Reimagining female agency: Cinematic representations in the post-#MeToo era

A qualitative analysis of female agency representation in post-#MeToo mainstream and independent cinema

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ABSTRACT

The #MeToo movement, which gained almost global significance in 2017 following widespread revelations of sexual harassment and abuse in Hollywood, marked an important cultural shift in how gendered power dynamics are understood and challenged in contemporary society. As cinema both reflects and shapes cultural norms, this thesis explores how female agency is represented in films released in the aftermath of #MeToo, examining whether such representations have evolved in response to feminist discourse or continue to reproduce traditional gender norms under a new guise. The main research question guiding this study is: *How is female agency represented in contemporary films, both mainstream and independent, released in the post-#MeToo era?* To explore this, the thesis applies a qualitative thematic analysis on three critically acclaimed films that center female protagonists: *Barbie* (2023), *Poor Things* (2023), and *The Worst Person in the World* (2021). These films were selected to capture a range of production contexts, genres, and narrative styles, providing a diverse dataset to explore the evolving cinematic portrayal of women's autonomy.

Grounded in feminist theory, gaze theory, and postfeminist media critique, the analysis explores how female characters are framed in terms of autonomy, decision-making, and personal transformation, how their actions are received and negotiated, and whether these portrayals align with individualistic postfeminist narratives or more collective visions of empowerment. The movies and their transcripts are analyzed using Atlas.ti to identify recurring themes related to agency. The findings reveal two dominant themes: (1) Female agency as a threat to patriarchal society that needs to be controlled, and (2) Female agency as a personal journey of self-discovery. While all three films center female protagonists with complex inner lives, the study finds that portrayals of agency remain entangled in tensions between empowerment and control. Even when women appear autonomous, their choices are frequently constrained by social expectations, power dynamics, or neoliberal ideals of self-management. Ultimately, the thesis concludes that while the post-#MeToo era suggests some shifts in cinematic representations,

mainstream and independent cinema continue to negotiate feminist values within a postfeminist framework that rather limits the importance of collective action. This study contributes to ongoing debates about gender representation in media and the transformative potential of the representation of feminist movements within cultural production.

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1.INTRODUCTION

In October 2017, American actress Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem." What started as a small call for support and action to raise awareness quickly turned into a global movement, bringing many hidden stories of female harassment and abuse into public view. It began with a major news report revealing numerous allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein (Khomami, 2017, paras. 1-3). But soon, personal stories began to surface from women in all industries across the world, and the hashtag #MeToo became a symbol of resistance against sexual assault and harassment from Sweden to India and Japan, challenging long-standing power structures about gender and prompting cultural shifts in the entertainment industry where the movement first gained global attention (Tambe, 2018, pp. 197-198).

Film is more than just entertainment; it is a powerful tool of communication that can shape how people think, feel, and see themselves. As visual form of public education, it helps construct meanings, identities, and social experiences (Giroux, 2011, p. 689). Cinema, especially Hollywood, has often been both a mirror and a producer of societal norms about gender, power, and identity (Mendes & Carter, 2020, pp. 1704-1705; Mulvey, 1975, pp. 11-17). Given that the #MeToo movement first gained attention within the Hollywood film industry, analyzing Hollywood cinema is crucial to understanding how portrayals of female agency have changed in response to this transformative movement. Hollywood cinema is a term often used to describe mainstream film production by major studios centered in Hollywood area in Los Angeles and is characterized by large budgets, commercial goals and the aim to reach wide audiences. Films made outside the control of major Hollywood studios, usually with lower budgets, more creative freedom, and a focus on artistic expression are called independent (Newman, 2011, pp. 2-4). Since films both mainstream and independent, reflect and influence social attitudes, they offer a valuable lens through which to study how movements like #MeToo are reflected, particularly in the ways female characters are portrayed with autonomy, choice, and voice.

This thesis explores the representation of female agency in post-#MeToo cinema, considering whether contemporary films embrace authentic empowerment or perpetuate traditional gender norms under new guises. Accordingly, the main research question is: *How is female agency represented in contemporary films, both mainstream and independent, released in the post-#MeToo era?*

1.1 Background of the study: From male and female gaze to the #MeToo era

In classic films, the dominance of the male gaze confined female characters to supporting roles with limited independent storylines (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11; Wang & Liu, 2023, p. 324). Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze explained how cinema traditionally framed women as passive objects of male desire, rather than as active agents with their own subjectivities. This cinematic framing contributed to a culture, in which female characters were often defined by their relationships to male protagonists and were visually presented in a way that rather emphasized their bodies than their voices or experiences, reflecting patriarchal power structures in which women's perspectives are marginalized or commodified (Bruneau, 2018; Lerner, 1986, p. 5-11; Mulvey, 1975, pp. 11-12; Walby, 1990, p. 20). However, feminist awareness throughout the 20th and 21st centuries led to more complex female characters and the emergence of the female gaze, which highlights women's experiences and agency and was influenced by the broader women's movement and the entry of more women into the film industry (French, 2021, pp. 53- 54; Wang & Liu, 2023, p. 326). The female gaze, seeks to reframe cinematic perspective to prioritize female subjectivity, emotions, and perspective (Dirse, 2013, pp. 21-27; French, 2021, p. 53).

Despite this progress, cinematic representation of women has been shaped by postfeminist ideas, particularly following the second wave of feminism. Postfeminism emphasizes individual empowerment over collective feminist action and often frames gender equality as a matter of personal choice (Gill, 2007, p. 148). According to Gill (2007), postfeminism celebrates female empowerment while simultaneously reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-surveillance and personal responsibility (pp. 163-164). As a result, it tends to depoliticize feminism by framing systemic gender inequalities as individual, not structural issues. This produces contradictory representations in media, where female characters are portrayed as both empowered individuals and sexual objects, mixing feminist and anti-feminist discourses and placing a greater burden on women to navigate these contradictions (McRobbie, 2009, p. 130; Press, 2011, pp. 110-111).

In October 2017, the #MeToo movement emerged as a transformative moment in contemporary feminism and became representative of fourth-wave feminism, which emphasizes the use of digital platforms to mobilize change. Although, it began in 2006 in the U.S. to support survivors of sexual violence, especially women of color, the movement gained global attention in October 2017, when *The New York Times* exposed Harvey Weinstein who at the time was the co-founder of Miramax Films and The Weinstein Company, for his extensive history of sexual harassment (Burkett & Brunell, 2019). Weinstein, once one of the most powerful figures in Hollywood and known for producing and

distributing critically acclaimed films became the catalyst for a global transformation. The revelations encouraged countless women to come forward, share their experiences with sexual harassment and assault, and unite under the hashtag #MeToo, forming a powerful collective response (Burkett & Brunell, 2019; Jaffe, 2018, p.80). The movement exposed systemic issues in various industries, beginning with film and spreading across other professional sectors, demanding accountability and institutional reform, as it renewed discussions about gendered power dynamics, workplace harassment, and the societal objectification of women's bodies (Jaffe, 2018, pp. 83-87).

As postfeminism often presents agency in individualistic terms, the #MeToo movement can be seen as a counter-narrative, highlighting the power of solidarity and shared experience. This shift in feminist discourse began to be seen in mainstream cinema, which became more sensitive to themes that emerged during MeToo and started adopting narrative and stylistic traits more often associated with independent films, such as emphasizing consent, and challenging stereotypes (Boora, 2024, pp. 21-24; Piyumali & Sandaruwan, 2022, pp. 22-34; Riebe, 2020, pp. 10-16). These changes indicated an effort within parts of the industry to respond to cultural demands for accountability and better representation, though substantial inequalities still remain. This raises an important question for media scholars: has this shift in feminist discourse been reflected in how female agency is represented in contemporary cinema? Are recent films, particularly those produced after the emergence of #MeToo, adopting elements that reflect the collective dimensions of the movement? Do they continue to operate within the contradictory framework of postfeminist ideology, presenting empowerment in depoliticized, neoliberal terms? This study aims to answer these questions and address this gap in the literature.

1.2 Overview of selected films

To address the research question, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on three contemporary, critically acclaimed films: *Barbie* (2023), *Poor Things* (2023), and *The Worst Person in the World* (2021). These films were selected based on their focus on female protagonists, exploration of themes related to female autonomy and gender dynamics, and cultural significance.

Barbie, directed by Greta Gerwig, is a mainstream production supported by a major studio (Warner Bros.) and marketed to a global audience. It represents a notable case in popular feminist media, reinterpreting a traditionally objectified cultural icon through a satirical and self-aware feminist lens. In contrast, *Poor Things*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos and based on the novel by Alasdair Gray, is a hybrid production, distributed by Searchlight Pictures, that blends elements of mainstream and independent cinema, due to its unconventional narrative structure, and arthouse, director-driven style.

The film follows the journey of a female character who defies patriarchal expectations to discover her own autonomy, pushing boundaries in both content and form. Finally, *The Worst Person in the World*, directed by Joachim Trier, is a European independent film co-produced in Norway, France, and Sweden, providing a nuanced portrayal of a young woman navigating relationships, career, and identity in modern European context (IMDb).

Each of these films offers unique perspectives on the representation of female agency and presents fertile ground for analyzing how gender roles, power, and autonomy are depicted in contemporary cinematic narratives. Together, they provide a culturally and stylistically diverse sample that allows for a nuanced exploration of how the collective and individual dimensions of feminist discourse are negotiated on screen in the post-#MeToo era. Moreover, as the selection includes films directed by both men and women, it also offers insights into how female agency is constructed from diverse gendered perspectives behind the camera. Acknowledging that media representations of gender and agency may vary across different cultural settings, the study focus is on Western cinema and societies where the #MeToo movement originated.

1.3 Academic relevance

This study contributes to academic discussions on gender representation, feminist media studies, and the relation of social movements to cultural production. While previous scholarship has explored the theoretical frameworks of the male gaze, female gaze, and postfeminist media culture (Dirse, 2013; French, 2021; Gill, 2007; Mulvey, 1975), there remains a gap in research that directly connects the collective dimensions of the #MeToo movement with female agency and its cinematic representation.

Existing literature has examined how postfeminist media often hides structural inequality by celebrating individual choice and empowerment, and how these narratives can reinforce neoliberal ideologies (Gill, 2007). Scholars such as French (2021) and Wang & Liu (2023) have explored shifts in the cinematic gaze and the growing presence of the female gaze in media. However, few studies have assessed whether these shifts relate to the collective feminist dimensions of #MeToo specifically portrayed in film.

Additionally, the research adds new knowledge to studies that investigate how mainstream and independent film production responds to the #MeToo movement. Independent films have historically offered space for critical, intersectional perspectives (Boora, 2024, pp. 21-24), and as Riebe (2020) and Piyumali & Sandaruwan (2022) suggest, the post-#MeToo era has seen some overlap between the two

spheres, particularly in the depiction of female subjectivity, intersectionality, and sexual consent. However, despite these shifts in representation, the film industry still faces challenges regarding gender equality behind the camera. Women, particularly those over 40 and from minority backgrounds, continue to be underrepresented in key creative and leadership roles across the film industry, indicating that symbolic progress in narrative content has not yet translated into structural equity in production contexts (Smith et al., 2020). By exploring how female agency is represented, this research enhances our understanding of feminist social movements' connection to representations in the film industry.

1.4 Societal relevance

Beyond its academic value, this research has significant societal relevance. Cinema, as both a mirror and a shaper of cultural values, plays a crucial role in constructing and challenging gender norms. Media representations influence public attitudes, shape identity formation, and contribute to the normalization or contestation of social practices (Mendes & Carter, 2020, pp. 1704-1705).

The way female agency is portrayed in film can affect how audiences understand concepts like empowerment, choice, and resistance. If films continue to depict women primarily through the lens of postfeminist individualism, they risk reinforcing the idea that gender inequality is more a matter of personal responsibility than a systemic issue. In contrast, if films embrace the collective values of movements like #MeToo, they have the potential to raise greater awareness of structural inequality and inspire collective action. However, as critics like Tambe (2018) have pointed out, the #MeToo movement also has its limitations, especially in how it often focuses on the experiences of white, middle-class women which gain more visibility in media and emphasizes the punishment of individual perpetrators rather than the deeper issues that offer space for abuse to happen (pp. 199-200). Therefore, these tensions highlight the importance of critically examining how the film industry responds to such movements in the narratives it produces. Given that the #MeToo movement began within the film industry, it is especially important to assess whether this cultural production sector has undergone any significant transformation.

