



## BARBIE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

### The Success of a Campaign Beyond the Cinema and the Box Office

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#### ABSTRACT

*The success of the premiere of the film Barbie is undeniable in terms of box office and social impact; however, another of the aspects in which the film stands out is its impact in terms of communication and promotion. The aim of this paper is to analyse the impact that the official Barbie account had on social networks during the week of the premiere. To achieve this objective, a quantitative methodology based on the Fanpage Karma social network analysis tools was used. Among the main results, it is worth highlighting that TikTok emerges as the communication and marketing channel that generates the most engagement, to the detriment of Facebook and Twitter (X).*

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## 1. Introduction

Social networks are a fundamental element in marketing and communication strategies for the dissemination of any project (Wuisan and Handra, 2023; Putri and Sanica, 2022). From the point of view of academic literature, studies in this area have focused on six main axes: (1) social media as a means of promotion and sales; (2) social media as a communication and branding channel; (3) social media as a source of monitoring and intelligence; (4) social media as a source of monitoring and intelligence; (5) media as a platform for customer relationship management and value creation; and (6) social media as a strategic and general marketing tool (Li & Larimo 2022). Moreover, among the different demographics, young people are the ones who use these social networks the most (Pertegal-Vega et al., 2019) and where brands invest the most effort when it comes to implementing their strategies (Fernández and González, 2021).

Herein lies the success of the Barbie movie premiere. Billed as Warnes Bros.' biggest box office hit (Barnes, 2023), audiences around the world flocked to cinemas to see Greta Gerwig's highly anticipated Barbie, starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling and produced by Mark Ronson (Brady, 2023). The Barbie effect has had such a social impact that Russian cinemas have circumvented sanctions to show the film (Safronova, 2023). In the case of China, which was expected to be unpopular given the country's idiosyncrasies, the film was also a box office success (Wang and Zhao, 2023). It is clear that the film, in addition to having an elite cast, has generated a lot of buzz for another reason, and that is that the Barbie film contains a number of messages about feminism in society (Gibson et al., 2023).

In addition, the film was as successful at the box office as it was on social media. To put this in context, according to data provided by the platform Onclusive (2023), from 1 to 23 July, the film registered 15 million mentions on social networks (Facebook, Twitter (X) and Instagram), websites and other digital media, compared to 3 million mentions for Oppenheimer, the other major film release of 2023 (Interactive, 2023).

Whether it is the advertising narrative (Magri, 2023), the cast or the management of the offline and online campaign, it is clear that the premiere was a success that crossed all borders.

On this basis, the aim of this paper is to analyse the impact that the official Barbie account had on social networks during the week of the premiere.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Barbie has been the quintessential symbol of Western femininity since the doll was launched in the United States in 1959 (Collins, 2011; Messner, 2000). Phillips (2002) points out that one of the most interesting aspects of Barbie is that, unlike other cultural references (e.g. superheroes), she does not have a source text in which the foundations of her identity are laid. This means that we cannot know where she comes from, what her profession is or what her surname is. This is why, as this author points out, there is no one Barbie (Phillips, 2002), because Barbie changes depending on who plays with her. In other words, she is not pigeonholed into a single name (Barbie), a single relationship (Ken) or a single profession (model, teacher, vet, etc.).

This aspect is important because, as authors such as Messner (2000) and Phillips (2002) point out, Barbie's identity adapts to the context of the people who play with her and the narratives in which they place her. That is, depending on characteristics such as age, class, gender or even sexual orientation, the narratives created about Barbie will change. Not only that, but Barbie is defined by what she looks like, what she wears and what she buys, all of which offers the possibility of reconstructing her appearance, clothes and accessories (Phillips, 2002).

This is reinforced by Mattel's marketing strategy to remain relevant in the market. This consists of a constant renewal and modernisation of the brand and its dolls. Its marketing strategy does not focus on imposing a single idea of what a girl or woman should be, but rather employs hegemonic discursive strategies that attempt to take into account the full range of possible interpretations and critiques of Barbie (Messner, 2000). That is, over the years it has introduced more models with different body types, skin colours, and even occupations or activities that she performs (Aboelenien and Nguyen, 2023; Collins, 2011).

This is what Aboelenien and Nguyen (2023) refer to as a critique overhaul tactic. By diversifying its product range with different and unconventional representations compared to the more stereotypical ones, Mattel is trying to address the criticisms of Barbie and thus further legitimise the brand in a

changing market. However, it is worth noting that despite these variations introduced by Mattel, Barbie's basic identity remains the same: slim, white, blonde and blue-eyed (Collins, 2011; Messner, 2000).

In addition to introducing a greater variety of dolls, Vered and Maizonniaux (2017) point out that since 2003, Mattel has begun to focus on a cross-media strategy to increase sales and, in the process, has achieved this modernisation through storytelling. In this way, Barbie films serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, they are promotional marketing material and, on the other, they provide a narrative context in which to play with the dolls.

