

# Existential Crisis: Redefining Ken’s Character in the Barbie Movie

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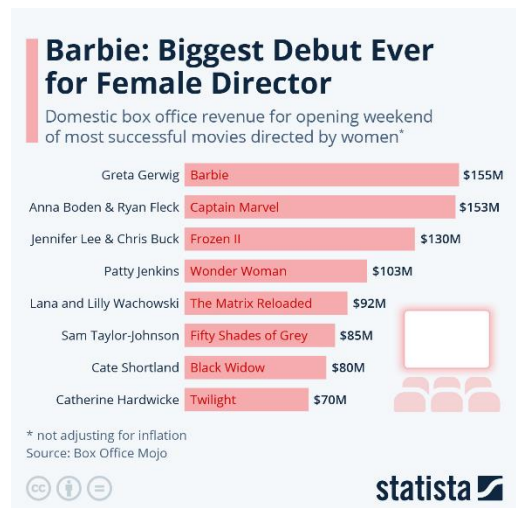
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**Abstract** This paper explores the transformative journey of the character Ken in the live-action adaptation of Barbie (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig. While existing reviews tend to center on Barbie, this paper shifts the spotlight onto Ken, a character often overshadowed by Barbie’s fame. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, the paper employs literature and multiple viewing of the film to gather essential visual information and dialogues related to Ken’s existential crisis. The analytical framework is rooted in existentialism by Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre, examining key concepts such as existence preceding essence and the importance of subjective experience. This paper aims to provide new insights into Ken’s character, illuminating broader themes of identity, gender roles, and personal development in the movie’s narrative. By analyzing Ken’s existential journey, this paper offers a deeper understanding of individual struggles against societal norms, emphasizing the perspective of marginalized male characters within the film.

**Keywords:** *Existential Crisis, Existentialism, Barbie Movie*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In mid-2023, Warner Bros. released a highly anticipated live-action Barbie movie that drew a lot of attention. This movie was a big deal in the entertainment industry and appealed to a wide varied audience. Directed by Greta Gerwig, Barbie has dominated the box office where it grossed nearly \$155M domestically in the first weekend, making it the highest-grossing film by a solo female director (Fleck, 2023). The movie proudly stands as the highest-grossing film of all time where it brought \$1.3 billion at worldwide box offices (Ulaby, 2023).



**Picture 1.** Barbie: Biggest Debut Ever for Female Director

Source: Statista.com

The story begins with the stereotypical Barbie, played by Margot Robbie, experiencing an existential crisis in her Barbieland. Things take an unexpected turn, she notices a small patch of cellulite on her thigh, and her naturally high-heeled feet touch the flat ground – she's becoming a real woman. This prompts her to embark on a journey to the human world to fix the 'disaster' and gain a deeper understanding of herself. Ken, portrayed by Ryan Gosling, accompanies her because his very existence hinges on Barbie's.

Upon arriving in the human world, both of them confront harsh realities. Unlike in Barbieland, the human world has very different gender norms where men dominate, and women have secondary roles. Barbie comes to the disheartening realization that she is not the inspirational role model she had perceived herself to be. While Ken, he is delighted to discover a power structure that benefits him, which gives men the upper hand. After experiencing the behavior of men in the real world, Ken returns to Barbie Land to initiate Ken's revolution. Transforming the pink female paradise into a horse-centric patriarchy called 'Kendom'.

Both Barbie and Ken set out on a path of self-exploration throughout the movie. It adds depth and complexity to the storyline, as it highlights the importance of individual identity as well as the impact of societal expectations and gender norms. The whole self-discovery arc enriches the storytelling and contributes to a more thought-provoking and engaging narrative.

As explained above, unlike the Barbie cartoon movies, this life-action adaptation has advanced plot lines that contain mature thematic territories. It elevates the narrative by exploring complex subjects and explores deeper emotional and psychological aspects of the characters. One of the notable topics addressed in this movie is the exploration of existential crises. Unlike the more simplistic and child-friendly themes commonly found in the animated Barbie films, this live-action adaptation dares to examine the characters' existential dilemmas and inner conflicts.

