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Character over Consistency: Telling Tales of Marketing's "She-Monsters"

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Character over Consistency:Telling Tales of Marketing's "She-Monsters"

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Abstract

Conventional brand management wisdom suggests that successful brands should resolve rather than embody contradictions. Yet some brands thrive precisely because they disturb and attract simultaneously. With the aid of mythographer Marina Warner's "she-monster" concept and Will Storr's insights on character-driven storytelling, we examine how Mattel's Barbie doll maintains and sustains the brand's hold over consumers by embracing rather than eradicating its contradictions. Via a three-phase empirical study of Barbie consumption, our analysis reveals three consumer responses to such brands: *scaring* (leveraging brand monstrosity to unsettle and titillate), *mocking* (defusing the brand's monstrous elements through humour) and *lulling* (finding comfort in the ostensibly disturbing). This framework challenges the field's emphasis on brand consistency, suggesting instead that cultural resonance may emerge from carefully cultivated contradictions. By examining how Barbie excels despite its consistent inconsistencies and disturbing backstory, we offer fresh understandings of brands that undermine conventional wisdom. Rather than attempt to resolve brand contradictions, myth-minded managers could productively embrace their brands' capacity to attract and repel simultaneously.

Key Words: Barbie; Mattel; Myth, Monster Theory, Storytelling; Branding, Character

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The bad girl is the heroine of our times, and transgression a staple entertainment.

—Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters*, p.11

In brand storytelling, traditional wisdom has long emphasized plot structures and narrative consistency (Escalas 2004; Rodriguez 2020). This focus on predetermined story arcs has resulted in what Storr (2019, 5) terms "…Mars Bar stories, delicious and moreish but ultimately cold, corporate and cooked up by committee". As brands navigate increasingly complex cultural landscapes, this plot-centric approach seems inadequate for capturing the nuanced, often contradictory relationships consumers form with brands. Moreover, this focus on structured narratives overlooks the complex, often contested nature of brand storytelling, where elements of "suspense, surprise, struggle, and strife" are crucial for maintaining consumer interest and engagement (Brown and Patterson 2010, 554).

Building on this insight and integrating Storr's (2019) emphasis on character-driven storytelling, we argue that a more effective approach lies in viewing brands as complex, evolving characters. Contra conventional conceptualisations of branding, where cohesion and coherence are considered crucial, we contend that contradiction and character are key. Building on marketing's mythopoeic tradition (Levy 1959; Stern 1995; Thompson 2004; Thompson, Arnould and Veresiu 2023), coupled with Storr's story science-sourced insights, we offer an alternative to Keller's (2021, 536) emphasis on "integration", "reconciliation" and, not least, the "orchestration" that is necessary to "harmoniously combine multiple marketing tactics or instruments to appeal to an increasingly heterogeneous audience". Steeped in Stephen King's (1981), 'myth pool' of monstrosity, this article argues otherwise.[1]

Our alternative, we believe, has implications for researchers' understanding of brand longevity (Parmentier and Fischer 2015), brand iconicity (Holt 2004), brand gestalt (Diamond et al. 2009), brand storytelling (Rodriguez 2023), marketplace monstrosities (McNally 2012; Slater 2011) and, more specifically, Mattel's beautiful yet beastly Barbie doll (Knudsen and Andersen 2024; McGrath, Sherry and Diamond 2013). If branding is mythopoetic, as many maintain (Campbell et al 2014; Sherry 2005; Thompson, Arnould and Veresiu 2023), a plunge into the netherworld, where evil yet alluring monsters dwell, may well prove insightful (Dell 2016).

Our branding bathyscaphe is Storr's (2019) critique of formulaic, plot-driven narratives. In *The Science of Storytelling*, the former ghostwriter articulates a character-first approach, arguing that "it's people, not events, that we're naturally interested in" (p.6). This perspective fundamentally shifts how we conceptualize brand narratives: from carefully plotted journeys to evolving stories of complex, flawed characters. Warner's (1994) concept of the 'she-monster' – a feminine figure embodying both allure and menace – aligns with this approach and provides a mythopoeic means of considering long-standing brands (Levy 1959; Stern 1995; Thompson 2004). This synthesis of Storr's and Warner's ideas offers a theoretical foundation for understanding brands not as static entities with fixed narratives, but as fluid, multifaceted characters capable of both captivating and repelling consumers. By combining these contrasting conceptual approaches, we respond to Pauwels et al's (2024, 590) recent call for research that "scholarship perhaps neglected in the past…[and can]…refresh readers' inspiration". We do so by exploring the tension between a brand's attractive and monstrous qualities, revealing how such seemingly oppositional forces can fuel enduring consumer fascination and cultural relevance.

Barbie, Mattel's iconic doll brand, embodies this character-driven, 'she-monster' approach to storytelling. For decades, the doll has been celebrated and demonized, her

narrative oscillating between empowerment and objectification. Variously described as a "vampiric gorgon" (Lord 1994, 208), a "femme fatale" (Peers 2004, 139), and an "ice queen...bitch goddess" (Lobel 2018, 54), Barbie's conflicting qualities and seemingly paradoxical attributes have become central to her appeal rather than problems to be solved. This complex character has experienced dramatic ups and downs (McGrath, Sherry, and Diamond 2013), from near-extinction a decade ago (Jamison 2023) to a phoenix-like resurgence with Greta Gerwig's critically acclaimed and commercially successful biopic (Moshakis 2023). The film's success, along with a flood of ancillary products (Dockterman and Lang 2023), has not only revitalised the brand but elevated Barbie to cultural icon status (Holt 2004), even earning a shortlisting for TIME's 'person of the year' (Southern 2023). This remarkable transformation raises intriguing questions: How does a brand like Barbie, with its contentious history and multifaceted persona, survive the slings and arrows of consumer antipathy and societal disapproval? More broadly, how can we understand the enduring appeal of brands that defy simple categorisation and consistently positive narratives?

Barbie's enduring appeal, we posit, lies not in a coherent, positive brand narrative, but in her capacity to conjoin complex consumer cravings and cultural contradictions. This approach allows us to move beyond conventional notions of brand consistency and explore the rich, often conflicting, narratives that consumers weave around iconic brands. In order to explore this phenomenon, we employ an exploratory, multi-method qualitative approach, combining immersive brand research, consumer introspections, and in-depth interviews. Through this methodology, we develop the 'she-monster'[2] construct and unpack its manifestation through three key archetypes: *scaring* (leveraging a brand's monstrous facets to titillate and thrill); *mocking* (using humour to defuse problematic and monstrous elements); and *lulling* (invoking a brand's capacity to comfort and captivate despite its dark side). These

archetypes align with Storr's (2019) emphasis on character complexity, allowing us to examine how Barbie's contradictory traits fuel consumer engagement. We further illuminate how these archetypes dynamically intertwine to regenerate the Barbie brand across evolving cultural contexts and successive generations of consumers.

Our research, in short, makes three key contributions. First, we introduce a novel conceptualisation that combines Storr's (2019) character-driven storytelling approach with Warner's (1994) she-monster construct. Second, by applying this framework to the Barbie brand, we highlight how a brand's monstrous facets and character flaws can fuel consumer fascination and cultural resonance, rather than detracting from its appeal. Finally, we chart new directions for branding research more broadly by exploring the generative tensions within brand characters, demonstrating how embracing contradictions and complexities can enhance brand storytelling and consumer engagement.

Such an approach complements prior research on 'sleeping beauty' brands (Dion and Mazzalovo 2017), aligns with Cayla and Arnould's (2013) insights on ethnographic storytelling in market learning, proffers a new twist on Belk and Sobh's (2019) tripartite taxonomy of theory-building approaches, and contends that although contradictions can be a consequence of outdated dualistic thinking (Cannifold and Shankar 2016), they can also provide plastic fantastic 'purification' for profit-making purposes. By importing she-monster theory from feminist literary criticism and applying it through the lens of character-driven storytelling, we contribute a different, darker voice to the cultural branding conversation.

Barbie's Backstories

"Stories", according to a leading literary critic, "are driving our species mad" (Gottschall 2021, 8). If that is the case, then marketing executives and educators are increasingly unhinged. Because 'storytelling' is one of the biggest buzzwords in business (Mills and Key

2023; *The Economist* 2020). Marketing-instigated storytelling has soared in recent years (Cayla and Arnould 2013; Mills 2023), bridging practitioner predilections and professorial preoccupations (Hamby and Escalas 2024). For Storr (2019), this lift-off is due to stories' ability to make sense of our world, to transform chaos into meaningful narrative, what Gottschall (2021, 56) calls their "almost irresistible power".

Whatever the causes, few brands are more storied than Barbie (Shapiro 2023), albeit James Bond comes close (Preece, Kerrigan and O'Reilly 2019). According to Mattel's official brand narrative, Barbara Millicent Roberts – the eldest child of George and Margaret – was born, fully-grown, on March 9, 1959 in the small, all-American town of Willows, Wisconsin. Before long, she was joined by sisters Skipper, Stacy and Kelly, as well as an entourage of companion animals including Fluffy the cat, Honey the pony, Tahiti the parrot, and a hapless human lapdog, Kenneth Sean Carson (aka Ken).