This, as Vered and Maizonniaux (2017) point out, was initially done through films released directly on DVD, most of which consisted of remakes of children's stories and classic tales. In this way, the Barbie brand reflects that it is aware of the criticism it has received - and continues to receive - while constructing new narratives of femininity and thus solving the 'problem' of Barbie. It also becomes a way of increasing sales by creating new markets around the films.

Thus, these authors point out that through these films, young girls and women can consume complex gender narratives in which they can find traces of, and sometimes even align themselves with, more recent feminist discourses. However, they also point out that at this early stage of their cross-media strategy, despite acknowledging the existence of feminist discourses, they avoid direct criticism of patriarchy or male privilege.

The film *Barbie* (2023) is the latest media element in Barbie's transmedia universe. Nowadays, activity and interactivity are very much taken into account when it comes to understanding and analysing an audiovisual phenomenon, especially since Henry Jenkins (2003) defined the concept of "transmedia storytelling", according to which a narrative is distributed over several platforms or channels that are independent of each other, or, in other words, it is not necessary to read the book to understand the film and vice versa. A transmedia narrative, as Guerrero-Picó and Scolari (2016) state, has three key elements: 1) it must extend across multiple media, each of which must be able to extend the narrative world; 2) it combines a top-down management (producers) complemented by a bottom-up extension (fans); and finally, 3) the world can be approached from any of the textual narratives that compose it.

But in the same way that the film represents an element of expansion of Barbie's own universe (doll), it has benefited from a transmedia strategy for its promotion. For example, the film's pre-release advertising campaign used a multi-platform approach with interactive and immersive experiences, both offline and online, and alliances with other brands (Zariwala, 2023). An example of this would be the opportunity to spend a night in Barbie's dream house in Malibu (with Airbnb), or the fashion and cosmetics collections developed for Forever 21 and NYX respectively.

### ***2.1. Barbie Beyond the Screens***

There is little doubt that there is fierce competition between films competing for the same audience, which means that effective marketing strategies are critical to the success of any film today. Production is often the most expensive stage of the film production process (Cleve, 2006). However, studios also typically spend millions of dollars marketing each film, with funds going towards market research, locations, promotional materials and public relations (Finsterwalder et al, 2012).

Social media has set a new standard for how companies interact with their customers (Nuseir and Elrefae, 2022; McGrath et al., 2023) and how these companies use social media to grow (Tourani, 2022). Appel et al (2020) argue that social networks are particularly important because they are the primary way in which much of the world's population receives news and information about ideas, opinions and shared aspects of their lives. The film industry has not been oblivious to this reality. Mateer and Haillay (2019) found that since on-demand distribution entered an already saturated market, it has become more difficult for filmmakers to reach their target audiences.

The film industry has not been oblivious to this reality. Mateer and Haillay (2019) found that filmmakers have found it more difficult to reach target audiences since on-demand distribution entered an already saturated market. These social networks and customer relationships were studied by Wong et al., (2022), who concluded that brand satisfaction, brand relationship quality, brand awareness and value awareness are important aspects to work on in other approaches to the film context. In turn, this

relationship has become a key aspect for the viralisation of films (Afifa and Mulyadina, 2022) and the overall success of the film industry (Yu et al, 2023).

Social media, and social media marketing in particular, is seen as essential for building long-term customer relationships (Suharto et al, 2022; Jamil et al, 2022). While major studio filmmakers optimise and leverage all the opportunities offered by social media, including organic and paid word of mouth, as well as purchasing analytics and monitoring data on potential audiences, when developing social media strategies prior to a film's release, Holmene (2018) suggested that independent filmmakers view and use social media as a channel that relies heavily on unpaid word of mouth. In any case, both major and independent filmmakers seem to agree that social media marketing is essential in their efforts to make a film successful.

In this sense, according to the empirical analysis conducted by Castillo et al (2021), there is a positive correlation between personal and interactive participation and film performance, and these positive effects reinforce each other, concluding that consumer participation driven by social networks improves film performance and adds value to companies.

Prior to the rise of TikTok as the undisputed favourite social network among teenagers and also young adults (Haryanto et al., 2022; Stahl and Literat, 2023), another study by Fondevila et al. (2021) found that among Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, which were the most used social networks at the time of their study, YouTube stood out the most in terms of engagement with film related accounts. As our study develops, we will show that TikTok could currently easily displace YouTube from the top of the rankings, using Barbie: The Movie as the focus of our analysis and adding to the existing literature that TikTok is becoming a crucial social network for purchase intentions (Meliawati et al 2023).