By exploring cinematic storytelling on female agency, this study can contribute to broader conversations about the cultural significance of social movements and the responsibilities of media creators in public discourse and towards society.

1.5 Outline of the Study

This thesis begins with an introduction to the topic, presenting the research question and its academic and societal relevance. The literature review then delves into foundational and contemporary scholarship on feminist theory, gaze theory, postfeminism, and empirical studies on mainstream and independent films. Next, the methodology chapter outlines the qualitative approach used to analyze the selected films. Chapter 4 consists of a combined results and discussion section. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the results, discusses their limitations, and suggests directions for future research. Through this structure, the thesis aims to explore whether post-#MeToo cinema merely rebrands traditional gender norms or genuinely contributes to transformative feminist representation.

2.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter outlines the theoretical concepts and frameworks that inform the analysis, aiming to answer the research question. Drawing on feminist and gender theory, the concepts of the male and female gaze, frameworks of female agency, such as postfeminism and its media representation, the chapter shows the development of feminist thought across different waves, leading to its current phase shaped by the #MeToo movement. By focusing on both theories and empirical studies, this literature review offers a nuanced understanding of how film representations interact with cultural views on gender and female agency.

2.1 Defining gender, patriarchy and female agency

  2.1.1The difference between sex and gender.

Judith Butler (1988) introduces the concept of performativity to challenge the traditional view of gender as a stable, natural identity (pp. 519-528). Butler (1988) argues that gender is not something we are born with but something we continuously perform through repeated actions, such as gestures, speech, and behaviors. These performances are shaped by cultural norms and expectations, making gender seem natural when it is actually constructed. Butler (1988) questions the common separation between sex and gender, suggesting that even what we consider biological sex is interpreted through cultural meaning (pp. 519-522). This aligns closely with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) idea expressed on his *"Phenomenology of Perception"*, which sees the body not as a vessel for pre-existing identity but as the site where identity is formed and expressed. While Merleau-Ponty does not directly address gender, his concept that the body gives form to existence suggests that identity, including gender and sexuality, is shaped and developed through embodied experience (pp. 161-166).

  Genders cannot truly be labeled as real or fake, true or false, though society forces individuals to live as if gender is fixed, and clearly divided, which goes against its fluid and performative nature, supporting systems of social control (Butler, 1988, p. 528). When one does not perform their expected gender "correctly", they face both direct and subtle punishments, such as marginalization, while performing gender in ways that align with social expectations brings comfort, as if it proves that gender identity is naturally fixed. Yet, the quick shift from comfort to anxiety shows that this "truth" of gender is socially made, not biologically real (Butler, 1988, p. 528). Lorber (1991) builds on this perspective by framing gender as a social construction deeply embedded in daily life, culture, and institutions (pp. 13-16). She emphasizes that gender is constantly created and recreated through human interaction and social practices. People are divided into categories such as "men" and "women," with each group

expected to fulfill different roles and behaviors (Lorber, 1991, p. 14). These expectations shape how individuals act and how society perceives them, reinforcing gender differences that are socially, and not biologically, based (Lorber, 1991, pp. 14-15). Even things that seem natural, like caring for children or forming families, are influenced by culture, traditions, and social rules, which change across time and different societies (Lorber, 1991, pp. 13-16). Gender structures are simultaneously sources of enjoyment, affirmation, and personal identity, as well as responsible for inequality and suffering. This dual nature makes gender political, but also complex and challenging for people to navigate (Connell, 2009, p. 7).

The performativity argument although influential, has been criticized by Fraser (1997), who argues that this theory risks becoming politically vague. In short, Fraser (1997) critiques Butler's theory of performativity for being overly focused on language, disconnected from real-world political struggles and everyday experiences, and weak in offering guidance for political judgment or collective action (pp. 215-219).

2.1.2 From patriarchy to profit: The intersections of gender and capitalism

Problematizing patriarchy as a structural system that imposes and benefits from rigid gender roles, is crucial for our understanding of female agency and the broader social context in which it evolves. Walby (1990) describes patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices through which men exert dominance, oppression, and exploitation over women (p. 20). Ethnographic studies reveal that women have been systematically exploited in many societies within and beyond the West (Moore, 1977, pp. 85-87). For example, women from indigenous nomadic communities in South Africa, historically referred to as "Hottentot", were responsible for nearly all labor such as gathering food, caring for children, milking, cooking, and building shelters, yet they were denied basic rights such as eating beef, drinking fresh milk, or inheriting property (Moore, 1977, p. 86). Similarly, among Australian Aboriginal groups, women provided most of the food and cared for children but were treated as objects in marriage arrangements, subjected to genital mutilation, and sometimes killed for violating male-only rituals. Wives accused of unfaithfulness could face brutal punishments, including amputation or rape (Moore, 1977, pp. 86-87). These examples from different cultures illustrate that early societies were not based on gender equality and highlight a recurring pattern of systemic oppression against women.

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner (1986) explores how women have been systematically excluded from shaping history, ideas, laws, and symbol systems (pp. 5-11). She argues that patriarchy is a historical system, not a natural one, that developed gradually over about 2,500 years, especially in ancient Mesopotamia. Women were denied education, kept from forming theories, and

marginalized from interpreting their own experiences (Lerner, 1986, pp. 5-8). Despite women's active role in society, they were excluded from its meaning-making processes, which contributed to women's struggle for awareness and change. According to her study, patriarchy became institutionalized through the control of women's sexuality and reproduction, reinforced by laws, religion, and the state (Lerner, 1986, pp. 5-11). This institutionalized control extended into the early modern period, particularly during the witch-hunts (14th-17th century), when patriarchal dominance aligned with emerging professional and scientific authority, and women were pushed out of medicine, with their knowledge dismissed by church and state powers using "scientific" claims to justify it (Ehrenreich & English, 1973, pp. 3-9). During the witch hunts, women were condemned for being overly practical, empirical, and morally corrupt. Yet by the 19th century, the narrative had flipped to serve male interests and women were seen as too emotional, unscientific, and fragile to engage in medical work (Ehrenreich & English, 1973, p. 23). Women's status in patriarchal systems is exclusively tied to their sexual and economic dependence on men, and their identity is split into "respectable" and "not-respectable" based on their sexual ties to men (Lerner, 1986, p. 8).

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969) introduced the idea that women are turned into objects through a system he called the "exchange of women" (p. 115). He explained that in tribal societies, marriage is not seen as a union between a man and a woman, but rather as a transaction between two groups of men. Women are exchanged like goods, with their consent being meaningless. Even if a woman appears to agree to the marriage, she has no power to change the structure of this system, which is built on deep-rooted power imbalances where women are treated as objects to be traded rather than active participants (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, p. 115). Moreover, women often contribute to maintaining patriarchy, even when it works against their own interests or those of other women. This happens because many women have absorbed beliefs about their own inferiority and tend to place loyalty to their families above forming united support with other women (Lerner, 1986, p. 218).

Given the context of this study, it is essential to discuss how capitalism and patriarchy are deeply interconnected. Capitalism depends on patriarchal structures to sustain and expand itself (Bruneau, 2018, Chapter 2). Capitalism marginalized domestic labor by pushing it into the private sphere and labeling it as unproductive or "natural" work, leading to the ideal of the unpaid "housewife" and patriarchy enabled capitalism to rely on women for the majority of unpaid care and domestic work, cutting labor reproduction costs. This dynamic has been sustained by institutions like the family, which reinforce women's roles as wives and mothers, uphold class and racial hierarchies, and absorb the social and emotional costs of labor (Bruneau, 2018, Chapter 2). As traditional gender roles weaken, patriarchy

adapts by shifting control from domestic confinement to judging women by beauty and sexual desirability (Bartky, 1990, pp. 72-80). Today, a woman's worth, regardless of race and class, is often judged by how she looks and how sexually attractive she is, instead of her role as a mother or caregiver. Poor women face even more challenges, as they often lack the time and resources to keep up with the beauty standards, and society judges them both for their appearance and their poverty, which affects their opportunities, including economic mobility (Bartky, 1990, p. 72). In this context, sexual objectification, often supported by capitalism, functions as a tool of patriarchy, reducing women to their sexual parts and encouraging them to internalize the male gaze while reinforces women's alienation from their own bodies (Bartky, 1990, pp. 27-35).

This structural constraint of women's autonomy highlights the challenges for reclaiming female agency.

2.1.3 Waves of feminism and frameworks of female agency

The four waves of feminism illustrate the shifting and expanding understanding of gender equality across time, with each wave attempting to respond to the limitations of the previous ones. The first wave (19th-early 20th century) focused on basic legal rights, such as voting and property ownership, but was largely confined to white, middle-class women in the West (Mohajan, 2022, pp. 8-10). The second wave (1960s-1990s) moved beyond legal issues to socio-cultural ones, including reproductive rights, workplace equity, and protection against domestic violence. However, it was critiqued for treating women as a unified category, which was addressed by intersectional feminists, who highlighted the marginalization of women of color and the working class (Munro, 2013, p. 23). The third wave (1990s-2000s) embraced diversity, queerness, and intersectionality, emphasizing self-expression, bodily autonomy, and a rejection of gender binaries, though its focus on individual choice drew criticism for distracting from collective political action. (Mohajan, 2022, p. 14; Munro, 2013, p. 23). The fourth wave (2012-present) leverages digital tools and global activism to confront systemic injustices like sexual violence and racism, promotes inclusive language and reaffirms the need for women's autonomy in all areas of life, recognizing that fighting patriarchy remains essential for social progress. This wave has been marked by movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and climate justice activism, which have emphasized the intersectional nature of oppression (Mohajan, 2022, p. 17; Munro, 2013, p. 25).

Female agency which is at the core of this study, is a complex concept, which refers to the women's ability to act independently and make their own decisions and choices. Different theoretical frameworks explore how these choices are shaped by different social structures (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018,

pp. 1213-1214). According to Davies (1991), from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, agency arises through discourse in three key ways: first, when individuals are recognized as having a voice and presence within discourse; second, when they become authors of their own meanings and desires by taking up the language and moral values of their communities; and third, when they creatively go beyond existing meanings by combining discourses, inventing new concepts, or imagining alternative possibilities (p. 51).

Two relevant concepts are problematized in literature. First, that of neoliberal feminism in which female agency is framed as the power to make individual choices, presenting gender inequality as an individual issue and suggesting that women can achieve empowerment by altering their behaviors and decisions (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, p. 1214). Second, postfeminism, which emerged after the second wave, and offers a hybrid perspective, emphasizing strategic femininity, where women can intentionally use feminine traits and behaviors to challenge and subvert societal norms (Gill, 2007, p. 148; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, pp. 1214-1215). McRobbie (2009) argues that postfeminism functions as a form of anti-feminism that paradoxically depends on the assumption that feminism has already achieved its goals, allowing media and culture to subtly reverse the progress made during the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s (p. 130). Holmlund (2005) describes three main types of postfeminism: "chick" postfeminism, which often rejects second-wave feminism and focuses on beauty, self-care, and consumerism; "grrrl" postfeminism, which is more political and celebrates diversity; and "academic" postfeminism, which explores feminist ideas through theory, highlighting how feminism has changed across generations and how not all women relate to it in the same way (p. 116) On one hand, postfeminism acknowledges some structural constraints but on the other hand, it largely promotes individual strategic action as a means of change.

Contemporary interpretations, particularly in the context of movements like #MeToo, are inclined to non-Western perspectives suggesting that conceptualizing agency requires both individual and collective dimensions to create meaningful changes (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, pp. 1212-1213). Namely, non-Western feminist traditions highlight collective agency and the emergence of collective feminism as essential for meaningful empowerment (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, pp. 1214-1217). Postcolonial feminism links agency to ethics, emphasizing the need to acknowledge the "Other" while critiquing the political systems that shape knowledge and power (Mohanty et al., 1991, p. 10; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, p. 1215). Decolonial feminism focuses on resistance and activism, enabling women in the Global South to challenge patriarchal structures imposed by colonialism and foster community-based values (Lugones, 2010, pp. 742-759; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, p. 1215). Transnational feminism highlights collective agency

through cross-border collaboration, leading to the emergence of "collective feminism" which integrates these perspectives and acknowledges that individual efforts alone are not enough for systemic change (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, p. 1215; Yuval-Davis, 2006, pp. 275-295).