This rich tapestry of Barbie narratives exemplifies what Storr (2019) describes as the power of character-driven storytelling. By creating a detailed backstory, Mattel tapped into this fundamental human interest, allowing consumers to engage with Barbie as a complex, evolving, larger-than-life character rather than just a product. This complexity aligns with Storr's (2019, 58) emphasis on the importance of flawed, three-dimensional characters in storytelling, noting that "well-told stories are explorations of the human condition; thrilling voyages into foreign minds". Barbie's contradictions and complexities allow consumers to explore different aspects of the iconic brand's gestalt. These contradictions are evident in six intertwined strands of Barbie's genealogy. Firstly, stories *about* the doll that form part of its complex system of brand meanings (Diamond et al. 2009), most notably Ruth Handler's origin myth, where she stumbled upon a risqué figurine during a family trip to Switzerland in 1956 (Gerber 2009). Enchanted, Handler developed a suitably bowdlerized version of Bild

Lilli for the puritanical American market and, despite the struggles, rejections and defeats that assailed her adult doll, Ruth triumphed in the fullness of time (Shapiro 2023).

Secondly, there are telling tales that *abet* the Barbie brand. Generated for the most part by parent company Mattel, these comprise the novels, the magazines, the videos, the stage shows, the computer games, the television commercials, the 'think pink' packaging and display materials, not to mention the PR copy that accompanies every iteration of the figurine as flight attendant, figure skater, fashion designer and so forth (Stone 2010). All of these are encapsulated in the overarching, story-inciting tagline, 'you can do anything'. Not least making blockbuster movies that bring brands back from the dead.

Thirdly, there are stories that *abut* the brand; stories generated by consumers, owners, users, proud possessors of the icon. The product was specifically designed to get girls talking, playing, inventing their own stories involving the doll, and her companions, and their countless, continually replenished accoutrements (Rogers 1999). To this end, Mattel employed Ernest Dichter, notorious market researcher of *Hidden Persuaders* infamy (Tadajewski 2010), who demanded that the doll be given a backstory as a yarn-stimulating springboard (Rand 1995).

It's a catapult, fourthly, that has compelled creative artists to *abduct* the brand and bend it into shapes that tell very different stories from the officially approved narratives. These include the Danish pop group Aqua, whose chart-topping single 'Barbie Girl' fell foul of Mattel's IP department (Hunter and Lastowka 2019); Suzanne Pitt, an installation artist whose dominatrix-themed artwork, *Dungeon Barbie* created waves with its carnal contortions; and Paul Hansen, who did something similar with *Trailer Trash Barbie*, *Drag Queen Barbie*, *Big Dyke Barbie*, all suitably accessorized.

Fifth, and frightening in their frequency, there are abundant *abominable* stories about Barbie. The doll is an abhorrent object for many, one that has done untold damage to four

going on five generations of young women. Apart from the part the figurine's purportedly played in women's sexual and aesthetic objectification, the brand has been dogged by scuttlebutt about its alleged contribution to the rise of anorexia, bulimia and self-harm behaviours among anxiety-prone adolescents (Oppenheimer 2009).

Despite this, Mattel's monstrous yet attractive doll remains beloved by millions of children and movie-goers (Dockterman and Lang 2023). Much to critics' chagrin (Vine 2023; Walter 2023), the icon hasn't been 'deep-sixed' by continuing consumer concerns. On the contrary, it has been *absolved* thanks to a stupendous feat of cinematic storytelling. By acknowledging and featuring many of the brand's innumerable missteps, including Video Girl Barbie, Sugar Daddy Ken, and Tanner the Dog, whose accessories included plastic poop, plus pooper-scooper, Greta Gerwig's brilliantly successful movie has given the old brand a new lease of life (Beckett 2023).

Or has it? This article seeks to find out by means of an empirical study of women and their often happy yet horrifying recollections of the marvellous marketplace monstrosity that is Ms. Barbara Millicent Roberts.

Conceptual Foundations

"When people see the word monster", Nina Allan (2020, 193) observes in her neo-Gothic novel *The Dollmaker*, "they want to know more". And, in a world that "teems with monsters" (Warner 1998, 17), there's no lack of knowledge. The Ashgate teratological encyclopaedia lists more than 200 categories of monsters, from Angels to Zombies (Weinstock 2014), which fulfil, if fail to prove, Derrida's (1992, 385) prediction that "the future is necessarily monstrous". This proliferation of monstrous forms in cultural discourse provides a rich

context for examining enduring icons like Barbie, whose complex cultural position often straddles the line between the familiar and the frightening.

Complementing this profusion of prodigious creatures is the efflorescence of Monster Theory, which is less a cohesive concept than a congeries of ideas and imputations (Weinstock 2020). Applied to marketing by McNally (2011) and Slater (2011) among others it's a constellation of pre-existing principles drawn from the 'great white male' tradition. These include Jung's archetypes, Todorov's fantastic, Derrida's hauntology and Marx's mouldering spectres. Barbie, as a cultural phenomenon, embodies several monstrous qualities: her idealized form evokes Freud's uncanny (itself predicated on the story of a living doll); her multiplicity of roles reflects aspects of Bakhtin's carnivalesque (grotesquerie included, as Rand (1995) shows); and her status as a mass-produced icon resonates with Baudrillard's concept of simulacra in consumer culture.

Embracing the beast in this manner is a conceptual counterpart, arguably, to scholars' increasing interest in extreme consumer experiences (Cova 2021), such as mud running, base jumping and free climbing (Cowart 2023). We live in a frightening world and our work reflects that fact. So much so, some scholars harbour para-apocalyptic thoughts about things to come (Ahlberg, Coffin and Hietanen 2022; Coffin 2022). At the same time, it is necessary to note that "we are dealing both with a material and metaphysical experience, with mystery, with that which by its very nature cannot be explained but can only be described" (Salomon 2002, 2).

The tension between the ineffable nature of monstrosity and attempts to theorize it echoes Storr's (2019) observations on character complexity in storytelling, where compelling figures maintain a recognizable core while harbouring darker, uncontrollable elements. This complexity reinforces DiBattista's (2010, 109) analysis of literary characters as "a somewhat unsightly agglomeration of disparate and ill-assorted parts", resonates with monster theory,

evoking Frankenstein-like assemblages that repel through their violation of natural order, yet compel our attention because they disturb, disrupt and unsettle. Not unlike Barbie.

While these theoretical frameworks offer valuable insights, particularly pertinent to our analysis is the contribution of monster-minded women. As Warner (1995, xi) notes about beast-versus-beauty fairy tales – Bluebeard, Rumpelstiltskin, Little Red Riding Hood, etc. – female characters tend to be victimized in such narratives, even though the telling of grisly tales 'makes women thrive'. She further avers that many of the most famous fairy stories were written by women, most notably Marie-Catherine, Baronne d'Aulony, and Henriette-Juliet de Castelnau, whose pioneering endeavours were appropriated and popularized by the Perraults, Grimms and Andersens of this world (Warner 2018).

And although it is true that women are routinely portrayed as monsters by male writers, be it heinous hybrid Harpies, barbiturates-addicted Stepford Wives or giantesses akin to Shelob, Tolkien's supersized spider, women are and always have been leading lights of the teratological tradition (Kröger and Anderson 2019). From 'Mad Madge' Cavendish (*Blazing World*) and Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*) to multiple award-winner Margaret Atwood (*Robber Bride*), monstrosities are their metier. There is a natural affinity between monsters and women, Williams (1984) contends, because they occupy similar positions within patriarchal structures of seeing. As Carol Clover's (1992) female avenger archetype, Cynthia Freeland's (2000) feminist cognitive framework and Barbara Creed's (1993) monstrous-feminine conception attest, many women are ready, willing and able to embrace this role.

That said, the most pertinent perspective for present purposes is Marina Warner's (1994, 1998) feminist, myth-informed focus on monsters in general and 'she-monsters' in particular. Drawing upon a deep well of fairy stories – as well as manifold Greek myths involving gorgons, hydra, sirens and so on – the mythographer doesn't just identify plentiful prodigies that predated the 'she-monster' B-movies of the 1950s (Jancovich 1996) but

considers consumers' reactions to them. The inventory ranges from Medea to Morgan le Fay, from Carmilla to Cruella de Vil, from *Sweetpea* to *The Substance*. And while Warner offers no categorical definition, our construal of a she-monster is of a feminine cultural figure who embodies an alluring yet alarming duality of desirability and danger. She-monsters encompass female icons, myths, and archetypes that have captivated the mainstream imagination, despite also unsettling societal norms and conventions due to their provocative nature. Crucially, Warner's analysis exposes how such 'monstrosity' often says more about masculine fears than feminine nature. Almost thirty years on from Warner's conceptualization, the list of appealingly appalling 'she-devils' (Weldon 1983) continues to lengthen: Heather Chandler, Cordelia Chase, Cersi Lannister, Shiv Roy, Villanelle and Furiosa. As Bogutskaya (2023) argues, these 'unlikeable female characters' captivate precisely because they reject the performative palatability demanded by patriarchal culture.

Monster Methods

Marina Warner is more than an erudite spokesperson for an unsung tradition. She offers an actionable interpretation of humankind's responses to monstrosity. That is, to the ways in which heinous creatures are overcome. Starting with the age-old question, 'why do we like to be scared by ghost stories and horror films?' the British mythographer builds upon Georges Dumézil's 'trifunctionalist framework' (Warner 1998). Almost unknown outside France, Dumézil was a polyglot philologist who identified commonalities across a huge corpus of Indo-European myths and dismissed, as amateurish, the myth-derived (and derivative) theories of Freud, Jung and their psychoanalytical descendants (Miller 2004). Summarized in *The Destiny of a King* (Dumézil 1973), these commonalities ranged "from triads of divinities

to triads of social classes to triads of diseases" and, not least, "the three sins of the warrior", which lead inexorably to heroes' ruination (Littleton 1999, 563). Warner, conversely, is concerned with 'the three charms of womankind', as it were, the ways in which terrifying threats are thwarted. These reactions, in keeping with the mythopoeic 'rule of three' (Ripley 2023) comprise *scaring*, *mocking* and *lulling*.[3] Taken together, they offer an understanding of "the stratagems we invent to allay the monsters we conjure up" (Warner 1998, cover copy).