Existentialism first coined by Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian and philosopher that assumes existentialism is a rejection of the absoluteness of reason. The key concept of this philosophy is the word *existence*,

referring to human existence. The existentialist viewpoint holds that to qualify as an existent being, an individual must possess the capacity for self-awareness regarding their own existence.

Existence precedes essence, a phrase associated with the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. He argues that individuals exist first and then define their essence through their choices and actions. This idea is a central tenet of existentialism and represents

Sartre's perspective on human existence and freedom. This philosophical perspective challenges conventional notions of human nature and the idea that individuals are born with an inherent, unchangeable essence.

According to Kierkegaard, human struggle as the core of existence where human beings face challenges in life and emphasize subjective experience rather than objective truth (MacMillan & Yue, 2017). Furthermore, it focuses on human individuality where they can understand their experience in a meaningful way. In this framework, the act of choosing becomes a fundamental aspect of human existence. It is through our choices that we define ourselves, shaping our values, beliefs, and moral principles.

In the contemporary area, existentialism is used in a broad sense where it is considered that existential issues are important in human life as it is crucial in creating meaning, freedom, and authenticity (Cooper, 2016). It is very common for people to search for meaning and purpose in their lives. However, the issue arises when we struggle to discover fulfilling responses to the inquiries we pose to ourselves, resulting in what is commonly referred to as an existential crisis. This implies that certain individuals become provoked when they cannot reach a resolution regarding their thoughts and emotions, giving rise to internal conflicts, frustration, and a diminished sense of inner happiness.

The study of existential crisis under existentialism can be defined as a confrontation and an experienced relationship of the existential realities, therefore, a crisis becomes an existential crisis (Buténaité et al., 2016). Many people go through times when they feel confused about their own identity and the quest to understand themselves during various stages of their lives. This struggle often signifies that they are undergoing an existential crisis. Existential crises tend to manifest during a period of high confusion and anxiety, especially when trying to answer big questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose in life?".

Experiencing an existential crisis is a natural part of being alive; it indicates that a person is dealing with an important life challenge to avoid negative consequences. The idea of an existential crisis can be traced back to Erikson's (1970) concept of an identity crisis. An identity crisis refers to a period characterized

by deep introspection and thorough exploration of various perspectives regarding one's self-identity (Erikson, 1970).

The concept of an existential crisis is mainly relevant in modern society because, in today's world, people from different backgrounds have many options to choose from. When people are presented with numerous options, they often strive to ensure they make the optimal choice for themselves. The act

of decision-making can generate significant anxiety and potentially trigger an existential crisis. Most people generally believe that their lives have a meaning and purpose, and an existential crisis is when that idea of having a purpose of living collapses (Routledge, 2018).

While the majority of reviews tend to center their analysis on Barbie, this paper aims to shift the spotlight onto Ken, a character often overshadowed by Barbie's prominence. After his return from the human world, he endeavors to establish his identity independently of his connection with Barbie and the societal expectations placed upon him. This profound inner struggle ultimately results in his character experiencing personal development and a significant transformation. By exploring Ken's journey, this written work aspires to not only provide a fresh perspective and deeper insight into his character, but also illuminate broader themes of identity, gender roles, and personal growth that resonate in the narrative of this movie. Through Ken's story, we endeavor to explore the complexities that many individuals face when challenging societal norms, with a particular focus on the perspective of marginalized male characters within the film.

## II. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing literature and multiple viewings of films to gather essential visual data and dialogues related to the conflict. The qualitative method broadens the scope of data analysis procedures and the strategies used for presenting, interpreting, validating, and forecasting potential study outcomes. This approach is chosen because the results of the data analysis manifest in linguistic forms such as words, sentences, and expressions (Creswell, 2014). The chosen method facilitates a detailed analysis of various aspects of the selected theme, enabling a nuanced exploration of its dimensions.