2.2 Female agency and media representation

2.2.1 The role of media in shaping gender roles

In contemporary societies, media plays a crucial role in shaping how traditional notions of gender roles and identities are reinforced or challenged, as according to the socialization model institutions like family, school, and media, are important influences of gender-appropriate behaviors (Connell, 2009, p. 95). Although they do not fully control what young people learn, they do influence outcomes, such as who gets support, and who faces punishment (Connell, 2009, pp. 95-101). Hall's (1980) encoding-decoding theory adds depth to this understanding by explaining that meaning is not simply transmitted from producer to audience, but is formed through a dynamic process, through which media creators encode messages with intended meanings, and audiences either accept, negotiate or reject those meanings (pp. 52-54).

Nowadays, people are constantly surrounded by media, and even passive exposure to television, films, magazines, and online content subtly influences how they view the world and interact with others. Media provides models for behavior and relationships, whether through soap operas, lifestyle magazines, or film characters, shaping social expectations. Repeated exposure to idealized images and advice, contributes to shaping individual identity, preferences, and perceptions of beauty and norms (Gauntlett, 2008, pp. 1-3). In this context, major cultural events like the Oscars or the Super Bowl do more than reflect existing gender roles; they actively shape them by showcasing idealized versions of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 2009, pp. 5-6). In a society dominated by visual media, idealized images of femininity have replaced religious teachings as tools of control. These beauty norms are no longer limited to elite women but are imposed across all ages and classes, turning physical appearance into a lifelong obligation (Bartky, 1990, p. 80). In this way, patriarchy continues to have power by disciplining women through their bodies.

This dynamic highlights the significant power of media in shaping public perceptions of gender and its role in society, as media does not merely mirror social realities, but is involved in the shaping, reinforcement, and sometimes challenging of gender roles. Building on this foundation, it is essential to explore how media representation, particularly through the frameworks of the male and female gaze, further shapes our understanding of gender, power, and female agency in visual culture.

2.2.2. From male to female gaze in Western cinema

In many classic Hollywood films such as *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), *To Have and Have Not* (1944), and *The River of No Return* (1954), female characters were rarely independent protagonists (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 11-12). Instead, they were often defined by their relationships to men, as wives, mothers, or daughters, serving to support the development of male leads rather than having their own narratives (Wang & Liu, 2023, p. 324). Historically, female agency in cinema has been restricted by the "male gaze" a concept introduced by Laura Mulvey (1975). Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, Mulvey (1975) argued that in a patriarchal society, visual pleasure is structured around men as active viewers and women as passive objects of that gaze (p. 11). Classical cinema has been traditionally structured around three distinctly male gazes that shape the visual and narrative experience: the angle of the camera itself, often controlled by male directors and cinematographers; the gaze of male characters within the diegesis who observe and dominate female figures and the assumed gaze of the spectator, who is presumed to be male and encouraged to identify with the male protagonist (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 11-12). Female characters were designed primarily to appeal to male desires, serving as objects of visual and erotic spectacle (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 11-12). These gazes collectively eroticize and objectify women, shaping the audience's pleasure and identification in a hierarchical, patriarchal framework. Mainstream films worldwide often reinforce these patriarchal conventions, depicting female characters through binary stereotypes such as virtuous, self-sacrificing figures or dangerous "femme fatales" with their roles being largely defined by their relationships to male protagonists (Wang & Liu, 2023, pp. 324-325).

Moreover, patriarchy manifests through the commodification of gender inequality and violence against women, repackaged as entertainment, particularly in Hollywood films (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1944, pp. 139-140). When cultural products, whether media, fashion, or entertainment, are commodified, their underlying patriarchal messages become ubiquitous, detached from their original meanings, and normalized within daily life (Collins & Rothe, 2017, p. 165). For instance, popular films, music, and advertisements often depict women as objects of desire, reinforce traditional gender roles, or glamorize male dominance and violence against women. These portrayals are packaged and sold as entertainment or lifestyle choices, making the consumption of such messages appear ordinary and even empowering, thus disguising their oppressive nature (Collins & Rothe, 2017, pp. 165-166). As a result, mainstream media and commercial portrayals of gender can significantly shape public consciousness, reinforcing the notion that unequal gender roles are not only acceptable but also natural. By integrating these values into the everyday things people watch, buy, and use, commodification masks the

mechanisms of social control, making gender inequality appear even desirable. This process ensures the persistence of traditional gender roles across generations, as individuals unconsciously internalize and reproduce these norms through their daily consumption habits. Ultimately, the market-driven reproduction of gender norms works to naturalize systemic inequality, encouraging both men and women to actively participate in their own subordination under the guise of personal choice and cultural normality (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 43).

In this context, Mulvey's (1975) influential concept of the male gaze becomes particularly relevant: female characters are often created to appeal to male desires, positioned as passive visual objects rather than active subjects (pp. 11-12). Camera angles, framing, and costume design frequently emphasize women's physical appearance and sexuality, even when such elements are unnecessary to the plot (Mulvey, 1975, pp. 11-12). This visual strategy not only objectifies women but also reinforces restrictive ideas about femininity, beauty, and behavior. Over time, such portrayals become normalized, making it difficult for viewers to critically engage with the power dynamics embedded in these representations. Thus, cinematic media, particularly under patriarchal influence, plays a central role in shaping and sustaining gender inequality.

However, the second wave of feminism influenced the portrayal of women in media, pushing for depictions that reflected greater individuality and self-awareness, reflecting a growing resistance to traditional patriarchal roles (Wang & Liu, 2023, p. 326). This transformation reflects the rise of the female gaze in cinema, a movement led by women filmmakers attempting to tell stories from their own perspectives and experiences (French, 2021, pp. 53-63). The female gaze is not merely the inverse of the male gaze but challenges traditional cinematic representation in several fundamental ways (French, 2021, p. 53). It rejects objectification by opposing male voyeurism and the masculine modes of looking, as outlined by Mulvey (1975), and instead emphasizes female subjectivity by centering women's lived experiences, emotional connection and distinct viewpoints (pp. 11-12). Rather than viewing women through the lens of others, it prioritizes female agency and communicates women's thoughts (French, 2021, pp. 53-67).

Similarly, Dirse (2013) emphasizes the role of women filmmakers in shaping a female perspective in cinema, utilizing cinematographic techniques that differ from those in male-centered storytelling to challenge traditional gender portrayals (p. 27). The female gaze subverts patriarchal norms and offers a different mode of subjectivity and representation. When women control the camera and the narrative, the dynamics shift: women onscreen become subjects of their own desire and agency, not objects of male fantasy (Dirse, 2013, pp. 23-26). For example, in films by female cinematographers or directed by

women, the act of looking can evoke empathy, intimacy, and authenticity. Audiences are invited to observe female experiences from within, gaining new insights into women's subjectivities, relationships, and sexuality on their own terms (Dirse, 2013, pp. 21-27). The female gaze adopts an alternative approach to subjects by emphasizing emotional connection, respect, and decentering the dominant gaze, aiming to establish a new cinematic language distinct from traditional male-dominated perspectives (French, 2021, pp. 53-61).

This study, among others, examines how films in the post-#MeToo era reflect the female gaze and particularly whether they prioritize female subjectivity or continue to reinforce the male gaze by tying female agency to male desires.

2.2.3 Contradictory contemporary mediated portrayals of female agency

Nowadays, popular media often present contradictory ideas about what it means to be a strong or empowered woman (Press, 2011, pp. 108-111). For example, TV shows, magazines, and movies often encourage young women to be confident, independent, and sexually free. On one hand, girls and young women are told it is good to express their sexuality and be open about their desires. But at the same time, they are often judged or shamed for doing exactly that (Press, 2011, p. 110). This paradox is clearly reflected in teen media, from films like "Clueless" to "Twilight", which simultaneously acknowledge sexual freedom while reinforcing traditional attitudes about female sexuality. Themes like virginity, how a woman's body looks, and what products a woman should buy to improve herself are repeated in media (Bartky, 1990, p. 40; Press, 2011, pp. 110-111). These messages trap women in constructed notions of what being truly empowered really means.

In the end, media does not just show what society already believes; it plays a big role in shaping those beliefs. It creates ideas about what women should look like, act like, and want. This leaves many women stuck in a difficult position: they are told they are free and empowered, but they still face old-fashioned rules and judgments. This creates a double risk where women are caught between enjoying new freedoms and still being held back by traditional expectations.

In the context of media representation, postfeminist portrayals of female agency often blend feminist and anti-feminist ideas. Gill (2007) further points out that postfeminism should not be understood just as a time period or a reaction against feminism, but as a way of thinking that highlights the mixed messages around gender today (p. 148). According to her theory (2007), postfeminist media representations emphasize femininity as tied to physical appearance, highlight self-regulation, reframe women as active subjects with desires rather than passive objects, and promote individual choice and

empowerment (pp. 149-155). Genz (2006) suggests that postfeminism enables the idea of a "female sexual agent" who takes control of her own image like an entrepreneur, while also both aligning with and distancing herself from feminist ideas (p. 335).

However, these ideals coexist with persistent inequalities related to race, class, age, sexuality, disability, and gender, revealing the limitations of postfeminism in addressing the full spectrum of women's experiences (Gill, 2007, p. 149). A big part of postfeminist thinking is the focus on personal choice and freedom, believing that as long as a woman makes a decision for herself, it is automatically empowering, even if the social systems that limit her remain unchanged (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 5). Women in postfeminist media narratives are often depicted as strong and independent while simultaneously facing intense societal control regarding their appearance and life choices. These contradictions align closely with neoliberal ideas, as both focus on individualism. The self-regulating, autonomous individual promoted by neoliberalism closely resembles the self-reinventing individual idealized in postfeminism, where women are often expected to maintain self-discipline and self-management more than men (Gill, 2007, pp. 163-164).

Popular feminism takes a lot from this postfeminist way of thinking. It is often seen in the media, promoted through celebrities, brands, and influencers, and is connected to things like confidence, empowerment, and inclusion (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p.9). This version of feminism is usually cheerful, positive, corporate-friendly and focused on personal success, rather than challenging unfair systems. It often links empowerment to buying products or making personal lifestyle choices, which can take attention away from deeper social and political issues (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, pp. 9-10). As a result, both postfeminism and popular feminism tend to focus too much on individual wins instead of fighting for broader changes.

However, popular feminism differs from postfeminism in some ways. While postfeminism often acts like feminism is no longer needed, popular feminism proudly uses feminist language and ideas, especially in public or online spaces (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 13). This visibility can give feminism cultural value or status. Still, this version of feminism is sometimes only superficial, as it tends to avoid conflict and is shaped in ways that can be easily marketed or sold (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 13). Therefore, popular feminism both continues and updates postfeminist ideas, supporting feminism in name, but leaving its deeper goals behind.

2.2.4 Cinematic representations and the #MeToo

Cinema today can broadly be divided into two spheres: mainstream and independent. Mainstream cinema is commercially driven, designed to appeal to the broadest possible audience, following standardized formulas for scriptwriting, casting, visual style, and promotion. Independent cinema refers to films produced outside Hollywood or major studios, typically with smaller budgets, greater artistic control, and fewer commercial constraints, characterized by oppositionality to mainstream norms. (Newman, 2011, pp. 2-4). Independent films play a vital role in driving social change and increasing cultural awareness by questioning dominant narratives and presenting more authentic and detailed portrayals of marginalized communities (Boora, 2024, pp. 21-22).

Independent films tend to move beyond simplified portrayals by highlighting intersectionality, that is the way gender, race, sexuality, and other identities overlap and influence each other (Boora, 2024, p. 24). They offer more realistic depictions of people's lived experiences, showing how systems of power like patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity interact to shape daily life, especially for those who face multiple forms of marginalization. Notable examples such as *Moonlight (2016)*, *The Watermelon Woman (1996)*, and *Pariah (2011)* have expanded cultural conversations by telling stories centered on characters navigating life, while trying to manage various aspects of their identity. These films invite viewers to encounter complex social realities, promoting greater empathy and deeper understanding (Boora, 2024, p.27). For instance, *Pariah* (2011) tells the story of a young Black woman struggling with her identity as a lesbian while dealing with the expectations of her conservative family. Through her personal journey, the film offers a moving exploration of Black queer identity and demonstrates how race, gender, and sexuality intertwine in shaping one's experience (Boora, 2024, pp. 24-26).