But how do such stratagems translate to the 'real world' or, for that matter, the hyperreal world of BarbieLand? The present research study, in accordance with triune tradition, can be encapsulated in the three interpenetrating As of *Absorb*, *Acquire* and *Assess*. The first involved immersion in Barbie culture, and comprised everything from retail store visits (to see the brand's celebrated 'pink wall' displays); examining Barbie-inspired artworks (including short stories and spoofs such as Ozempic Barbie), watching a selection of computer-generated imagery (CGI) Barbie movies (including fan favourites *Princess and the Pauper* and *A Mermaid Tale*); and, not least, reading pertinent, previously published research (approximately 300,000 books and articles are extant, according to Google Scholar). On top of that, we undertook tours of toy museums (in London, Nuremberg, Edinburgh and Sudbury) to deepen our understanding of dolls' long history, as well as a big Barbie exhibition in London's Design Museum (Table 1).

[Insert Table 1: Data Collection Overview]

Having absorbed Barbie's backstory as best we could – and running alongside it as the study progressed – our research team turned to *acquiring* empirical information about the brand. This came in two forms: introspections and interviews. All told, 187 introspections were gathered in three phases: one two years before the release of Gerwig's PG-13 movie

(n.103); a second when *Barbie* was on most people's radar but prior to its premiere (n.28); and a third six months afterwards, when the 'think pink' trend waned somewhat (n.56). These comprised written accounts of informants' beliefs about, feelings for and memories of the brand. First-year undergraduate students for the most part, two-thirds of whom self-identified, per Peñaloza et al. (2023), as cis-women, their accounts averaged 900 words, which equates to approximately 740 pages of double-spaced transcript.

Above and beyond the introspections – and in order to expand the scope of our study – we conducted online, face-to-face interviews with 34 female informants of rich and varied ages, races and nationalities (from Irish to Indian, Malaysian to Mexican), and whose experiences of and attitudes towards Mattel's icon were equally rich and varied. Undertaken immediately before during and after *Barbie*'s six-week run in movie theatres, the interviews lasted one hour on average and, taken together, comprise 1,558 double-spaced pages of transcript (Table 2).

[Insert Table 2: Interview Participants]

Assembling a wide-ranging dataset is one thing, *assessing* it is something else again. In keeping with interpretive research tradition, the entire dataset was shared, studied, sifted, strained and synthesised by all three members of the research team and shaped for present purposes. Our data, to be clear, were analysed with Warner's triform, terror-tackling tactics to the fore. Complementing this mythographic approach, we also drew on Storr's (2019) work concerning character-driven storytelling. His emphasis on the primacy of character over plot in narrative engagement provided an additional theoretical lens, suggesting that our analysis should focus not on Mattel's allegedly monstrous management practices, nor the societal

opprobrium poured on the doll in the court of public opinion, but on how consumers relate to the doll as a complex, evolving character.

Such an approach, predicated on pre-existing constructs, may be anathema to some interpretive researchers, those who cleave to the bottom-up belief that meaningful themes rise from the depths like Godzilla. But as Stern (1998) showed in an early analysis of classic interpretive articles – The Odyssey, River Magic, New Bikers, etc. – two contrasting approaches are typically employed by scholars, *emergent* (bottom-up) and *enabled* (top-down). The latter was central to Stern's own literary theory-led analyses, and is not only evident nowadays in studies informed by, for example, ANT or Assemblage Theory (Canniford & Bajde 2013; Dolbec, Fischer & Canniford 2021), but is employed in more than 60% of all interpretive articles (Lucarelli et al, 2024), as well as the present case.

There is, however, a key difference between our own approach and conventional interpretive practice, be it *emergent*, *enabled* or indeed '*enfolded*', as Belk and Sobh (2019) explain. Whereas most school-of-CCT studies seem to rely on 20-30 depth interviews, we are working with a 'sample' of 187 informant introspections, plus 34 personal interviews. And in order to reflect the rich *range* of consumer responses, as well as their *depth*, we find that shorter excerpts, and more of them, better reflect informants' feelings about Mattel's fascinating figurine. The results, we believe, represent an *enrichment* of prior conceptualisations and, we further believe, offer insights that are not inferior to those derived from the *embryonic* originality recommended by Belk and Sobh (2019). As retrobrands bear witness, combining old and new can prove popular and profitable (Brown 2018; Ostberg and Hartmann 2025).

The ultimate aim of our research programme was to contribute the fourth A – *Advance* – of marketing scholarship.

Frightening Findings

"You would not think a doll so small and weighing so little could scream so hard and that her fingernails…could inflict so much damage". So says Joyce Carol Oates (2016, 21) in her frightening short story about Barbie, where the protagonist contemplates "chopping her into pieces" for her defiance. But what defences *do* consumers employ against the fearsome figurine? According to Warner (1998), writing with childhood and memories of childhood in mind, there are three tactics that protect those who stray into fairy story territory: *scaring*, *lulling* and *mocking*. Scaring diminishes terror through pleasure, by telling spooky stories about beastly creatures that both disturb and delight; mocking goes further insofar as it uses comedy defensively, a device that defeats dread by laughing in the face of fear. Lulling, meanwhile, placates by emphasizing the positive, providing reassurance, promising that we'll all live happily ever after.

Such defensive manoeuvres align with Storr's (2019) analysis of how we process phenomena that both threaten and fascinate. Our relationship with such entities, he suggests, isn't merely defensive but generative – we actively construct meaning from that which simultaneously attracts and repels. The tripartite sections and subsections to follow show how these complex engagements manifest through Warner's (1998) triad of tactics – *scaring*, *mocking* and *lulling* – that reveal how Barbie maintains her paradoxical power through each mode of consumer response (see Web Appendix 1 for more examples of each category).

Scaring

When the genealogy of Barbie is considered, it's hard not to be scared by the brand's disturbing history (Oppenheimer 2009). Mattel's marketing misdemeanours, all of which were aired at length during its courtroom confrontations with MGA, are frightening in their

flagrancy (Lepore 2018). Long before the legal dispute with Bratz dolls' defendants, however, the hard-driving co-founder of the firm, self-proclaimed 'marketing genius' Ruth Handler (Gerber 2009, 104), was convicted for "padding the books, falsifying financial statements and profiting from the sale of her own overvalued stock" (Lobel 2018, 71). On top of that, she claimed the doll was her idea, and hers alone, even though the figurine was filched in the first place (Lord 1994). Handler's angelic appearance at the end of Gerwig's *Barbie* is the fictive Dr Jekyll to the real-world Sister Hyde.

Storr (2019) identifies how certain identity-forming beliefs appear virtuous to their holder while potentially harming others – what he terms the 'sacred flaw'. Handler's unshakeable conviction in her marketing genius and her righteous claim to the doll exemplifies such self-deception, a flaw that precipitated her downfall yet paradoxically ensured Barbie's success. The brand inherits this complex legacy, becoming what Storr describes as a character whose flaws prove inseparable from their achievements. Such corporate transgressions form part of Barbie's frightening institutional history, yet they are kept hidden from view.

Although none of Mattel's marketplace malpractices are familiar to, or recounted by, informants, more than a few draw attention to the abundant abominations associated with the doll itself. Isadora mentions, for instance, Teen Talk Barbie, the infamous doll who was programmed to say 4 from a possible 270 phrases, particularly infuriated educators in the early nineties when they learnt that some dolls would spout 'math class is tough' (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2008). The body-shaming bathroom scales of Slumber Party Barbie are weighed in the balance and found wanting by Juna. The uproar that accompanied little sister Midge's teenage pregnancy is recounted, more in sorrow than censure, by Sofia. And the long catalogue of psychological damage done to young women – and, moreover, young men – by the infamous figurine features in numerous informants' accounts. Maddie's is typical:

> Growing up, Barbie was idolized, not only as a toy but as a woman. Somehow, despite being a plastic fictional toy, the doll managed to have an impact on societal beauty standards for both boys and girls, creating an idea for girls of what they so badly wanted to look and be like, and expectations for boys on what their desired girl should look like…What began harmless then became rather concerning for such impressionable young girls and boys as this idolization and admiration of Barbie and what she represented arguably consumed a generation.

Three things are noteworthy, though. First and foremost, doll owners are no angels. They aren't just unsettled *by* Barbie, they do unsettling things *to* Barbie. Beheading, for instance, is an everyday occurrence, reported by several informants. It's an abomination, admittedly, that's primarily perpetrated for playtime convenience, since it's easier to remove and replace the outfits of headless dolls, Claudia says. But for girls of a sensitive disposition, it is unsettling all the same:

> One of my friends used to, like, chop their heads off. That was traumatic for me. I remember going to her house and she was like, oh, shall we cut our Barbies? And I was like, nooo…And when my mom picked me up, I was like, 'Can you believe this girl…some of her Barbies don't have heads!' (Gabriela)

Doll decapitation is all very well, if disconcerting for some. But it's only one of many mutilations inflicted on Mattel's 'she-monster'. Other disfigurations include scarring, scorching, scourging, stabbing and being buried alive in the backyard. Her tresses too are treated with relentless disrespect by self-taught hairstylists like interviewee Ira. Makeovers range from barbaric buzz cuts and disastrous dye-jobs to Abigail's abortive attempt to straighten the doll's coiffure with a styling iron, which not only melted Barbie's crowning glory but ruined the straighteners as well.