3. Methodology

This study is based on a quantitative perspective that shows and, where appropriate, proves the number and nature of interactions on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. In this sense, the objective is to know the real facts as they occur objectively, trying to point out their common characteristics with other similar facts, their origins and their consequences (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012). Therefore, this methodology is essential because it tries to determine the general external characteristics of a population based on the observation of many individual cases (Sierra, 1998).

Specifically, this paper uses the software Fanpage Karma. This is an online tool for monitoring social networks that has been used and validated in numerous research studies for network analysis, such as those of Márquez-Domínguez and López-López (2017), among many others, with the common axis of quantitative analysis (Bustos et al., 2023; Caballero-Escusol et al., 2021).

3.1. Variables Description

To understand the results, each of the variables considered in this study is described as follows:

Table 1. Description of the study variables.	
Common variables on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X)	Variable description
Interaction rate of publications	Average number of interactions on posts per follower per post
Number of publications	Total number of posts, videos, tweets, pins, etc. made in the selected period.
Number of Reactions, Comments and Shares	Total likes, likes, likes, reactions, comments, pins, shares, shares, etc. of all posts in the selected time period
Engagement	Average number of interactions on posts per follower per day

Source: Own elaboration

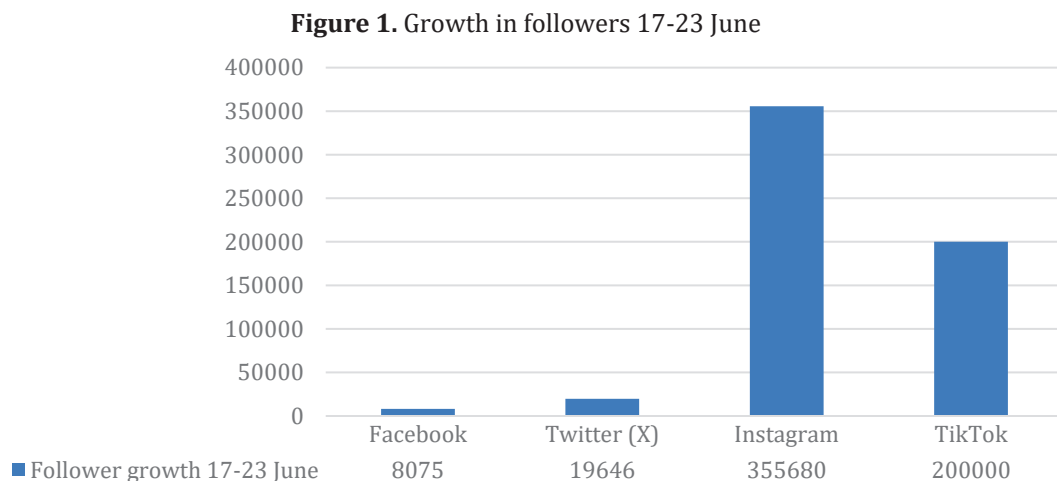
Engagement shows how much a profile encourages users to interact. As all data used is public and interactions are standardised according to the number of followers, this indicator can be used to compare the success of profiles of different sizes and all competitors.

The variables described have been applied to four social networks: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok, as these are currently the social networks with the most users. In addition, the growth data of each of the official Barbie accounts in Spain was collected to see the impact that the premiere of the film had on each of them.

Finally, the sample was collected from 17 June to 23 June, the day of the film's premiere. In this sense, to measure the impact of the pre-release campaign on social networks, we used the week before this date.

## 4. Results

In order to contextualise the impact of Barbie's premiere on the different official profiles on social networks in Spain, Figure 1 below shows the absolute increase in the number of followers for each account:



Source: own elaboration based on data obtained from Fanpage Karma.

As stated in the methodology, the data correspond to the period 17-23 June, i.e. one week before the premiere. In this sense, the social networks that generate the fewest new followers are Facebook and Twitter (X), which is in line with the lack of use of these two social networks, a phenomenon that will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

On the other hand, and as the data show, Instagram is the social network that attracts the most followers, with a total of 355,680 in 7 days. It is clear that this social network has become one of the most popular among Internet users. Finally, and in line with the academic literature, TikTok is the social network that attracts the most interest among regular social network users. As shown in Figure 1, TikTok has 200,000 new followers, an achievement considering that it is the most recently created social network. However, the impact it has on the population, especially the young population, makes this social network a key element in any communication and marketing strategy.

### 4.1. Analysis of Barbie's Impact on Social Media in Spain

Based on this methodology, Table 2 shows the impact of Barbie's premiere on the different official profiles she has in Spain in each of the social networks studied.

**Table 2.** Results obtained on the basis of the study variables

Social network/Variable	Number of publications	Number of Reactions, Comments and Shares	Engagement	Interaction rate of publications
Facebook/Barbie	1	119,567	0.33%	0.33%



Instagram/Barbie	0.9	992,819	4.7%	5.5%
Twitter (X) /Barbie	2.3	40	0.0015%	0.00067%
TikTok/Barbie	0.9	1,280,346	14%	-

Source: own elaboration based on data obtained from Fanpage Karma.