Within this methodological framework, the literature, visual data, and dialogues considered are specifically related to the existential crisis, serving as the analytical framework

for this study. The objective is to gather comprehensive information that goes beyond surface-level observations. We plan to delve deeply into relevant journals, articles, and examine the content of the Barbie (2023) movie. Through this process, our aim is to fully comprehend the complexities of the existential crisis depicted in the movie. This thorough exploration will contribute to a profound and comprehensive analysis of the identified conflict within the scope of this research.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Ken in Barbie Movie

"Barbie" movie (2023) has provided Ken, known as Barbie's boyfriend, the center stage of his exploration of finding his true identity. Ken's journey reflects the existentialist concept, weaving a narrative of authenticity, freedom, and the quest for meaning. Ken was first introduced as a doll in 1961 as Ken Carson, two years after the Barbie doll was initially released. This timeline explains their Genesis story, that Ken was created as Barbie's accessory (Collinge, 2023). Although Ken was initiated as Barbie's "kinda-sorta boyfriend", he is often portrayed as Barbie's "best friend". It is also important to note that the relationship between Ken and Barbie isn't sexual since nobody has genitalia, just gender. Ken and Barbie differ significantly in terms of ambition, power, and even the smallest details such as their wardrobes, deliberately crafted to establish this distinction. This difference supports the dominance of Barbie and sets Ken in Barbie's shadow in this movie.

At the beginning of the movie, Ken is aggrieved that Barbie doesn't reciprocate his affection and feelings. Ken doesn't have a house, or a job, and is "Just Beach Ken". He is unable to spend the night together with Barbie as Barbie consistently designates it as "every night is girls' night," and while the Barbies reside in luxurious dream houses, the Kens appear to lack their own places. Besides that, Barbie Land implements a matriarchy system, where the Barbie can be anything they want (Doctor Barbie, Judge Barbie, President Barbie, and so on). This condition pushes the radicalization between the Kens and the Barbie which is motivated by a feeling that the Kens are being left behind by a feminist world, the Barbie Land, or a system that doesn't value them (Nicholas, 2023).

The transition occurs when Barbie and Ken go to the real world. In his journey in the real world, Ken realizes the power he could have, being compared to his position in the Barbie Land. Due to his exposure to the concept of patriarchy, Ken decides to bring this system to Barbie Land and establish his new world named Kendom. While Barbie is returning to Barbie Land seeking help for her business in the real world, the Kens have taken over the

place. This situation unites all the Barbies, involving the “Weird Barbie” and the “Stereotypical Barbie” to restore the Kendom into Barbieland again. They plan to unbrainwash the other Barbies and set the Kens in conflict with one another as a distraction to seize the Constitution. This plan works smoothly and successfully to restore Barbieland from the patriarchy. Barbie and Ken have a serious conversation talking about their relationship. Barbie tells Ken that she does not have any intention to be involved in a romantic affair with him. Barbie also mentions that Ken has to find his own identity on his own. He cannot base his attraction to someone on his existence and link them when the affection does not go both ways. Ken is confronted with #Kenough and I’m Just Ken (and I’m enough) as a form of self-awareness (Dockterman, 2023).

The movie illustrates how patriarchy can explain Ken’s aggrievement caused by the imbalance of power between the Barbies and the Kens in Barbieland. Ken is attracted to the patriarchal system which affirms Ken’s feelings towards Barbie. Ken’s entire patriarchal framework is essentially an expression of frustration towards Barbie, stemming from her rejection of him. Much like incels, his ideology is essentially a byproduct of his feelings of bitterness and isolation. While Ken might initially appear as a repetitive and one-dimensional character, he possesses complexities. He is insecure about self-consciousness, often resorting to excessive behavior as a defense mechanism against his feelings of inadequacy. In contrast to the movie’s portrait of the stereotypical Barbie, Ken emerges as a significantly multifaceted character (Flint, 2023).