On the other hand, the industry's white male leadership has led mainstream cinema to present stereotypical or exclusionary portrayals of marginalized communities which include racial minorities along with LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities and women (Patel, 2024, p. 43). Classic stories often depict women sacrificing their needs for men (Wang & Liu, 2023, p. 324). Even in more recent years many mainstream U.S. superhero films reinforce traditional gender roles by showing female characters as attractive, sexualized, and often needing rescue, which promotes the idea of male dominance and female dependence (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015, pp. 212-219). While some films feature strong and capable superheroines, these characters are often still sexualized, sending mixed messages about women's empowerment. As a result, strength in women is often only accepted when combined with sexual appeal, limiting the full impact of these empowering portrayals.

Under the influence of the #MeToo movement, mainstream cinema has begun to incorporate elements that were once more characteristic of independent films. This shift is particularly evident in how sexual encounters are depicted on screen. Filmmakers across both mainstream and indie productions are increasingly emphasizing explicit communication of consent and portraying mutual respect in intimate scenes (Riebe, 2020, pp. 9-10). Focus group participants who viewed sexually intimate scenes from post-#MeToo films such as *Lady Bird* (Greta Gerwig, 2017), *Booksmart* (Olivia Wilde, 2019), *Dude* (Olivia Milch, 2018), *Atomic Blonde* (David Leitch, 2017), *Hot Summer Nights* (Elijah Bynum, 2017), and *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham, 2018) recognized a heightened awareness of how verbal consent is portrayed, identifying it as a key influence of the movement (Riebe, 2020, pp. 10-16).

Second, #MeToo helped to break down reductive stereotypes about women, moving away from the old dichotomy of female characters as either "virgins or whores" (Riebe, 2020, p. 10). Films now present a wider variety of emotionally rich female characters who display assertiveness and vulnerability alongside sexual confidence without facing objectification or judgment (Riebe, 2020, pp. 10-11). This narrative shift was especially visible in films released after 2017, as noted by viewers who saw new opportunities for women to be portrayed as multi-layered individuals instead of tropes.

Supporting these findings, other empirical research highlights similar trends in both mainstream and independent films released in the post-#MeToo era. Films like *The Assistant* (2019) and *Late Night* (2019) exemplify a broader cultural transformation within the film industry. According to Piyumali and Sandaruwan (2022), these works reflect a growing awareness of sexual harassment and power imbalances, while also promoting survivor empowerment. They also highlight the importance of legal reforms, corporate accountability, and intersectionality, while portraying the emotional toll of systemic inequality and the need for mental health awareness (Piyumali & Sandaruwan, 2022, pp. 22-34).

However, according to the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, in 2019, gender inequality remained a major issue in mainstream cinema, with only 34% of speaking characters being female and just 14 of the top 100 films featuring gender-balanced casts. Although the number of female leads reached a record high at 43%, women, especially those over 40, were still significantly underrepresented, both on screen and behind the camera. (Smith et al., 2020).

Taking all the above into consideration, in an era where postfeminist ideologies and representations dominate, questions around the depth and authenticity of female agency in media become increasingly complex. While women's visibility has grown and empowerment narratives are everywhere, it is crucial to explore portrayals in after MeToo movies and reflect on whether they represent genuine autonomy or merely repackage traditional norms under the guise of choice and

individuality. This thesis addresses these concerns through a qualitative content analysis of three post-#MeToo released movies, as outlined in the following chapter.

3.METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the research methodology used to carry out the analysis for this study. It explains the reasoning behind the chosen method and justifies why it was considered the most appropriate approach for addressing the research question. Section 3.1 introduces qualitative thematic analysis and explains its suitability as the research method. Section 3.2 presents the data collection and sampling strategy employed in the study, including a description of the films selected for analysis and the criteria used to determine the final sample. Section 3.3 outlines how the study's main concepts were operationalized to effectively conduct the analysis. Section 3.4 gives a detailed explanation of how the data analysis was carried out in two main steps: a pilot phase and a full analysis phase. Section 3.5 reflects on the research design's validity and reliability, outlining the measures taken to enhance the study's consistency and trustworthiness. It also addresses the researcher's positionality and reflexivity throughout the research process.

3.1 Description and justification of methodology

To address this study's exploratory research question, a methodology that allows the identification and interpretation of the meanings embedded in films regarding female agency is required. A qualitative approach is well-suited for this purpose, as it seeks to make sense of and analyze social phenomena by interpreting their meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Unlike quantitative methods, which rely on numerical data, qualitative research embraces subjectivity and contextual understanding, making it ideal for analyzing cultural products like films, where meaning is often constructed through narrative, dialogue, and visual elements (Flick, 2018, pp. 4-5). Qualitative research is inherently interdisciplinary, interpretive, political, and theoretical, relying on language to explore and understand concepts and highlighting multiple perspectives and truths while recognizing the researcher's active involvement in the research process (Brennen, 2017, p. 4). Ultimately, qualitative content analysis is a research method that enables the identification of meanings within data by interpreting the underlying messages it conveys, aiming to answer research objectives (Williamson et al., 2018, p. 464). Analysis in qualitative research involves breaking down the data into smaller, meaningful segments and then reorganizing them to uncover patterns, relationships, and insights that address the research question. This process helps transform raw data into structured findings that reflect the core themes of the study (Boeije, 2010, p. 94).

Namely, this study uses thematic analysis to examine how female agency is represented in post-#MeToo era films. Thematic analysis is a flexible and widely used method in qualitative research that

involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring patterns or themes within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). These themes help organize and describe the data in rich detail while also allowing researchers to interpret various aspects of the research topic. Visual and narrative content in mass media, including cinema, can be thematically analyzed to uncover recurring patterns and deeper societal messages (Joffe et al., 2012, p. 211). In this case, the dataset consists of three carefully selected films that center female protagonists, ideal to explore different narrative constructions of agency. By applying thematic analysis to the selected films, this study reveals underlying themes and patterns regarding how filmmakers present and frame female agency. This includes examining how female characters demonstrate autonomy, resistance to patriarchal norms, personal growth, and decision-making power, as well as examining how these expressions of agency are received by the social environments surrounding the protagonists. The analysis also considers how these elements intersect with postfeminist ideologies and the broader cultural frame of the #MeToo movement.

3.2 Sample and data collection

This study employs a purposeful sampling strategy to explore the representation of female agency in mainstream and independent post-#MeToo films. The following films were selected based on their nuanced focus on female autonomy, critical acclaim, and representation across different genres and industry contexts.

Barbie (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, is a mainstream English language fantasy-comedy live-action film produced by Warner Bros. With a high production budget of approximately 145$ million, a runtime of 114 minutes, and widespread media attention, it can illustrate how female agency is represented in commercial cinema by a female director. The film reimagines the iconic Barbie doll allegedly through a feminist lens, critiquing gender norms and societal expectations around them. Its cultural impact is underscored by multiple Academy Award nominations and Golden Globe wins, making it a relevant case for examining how female autonomy is framed within a traditionally male-dominated industry (IMDb, 2023).

Poor Things (2023), is an English-language film, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, and based on Alasdair Gray's 1992 novel, that blurs the line between mainstream and independent cinema. Although distributed by Searchlight Pictures, a subsidiary of Disney, the film maintains qualities typical of independent film, such as a surreal visual style and an abstract-philosophical narrative. With a production budget of around 35 $ million and a runtime of 141 minutes, it tells the story of a woman's radical journey of self-discovery, challenging patriarchal control in inventive ways, reimagining female

self-determination. It has received widespread acclaim, winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, earning several Oscar nominations and wins, and achieving an average Metacritic rating of 88 out of 100 (IMDb, 2023).

The Worst Person in the World (2021), directed by Joachim Trier, is a character-driven, Norwegian-language, romantic drama and a clear example of independent cinema. Produced by smaller Scandinavian companies and premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, it gained critical acclaim and was nominated for the Palme d'Or. The film had a modest budget of approximately $5 million and a runtime of 128 minutes and intimately explores a woman's evolving sense of identity, relationships, and agency within a modern European context. Its introspective storytelling provides a contrast to more commercial approaches, offering a realistic lens on the complexities of contemporary womanhood (IMDb, 2021).

The selection and combination of the three films was guided by clear criteria to ensure both the relevance to the research question and a systematic approach to the overall research process (Schreier, 2011, p. 171). The films were chosen after extensive research on IMDb from a pool of releases based on the following inclusion criteria: First, the film had to focus on female lived experiences, decision-making, and autonomy, allowing for an in-depth analysis of how agency is negotiated in cinema. Second, the main character had to be female, as the study centers on the representation of female agency, and films with female protagonists provide a direct lens to analyze female autonomy and decision-making. Third, the films had to be produced after 2017 and released after 2020 to ensure that their production period overlapped with the cultural shifts following the #MeToo movement, increasing the likelihood that they reflect evolving conversations around gender, power, and female agency. Additionally, a variety of genres and industry models, both commercial and independent, were prioritized to provide a well-rounded analysis across different cinematic styles and production contexts. After this preliminary assessment, critical recognition was considered in the final selection, as films that have received significant critical acclaim are more likely to reflect and drive societal narratives.

Several exclusion criteria were also applied to maintain a focused and coherent analysis. Animated films were excluded to ensure a consistent approach to performance, realism, and narrative style. Films without accessible English transcripts were also excluded, as a complete and accurate textual analysis requires verified dialogue and script availability. Additionally, films set primarily in non-Western contexts were not considered. Given that the #MeToo movement originated in Hollywood and has largely interacted with Western media industries, focusing on Western narratives ensures a more direct engagement with the movement's relation with cinematic portrayals of female agency.

In view of the above the three films ideally combine several key selection dimensions: they all center on female protagonists and explicitly engage with questions of autonomy, identity, and self-determination; they reflect varied industry models from mainstream studio (*Barbie*), hybrid/art-house (*Poor Things*), to independent cinema (*The Worst Person in the World*); and they represent different genres (fantasy-comedy, surreal period drama, romantic drama), allowing for an exploration of how genre influences the portrayal of female agency. Each film also reflects a distinct cultural and industrial positioning, thus providing a holistic view of how the post-#MeToo cinematic landscape negotiates female subjectivity. *Barbie* is directed by a woman (Greta Gerwig), while *Poor Things*, and *The Worst Person in the World* by a male director (Yorgos Lanthimos, Joachim Trier respectively), adding an additional dimension for analyzing the impact of directorial perspective. All three films have achieved critical acclaim, substantial international visibility, and award recognition, making them not only culturally significant but also influential in discourses around gender and agency. Therefore, their combination provides a multi-layered foundation for analyzing female agency in post-#MeToo Western cinema.

An essential part of any research is data collection. The primary data for this study consists of films, their transcripts and dialogues. Full transcripts, translated into English, were obtained from publicly available credible script databases. The film scripts used for analysis in this study were obtained through an online search using the keywords "[Movie name] + script." As no official versions were publicly available, unofficial scripts were downloaded from two websites: *Deadline.com* for *Barbie* and *Poor Things*, and *Scrapsfromtheloft.com* for *The Worst Person in the World*. To ensure the accuracy of these scripts, the researcher carefully cross-checked against the corresponding film by watching the movies and verifying the dialogue line by line. This process confirmed that the transcripts were consistent with the spoken lines in the films. After their verification, the scripts were converted into PDF format and imported into Atlas.ti to facilitate thematic analysis.

3.3 Operationalization

Female agency refers to a woman's capacity to act intentionally, make independent choices, and have control over her life circumstances while navigating and responding to the broader social structures that influence and often constrain those choices (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, pp. 1213-1214). In this study, female agency is explored by analyzing the transcripts and following the character development of the female protagonists in the selected films. Specific focus is placed on key elements such as autonomy, personal growth, self-expression, and decision-making, as these are central indicators of how agency is

constructed and represented in cinematic storytelling. The analysis also considers how the surrounding environment and broader society react to the female characters' actions, highlighting the social dynamics that support or challenge agency. This involves looking closely at how other characters, such as family members, romantic partners, friends, or authority figures, respond to the protagonist's choices and behavior. For example, do others encourage her independence, or do they attempt to control, silence, or punish her for stepping outside traditional gender roles? Scenes showing approval, resistance, conflict, or support are carefully examined to understand the social pressures or reinforcements at play.