From the various variables analysed for each of the social networks, several factors stand out. Firstly, it is clear that TikTok is positioned as the social network with the greatest projection, confirming that Instagram has become a key social network for the marketing of any brand. In this respect, Table 2 shows that Barbie Spain's official profile on TikTok generates a total of 1,280,346 reactions, comments and shares, placing it ahead of Instagram with 992,819 reactions, comments and shares.

These are also the two social networks that generate the most engagement, 4.7% in the case of Instagram and 14% in the case of TikTok. On the other hand, the brand does not manage to generate much interest on Twitter, where it generates a total of 40 reactions, comments and shares and an engagement of 0.0015%.

In the case of Facebook, there is more interest, with 119,567 reactions, comments and shares and an engagement of 0.33%. However, in relation to Instagram and TikTok, it is positioned as a low impact management.

Finally, the interaction rate of the publications is presented. This is a key element, as it allows us to know the average number of interactions in publications per follower per publication. First of all, we must point out a limitation of the study, which is that the tool used in the methodology does not yet allow us to address this variable in TikTok. However, it does allow us to analyse the rest of the social networks studied. In this respect, the low level of interest generated by Twitter (X) and the high level of interaction on Instagram (5.5%) stand out, especially when compared to Facebook, which is the second network with the highest level of interaction, barely reaching 0.33%.

## 5. Discussions

The data obtained in this work highlights the following points. Firstly, it confirms the importance of social networks for the management of any brand, according to Nuseir and Elrefae (2022) and McGrath et al., (2023), as these channels offer opportunities for outreach and interaction with a wider audience. It also shows the importance of using them as a whole, rather than as separate entities.

The social network Twitter (X) and Facebook are no longer a decisive element in the execution of a campaign. As we have seen in the previous section, they have been relegated to a complementary function that may generate some kind of conversion, but clearly does not add value in terms of interaction with users. However, they cannot be completely dismissed as they contribute to the ubiquity of the message. Although not part of the objectives of this research, the fact that there were more publications on Twitter (X), but with a lower degree of interaction, could be explained by the logic and use of Twitter (X). One explanation could be that this platform is used as an informative rather than promotional component of communication management.

On the other hand, the rise of TikTok is confirmed by the work of Meliawati et al. (2023). This social network is still at an early stage of development, but we can already observe the interest it arouses and generates among users and the added value it offers to any brand in terms of spreading its message. In the case of Barbie's official accounts in Spain, the social network has undoubtedly brought the greatest benefits.

It is also worth noting that there was only one post on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok in the week leading up to the film's release. This may seem surprising when social media is isolated as a promotional element, since, as Josh Goldstein, president of worldwide marketing at Warner Bros, put it in an interview in *The Guardian*, the goal of the promotional campaign is to get everyone to go see the film on opening weekend (Beckett, 2023). It should be noted, however, that these platforms were only part of the marketing strategy that began at CinemaCon in 2022, as Goldstein points out in another interview (Rubin, 2023).

### **5.1. Limitations and Future Research Paths**

This work is not free from the limitations inherent in the scope of the study itself and the methodology chosen. For example, the interest was to observe the impact of the film's premiere on Barbie's official profiles on social networks, so the phenomenon of user-generated content was not taken into account. Therefore, future research can analyse the fan phenomenon behind the promotion strategy of this film and see how it has affected Barbie's profiles, the conversations around her and also the brand's reputation.

In the same way, the study focused on the week before the release of the film and especially on social networks. Although this allowed us to focus on this period and provide a snapshot of the moment, it may have obscured data of interest, such as the evolution of these profiles since the start of the campaign or the impact of the film after its release. Therefore, future research could conduct a longitudinal study of the role of social networks during the period of the advertising campaign. In this way, it could also be observed whether certain actions carried out in other channels can have an impact on social networks.

Finally, the study focused on the impact on publications, but did not take into account the type of content published. In the previous section it was noted that some of the explanations for the results could be due to the type of publication. Therefore, it would be interesting to study what was published on each platform in order to get a more complete picture of the use and impact of different events on social media profiles.

## **6. Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to analyse the impact of the official Barbie account on social networks during the week of the premiere on the main social networks. As mentioned in the previous section, social networks play a key role in any campaign, but it can be said that we are witnessing the end of the use of Facebook and Twitter (X). At the same time, Instagram is reasserting itself as a key social network in any strategy, while TikTok is becoming the main social network when it comes to carrying out any marketing strategy.

For future work, it would be interesting to contrast this phenomenon with other brands to confirm the decline in the use of social networks at the beginning of the 21st century, as opposed to the new social networks.

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