Sadistic sisters, jealous friends and vengeful relatives are also ever ready to ruin the doll's day with random acts of recreational torture. Battered Barbie, Burns-victim Barbie and Broken-limbed Barbie may not be placed beside Ballerina Barbie, Babysitter Barbie, and

Business Executive Barbie on supermarket shelves. But badly-bitten-by-demonic-companion-animal Barbie is a fixture of numerous playrooms, Lucy's included: "I remember my dog used to eat the top of our dolls' heads off…which could be traumatic as a child to see your Barbie without any head…or arm or leg". Tianna's grandparents' terrier likewise lived up to its lineage one particularly despicable day:

> I still remember the pain I encountered one fatal Christmas when I was at my granny and granda's for dinner, got my new Barbie mermaid on the go but she soon caught the attention of their Jack Russell, Patch. I'm sure you can imagine what happened next, Mermaid Barbie became Patch's new chew toy…That tragedy may have been the beginning of my OCD tendencies.

Such acts of playtime depravity could of course be construed as cosmic payback, plastic karma, richly deserved acts of restorative retribution. The doll, after all, hasn't just been deemed a bad influence on preteen behaviour, the baleful presence that has blighted the lives, body images and mental wellbeing of many young women, but egregiously and repeatedly reinforcing racist, ableist and heteronormative stereotypes (Rand 1995). These too haven't gone unnoticed by informants, not least Eileen:

> The Barbie brand is heavily criticized due to its lack of diversity and due to the fact that consumers' perception of the brand is that there is only 'one real Barbie' – white skin tone, long blonde locks, model height, blue eyes. This can lead children to believe that if they are dissimilar, they are inferior. But this is not right!

A second point worth noting is that this reparational/revengeful interpretation is belied by informants' imaginative endeavours. Many of the stories concocted during pre-teen playtime are hazardous at best and horrifying at worst. Tall tales of doll brawls, abductions, squabbles, domestic violence, and perilous journeys are par for the course. None more so than Olivia's imaginative, if catastrophic, car crash which killed everyone in the vehicle, Barbie and Ken among them. Interviewee Ellie's dolls also suffered considerable four-

wheeled trauma in the head-on collisions she contrived. They were no big deal, though, an everyday occurrence:

> *Interviewer*: So, did Barbie have like many dramas in your play?
>
> *Aisling*: Yes, she did. She had lots of that kind of thing. She had injuries, you know. Once she became paralyzed in a car accident…or somebody died or something. It was that kind of thing. I really enjoyed it.

Even I-take-thee-Ken wedding ceremonies can be interrupted by jilted lovers, jealous friends, and sudden shocking appearances by rivals for the bride's affections, such as Buzz Lightyear from the *Toy Story* franchise. To matrimony and beyond!

Third, while such incidents can be construed as harmless entertainment, some informants shared rather more unsettling stories. Consider the all-consuming doll-care activities of interviewee Parvati, who not only changed the outfits of her 100-strong collection every single day but also gave each doll a number (inscribed on the soles of their feet), for fear that her affluent family's servants are stealing their owner's figurines. A fair few, furthermore, refuse to let other children touch, let alone play with, their pristine collections, despite being encouraged to do so by adults.

And then there's the cadre of consumers, including introspectees, Callie and Morgan, who scare *themselves* when recollecting their insatiable Barbie obsession, which placed a considerable financial burden on their parents, burdens they rue in retrospect. Whether the same can be said for Ailbhe's pediophobia, which is 'treated' en famille with kill-or-cure shock-tactics, is another matter entirely:

> Throughout my childhood, my family used my fear of dolls for their own entertainment. There was nothing they loved more than using Barbie dolls to scare me on a daily basis. Most of it was sending me memes about dolls or putting on one of the famous Barbie movies and not letting me out of the room while it played…One

> day I came home to an empty house. I opened the front door and, on the stairs, sat a Barbie doll, holding a knife…

As if that weren't enough, Ailbhe found further dolls in her bedroom, one of which was hiding in the wardrobe. Scaring doesn't begin to describe it. Petrifying is closer. *Pace* Goya, the Dreamhouse of Barbie breeds monsters.

Mocking

Widely regarded as an abominable brand by feminists, educators and dieticians alike, Barbie has never lacked belittlers. It is often through humour, however, that consumers hope to defuse both the brand's problematic and monstrous elements. Whether it be Dave Barry's irreverent description of her "eyeballs the size of beer coasters" (Rogers 1999, 24) or the brand hijacking escapade by the so-called Barbie Liberation Front (Lord 1994), which involved swapping the fashionista's voice-box recordings ('Let's go shopping', etc.) with those of GI Joe ('Eat lead, Cobra!' et al.), the figurine has provided hours of innocent fun for pranksters, pun mongers, and parody portrait painters (e.g. *Barbie de Milo*, *The Barbie Lisa*, *Barbie Descending a Staircase*), as well as satirical installation artists with a point to prove (Sweatshop Barbie [objecting to Barbie dolls being manufactured in factories in China, Thailand, and Indonesia Suicide Bomber Barbie). These subversive reimaginings demonstrate what Storr (2019) identifies as our profound need to remake threatening cultural phenomena in our own image. When consumers mock Barbie, they're engaging in what he terms 'model-defending behaviour'; actively reshaping a challenging cultural icon to assert control over its meaning. Yet paradoxically, such mockery often strengthens rather than diminishes Barbie's cultural power, making her more rather than less compelling through each irreverent iteration. A quick online search uncovers numerous satirical stories, such as

the mythical Divorce Barbie, which introspectee Connie adapts for her own narrative:

> My dad asked why the divorced Barbie Doll is $250 and the others are only $20. The sales assistant rolled her eyes…and stated that the divorced Barbie comes with Ken's car, Ken's house, Ken's boat, Ken's furniture, Ken's computer, one of Ken's friends, and Ken's bank card. Unfortunately, I had to settle for a Ballerina Barbie.

Greta Gerwig's film adaptation represents the most sophisticated and sustained form of mockery, with its final line serving as a particularly impactful example. That said, scoffing goes well beyond the lively banter of the Barbie movie and its tongue-in-cheek trailer which encouraged understatement-inclined Eleanor to find out what the fuss was about: "Like when I first saw the advertising, I thought I'm not going to see that! But then when I saw the trailer and it was quite funny, I was intrigued. I think I'm intrigued to see it. And I think it might be quite good. Yeah".

That said, most informants – first of all – refuse to take the doll or its entourage too seriously. Consider Rionach's Barbie-inculcated beliefs about boyfriends. Far from being a "handsome, rich, tanned, athletic, perfect-bodied" Ken-alike, the love of her life is a "skinny white guy who eats all my food". Ken is frequently the subject of persistent satire and derision and, as an intellectual lightweight, is routinely replaced as Barbie's preferred paramour in playroom-enacted episodes of informants' imaginative narratives. Stand-ins include Skeletor, John Cena, Optimus Prime, a platoon of WWE warriors and, when Gabriela is casting director, the cowabunga-bellowing Ninja Turtle, Michelangelo. Even Teddy bears are better than "creepy", (Thalia) "couch potato", (Andrea) "no gumption" Ken (Lily).

There is, admittedly, a dichotomous aspect to mockery. On the one hand, a fair number of informants ridicule Mattel's attempts to embrace the diversity/equality/inclusivity agenda and the tokenism of, say, its Laverne Cox transgender doll (Peñaloza et al. 2023) or the plump, so-called 'curvy doll' which equates to U.S. size 4 (Hains 2021). They either

consider such acts “too little too late” (Logan), or an egregious instance of ‘doll-washing’ driven by the corporation’s despicable desire to cash-in on societal developments (Willow). That said, the majority of informants applaud Mattel’s belated endeavours, especially its 2016 Fashionista range which was augmented in 2023 to benefit from post-*Barbie* goodwill. The selection not only features a Down Syndrome doll “which further allows more children to see themselves in Barbie”, but “comes with 5 different body types, 22 skin tones, 76 hair styles, 94 hair colours and 13 eye colours!” Margaret’s cynicism isn’t far from the surface.

The second mode of mockery involves Barbie-baiting consumer behaviours. Principally, by buying into Bratz. Designed by disgruntled Mattel employee, who assembled the characters from abandoned Barbie body parts, Bratz dolls are the antithesis of Mattel’s Aryan icon (Hart 2022). Initially called “Frankenbratz” by creator Carter Bryant (Lobel 2018, 28), they are much preferred by many informants. Yes, they possess Barbie dolls as part of their collection – who doesn’t? – but they’d much rather play with Chloe, Sacha, Jade, and Yasmin, whose insouciant personalities strike a chord beyond the ken of Mattel. And whose outfits, Anouk announces, after seeing them for a first time at a friend’s, “blew Barbie’s bikinis out of the water!”

Criticism indeed is not limited to the doll itself. Almost every element of the doll constellation is treated with delightful disrespect. “You can do anything”, Siofra sarcastically comments, “as long as you are tall, thin, and very beautiful”; Zara feels so “empowered” by the figurine she’s ready for her *Forbes* front-cover photoshoot (as if!); the cheesy CGI movies, Sally declares, with just a (big) hint of hyperbole, “are the greatest of all time!”; Oona, on the other hand, wonders (with irreverence aforethought), how on earth she’ll manage without a pet unicorn; Amber wryly recalls that her Dreamhouse was furnished with an ironing board, which serves as a built-in reminder of the good old bad old days of domestic servitude; Rosie reports that she’ll refuse to let her future offspring play with

Barbie. But not because of the doll's deleterious long-term impact on children's wellbeing. It's the cost of kids' Barbie obsessions, plus pester-power prowess, that bothers her.