### Subjective Experience

In Kierkegaard’s philosophy, the concept of subjectivity plays a central role, emphasizing that individuals must actively explore their inner selves and, in doing so, take full responsibility for their choices and actions. At the start of the film, Ken’s role primarily revolves around being Barbie’s boyfriend, lacking a clear purpose. However, he soon discovers a new sense of purpose during his adventures in the real world, only to realize by the end of the film that it doesn’t quite align with his true self.

Despite his efforts to establish Kendom, he finds that it doesn’t bring him the fulfillment that he sought. His underlying insecurities persist, and his inability to effectively process these insecurities and emotions ultimately leads to his frustrating defeat. This is shown in the scene when he was desperately lost, and Barbie reminds him to figure out who he is. She highlights the idea that it’s

not about being 'Barbie and Ken,' but rather, it's about being 'just Barbie' and 'just Ken'.

It is only when he is given the space to reflect on his feelings, combined with a genuine recognition that Barbie has repeatedly dismissed his emotions, that Ken finally begins to discover his true inner strength. In a pivotal scene where he realizes that 'Ken is me,' Ken embraces his 'Kenergy' and comes to the realization that he is 'Kenough' without the need for external validation. This transformative process extends to each of the Kens in the story, as they collectively begin to find their own voices. They come to the realization that their conflicts arose from a lack of self-understanding.

The experiences that Ken goes through, transitioning from a secondary role in Barbieland to exploring the real world and then returning to construct a patriarchal society in a predominantly pink world, represent a journey of self-discovery and personal development. Throughout these experiences, the subjective element of Ken’s perception and understanding of the world, as well as his evolving sense of self, comes to the forefront. This evolution in his perception and self-awareness is central to the narrative, as it ultimately plays a defining role in shaping Ken’s identity by the ending of the film. It underscores that Ken’s personal journey involves not only external events and actions but also a profound internal transformation and the development of his individuality.

### Existential Crisis

The process of Ken finding his identity involves several stories. In the beginning, Ken only cares about how Barbie sees him. Ken does not know about his purpose in life, other than getting Barbie’s attention. This plot thus produces another movie tagline, “She’s everything, he’s just Ken” (Abad-Santos, 2023). His vision is everything about Barbie, but he is unable to set his own direction regarding his personal interest, motivation, or dream.

The major shift happens after Barbie and Ken visit the real world. When Ken enters the real world with a society where men reign supreme. Ken is fascinated by the newfound power where people treat him with a measure of respect. People call him “sir” and ask him for advice and help, which does not happen in Barbieland. Unfortunately, Ken cannot get any job in the real world since he lacks the necessary credentials to secure employment in the real world. He becomes increasingly aware of the gender dynamics in Barbie Land, where Barbie is the central figure, and it seems like he is only created merely as an accessory in Barbie’s life. This marks the initial stage of Ken’s realization that his existence comes before any predefined essence, as he begins to break free from the constraints of societal norms, it triggers his desire for independence and domination.

As a result, Ken decides to build his patriarchal world, named Kendom. This revolution turns the pink female world into a horse-centered patriarchal sphere, where the Kens start wearing fur coats and redecorating Barbie's house into Mojo Dojo Casa House. "Boy's night" becomes a nightly occurrence, replacing the girl's night of the Barbies. This change

has a significant impact where the Barbies don't remember who they are. The Barbies are forced to hear countless melancholic guitar melodies, explanations of the meanings behind *The Godfather*, and countless condescending offers to teach them how to play sports (Mullor, 2023).