To evaluate autonomy, the analysis explores whether the protagonist drives the narrative forward through her own goals and actions or if she exists primarily in response to male characters and their needs. A character's independence is considered more significant when she initiates essential plot developments, takes risks, or makes meaningful life choices without relying on male intervention (Davies, 1991, p. 51; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, pp. 1213-1214). Personal growth and self-expression are observed through moments in the films where the female characters express their desires, pursue self-discovery, resist external pressures, give voice to their feelings, or challenge societal norms, such as questioning traditional gender roles, resisting romantic expectations, or choosing career paths over conventional domestic roles. These moments highlight a character's internal evolution and depict a deeper level of agency within the story.

Decision-making is also critically analyzed to examine whether the protagonist's choices are self-determined or shaped by societal expectations, relational obligations, or male validation. For example, if a character repeatedly adjusts her decisions to conform to social norms or to gain approval from men, her autonomy may be compromised, even if she is presented as outwardly "strong". The extent to which female characters are allowed to pursue their goals without punishment or narrative suppression (e.g. through personal downfall) is also examined.

Furthermore, the study explores the ideological framing of female agency to reflect on its relationship to a postfeminist or a more collective feminist framework. Postfeminist portrayals, often emphasize individual empowerment through personal choice, physical appearance, and self-regulation, framing empowerment as a private journey rather than a social or political movement (Gill, 2007, p. 149). These representations often suggest that women are already empowered and that success lies in personal transformation rather than systemic change. In contrast, collective feminist narratives, particularly in the context of the #MeToo movement, tend to emphasize solidarity among women, activism, and resistance to patriarchal structures, highlighting the importance of community support, and collective action in achieving meaningful empowerment (Jaffe, 2018, pp. 83-87). This ideological

distinction is examined by analyzing whether the protagonist's empowerment is depicted as an isolated, individualized journey of self-discovery or if it emerges in relation to broader feminist values and collective experiences. Through this approach, the study aims to illuminate how different frameworks shape the representation of female agency in post-#MeToo cinema and whether these films reinforce, challenge, or negotiate dominant gender ideologies.

3.4 Description of data processing and analysis

In social science research, the term *pilot study* can have two distinct meanings. It may refer to a feasibility study, which is essentially a smaller-scale version or test run conducted in preparation for the main research project (Polit et al., 2001, p. 467). Alternatively, it can describe the initial testing or trial use of a specific research tool or method (Baker, 1994, pp. 182-183). One of the key benefits of carrying out a pilot study is that it can provide early insights into potential problems in the main study, such as flaws in research design, issues with the implementation of procedures, or the unsuitability or complexity of the chosen methods or instruments (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). In this thesis, the pilot phase served both purposes: it acted as a preliminary trial of the method and also as a way to test and refine the research tool to ensure its appropriateness for the analysis, as the researcher conducted a pilot study to ensure the suitability of the thematic analysis process, particularly concerning coding and theme identification. The pilot study was conducted on the first part (e.g., corresponding to five pages of transcripts) of all three movies, following the six phases of thematic analysis, and finalized the coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After assessing the feasibility of the method, the complete analysis was conducted following the same six phases. An inductive approach was used to guide the analysis, allowing themes and concepts to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed by pre-existing theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 83-84), although as explained in operationalization section some key concepts and the research question informed the coding. At the same time, the researcher remained mindful of earlier theoretical discussions on female agency, the male and female gaze, postfeminism, and the #MeToo movement.

 First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data. The films were reviewed multiple times, and transcripts were thoroughly examined to ensure they accurately reflect the audio, maintaining reliability in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 87-88; Silverman, 2011, p. 366). In the second phase, meaningful fragments related to female agency were coded using Atlas.ti to generate initial codes, such as "patriarchal protection as disguised control", "refusal of traditional feminity*" and "female solidarity as threat to patriarchal control" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 88-89). In applying thematic analysis, I

generated initial codes by closely engaging with both the transcripts and the visual elements of each film. Attention was given not only to dialogue and narrative progression but also to how meaning was conveyed through cinematic techniques such as costume, makeup, framing, and body language. For instance, in *Barbie* (2023), Barbie's breakdown is visually marked by her appearing without makeup. This visual shift was coded as indicative of resistance to conventional femininity. During the thematic analysis, I developed a total of approximately 600 initial codes in over 400 quotations across the three films, as illustrated in Appendix A.

Next, following constant comparison of the data and initial codes to ensure research validity, related codes were grouped into two broader themes that captured recurring patterns across the films (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 90-91; Silverman, 2011, p. 376). The themes, each with two subthemes, captured recurring ideas around first, "female agency as a threat in patriarchal society" and second, "female agency as a personal journey to self-discovery". Subthemes reflect more nuanced expressions within each theme, allowing for a deeper exploration of how agency is negotiated and expressed. The emerging themes were then reviewed again to ensure coherence and consistency across the dataset and to confirm that they effectively captured the meaning of the data. Subsequently, the themes' focus was refined reflecting key aspects of female agency represented in the data in line with the RQ. The procedure ended in a report that demonstrates how the findings align with the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 91-93). Throughout the process, I moved back and forth between steps, constantly refining the codes and themes to better fit the data and theory. In Appendix B, there is a table presenting the themes, subthemes and indicative initial codes.

3.5 Validity, reliability and positionality

To maintain reliability, I adopted a structured approach to thematic analysis. This included repeatedly engaging with the data by watching the movies and reading the scripts, applying clear and consistent coding procedures, and conducting ongoing comparisons to maintain interpretive consistency (Silverman, 2011, pp. 366-367). The use of the software Atlas.ti, along with thorough documentation of each step in the analytical process, contributes to the transparency and replicability of the study (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). To ensure validity, the analysis was grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks and supported by established academic literature, while the stage of initial coding involved constant comparison of data fragments to maintain consistency (Silverman, 2011, pp. 374-377). Nevertheless, I recognize that, as with all qualitative research, thematic analysis is inherently interpretive, and my own perspectives may have influenced the way themes were identified and understood.

Recognizing the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, this section outlines the researcher's positionality and how it may influence the interpretation and analysis of postfeminist discourses and representations of female agency in contemporary cinema (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). The researcher identifies as a young woman with an academic background in media studies, situated within a Western European cultural and educational context. Her familiarity with Western cinematic representations influenced the decision to focus exclusively on Western and European films in this study. This choice was shaped by both practical considerations, such as easier access to these films and a desire to engage with cultural narratives she is most familiar with through her academic and personal experience. As a result, films set in non-Western contexts were not included, which was considered that allows for a more direct examination of the movement's relation to cinematic representations of female agency, since the #MeToo movement originated in Hollywood and has primarily impacted Western media industries.

The researcher's engagement with feminist discourse, both academically and personally, has shaped her sensitivity to issues surrounding gender representation, power dynamics, and media influence. Her familiarity with current feminist debates, including those around the #MeToo movement and postfeminist contradictions, enhances her ability to critically assess the nuanced portrayals of female autonomy in film. However, this same familiarity may also include certain assumptions or expectations about what constitutes "empowered" female characters, which could shape how agency is identified or interpreted. While recognizing and supporting the importance of individual freedom and the right of women to define their own paths, the researcher maintains a distance from postfeminist discourses that frame empowerment solely through personal choice, often detached from the broader social inequalities that continue to shape women's lives. She remains cautious toward celebratory or surface-level representations of female empowerment that do not situate individual autonomy within the larger context of systemic oppression and collective feminist struggle.

By acknowledging her own interpretive cultural positions, the researcher aims to remain critically aware of how her perspective may shape the analysis. Transparency about these influences contributes to the trustworthiness of the study and ensures that the interpretations offered are grounded in both the data and a clear understanding of the researcher's point of view.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the thematic analysis, structured around two analytical themes that respond to the main research question concerning how female agency is represented and negotiated in the films *Barbie, Poor Things,* and *The Worst Person in the World.* The first theme "*A threat in patriarchal society that needs to be controlled*", highlights how female autonomy is perceived as threatening to patriarchal structures and consequently needs to be controlled. The second theme, "*Female agency as a personal journey of self-discovery*", focuses on the internal struggle and development of agency, as characters reject pre-defined roles and explore their desires, identities, and futures on their own terms and through lived experiences. These themes are summarized in Appendix B.

4.1 A threat in patriarchal society that needs to be controlled

Across all three films, the acts and choices of women are not neutral. They are perceived as subversive and dangerous to the status quo and are often met with implicit or direct attempts of control, by men, institutions, or even other women who participate in upholding the dominant order. This shared representation exposes a cultural "truth": female agency remains a disruptive force in societies that depend on women's compliance thus, it needs to be managed, redirected, or suppressed to preserve the balance of patriarchy. The fact that the protagonists live in patriarchal contexts is evidenced by the way social norms and expectations are shaped by male authority and privilege. Within these systems, women are valued for their conformity, passivity, and availability, and when they move away from these roles, they are punished or controlled, which confirms that patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby, 1990, p. 20). This overarching theme is explored through two subthemes: one examining the mechanisms of explicit control, and the other investigating the more subtle, implicit forms of control that society uses to negotiate female agency.

4.1.1 Explicit control

Across *Barbie, Poor Things*, and *The Worst Person in the World*, female agency is consistently portrayed as destabilizing force to patriarchal society that needs to be controlled, either through objectification, confinement, or even violence, otherwise the women protagonists can become dangerous to the established societal order.

Objectification is a repeated pattern of control seen across the dataset. In *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023), when the protagonist Barbie, often referred to as "Stereotypical Barbie" enters the real world,

she is quickly treated as an object rather than a person. Men at the construction site from where she passes, make sexual comments about her body. She says she feels uncomfortable and senses "an undertone of violence" showing that the attention is not flattering but threatening. This moment signals the shift from Barbie's female-centered fantasy world into a patriarchal society where male entitlement to women's bodies is normalized. As Bartky (1990) explains, sexual objectification reduces women to their bodies or sexual parts, encouraging internalization of the male gaze and reinforcing women's alienation from their bodies and subordination. The way her body is looked at and commented, reflects this broader cultural structure in which a woman's visibility often invites surveillance of her body, and becomes a way to limit her freedom and make her feel threatened. In *Poor Things* (Lanthimos, 2023*)*, Baxter, a scientist who resurrects Bella by transferring the brain of her unborn child into her adult body and becomes her paternal figure, justifies the surveillance and confinement of Bella at home by declaring, "I must control the conditions or our results will not be pure," reducing Bella to an object of scientific observation rather than a person with agency. Even her origins are a product of bodily violation, as her brain is replaced without consent, turning her body into a patriarchal experiment. Baxter uses the language of science to legitimize his control, effectively masking patriarchal dominance behind the guise of science and progress. This echoes historical instances, during and after the medieval period, such as the witch hunts, where science and professional authority were weaponized to discredit women and suppress them in the name of progress and legitimacy (Ehrenreich & English, 1973, pp. 3-9).

Although Bella was created from the beginning to obey, she does not, and her desire to explore the world is constantly being met with resistance by her environment. For instance, Baxter forcibly chloroforms her when she insists on going outside the car, a violent act of physical and symbolic silencing. Confinement and restriction are shown as powerful tools used to silence female agency in *Barbie*, too. When Barbie comes to the "real world", the male executives at Mattel, a global toy corporation that launched Barbie, decide she needs to be controlled. The moment the male CEO says, "This sounds like a job for the box," and orders, "No one rests until this doll is back in a box!", makes it clear that they see Barbie's freedom as a threat. The box symbolizes a return to her old, limited role where she is passive, pretty, and silent, and reflects the imposition of gender norms that capitalism and patriarchy jointly enforce to maximize profit. As Bruneau (2018) argues, capitalism has not only accommodated patriarchal norms but has actively benefited from and reinforced them to maximize profit, redefining the role of women by framing domestic labor as unproductive or "natural" work, creating the ideal of the unpaid "housewife". Similarly, when Barbie is in a box, literally and symbolically,

then profit is guaranteed. It represents a system trying to shut down her personal growth and curiosity by forcing her back into a version of herself that is easy to manage and easy to sell.