Both aside, the third and most irrepressible instance of irreverence, is found the refreshingly wry earworm, 'Barbie Girl'. A big hit for Scandi band Aqua in 1997, reaching number one in over 15 countries and selling 8 million copies worldwide, the parodic pop song's perpetrators were repeatedly (and ultimately unsuccessfully) pursued through the courts by Mattel's IP department (Hunter and Lastowka 2019). The fact that the corporation later licensed the song they took all the way to the Supreme Court for an advertising campaign – and later still remixed it for Robbie's *Barbie* movie – is too mock-worthy for words (Greene 2022). Granted, as far as Callie is concerned it's "a national anthem for all teenage girls". Saffron reports singing Aqua's catchy classic, with several close friends, at the start of girls' nights out and even Treasa, who acknowledges that her repeated replays of the CD had her loving family begging for mercy, still yodels the addictive ditty. The song, Tara makes clear, is always sung knowingly, ironically, with tongue-in-cheek, so to speak. And meta-mockery is never far away. Amber, for instance, has an issue with the lyrics which fail to specify whether the doll will attend Aqua's proposed party:

> *Come on Barbie let's go party?*
>
> *Uh oh…uh ohhh.*
>
> What? Is that a yes, or a no?
>
> Barbie never knew what she wanted, and this irritated me! I needed an answer, I needed to know. GIVE ME AN ANSWER BARBIE! ARE YOU GOING TO THE PARTY OR NOT? WE WANT TO PARTY BARBIE!

Amusing as Amber's ire is, the ultimate expression of irreverence, which almost surpasses the relentless ironizing of Greta Gerwig's cinematic masterpiece, is the experimental activities of Rosie and her sister. Artfully combining humour and horror, as

Stephen King (1981) advises in *Danse Macabre*, their cosmetic surgeries put Victor Frankenstein to shame:

> The only joy Barbie brought me and my sister was during our favourite childhood pastime. We called it 'operations'. Barbie would be laid down on the operating table before having her clothes snipped off her back, her leg amputated and then patched up with a SpongeBob plaster, not forgetting a quick bowl-cut before she woke up from the general anaesthetic. If she wasn't going under the knife, she was being utterly mutilated in other ways, all her limbs would be ripped off and put back in the wrong places, we'd make her horrible clothes and cause permanent facial deformities by feeding her to the dog.

If such behaviours are to be believed – and their existence triggered our interest in the first place – Barbie's 'screamhouse' is Bluebeard's 'bloody chamber' rebooted. The figurine's fans aren't so much engaged in customer co-creation as customer ruination.

Lulling

Lulling is a form of comfort food, chicken soup for the soul. As far as Marina Warner (1998) is concerned, it comprises the nursery rhymes mothers' sing while rocking their children to sleep. They help them on their way to the languid Land of Nod. It's an imaginary land, however, where nasty creatures like the Sandman lurk, and where rock-a-bye babies in the treetop come crashing down, cradles and all. "Lullabies", the fairy tale-telling scholar asserts, "overcome the objects of fear…by dipping infants prophylactically in an imaginary future of ordeals and perils" (Warner 1998, 17).

Such soothing yet subtly threatening narratives exemplify what Storr (2019) identifies as story's fundamental consolatory function. The controlled exposure to gentle peril within safe boundaries allows children to rehearse responses to real-world anxieties. Through this lens, Barbie becomes more than mere plaything; she offers what Storr terms a 'simulacrum of

consciousness' – a way for children to experience and process complex emotions through seemingly simple play narratives.

Gentle jeopardy is integral to cradle song, much as it is in many Barbie narratives. The early novels, the later newsletters, the latter-day vlogs and social media posts, not to mention the computer games and sub-Disney movies, such as *A Mermaid's Tale*, unfailingly involve mildly threatening situations. These are triumphantly transcended in accordance with a pre-teen version of Hollywood's preferred storyline, the hero's journey. None other than Robert McKee, the legendary screenwriting guru whose *Story* seminars have influenced everyone from Peter Jackson to Jimmy Fallon, is a consultant for the Mattel corporation's cinematic endeavours (McKee and Gerace 2018).

Numerous doll detractors notwithstanding (Vine 2023; Walter 2023), the three-fold reality is that, firstly, playing with the figurine proves enormously comforting. Barbie conveys her consumers to a peaceful place, a happy valley of the dolls that's far away from the trials and tribulations of family life and the schoolyard bearpit. Whatever else she is, Barbie is a beautiful blank slate, a comfort blanket for the soul, a pre-teen panic room to retreat to when living isn't easy and the slings and arrows of childhood are raining down in torrents. Interviewee Aoife is typical:

> …But yeah, Barbie was just kind of like, I don't know, my like little time of peace and quiet, you know. If something was going on in the house, or if I was sick or something…I would just forget about everything and be like, Oh my God, anything is possible, you know?
>
> *Interviewer*: Yeah, was there anything in particular that you were trying to get away from?
>
> *Aoife*: Um, I think it was just like home stuff, you know, like parents fighting or like, there was like a neighbour who would come over, I didn't like them, whatever…I'd be like, okay, let's just play, let's just play, let's just go back to the imagination, just to get away from it. Just stuff like that.

Mattel's doll, secondly, is more than a "forcefield against reality" (Isadora). She functions as a close friend, an imaginary sibling, a living, breathing boon companion who sits beside them to watch TV, shares their bed at night and serves as a shoulder to cry on. They're someone to take to school, the mall, on vacation, and, in broken-wristed Sally's case, "to the hospital to get my plaster-cast removed". Many mention deep, meaningful conversations with their dolls, not least interviewee Diana. A 36-year-old marketing scholar, she discusses her research concerns with Wheelchair Barbie, who shares her university office:

> *Interviewer*: She's beautiful, isn't she?
>
> *Diana*: Yeah, she's really cute…She's quite good as well. Like, I have chats with her quite a lot. She sits on a windowsill in the office but I'd be like, 'What do you think, Barb? Do you think that's working? Yeah.
>
> *Interviewer*: Ah, she keeps you company?
>
> *Diana*: Yeah, yeah…

Mattel's doll, in effect-cum-affect, provides a constant reassurance, someone who has nourished their imagination (Imogen), encouraged their creativity (Robyn), bolstered their storytelling abilities (Julia), advanced their interpersonal and communication skills (Finola), and, last but far from least, furthered their fashion sense (too many to mention). So salutary is Mattel's de-stress device that many believe Barbie ownership is a blessing in the guise of a doll unfairly demonized by society, a doll which is no worse, Leah alleges, than "the unrealistic characters that little boys play with like Superman and Batman". It's a doll that many informants fully intend to employ to assuage the fears of their future offspring.

And that's not all. The doll doesn't just lull, it leads, enlivens, exalts. A consistently inspirational role model, Barbie is a beacon of bright futures and anticipatory achievement, living proof that people including wheelchair-bound Maisie, "can overcome any obstacle or make any choice in life". She too can be president, Lyra announces. "Astronaut? No

problem", Siobhan declares, "I could go to space in the morning". Real world outcomes may be very different, of course – informants aren't naïve about the world of work – but Barbie gives young women the belief that nothing is beyond their compass. Maisie, once again, puts it perfectly:

> Barbie to me was an iconic part of my childhood, a time when I did not need to deal with struggles or strife but just to sit on my living room floor playing with my Barbie dollhouse and making the dolls face their own endeavours created by me. I have heard that children playing with dolls is an important aspect of growing up because it aids social skills and empathy and I believe this to be true because I put my dolls through many life dramas both happy and sad, so I now deal with things as they would. Barbie's statement is 'girls can do anything'…She is the epitome of a girl's childhood, especially mine.

Lulling, thirdly, doesn't begin and end with the figurine. The ancillaries, the accessories, the full spectrum components of the doll-constellation provide succour for someone or other. The 'can do anything' slogan warms the heart of Ciara; the clunky computer games for handheld devices are fondly remembered by Finola; the monthly magazines – with free stickers! – once conveyed Julia "over the moon with happiness"; the wonderous weekly series of animated shorts that depicted Barbie as a vlogger, *Life in the Dreamhouse*, is gone but far from forgotten by Andrea; thinking back to the tantalizing unboxing process not only consoles Amelia but, as far as Elizabeth's concerned, is like "unwrapping a magical world busting with joy and fantasy".

More than anything else, however, it is the CGI movies that pluck the mystic chords of memory (Kammen 1993) and carry consumers back to their Barbie-bewitched childhoods. A sizable group of consumers not only confess to watching them repeatedly but knowing the words of every song, each rendition of which still delivers singalong solace, especially during marathon Barbie movie sleepovers with former schoolfriends. One indeed was so in need of *Princess and the Pauper*'s calming balm that "I basically bribed the two girls I was

babysitting into watching that movie" (Saffron). Yet another interviewee, Durga, recalls being enthralled by the "making of" vignette at the end of a DVD:

> I just found that like, so fascinating. So for the like Dancing Princesses, Twelve Dancing Princesses, they showed how they actually modelled it off real ballerinas…I didn't realize like, that's how much work they put into these movies. So I was completely like, shocked by that. So obviously for a while I was like, oh my god, I want to be a ballerina!