In this world, even the previous female president of Barbieland serves drinks to the Kens on the beach, and the formerly all-female Supreme Court is relegated to a cheerleading squad. This situation makes Ken, who has rarely had the chance to evolve, feel he has gained his own value and confidence since he gets more control over Kendom, a totally different situation compared to the condition before he went to the real world. This phenomenon not only emphasizes Ken's wish to take charge and make an impact in this freshly created world but also signifies a significant change in the existing system, highlighting how individuals can shape and redefine societal structures through their actions.

The exact Ken's moment of realization takes place when Barbie successfully restores the Barbieland from the patriarchal Kendom. In their conversation, Barbie clears her stances about being involved in a romantic relationship with Ken. Barbie also says that Ken is enough, just Ken. Ken does not have to set Barbie as his entire world, or his everything. Ken has to find his own path and identity, and in order to feel powerful Ken does not have to steal the women's agency (Mullor, 2023). The entire Ken's journey describes the struggle and frustration of Ken to find the meaning of his existence. It also shows how he faces the absence of his meaning and purpose, one of the main cognitive components of existential crisis (Buténaité et al., 2016). Ken's journey however involves direct conflicts with Barbie to reach the awakening moment of his true essence.

#### Meaning and Authenticity

Ken, as one of the characters in the Barbie narrative, can be regarded as a fundamentally one-dimensional character. This characterization is indicative of a lack of multifaceted depth and complexity, as well as a limited capacity for learning or character development within the

narrative framework (Fleming, 2018). An illustrative example of this characterization is evident in Ken's portrayal as 'beach Ken,' a nominal role. Ken is not required to perform his role in a literal sense, as the characters in this film are not depicted as having the ability to swim or be at risk of drowning. Consequently, his position as 'beach Ken' is merely a title with no meaning behind it. Furthermore, Ken lives in a matriarchal world, an environment that shapes him into an insecure character because all positions are occupied by Barbie. Ken's submissive nature thus makes him deal fine with this kind of situation.

Moreover, Ken's initiation of establishing Kendom was caused by his view of how appealing patriarchal values are. Ken assumes the patriarchal system places higher importance on men, in comparison with the previous stable matriarchy system applied in Barbieland and it suits him better than the other systems that exist. The problem lies in Ken's understanding of this concept. Ken perceives the patriarchal system has something important to do with horses, not highlighting other crucial values in it. He eventually loses interest when he realizes patriarchy does not prioritize horses (Freedman, 2023). This misperception only happens in Ken's case who implements the patriarchal system, different from the matriarchal world of Barbie because they have lived it before.

In the Barbie narrative, a significant development occurs in which Ken is given a storyline that pushes his character beyond the one-dimensional label, leading to personal growth and the transformation of his character into a multifaceted and more complex character. As Ken poses the question, "Is it my destiny to live and die a life of blonde fragility?", it highlights his vulnerability as a male character within the film. However, this inquiry undergoes a transformation following his journey with Barbie, evolving into the affirmative statement, "I'm just Ken, and process shapes Ken's path of self-discovery, making him a fully realized character rather than a one-dimensional figure in the narrative.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the live-action adaptation of Barbie (2023) has successfully shocked the box office records and brought a narrative that goes beyond the conventional expectations associated with the iconic character. Directed by Greta Gerwig, the movie explores existential crises, social norms, and personal growth, challenging the prejudged notions surrounding the Barbie franchise. This paper focuses on analyzing Ken, a character often overshadowed by Barbie's fame. Using a qualitative methodology, this paper examines Ken's existential crisis he experiences and the transformative journey that shapes his

identity. In doing so, the paper aims to provide a perspective on Ken's character and implies broader themes of identity, gender roles, and personal development rooted in the narrative. The analytical framework, embedded in existentialism, served as a lens through which Ken's subjective experience and existential crisis were explored. This analytical instrument provides a foundation to understand Ken's journey, starting as a one-dimensional character to a complex, self-realized individual. This concept mirrors Ken's struggle to define his identity independently of his societal expectations and his connection with Barbie.

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