Physical and psychological violence, as well as seemingly harmless advice, are often used as means of control. For instance, in *Poor Things*, Duncan, Bella's lover, violently tries to suppress Bella and make her conform, advising her to limit her speech to decorative, agreeable phrases during an event. When Bella expresses intellectual curiosity and begins reading philosophy, Duncan responds by throwing her books overboard, saying she is losing her "adorable way of speaking". Her intellectual growth is viewed as a betrayal of the roles the men have assigned her, echoing how, historically, women were denied education, and were excluded from interpreting their own experiences, but also how patriarchal control was institutionalized during the witch-hunts in medieval and early modern periods of European history, when women's knowledge was suppressed (Ehrenreich & English, 1973, pp. 3-9; Lerner, 1986, pp. 5-8). Alfie, her ex-husband who attempts to force her back into her old life, embodies the most brutal expression of patriarchal domination in *Poor Things*, treating Bella as a possession to be managed, reshaped, and ultimately subdued. His insistence that "You are mine and that is the long and short of it" reveals a mindset rooted in possessive masculinity, where love is indistinguishable from ownership (Butler, 1988, p. 528; Lévi-Strauss ,1969, p. 115; Lorber, 1991, p. 14). When Bella tries to leave him, Alfie is planning a clitoridectomy to "calm her," using medicine as a tool of suppression of her agency, as her sexual pleasure is viewed not as her right, but as an inconvenience to be eliminated, which reminds of the ethnographic examples provided by Moore (1977) where genital mutilation, and domestic violence were common mechanisms to assert male power over women in many tribal societies throughout history (pp. 86-87). The doctor's cold precision "like a button on a suit", when he talks about the procedure of clitoridectomy, adds an institutional layer, reinforcing how systems of power and namely science collaborate to regulate female bodies, reminding again the medieval witch hunts, when science and professional authority were used to the oppression of women (Ehrenreich & English, 1973, pp. 3-9). This violence also reflects what Lerner (1986) identifies as the historical roots of patriarchy: the institutional control of female sexuality and reproduction through law, religion, and state power (pp. 5-11). Bella's punishment for defying gender roles shows how such control persists. As Butler (1988) argues, gender is performative, not fixed, yet those who fail to perform it "correctly" face social and physical discipline (p. 528). Bella's resistance, then, reveals both the violence used to maintain patriarchal order and the cracks in its supposed naturalness.

Moreover, heterosexual marriage is weaponized as a contractual tool of control, which is less about love and more about ensuring a woman's continued surveillance and containment. In *Poor Things*,

Baxter and Max even negotiate Bella as if she were a legal asset, drafting contracts that control her movements and future, reminding of what Lévi-Strauss (1969) called the *"exchange of women."* (p. 115). Bella is passed between men through legal contracts and marriage proposals, showing how the commodification of women remains central to eternal patriarchy. Later, Duncan also uses the idea of marriage not to show love, but to control Bella. He tries to lock her into a relationship and when Bella refuses to belong to him fully, he becomes angry and violent, shouting, "I will fucking throw you overboard!". His sudden offer of marriage is not about care but about possession. He wants to make sure she stays with him, even if she no longer wants to. When Bella does not act the way he wants, he threatens her, showing that his version of love is actually about power and control. Marriage becomes another tool of trying to trap her.

In *The Worst Person in the World* (Trier, 2021), advice and pressure to embrace motherhood are explicitly used as tools to constrain female agency, particularly in the emotionally charged exchanges between Julie and her partner, Aksel (see Figure 1). When he says, "You're almost 30. Not a bad age to have kids" and emphasizes "I'm 44. I want to go to the next level. With you.." he is not just expressing desire but he is putting pressure on Julie by tying age, having children, and being in a relationship to a sense of urgency, considering Julie's hesitation as a sign of immaturity. Similarly, in *Poor Things*, Alfie declares that a woman's "life's work is children," reducing Bella's identity to biological reproduction controlled by men. By planning to remove her sexual autonomy and "plant a seed," he claims ownership over her body and future, turning motherhood into a duty imposed by male will rather than a personal choice. Together, these examples reveal how motherhood can be weaponized to limit women's freedom. By tying their worth to fertility and their timeline to male-defined milestones, female agency is considered as selfish or misguided if it resists reproductive expectation.

Figure 1: Julie and Aksel discuss the possibility of motherhood.

Finally, sexual judgment is also used as a tool for limiting female agency. In *Poor Things*, when Bella openly reveals to Duncan that she has engaged in sex work, he reacts with violent ego collapse, calling her a "whore" a "monster" and even a "demon sent from hell" revealing that what he truly fears is not her sexuality, but her independence. A man's identity, in patriarchal society, collapses in the face of a woman who no longer depends on him or needs his validation to enter sexual relations. Duncan's final outburst showcases the patriarchal horror provoked by Bella's emancipation, shouting she is "a demon... in an alluring body that cannot be satiated and a mind that picks people apart stitch by stitch." No longer able to control her through "affection", Duncan resorts to metaphorical violence, portraying Bella not as a woman but as a demonic, hypersexual, and intellectually dangerous monstrous creation. Her sexual autonomy is framed as unnatural and destructive, drawing on tropes that connect female desire with moral corruption, while her intellect becomes a threat, as if critical thinking itself was a violent act, reminding again the medieval witch hunts (Ehrenreich & English, 1973, pp. 3-9).

4.1.2 Implicit control

Across the dataset, female agency is often represented as a threat that must be neutralized, not only explicitly, but also through manipulation, redefinition, and ideological control. Whether through patriarchal logic, romantic coercion, or psychological invalidation, male figures work to undermine women's autonomy while appearing reasonable, loving, or protective. In this subtheme, female agency is framed as dangerous to women themselves, justifying its suppression under the guise of care, concern, or moral guidance.

In *Barbie* (2023), female agency is also portrayed as a destabilizing force that must be subtly controlled, especially through Barbie's relationship with Ken. Ken's transformation of Barbie Land into a patriarchal regime stems not from a desire for simple power, but from a deeper fear of women's autonomy. His pride in declaring that Barbie "crumbled" after hearing "the impeccable immaculate seamless garment of logic that is Patriarchy" reveals a calculated effort to dominate female agency not through violence, but through ideological and emotional manipulation. By presenting patriarchy as a rational, inevitable system, Ken creates an illusion of order that attempts to erase Barbie's independence. This manipulation is most clearly seen in the line, "I like not having to make any decisions," spoken by a brainwashed Barbie, reflecting Lerner's (1986) argument that women may actively participate in supporting patriarchal structures due to internalized beliefs of inferiority (p. 218). Here, surrender is framed as serenity, and the burden of choice is redefined as unnecessary and unwanted. Ken's regime takes away the professional roles and critical thought of Barbies, convincing

them that such losses are good for them, reframing female submission as voluntary and rewriting their desires to align with male control.

A similar strategy is evident in *Poor Things*. Alfie, Baxter, Max, and Duncan each use emotional manipulation to contain Bella's agency. Alfie insists she must stay indoors "until she recovers," pretending to care while secretly planning to harm her, and thus through implicit control attempts to open a path towards explicit control. Baxter locks her in the house for "her safety" creating a world that appears "entertaining and safe" but is actually a prison. Max only proposes to Bella after agreeing with Baxter that she has to keep living with him, redefining emotional possession as romantic commitment. Duncan, too, imposes his dominance under the guise of affection, trapping Bella into a ship, and calling it a "romantic jape", then tries to reconcile by grabbing her tightly, despite her visible anger and clear rejection of his embrace (see Figure 2). Alfie even rewrites her suicide attempt, insisting she "fell while looking for fish.." thus erasing her pain and rewriting her reality.

 In all cases, female agency is perceived as a threat to the male characters' control, and their responses are to disguise restriction as care. These men do not just rely on force; instead, they use logic and affection to frame domination as benevolence. What makes this control so insidious is that it redefines agency as instability and safety as submission, reshaping women's sense of self to fit a narrative that maintains male power. Ultimately, their decisions are framed as being "for her own good", reinforcing capitalist-patriarchal ideologies of the protective male provider of material goods (survival) and the obedient female dependent (Bruneau, 2018).
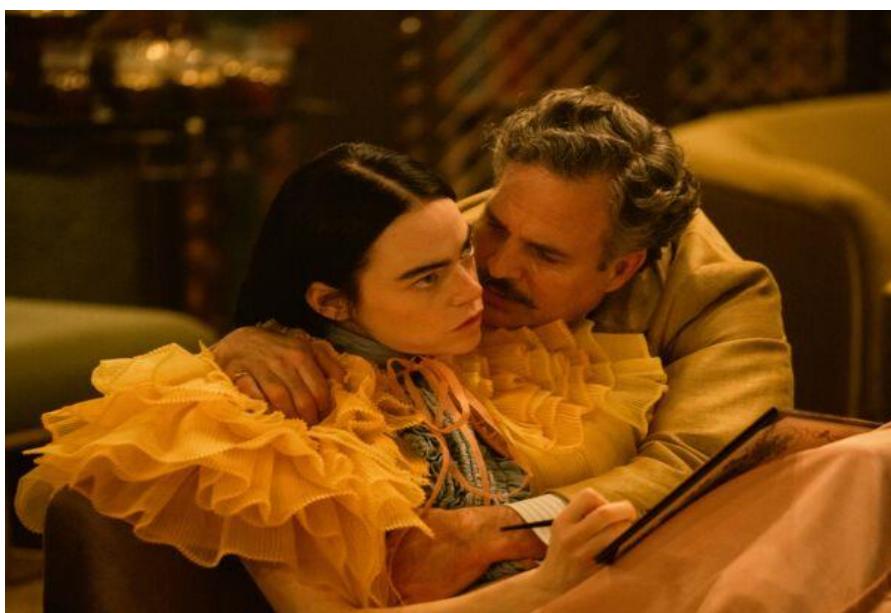
Figure 2: Duncan hugs Bella tightly under the guise of affection, attempting reconciliation after having isolated her on the ship.

In *The Worst Person in the World*, this implicit control takes a psychological turn. When Julie tries to voice her feelings, her boyfriend, Aksel, dismisses her experience, saying she is "acting out the confrontation [she] never dared have with [her] father.." Rather than engaging with her emotions, he pathologizes them, redirecting her pain into a narrative that serves his interpretation. By defining her reality for her, he removes her ability to author her own story, which aligns with Lerner's (1986) insight that women have often been excluded from interpreting their own experiences (pp. 5-11). This interaction demonstrates how female agency is often treated as irrational, misdirected, or threatening, and thus must be reinterpreted or subdued. Aksel's manipulation escalates when he attempts to make her feel guilty for leaving him. He tells her, "You'll regret it .. The saddest thing is one day, you'll want kids. In any case, you'll have other relationships. And you'll realise that what we had was unique..". These words are used to impose guilt, to make her feel selfish, shortsighted, and ungrateful, weaponizing future regret to reassert control, painting himself as the one who knows what she truly wants better than she does. By weaponizing the expectation of motherhood, a role traditionally imposed on women as their ultimate purpose, Aksel also reinforces societal pressures that reduce female identity to a singular, restrictive function that has an expiry date. This reflects how, as Lorber (1991) argues, these roles are not biologically determined but socially constructed, maintained through cultural norms that script women into caregiving and family-centered identities (pp. 13–16).

Another way female agency is controlled in *The Worst Person in the World* is humor. When Julie talks about the absence of female experiences, such as menstruation and sexual pleasure in literature and film, her comments are quickly dismissed through mockery and joking by the male guests. Remarks like "Tell us. In juicy detail" and "Can you womansplain it better?" shift the tone from serious critique to amusement. This moment demonstrates how humor can function as a form of social control, where ridicule is used to undermine and delegitimize women's voices. Rather than taking her point seriously, the men reduce it to a joke, reinforcing the idea that female desire and bodily autonomy are inappropriate or embarrassing topics. The use of the term "womansplaining" in this context functions as a sarcastic reversal of "mansplaining", a term typically used to describe a man explaining something to a woman, often about her own experiences. By flipping it, the male guest attempts to mock the legitimacy of Julie's perspective, suggesting that her insights are emotional, and "too much". This mocking response shows that women in patriarchal societies are discouraged from speaking openly about their body and their desires, which maintains cultural taboos and confines female expression within socially acceptable boundaries.