The majority of playtime activities are rather less evocative, admittedly, though cruising the not-so-mean streets of Toytown in Barbie's pink Corvette, pink camper van, pink rollerblades et al. are pleasurable in themselves. Spare a thought too for Eulalie, who recalls receiving Veterinarian Barbie for Christmas and experienced the 'joys' of using the pink pooper-scooper to pick up the 'parcels' deposited by its 'moving-parts' puppies:

> One year at Christmas my grandfather bought me…the vet clinic doll. The thought of that fake dog poo is still engraved in my memory, along with the three small dogs that came with it.

Such seemingly ineradicable memories may be gross, but they are far from grievous. At worst they are so-bad-it's-good, as in the case of Durga, who doesn't just adore Tanner the dog but finds its daily defecations delightful. At best they reflect a 'double lull' effect, which not only provides comfort in the anxiety-ridden present but catapults consumers back to pleasurably perverse poop pursuits as pre-teen transgressives. As Barbara Creed (1995, xvi) concedes, cutting to the chase of our love-hate relationship with monstrous women, be it Barbie or Baba Yaga: "there is something immensely attractive about creatures that are at home in the heart of darkness".

Demonic Discussion

"History", Rebecca Yarros (2025, 155) writes in an SF reinterpretation of Ancient Greek myth, "is simply a collection of stories, each influenced by those that happened before and steering the ones to come". The same is true of Barbie, whose prehistory has been traced back to fertility figurines from the Aegean islands c.2000 BCE (Lord 1994). Our own myth pool-sourced study, which melds Warner's (1998) 'she-monster' framework and Storr's (2019) insights on character complexity, contends that brands can cohere by embracing rather than eschewing contradiction as a source of cultural power (Canniford and Shankar 2016). When viewed through a storytelling lens, the doll is revealed as a congeries of incongruities that not only run counter to managerial 'best practice' (Keller 2020), but blossom thereby.

More than that, the tripartite nature of Warner's framework – *scaring*, *mocking* and *lulling* – provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how brands generate enduring cultural resonance. Barbie scares through her impossible proportions and the anxieties she induces about body image; is mocked by consumers' ironic engagement with the brand and their subversive playtime practices; and yet simultaneously lulls with her comforting familiarity and the dream-like secondary world she bestrides. This interplay transcends traditional models of brand meaning-making. As the Islamic anti-Barbie Fulla doll illustrates, its success is frightening for some, subject to sectarian scorn by others and reassuring for many more besides (Izberk-Bilgin 2012). Such complexities of engagement challenge existing theories of brand loyalty and resistance, revealing how totemic brands thrive not through consistency but through their capacity to be constantly changing cultural touchstones. In Barbie's case, she becomes a plastic proxy onto which generations project their desires, fears, critiques of femininity and consumerism, as well as American culture writ large. Or, as Lord (1994, 200) puts it, paraphrasing Shakespeare"s *Antony & Cleopatra*, "Age cannot wither her nor custom stale her infinite plasticity".

By applying Warner's 'she-monster' framework to the Barbie brand and identifying new dimensions of consumer response, this paper extends the conceptual vocabulary of marketing monstrosity and demonstrates its utility in illuminating the complex, often paradoxical relationship between consumers and their brands (Holt 2004). In doing so, it contributes to marketing's storytelling traditions, especially those involving horror story-sourced tropes and character types – doppelgängers, ghosts, witches, etc. – and, in Barbie's case, the shapeshifter (Kachuba 2019). With more than 250 versions of the figurine, scores of which feature in Gerwig's movie, Mattel's doll is inherently contradictory, simultaneously fixed and fluid.

Our study thereby adds to marketing's massive mythopoeic tradition, the emergence of which coincided with the rise of the Barbie doll, itself shaped by the infamous myth-minded Freudian, Ernest Dichter, who mesmerized marketing in the late 1950s (Stern 1990; Tadajewski 2010). It simultaneously stretches back to the Creation Myth of western civilization, the serpentine source of supposed she-monsters such as Eve – according to Greta Gerwig (Handyside 2024) – and forges links with marketing's rich, fertile and flourishing myth-enriched mindset, which kickstarted the interpretive paradigm (Levy 1959) and is stronger than ever today (Thompson, Arnould and Veresiu 2022).

It also offers an alternative angle on brand iconicity (Holt 2004), in so far as Barbie's success has less to do with assuaging cultural contradictions, though that is important, than the inherent contradictions of the character herself. This suggests that, contrary to the conventional wisdom of branding, contradictions are not something to be soothed or palliated or indeed dismissed as the dregs of dualistic thinking (Canniford and Shankar 2016), but things to be tilled, cultivated and harvested for the betterment of the brand. As in the Barbie movie, they ought to be embraced rather than eschewed. Or examined carefully at least before exorcism is contemplated. Out demon out is outdated.

There are implications too for the brand gestalt trope, which attained its acme in an interpretive investigation of another figurine in the Mattel corporation's rich brand roster: American Girl (Sherry et al 2008). The gestalt construct sets great store by coherence, coordination and clarity of brand identity (Urbany and Dapena-Baron 2024). Granted, Diamond et al (2008, 131) acknowledge that consumer response is a "disorderly aggregation of complementary and contradictory accounts", as do Zanette and Scaraboto (2019) in an analogous study of Spanx, but they are treated as things to be eradicated rather than employed for the betterment of the brand. The contradictions that inhere in American Girl's stablemate, our study suggests, are necessary not nugatory.

Gestalt or not, Barbie injects new life into brand 'longevity', everlasting life if the monster metaphor is embraced. Because if there's one thing we know about monsters, it's that they're almost impossible to kill and keep coming back from the dead (Asma 2009). Much as Barbie has done. Having seemingly reached its nadir in the aftermath of the decade-long Bratz debacle (Lepore 2018), the brand sank even more deeply into the mire with 2015's Hello Barbie, an AI-assisted horror show. So much so, the heinous Hello creature didn't get a mention in Gerwig's ironic, irreverent, iconoclastic biopic, which mocked Mattel's monstrosity unmercifully and, by doing so, brought Barbie back from death's door.

Self-mockery indeed is an underrated strategy in the boastful, bigger-is-better world of branding (Hartmann and Brunk 2019). But as Ryanair's online abuse of its passengers attests, it works (Riley 2025). It worked for Lego, as well; it worked for Balenciaga under Demma Gvasalia; it worked for Supreme; it worked for Crocs; and it works for the James Bond franchise (Preece, Kerrigan and O'Reilly 2019, 341), which has been characterized by raised eyebrows since the reign of Roger Moore (in the title role) and where a policy of 'having your cake and throwing it like a custard-pie' prevails. Whether it'll continue to work in the post-Daniel Craig era (during which custard-pie duties were performed by Q) and when

the hero has been killed off by the producers (only to fall into the grasping hands of Jeff 'Blofeld' Bezos), remains to be seen. (See Web Appendix 2 for more examples of she-monster brands.)

In this regard, prominent thinkers on the philosophy of horror stress that the best expressions of the genre are found in spoofs and parodies, such as *Rocky Horror*, *Young Frankenstein*, *Scary Movie* and so on (Carroll 1990; Twitchell 1987). If that's the case, the unsuccessful comeback of Victoria's Secret as a societally attuned, EDI-aligned, yet still sexy lingerie brand might have been better served by showcasing a tongue-in-cheek, so to speak, range of Spanx-style support wear (Light 2024). Ditto Jaguar's 'woeful woke rebrand' (Coren 2024), which sought non-binary appeal by abandoning its iconic 'roar' – rather than, say, opting for an irreverent 'meow' – and, by doing so, made a serious error of judgment (Ritson 2024), albeit renowned ironist Jeremy Clarkson (2025) thinks otherwise.

For now, it is sufficient to note that if Warner's tripartite tactics were to be encapsulated into an actionable, three-phase process, the following approach could be adopted: (1) *exhume* the cadaver; (2) *excoriate* what remains; (3) *exonerate* its transgressions, albeit with tongue in cheek. Then take it from there. And glib as this seems, it aligns with our empirical findings (Figure 1) where exhuming the figurines could be scary for some, excoriating the icon was near enough the norm and exonerating its all-too-evident iniquities helped heal the damage done (cf. Östberg and Hartmann 2025). It's a process which was aided and abetted by Gerwig's relentlessly irreverent movie which put the superstar brand back on top.

And although the Star-Power Process (Figure 1) should be evaluated in a Gerwigesque fashion, its stellar structure deserves further elaboration. The process visually represents how *scaring*, *mocking*, and *lulling* radiate from a central point of brand contradiction, with each point capturing a distinct consumer response. The intersecting rays

highlight the transitional processes of exhuming, excoriating, and exonerating, creating a celestial cartography of Barbie's cultural orbit. Like heavenly bodies in a pink galaxy, these contradictory forces generate the gravitational pull that has kept the figurine in cultural orbit for over six decades.

