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- Many young viewers say that the Barbie movie was a refreshing twist to the usual blockbusters featuring male lead characters
- They said the movie was more profound than they expected and got them thinking about female empowerment
- Experts say demand for more accessible stories by women and about women has been growing
- Barbie is the first film that has managed to explore female empowerment while earning massive success, and this could pave the way for more similar films, they say

When Ms Sri Vidya first learnt of the Barbie movie, she had low expectations for it, seeing as her exposure to the toy dolls as a child was through various animated series.

“Barbie has always been portrayed as the perfect icon, the perfect girl, everyone can agree to that (but) I didn’t see Barbie as what I wanted to be like,” said the 25-year-old senior digital marketing analyst.

Given her knowledge of the brand and the old animated series, she would not have been surprised if the Barbie movie, which was released in Singapore on July 20, featured a “childish” or lighthearted theme, she said.

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So she was pleasantly surprised that the movie was anything but.

“I was blown away from the start. The set was beautiful, the cinematography was beautiful, everything was beautiful, the production value was so good, the soundtrack was so on point... It was so much deeper than what anyone thought it would be.”

More than the visuals and production value, it was the fact that the film is made by a female director and is largely centred around the theme of female empowerment that struck a chord with her.

This was what led her to post a TikTok video featuring a scene in the movie that she found particularly touching, in which actress America Ferrera’s character, Gloria, delivers an impassioned monologue about the challenges of being a woman, a sentiment that Ms Vidya said she “completely related” to.

This post went viral, and in two days received more than 5 million views and thousands of supportive comments from all over the world.

“In the comments section, there was a whole community that felt the same way, not just women, but men too. Many people wanted to watch this,” Ms Vidya said.

Many other young people, both men and women, whom TODAY spoke to agreed that the movie was a refreshing twist to the usual blockbusters featuring male lead characters and that they would love to see more of such content.

This was the same for 20-year-old university student Rebecca Loh, who dressed up in pink with friends to watch the film.

“Initially, I assumed that the movie was going to be a fun, chill and entertaining film, but it was so much more,” she said. “Barbie literally addresses the issues women face in a society, such as male domination.”

New media experts and sociologists added that the film is unique because it manages to explore the serious topic of feminism while managing to enjoy massive box office success and attract both male and female audiences.

They added that the success of Barbie could pave the way for more mainstream films and content by and about women.

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SUCCESS OF BARBIE COULD INSPIRE MORE MAINSTREAM FEMINIST FILMS: ANALYSTS

Content created by women about issues faced by women is nothing new, and many such works have achieved critical success, but they often struggle to attain mainstream success at the box office, experts noted.

One such example is "Women Talking", a 2022 film directed by Sarah Polley, which features a full female cast except for one man, noted Dr Soh Kai Ruo, a lecturer at the National University of Singapore's Department of Communications and New Media.

The black-and-white film centres around a group of women who belong to an isolated religious colony. The film largely features them having an extended discussion about a spate of sexual assaults that they have been subjected to, and whether they should stay or leave the colony.

The film was "very beautifully shot, has a strong message about female empowerment and agency, but (it is) not mainstream because it's such a tough conversation", Dr Soh said.

"Which I think is why Barbie is a good film to start women talking," she added. "Because 'Women Talking' wouldn't be able to do that... you can tell by looking at the box office figures alone."

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Worldwide, Barbie grossed US\$356.3 million (S\$474 million) worldwide for its opening debut, outpacing other critically acclaimed films that opened the same weekend, such as Oppenheimer (US\$174 million).

Agreeing, film educator Eternality Tan said that audiences here are becoming fatigued from watching the typical superhero blockbuster and want something more refreshing.

“The superhero genre has been showing some strains of audience fatigue post-Covid and franchising isn't as appealing as before,” said Mr Tan, who is also the vice-chair of the Singapore Film Society.

“Audiences want fresh, interesting content or experiences.”

He added that Barbie has an edge over other prominent female-led films simply because of its mass appeal.

“Barbie may be one of the few more prominent examples of 'Women in Film' going sufficiently mainstream, doing much more than, say, Chloe Zhao and Jane Campion winning Best Director Oscars in recent years,” he said.

Dr Soh said that the movie, having broken new ground in captivating a mainstream audience, can now pave the way for similar movies in the future.

“Some may find (Barbie) to be 'shallow' feminism, but it gets the conversation going, whereas films like 'Nomadland' and 'Women Talking' are for a very different audience,” she said.

“I think in the future there will be more films like Barbie, where it's more accessible and led by women.”

WHY HAS BARBIE BEEN SO SUCCESSFUL?

Dr Soh said that other than Barbie's tremendous marketing efforts in the months before the release, what the film was able to do was to tackle common criticisms of the Mattel brand and its iconic doll head on.

“(The film) shows how the conversations have shifted within this generation; how the environment has changed,” she said.

Experts added that the persistence of gender inequality in Singapore society also fuels demand for films like Barbie.

Associate Professor Michael Schaerer from the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at the Singapore Management University said that while in Singapore the gender pay gap has narrowed over time and women's participation in the workforce has gradually increased, there is still “more work to be done”.

“There is still a wage gap, expectations to conform to traditional gender roles, and a lack of representation of women in C-suite positions,” he said.

For instance, in 2022, the World Economic Forum ranked Singapore 49th in the world in terms of gender equality.

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Said Dr Soh: "Inequality still exists and it exists in many forms. Gloria (America Ferrara's character) demonstrated this well verbally in her monologue showing us how 'invisible' inequality still exists in our society and how it's ingrained in us, especially towards working mothers."

In addition to its success in marketing and representation of women's issues, Assoc Prof Schaerer said that there are also other aspects, such as the nostalgic value of the Barbie brand, the intergenerational themes that attract both adults and children, as well as popular actors Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling attracting their own independent fanbases that has also contributed to the film's success.



YOUNG AUDIENCES WANT MORE

Young audiences and fans of the film said that watching Barbie has made them want even more content created by women and about women.

Disk jockey and influencer Jade Rasif, who was among the thousands who dressed up in pink to watch the movie when it was released last week, said that she found herself still thinking about the film even a week after watching it.

The 29-year-old said that having grown up in a household that did not have any male figures, she could not entirely relate to the struggles of having to operate within a patriarchy, but that the film helped her see things through the perspective of other women.

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"I can see how women feel when some of the struggles they face are echoed to them (in the film)," she said.

Men who had watched the film said they also learnt a thing or two.

Moviegoer Noel Wong, 28, said that he was "refreshed" by the film, and found the juxtaposition between "Barbieland" in the film and the real world showed him just how entrenched patriarchal power is.

"One point that was really highlighted was the privilege of men in the real world, and highlighting that is important in how female empowerment works and how effective it has been so far," said Mr Wong, who works in the tech industry.

He also saw the portrayal of Ken's character, played by Ryan Gosling, as pivotal to the film's depiction of female empowerment.

"It's difficult to understand Barbie without Ken, and Ken without Barbie... female empowerment by itself does not have that meaning unless you accord it a context," he said.

Ultimately, Ms Rasif doesn't just want to see more women represented on screen, but also women taking a leading role in these films.

She said that even if women are represented on screen, it may not be women who produce the films, and so increased female representation "doesn't always count as female empowerment".

"Female directors and a female cast — that is empowerment, women telling women stories, instead of just women acting in movies," she said.