4.2 Female agency as a personal journey of self-discovery

Throughout the analysis, a recurring theme emerged around how these films portray female agency as a personal journey of self-discovery, that involves both the rejection of predefined roles by patriarchal society and the pursuit of authentic existence through exploration. Agency is not portrayed as given or inherited, but as a personal achievement earned after resistance to imposed norms, lived experience, existential crises, and emotional and intellectual growth. The protagonists refuse to comply to socially scripted paths such as motherhood, or romantic closure as default expressions of womanhood. Instead, they embrace uncertainty, ambiguity, and open-ended becoming of their authentic selves. The following sub-themes will explore how this journey from performance to actual awareness unfolds.

4.2.1 Rejection of performativity and externally imposed roles

This sub-theme focuses on the pattern of rejecting predetermined futures and roles that society imposes. The films analyzed present portrayals of women who refuse to comply with societal expectations surrounding femininity, and politeness. Their resistance is embodied in moments where they fail to perform or choose not to, according to what is expected of them. Women, across the movies, try to resist against the ways patriarchal society tries to control and tame female agency. By resisting this control and rejecting the roles imposed on them, the protagonists reclaim the right not to be reduced to a script written by others.

In *Barbie*, the protagonist begins as the embodiment of idealized womanhood as she is flawless, ever-smiling, and emotionally available. She was literally created to represent the "perfect woman" burdened with embodying every aspirational trait while remaining pleasing to all, men and women. Her existence is structured around perfection: aesthetically, emotionally, and socially. This begins to be deconstructed when she starts "malfunctioning", waking up with thoughts of death, developing cellulite, and losing her perpetually arched feet. These changes symbolize the breakdown of a performance she never consciously chose, revealing the cost of sustaining an artificial ideal. Barbie rejects performativity (Butler, 1988) and embraces the idea that gender is not a stable identity but a repeated set of actions shaped by cultural expectations. Through repetition, these performances come to feel natural, making femininity seem fixed (Butler, 1988, pp. 519-528), but in this case Barbie becomes gradually aware of them. Therefore, Barbie's sudden deviation from her expected role exposes how deeply these performances have shaped her identity, and how fragile they truly are when disrupted. As she enters the real world and faces objectification and hostility for the first time, she is forced to confront the

disconnect between who she is and who she has been made to be. Sasha, who is a teenage girl from the real world, is the first that critiques Barbie as a symbol of superficial empowerment that makes women feel inferior shaking the foundation of her self-image, and revealing she was created to be the ideal, apolitical icon of cheerful, popular feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, pp. 9-10). Gradually, her journey becomes one of slowly rejecting the roles imposed on her, including the expectation to be beautiful, kind, selfless, and emotionally available at all times.

The struggle of perfectionism and aligning with societal expectations is captured vividly in a moment between Barbie and Gloria, where Barbie, without make-up, breaks down, saying, "I'm... not... pretty... any... more," and "I'm not smart enough to be interesting" (see Figure 3). Gloria, a Mattel employee and admirer of Barbie, responds with a truth: "It is literally impossible to be a woman! You are so beautiful and so smart and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough.." Gloria's speech lists the endless, contradictory expectations women face: be thin but not too thin, be a boss but not mean, be pretty but not too pretty. She points out how exhausting and unfair it is that women are blamed no matter what they do: "Not only are you doing it all wrong but that everything is also your fault." This speech highlights how Barbie's struggle is not just personal but a reflection of societal pressure that traps women in impossible roles, which connects strongly to the contradictory postfeminist ideas and rigid beauty standards often reinforced by media (Bartky, 1990, pp. 72-80; Gill, 2007, pp. 163-164; Press, 2011, pp. 108-111). Postfeminist messages often say that women are free to choose how they look and act, but this freedom is deeply connected with neoliberal self-regulation, where women internalize societal expectations and try to embody them flawlessly (Gill, 2007, pp. 163-164). At the start of the film, Barbie is shown as beautiful, confident, and in control, fitting the postfeminist image of the "perfect woman" who is independent and empowered. But when she breaks down emotionally, it shows how weak and full of pressure that image really is and what truly matters is to be free, not perfect.

Figure 3: Barbie, appearing without makeup for the first time, breaks down upon realizing she can no longer perform or comply with beauty standards.

Barbie's refusal to perform becomes clear when she rejects to be Ken's emotional caretaker or girlfriend. When Ken insists, "It's Barbie and Ken! There is no just Ken" she gently replies, "Maybe it's time for you to discover who Ken is" firmly setting boundaries, which represents a reversal of the dynamic seen in earlier themes, where male figures guide, shape, or control women's identities. By denying his repeated attempts for a kiss, Barbie declares her autonomy, refusing to be the supportive woman whose identity revolves around male validation. Barbie's character evolution shows how painful and disorienting it is to resist the script that has been literally coded into her. Her agency emerges in the vulnerability of saying, "I want to be the one imagining, not the idea being imagined." In letting go of her role as an icon, Barbie begins the messy, but necessary act of shedding a script written for her before she even had a voice. The film also shows how this performance can be turned into a form of resistance against patriarchy. Barbie says, "We'll recruit the now unbrainwashed Barbies to our cause," describing a plan where the Barbies pretend to be helpless to distract the Kens and regain power. Then Gloria advises, "Tell him you've never seen *The Godfather* and you'd love him to explain it to you", using irony to highlight how women can use the stereotypes that want them passive, and in need for male guidance for everything, which is known as mansplaining, to fight back. These scenes show that rejecting performative femininity and weaponizing it when needed can be a way to take back control, balancing

postfeminist ideals of strategic femininity, where women use traditional gender norms to subvert power, with collective feminism, which emphasizes solidarity and collaborative action for broader systemic change (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, pp. 1214-1217). At the same time, the scene reveals something critical about masculinity: the Kens are shown to be naive and easily flattered which again confirms the constructed nature of both femininity and masculinity (Butler, 1988).

In *The Worst Person in the World*, Julie's rejection of societal expectations are quiet but just as powerful, especially when it comes to the societal expectations of motherhood and familial obligation. A key moment is her conversation with her boyfriend, Aksel, about children, as he wants them, and she does not, refusing to lose herself in a role that has been pre-scripted for women. Her discomfort with motherhood is painted as an honest resistance to the expectation that womanhood must culminate in reproduction, a central mechanism through which, as Lerner (1986) argues, patriarchy controls women's bodies and identities. Another pivotal moment is when she quietly leaves Aksel's publishing event, alienated by the way she is reduced to a supportive role in his intellectual crowd. Julie's reluctance to smile, perform interest, or stand by his side reflects her resistance to the idea that women must always be kind, pleasant, supportive or charming for others' consumption. In another scene, she tells Aksel, *"I feel like a spectator in my own life"* and , *"I'm trying to tell you how I feel, and you're defining my feelings.."* as she breaks up with him, rejecting a role that demands she disappear into someone else's vision of fulfillment. Later in the film, Julie visits her father one final time and experiences yet another cold, dismissive encounter. When she finally cuts him off, it marks a critical moment of rejecting the "good daughter" role that demands emotional labor, forgiveness, and continued attachment despite neglect. She refuses not only his absence but also the larger narrative that dictates a daughter must reach out to her father, even when he has repeatedly failed her. Julie's agency lies in her rejection of roles that would make her less truthful.

In *Poor Things* (2023), Bella Baxter's rejection of femininity is radical. One of the earliest scenes that captures this is when she begins to masturbate, unapologetically, in a space where she is clearly not "supposed" to, in public view. This act can be seen as a symbolic refusal of the rule that female pleasure must be private, regulated, or absent. Another key moment takes place at the dinner table with Duncan, where she refuses to use the "proper" words he offers her. Instead, she intentionally distorts the phrase, rejecting the notion that womanhood is about pleasing men through delicacy and politeness. Perhaps the most visually interesting rejection of aesthetic femininity (Bartky, 1990, pp. 72-80) comes in her bizarre, unpolished dance, and her constant attempts to avoid dancing with Duncan as a "normal" couple, breaking all codes of elegance and conventionalism with her wild and unapologetic movements

and deconstructing the behavioral standards of traditional femininity (see figure 4). Bella's agency is embodied in her refusal to comply with the notion of what it means to be a "proper" woman. Her story complicates the narrative of postfeminist empowerment, which, as Gill (2007) describes, often encourages women to feel "free" and "empowered" while still holding them to rigid standards, especially about how they look and behave. Bella's empowerment does not come from conforming to those standards, but from breaking the rules, refusing to participate in them at all. Her pleasure is not carefully hidden, her body is not tamed to fit beauty norms and her language is not filtered to make men comfortable, which stands in contrast to postfeminist media and popular feminism, which often celebrate sexual freedom or confidence but only when it still looks attractive or marketable (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, pp. 9-13; Gill, 2007, p.149).

Across all three films, these female protagonists are actively refusing the roles handed to them to varying levels. They reject motherhood, politeness, sexual modesty, beauty standards, and familial obligation, with their power lying in what they refuse to be. By rejecting these norms, they expose femininity itself as a set of social performances rather than natural truths, echoing Butler's (1990) idea that gender is something we do, not something we are.

Figure 4: Bella resists Duncan's expectations by refusing a traditional couple's dance, using her unpolished movements to reject normative standards of femininity.

4.2.2 Authentic self-reinvention through exploration

In *Barbie*, *The Worst Person in the World*, and *Poor Things*, female protagonists reclaim their agency not through rebellion alone, but through a deeply personal process of existential, intellectual, emotional, and sexual exploration, sometimes supported by female solidarity. A deliberate confrontation with uncertainty, discomfort, and growth marks their journeys.

Existential awakening plays a vital role in each protagonist's journey toward agency. These are not characters who follow linear paths of success or approval. Instead, they question not only their roles in society but also the very nature of existence itself, seeking meaning through experience and true values rather than conformity. In *The Worst Person in the World*, Julie's search for identity is marked by constant transition, from medicine to psychology to photography and writing. She states, *"My passion has always been what goes on inside, thoughts and feelings."* revealing a deep desire to live an internally guided life, even if it involves uncertainty, and continual trial-and-error. Bella in *Poor Things* similarly undergoes an existential awakening when she sees the poverty outside the luxurious cruise ship and insists on giving Duncan's money to those in need. Moved by the suffering she witnesses, Bella's sadness becomes a call to action, showing that emotional depth leads her toward compassion and solidarity. Later, she decides to become a doctor: freedom becomes about building a life rooted in purpose, rather than just escaping control; it is not only about her but about others. Her transformation, driven by curiosity, is about choosing a role based on her own evolving values. This shift shows how autonomy matures when experience leads not just to rebellion but to redefinition of one's social role. In *Barbie*, existential awakening begins with a moment of wondering: *"Do you ever think about dying?"* Barbie, too, experiences an existential crisis when faced with the choice between a high heel and a Birkenstock sandal, symbolizing the tension between perfection and truth in the everyday. Weird Barbie tells her, *"You have to want to know"* prompting Barbie to leave Barbieland and begin a journey from artificial perfection toward conscious, questioning existence. Her decision to become human is the ultimate embrace of imperfection, aging, choice, and mortality. In doing so, she accepts the freedom to define herself, and the responsibility and vulnerability that come with it. In all three films, existential exploration seems necessary and is portrayed as a brave confrontation with life's uncertainties, which are essential for authentic agency and values.