[Insert Figure 1: The Star-Power Process]

This celestial visualization aligns perfectly with our paper's mythopoeic ethos and conceptual ambitions. The construct, which possesses both managerial and theoretical 'relevance', recounts a three-phase SEMELE sequence (Scare-Exhume/Mock-Excoriate/Lull-Exonerate). And although this may be a mere acronym, SEMELE is the name of the Ancient Greek goddess of good times and, as the mother of 'twice-born' Dionysus, dangerously delightful revels. Indeed, as Napoli (2011, 120-121) argues in her anthology of Greek myth for pre-teens, Semele was widely considered a beautiful scatterbrain who had no notion of deities' destructive powers. But, not unlike Barbie, brought great joy to the world.[4]

For brand stewards tasked with managing these fearsome yet fascinating creatures, our conceptual construct offers more than celestial cartography; it provides a navigational chart through treacherous commercial waters. Rather than exorcising contradictions – a futile endeavour that often banishes the very spirits that animate iconic brands – savvy conjurers might instead discern which points of their brand's constellation require illumination as cultural tides shift. Mattel's magicians have learned this lesson well, recognizing when to employ controlled frights that titillate (scaring), when to deflect criticism through knowing winks (mocking), and when to emphasize Barbie's comforting enchantment (lulling). The framework suggests a cyclical dance between these positions, an alchemical process of exhuming buried brand elements, transmuting them through self-aware critique, and

ultimately achieving redemption through cultural recontextualization. This approach stands in sharp contrast to the conservative grimoire of conventional brand management, with its solemn commandments about consistency and coherence. As Barbie's phoenix-like resurrection demonstrates, allowing a brand to embrace its contradictory nature can transform apparent curses into powerful blessings, conjuring both cultural resonance and commercial rejuvenation from the very elements that once threatened to consign it to branding's Boot Hill.

Future Fears

More seriously, the foregoing study treats cultural contestation as a theoretical lynchpin of long-lasting success, inverting conventional wisdom about managing brand criticism (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel 2006; Giesler 2012). Barbie's enduring relevance stems not despite but because of the controversies that have shaped its history (Oppenheimer 2009; Shapiro 2023). The doll's transformation from monolithic beauty ideal to diverse cultural symbol illuminates how brands generate power in the long term through cultural critique (Holt 2004; Cayla and Arnould 2013). Mattel's introduction of both a blind Barbie with tactile clothing and a Black Barbie with Down syndrome (Vadukul 2024) exemplifies how brands can transform criticism into innovation. This theoretical insight extends beyond simple adaptation to criticism; it suggests that cultural tensions themselves constitute a form of brand equity, one that conventional brand theory has largely overlooked (Keller 2020). In Barbie's case, these tensions create a dynamic canvas for societal debates about beauty, gender, and identity (Hains 2021; Peñaloza et al. 2023), demonstrating how brands become cultural institutions precisely by embodying rather than resolving contradictions.

The "fluid and fast-changing marketplace" (Keller 2020, 1000), furthermore, is embodied in Barbie's evolution as a cultural icon. The word 'branding' itself, as both Stern (2006) and Twitchell (2004) show, is nothing if not mercurial, moving from burning branches and carceral stigmata to indications of ownership by US cattle barons. Its modern definitions are no less protean, ranging from "a companion spirit" (Sherry 2005, 41) to "the packaging of emotion" (Davis 2005, 57). Just as Warner (1995, 299) notes that "monstrousness is a condition in flux, subject to changes in attitude", our analysis reveals similar fluidity in consumer perceptions and brand meaning. Conceptually, branding's chameleonic character has been captured by Heding, Knudtson, and Bjerre's (2020) eight-element chronological construct, Holt's (2004) tripartite take on the trajectory to iconicity, as do his archival analyses of Mountain Dew (Holt 2003) and Jack Daniels (Holt 2006). Giesler's (2012) four-phase process of the Botox brand's 'contestations' is cut from similar conceptual cloth. Powerful as they are, such stage-type models and phase-based frameworks are predicated on the assumption that passing time can be divided up into bite-sized chunks. But that is not the case, contends award-winning novelist Margaret Atwood (1994, 558): "Time is not a solid, like wood, but a fluid, like water or the wind. It doesn't come neatly cut into even-sized lengths, into decades and centuries. Nevertheless, for our purposes we have to pretend it does".

The same is true of researchers' reports of their findings, which overwhelmingly adhere to the traditional social science structure of theory-hypotheses-methods-findings-implications-research going forward. But storytelling doesn't operate that way. According to Lodge (1992), it routinely employs all sorts of devices – from suspense, surprise, mystery and misdirection to mythopoeia's standby, *in media res* (starting in the middle of the action) – judicious use of which may enliven marketing scholarship. Front-loading with theory, for instance, is the detective story equivalent of telling readers who the killer is at the outset.

And, by doing so, killing any hope of 'narrative transportation', something scholars are prepared to write about but rarely put into practice (Thomas and Grigsby 2024).

As Warner (1995, 299) analogously observes in *The Beast and the Blonde*, a monumental work of cultural exegesis predating her she-monster preoccupation, "monstrousness is a condition in flux, subject to changes in attitude". Latter-day use of the word to refer to 'enormous success' (a box office monster like *Barbie*) and 'to monster', as in 'brutalize' (by malevolent informants) is testament to the term's transformational tendencies. This mutability has profound implications for brand theory, where shapeshifting between threat and triumph characterizes the most culturally resonant brands. "The more science tightens its grip on reality", Keetley (2022, 185) contends, "the more monsters it creates – and we need them". This necessity extends to marketing theory, where both Big Data-driven marketing 'scientists' and cultural history-inclined marketing 'artists' require frameworks that embrace rather than eliminate contradiction.

Barbie feeds that need, though she takes a different form from the heinous creatures hitherto identified. Unlike doppelgänger brands, like Starbucks, with their demon doubles (Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel, 2006), vampire brands, like Goldman Sachs, that bleed their victims dry (Freund and Jacobi 2013), revenant brands like Alfa Romeo's Giulia, which frighten classic car lovers (Cantone, Cova and Testa, 2020), and ghost brands that go bump in the night, not unlike Hollister (Brown, Patterson and Ashman, 2021), Barbie represents a theoretically distinct category of brand monster. She is a shapeshifter, consumer society's equivalent of the lycanthrope, changeling, manitou, sassabonsam, what Stephen King (1986, 812) calls a "glamour". Never less than glamorous, even in her most mundane incarnations, Barbie exemplifies "what is probably the most well-known shapeshifter, the werewolf" (Kachuba 2019, 93). A *were-maid*, as it were, Barbie's *were-brand* status suggests brands maintain relevance not through consistent identity but through controlled metamorphosis.

There are of course several other 'big picture' issues that impinge upon the present study, most notably anthropomorphism (Sharma and Rahman 2022), feminism (Maclaran, Stevens and Kravets 2022) and, for literary theory-inclined scholars, ambiguity (Ostberg and Hartmann 2025). For now, however, it is enough to acknowledge that the Barbie brand transcends conventional theoretical categories, embodying what marketing scholarship has struggled to capture; the fearful, fascinating monstrosities that humankind finds attractive and repulsive simultaneously. If we float, as Warner (2018, xxii) maintains, on an "ocean of story, which like the cosmic river of the ancient world encircles the earth since recorded time", then we would do well to consider the voyage of Barbara Millicent Roberts. Despite decades of denigration, Barbie demonstrates how brands achieve cultural power not through resolution but through embodiment of contradiction. As Bobaru (2024, 67) rightly points out in her fourth wave feminist critique of *Barbie*, "she symbolises a shift from traditional representations of gender and identity to more fluid and mutable understandings".

The opportunities for future research are equally oceanic. How, for example, might the 'she-monster' framework illuminate other culturally significant brands? What new species of marketing monster emerges in digital domains? In what ways do brand monsters evolve as they swim through time? In the ever-shifting currents of consumer culture, Barbie stands as a plastic paragon of paradox – an appealingly appalling archetype that transcends theoretical containment. Whatever else we do as scholars, marketing's myth pool is always worth dipping into.

Buy-Buy Barbie

Waving, we hope, rather than drowning, our precipitous plunge into the mythopoesis of Barbie's monstrous metamorphoses reveals what Marina Warner might call a quintessential

'B-monster'. In *No Go the Bogeyman*, Warner observes that monsters' names often begin with the letter B, noting that the b-sound "dominates the expression of bogeymen terrors" in numerous Indo-European languages (Warner 1998, 43). If updating her bestiary today, Warner might well include Barbie alongside boggart, barguest, bugaboo – and perhaps branding itself.

Contrary to Keller's (2020) and Rodriguez's (2020) advocacy for cohesive brand narratives, Barbie has flourished by embracing her fractured, often frightening facets. Rather than smoothing over paradoxes, brands can, and perhaps should, celebrate complexity over coherence, character over plot, as Storr (2019) urges storytellers to do. In answering Pauwels et al.'s (2024, 590) clarion call for "disruptive papers…[that]…seek to arrange things in new ways", we offer Warner's 'she-monster' framework, which reveals the power of brands to embody and navigate cultural tensions rather than resolve them. In these murky depths swim strange creatures indeed, but it is precisely their strangeness – their capacity to unsettle and entrance – that gives them preternatural power. Long live Barbie!

Footnotes

1. Horror-meister Stephen King's (1981, 66) 'myth pool' of monstrosity contains three core archetypes: "the Vampire, the Werewolf and the Thing Without a Name". Interestingly, Boehm and Steidl's (2016) comparative review of (all 26) archetypes in marketing mythopoeia doesn't mention monsters. Yet in one of his earliest analyses of marketplace myths, Levy (1960, 215-216) specifically singles out sorcerers of selling and the demons of the TV screen.

2. The term 'she-monster' might raise eyebrows, yet this is precisely Warner's point. By adopting the language of patriarchal anxiety, Warner exposes how culture has long transformed threatening feminine power – whether embodied by women, queer, or nonbinary folk – into manageable monster stories. Our use of her framework follows this critical tradition, not to perpetuate the tired trope of woman-as-threat, but to examine how brands like Barbie can commandeer these creaking narratives and make them dance to a different tune.

3. Note, Warner's tripartite typology is just that – a three-part taxonomy of techniques that help overcome monsters and monstrosity. No directionality is implied, nor are the elements sequential. That said, there is no reason why they can't be considered from a processional perspective (Figure 1).

