, Mattel successfully reinvigorated the Barbie brand and solidified its place in the modern market. This comprehensive approach not only reversed the brand's decline but also positioned Barbie for continued relevance in an increasingly competitive industry.

4. Conclusion

The release of the Barbie movie marks the success of Mattel's rebranding and strategic transformation, not only reversing longstanding consumer perceptions of Barbie but also addressing gender stereotypes and body image issues, helping the brand regain market share. Through this film, Mattel deconstructs years of gender-related stereotypes surrounding Barbie, repositioning her from a looks-centric icon to a symbol of female empowerment. This transformation not only addresses academic criticism but also offers audiences a fresh perspective on the character, generating strong emotional resonance.

The film highlights the social expectations and limitations women face in the real world, emphasizing the diversity of gender roles. It gradually dispels Barbie's appearance-based stereotype, portraying her as a bold and progressive social symbol. Additionally, the emotional impact of the film prompts viewers to reflect on issues related to women's body image while promoting Mattel's Barbie

Dream Gap Project, which further challenges the limitations imposed on women's professional advancement.

In terms of market competition, the success of the Barbie movie not only helped the brand regain its market advantage but also effectively utilized word-of-mouth communication strategies through the PESO and STEPPS models. The combination of multi-channel media promotion with the emotional resonance of word-of-mouth marketing allowed the Barbie brand to rebuild a positive perception among consumers. Through extensive word-of-mouth communication, the brand further enhanced its competitiveness in the modern market.

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