4. The 'twice-born' term refers to the fact that Semele died a horrible death – at the hands of almighty Zeus – but the child she was carrying, Dionysus, was grafted on to her killer's thigh. Then carried to term by his father.

If Gerwig's Barbie movie represented the rebirth of the brand, which it assuredly did, Barbie can surely be deemed a Dionysian doll…

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Table 1: Data Collection Overview

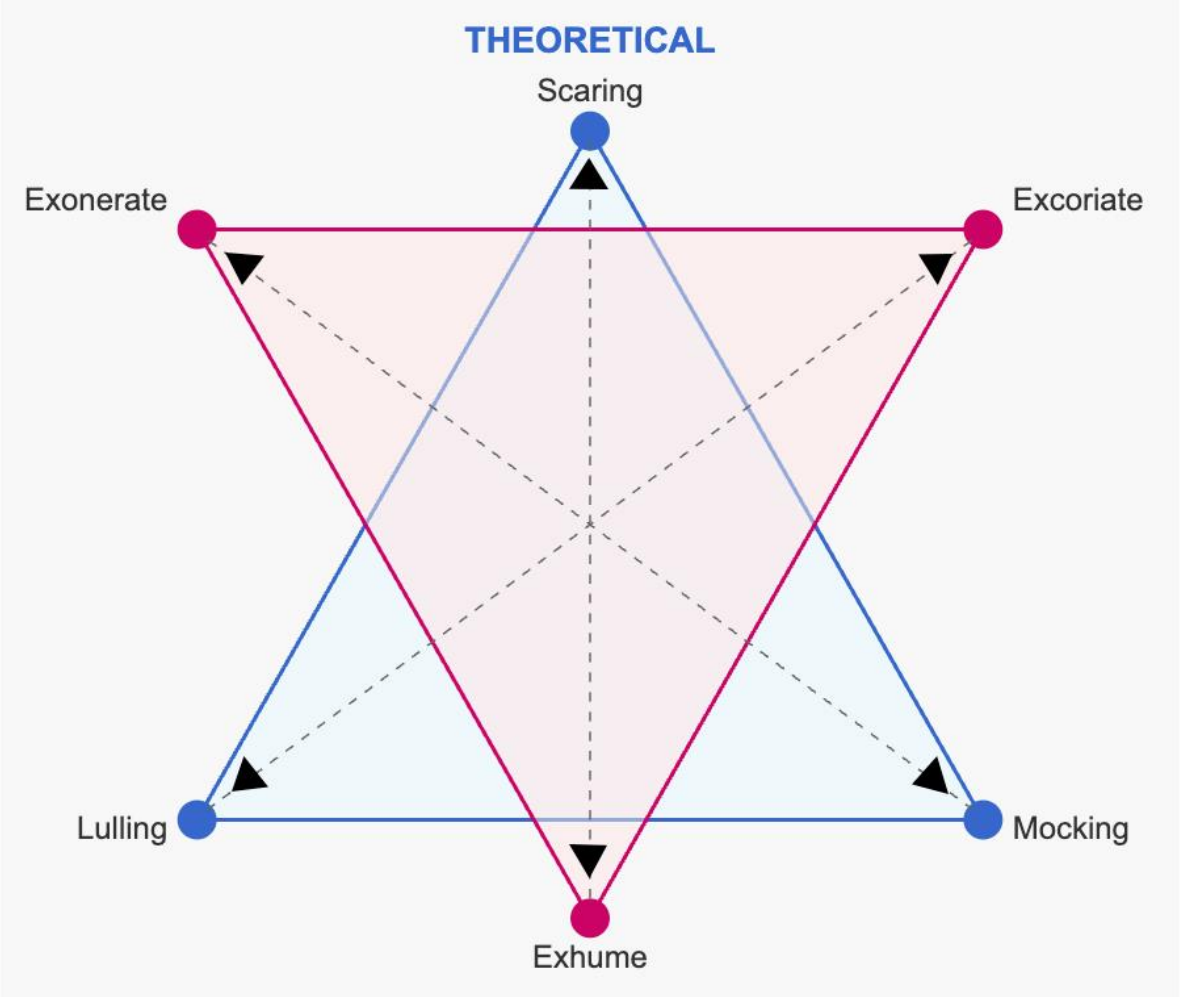
Data Collection Method	Purpose	Sources
Ancillary Materials	Understanding Barbie brand presentation and meanings.	Short Story Anthologies, Artworks, 43 Mattel Created Barbie Videos
Ancillary Activities	Generating firsthand experience and observation of the social and cultural context being studied.	Store Visits (including Galeries Lafayette in Paris, Hamleys in London, and Cleary's in Dublin), Toy Museum visits (in London, Edinburgh, and Suffolk [UK] and Nuremberg [Germany]).
Consumer Introspections	Understanding women's past and present experiences with and perceptions of the Barbie brand.	187 written introspective accounts collected in three tranches (first round, 103; second round, 28; third round, 56).
Depth Interviews	Understanding women's past and present experiences of owning Barbie dolls, and their memories and knowledge of the Barbie brand.	34 in-depth interviews with self-identifying Barbie fans from three continents
Mainstream Media Observations	Understanding the media framing of the Barbie brand before and after the release of the Barbie movie.	151 Broadsheet newspaper and reputable magazine articles including film reviews and special issues devoted to Barbie in outlets such as The New York Times, The New Yorker, Business Insider, People Magazine, and BBC News.

Table 2: Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Commitment to Barbie*
Amelia	32	British	High
Diana	36	British	High
Aoife	19	Irish	High
Isobel	19	Irish	Low
Eleanor	29	British	Medium
Idna	50	Austrian	High
Gabriela	24	Mexican	High
Ellie	47	British	High
Aylin	36	Turkish	High
Andreea	23	Romanian	High
Dhia	27	Malaysian	High
Deniz	29	British Turkish	High
Catherine	33	British	Low
Tabitha	68	British	Medium
Nancy	29	British	Low
Pandora	29	British	Low
Parvati	26	Indian	High
Freya	24	Costa Rican	High
Ophelia	30	British Tunisian	Medium
Durga	29	Indian	High
Aditi	28	Indian	High
Saanvi	27	Indian	Medium
Aarna	27	Indian	Medium
Jaya	25	Indian	Low
Lakshmi	27	Indian	High
Anika	25	Indian	Low
Ira	31	Indian	Medium
Evelyn	21	American	High
Charlotte	24	British	Medium
Claire	46	Irish	High
Maria	24	Bulgarian	Medium
Lily	28	English	High
Angharad	43	Welsh	High
Mary	61	American	High

*All our interview participants nominated themselves to take part in our study, fulfilling our inclusion criteria of 1) having past and present experiences of owning Barbie dolls, and 2) memories or knowledge about the Barbie brand. After interviewing we categorised our participants commitment to Barbie as low, medium, or high.

Figure 1: The Star Process



Dear Professor Eric Arnould

Thank you very much for the additional careful and constructive feedback that you and Daiane have provided on our manuscript. We are extremely grateful to both of you for your attention to detail and for your thoughtful engagement with the material. We've now addressed all the corrections that you flagged, including formatting issues (e.g., spacing between sentences, replacing em dashes [apologies for any trans-Atlantic confusion regarding the use of these] and single quotation marks, typo corrections, and figure labelling), as well as referencing and citation updates.

We've also ensured the first use of CGI is now spelled out and have included the missing year in the Warner reference. The duplicate in-text entries for endnote 3 have been resolved, and the missing endnote related to Jeremy Clarkson (2025) was included by mistake (sorry) so we have deleted it. Paragraph formatting has been corrected in both the Findings and Future Fears sections, and in keeping with your wishes, Table 1 has been reinstated with further details now included regarding the format of the introspections.

With regard to your request for more contextual elaboration of our more niche cultural references: thank you for prompting us to strengthen this for clarity and accessibility. We've taken this opportunity to provide some additional cultural framing. For instance, we've expanded a little on the story behind Teen Talk Barbie, highlighting her controversial "math class is tough" quote and its educational backlash (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2008), as well as providing more detail on both the global commercial success of Aqua's 'Barbie Girl,' which reached number one in 15 countries and sold over 8 million copies, and given more insight into the web show, *Life in the Dreamhouse*, in which Barbie is portrayed as a savvy vlogger. We've expanded also on who Robert McKee is, explaining that he is a legendary screenwriting guru whose *Story* seminars have influenced everyone from Peter Jackson to Jimmy Fallon.

Finally, and most substantially, we appreciate your critical observation about the use of the 'she-monster' framework and the tone of certain passages. In response, we've made several key revisions: First, we've added a qualifying footnote at the first mention of 'she-monster' that clarifies our usage. In it we explain that the term 'she-monster' might raise eyebrows, yet this is precisely Warner's point. By adopting the language of patriarchal anxiety, Warner exposes how culture has long transformed threatening feminine power – whether embodied by women, queer, or nonbinary folk – into manageable monster stories. Our use of her framework follows this critical tradition, not to perpetuate the tired trope of woman-as-threat, but to examine how brands like Barbie can commandeer these creaking narratives and make them dance to a different tune. Second, we've revised the paragraph you expressly mention which lists contemporary 'she-monsters' to better foreground Warner's critical feminist stance, now closing with Bogutskaya's (2023) point that these 'unlikeable female characters' captivate precisely because they reject the performative palatability demanded by patriarchal culture. We hope these revisions directly address your concerns while strengthening the manuscript's inclusive ethos.

Once again, thank you for your insightful reading and supportive editorial guidance. We believe the manuscript is much improved as a result.

Yours Sincerely

The Authors