Moreover, female protagonists across the films pursue intellectual growth as a means of redefining their agency. In *Barbie*, this shift begins when she is unexpectedly called a "fascist" by Sasha. The confrontation shatters her perception of herself as a harmless, idealized role model and pushes Barbie to reexamine her identity and narrative from a new perspective, sparking a deeper process of

intellectual self-reflection, now with the knowledge that she may have unknowingly contributed to an oppressive system. She chooses to see the truth into Sasha's words, marking the start of her intellectual awakening. This journey peaks in her decision to become human in order to learn through direct experience what it means to live a real, imperfect life. Her choice to leave Barbie Land and enter the real world symbolizes a commitment to knowledge over ignorance, and to complexity over simplicity. She embraces human existence as a space of empirical and intellectual learning, where growth is ongoing and truth is found through lived experience. In *The Worst Person in the World*, Julie's path to agency is shaped by her curiosity and desire to understand herself. Her essay, *"Oral Sex in the Age of #MeToo"* shows her trying to make sense of the complex relationship between desire, power, and gender, and to explore the contradictions of modern womanhood. Writing becomes a way for Julie to ask questions, express and intellectualize doubts, and take part in conversations often led by men. In *Poor Things*, Bella's intellectual development is visible in both her language and her interests. What begins as naive mimicry slowly transforms into genuine curiosity and thoughtful engagement. Bella starts to seek out ideas that help her make sense of the world and her place in it, shown through her reading of Emerson and her involvement in philosophical conversations. These moments reflect intellectual growth and a deeper desire to understand life on her own terms. Her reflection that "it is the goal of all to improve, advance, progress, and grow" shows her own internalization of intellectual thought as a guiding principle.

Figure 5: Bella's intellectual development is symbolized by her engagement with philosophical books.

In all three cases, intellectual exploration enables the women to learn new things about themselves and their world and move from internal uncertainty to active meaning-making, allowing them to define their identities on their own terms.

Emotional experiences are a critical tool for self-actualization across these narratives. In *Barbie*, emotional awakening arrives in the form of tears. When Barbie cries for the first time in the real world, she says, *"That felt achy… but good."*. This moment breaks her flawless exterior and marks her transformation into someone capable of vulnerability, choice, and growth. Barbie learns that emotions can hurt, but still chooses to feel them and explore the real world guided by them. In *Poor Things*, Bella's emotional awakening becomes evident during her time in Lisbon, particularly in her interactions with Duncan. As their relationship unfolds, Bella begins to develop a language for her emotions and articulates them with growing confidence. When confronted with Duncan's disapproval of her independent actions, Bella does not retreat or apologize. Instead, she expresses frustration and recognizes for the first time that her emotions, like anger, are a valid response to how she is being treated. Her declaration that his sadness "makes her discover angry feelings" signals a turning point: she is no longer responding passively to others' expectations but actively interpreting and supporting her own emotional truth. In *The Worst Person in the World*, Julie's emotional growth is shown when she decides to end her relationship with Aksel, realizing it no longer matches how she truly feels. Although the conversation is difficult Julie chooses to be honest with herself and with a new man who has caught her interest. This decision reflects her commitment to living authentically, free from situations and people that do not align with her path, and embracing her playful, curious nature.

Figure 6: Julie flirts with a new romantic interest, indicating her decision to end a relationship that no longer aligns with her evolving desires.

Finally, sexual and physical agency in *Barbie*, *Poor Things*, and *The Worst Person in the World* centers the notion that the female body and identity can be sources of personal discovery and autonomy. In *Poor Things*, Bella's sexual agency is central to her journey of self-discovery, evolving from instinctive curiosity-like a child-to an empowered, cautious choice. Her journey includes reclaiming control over her body through continuous experimentation, ultimately choosing to engage in sex work. *"As an experiment"* she tells Duncan, *"which I think will aid us in our relationship",* mocking his possessiveness and reaffirming her right to define her sexuality on her own terms. Bella's unapologetic embrace of pleasure and experience reframes sex as an aspect of personal freedom and identity formation. This reflects what Gill (2007) describes as a key feature of postfeminist culture, where women are no longer shown as simply passive objects but as active, desiring sexual subjects. Bella appears to choose an objectified form of sexuality because it aligns with her personal goals and interests, making her seem liberated. However, this choice still takes place within a system that rewards women who perform a specific kind of sexual confidence, that is still shaped by the male gaze (Gill, 2007, pp. 151-154; Mulvey, 1975, pp. 11-12). Bella's journey, while empowering on the surface, also shows how freedom and objectification can become connected under postfeminist ideals, reflecting Genz's (2006) argument that postfeminism enables the figure of the "female sexual agent", who takes control of her own image like an entrepreneur, while simultaneously aligning with and distancing herself from feminist politics, as if sex is a form of currency (p. 335). Julie, in *The Worst Person in the World*, also navigates intimacy on her own terms, using her relationships and sexual experiences as means to reflect and understand herself better. Barbie's exploration is more symbolic. Her decision to explore and experience her journey without any romantic or sexual involvement shows a reclamation of her personal story. It is an act of choosing to define her life on her own terms rather than through romantic connection to another. Her path becomes about discovery, prioritizing solitude, curiosity, and self-exploration over emotional or sexual entanglement.

Across all three films, the female protagonists use and explore their bodies and boundaries to create space for their own evolving identities, through the female gaze (Dirse, 2013, pp. 21-27; French, 2021, pp. 53-63.) Importantly, female characters are not eroticized or flattened into stereotypes; the camera lingers on their expressions, and gestures, even in erotic scenes, such as Bella's time in the brothel, emphasizing emotional nuance and psychological depth rather than their bodies. Through this visual language, the films privilege subjectivity over spectacle, marking a significant evolution in how gender is constructed and represented in contemporary cinema.

Figure 7: In the brothel scene, the camera centers on Bella's facial expressions rather than her body, emphasizing her subjective experience over objectification.

One final pattern worth highlighting more in depth here is the role of female solidarity as a means of exploring the self through connection with others, which emerges prominently in *Barbie*, more subtly in *Poor Things*, and is largely absent in *The Worst Person in the World*. In *Barbie*, moments of connection, like the conversations between Barbie and Gloria, or the Barbies working together to stop the Kens, show that personal growth happens in relationship with others. Barbie does not change alone; other women help her see herself differently and support her emotionally. Her agency is shaped through these interactions. In *Poor Things*, Bella also finds support through friendships with women, especially Toinette, who is fellow sex-worker. These relationships give her emotional stability and offer new ways to think about being a woman outside male-controlled spaces. Even when the ultimate trajectory of the heroines remains individualized, these moments of connection suggest that agency can emerge not only through introspection, but through shared experiences and mutual care. By contrast, *The Worst Person in the World* shows Julie's growth as a mostly individual process. She rarely connects deeply with other women, and her path is shaped more by isolation or support by her romantic interests. While this highlights her independence, it also reflects a more individualistic, even neoliberal, view of agency, where self-improvement is a strictly private task. This absence of female solidarity makes Julie's journey more emotionally isolated and less rooted in collective experience, especially when compared to the relational frameworks present in *Barbie* and *Poor Things*. It reflects what Gill (2007) identifies as a key

feature of postfeminist culture: the emphasis on individualism, personal choice, and self-surveillance, where empowerment is framed as a solitary, internal project rather than a collective or political endeavor.

Ultimately, Bella's sexual curiosity, Barbie's confrontation with mortality and physical imperfection, and Julie's changes between careers and lovers are all grounded in their intellectual and bodily, lived experiences. Rather than starting from a fixed sense of self, each character discovers who she is through movement, exploration and choice, echoing Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion that identity is created through experience (pp. 161-166).

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Major findings

This thesis explored how female agency is represented in post-#MeToo cinema through a thematic analysis of three significant contemporary films: *Barbie* (2023), *Poor Things* (2023), and *The Worst Person in the World* (2021). These films are unique in terms of cultural impact, stylistic diversity, and engagement with gender norms and subjectivity. These elements made them ideal to address the study's central aim to understand how women's autonomy, identity, and resistance are portrayed in an era influenced by fourth-wave feminism and by the cultural momentum of the #MeToo movement. Drawing on postfeminist critique (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; Genz, 2006; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Press, 2011), feminist and gaze theory (Butler, 1988; Connell, 2009; Dirse, 2013; French, 2021; Lerner, 1986; Mulvey, 1975; Walby, 1990) this study explored how these portrayals relate to collective feminist agency or rather emphasize individualized empowerment.

The main research question asked: How is female agency represented in films, both mainstream and independent, released in the post-#MeToo era? The thematic analysis revealed two dominant patterns of representation: (1) Female agency as a threat to patriarchal systems, and (2) Female agency as a personal journey of self-discovery. On one hand, the films analyzed depict female agency as threatening to patriarchal systems, met with both explicit and subtle attempts by men, institutions, or even other women who participate in upholding the dominant order, to control or limit it. On the other hand, they also portray agency as a deeply personal journey of self-discovery, expressed through both resistance to performativity and patriarchal norms, as well as existential, emotional, intellectual, sexual exploration and, at times, through female solidarity as a means of understanding the self in relation to others.

Specifically, one of the most persistent representational patterns identified in this study is that female agency is portrayed as disruptive to patriarchal systems and broader societal order. Autonomy, whether expressed sexually, intellectually, or emotionally, is threatening to patriarchy, echoing Walby's (1990) understanding of patriarchy as a system of structures that continuously seeks to maintain male dominance through regulation, restriction, and coercion. In these narratives, women's desire for self-determination often triggers a systemic backlash, ranging from violence to more subtle mechanisms of control. Marriage and motherhood are portrayed as tools through which patriarchal control is naturalized, which is directly connected to Moore's (1977) anthropological analysis and Lévi-Strauss's (1969) theory of women as objects of exchange in the structural organization of society.

What is particularly notable in these portrayals is that control is not always enacted through physical force. Instead, there is also reliance on emotional manipulation, ideological coercion, and women's internalization of patriarchal thoughts. These techniques align with Lerner's (1986) argument that patriarchy is historically sustained not just by institutions, but by internalized norms that make women feel inferior and in need of male guidance. Female characters who attempt to speak, act, or live independently are often met with repressive reactions disguised as concern, romance, or rationality. This type of control is especially insidious because it redefines domination as care, positioning male characters as protectors rather than oppressors, a tactic that perpetuates inequality under the guise of emotional protection.

Furthermore, these representations often highlight how gender roles are policed through performance expectations. When women deviate from norms associated with politeness, nurturing, or sexual modesty, expressing their preferences and desires, their behavior is seen as destabilizing and deviant. When female characters deviate from these expectations by asserting their own preferences, desires, or boundaries, their behavior is portrayed as unsettling. This framing highlights how female agency is perceived as a threat precisely when it challenges the performative scripts of normative womanhood. This aligns with Butler's (1988) theory that gender is not a fixed or natural identity but a set of repeated actions and behaviors that come to appear natural over time. When these repetitions are interrupted, the illusion of gender stability is broken, which exposes the constructed nature of gender roles, provoking discomfort or backlash from the patriarchal system that needs to control and maintain stability. The films, therefore, in a way expose the fragility of patriarchy by de-naturalizing the everyday mechanisms that uphold conformity for both men and women. However, one possible critique is that they risk highlighting only the performativity of patriarchy rather than its material structures of oppression (Fraser, 1997).

Closely related to this is the second dominant pattern: the portrayal of female agency as a personal journey toward self-awareness and authenticity. This process involves rejecting externally imposed roles and gendered performances, and instead embracing uncertainty, experimentation, and emotional vulnerability. Female characters often challenge gender norms by rejecting beauty norms and refusing to engage in roles such as mother, wife, caretaker, and seek to reconstruct a sense of self that feels personally meaningful rather than socially scripted, through introspection, changing careers, rethinking relationships, or pursuing intellectual growth. The protagonists' experiences are central to how they understand themselves and claim agency, aligning with Merleau-Ponty's (1962) theory of embodied subjectivity, in which identity is formed through lived experience. Female protagonists are not

"liberated" in one singular moment, but they become themselves gradually, through experience, discomfort, and emotional evolution.

Furthermore, this emphasis on existential, emotional, intellectual, and sexual exploration aligns closely with the concept of the female gaze, which privileges female subjectivity and experience over objectification. As French (2021) and Dirse (2013) argue, the female gaze shifts cinematic representation from voyeurism and male fantasy to authenticity, and emotional depth. Across the films, women are not portrayed as passive objects to be observed but as evolving subjects whose agency is tied to their inner lives, decisions, and experiences, with the camera focusing mostly on their expressions.

Yet, even within this more empathetic mode of representation, the protagonists largely embody the postfeminist ideal of the self-aware, self-improving woman who finds empowerment through personal growth rather than collective resistance. This mirrors Gill's (2007) critique to postfeminism, which frames the postfeminist subject as a critical agent expected to constantly work on herself, making the "right" choices, regulating her emotions, and achieving empowerment through self-reinvention (pp. 153-155). This framing positions female agency as a project of individual development and self-surveillance, rather than systemic challenge, which also reflects what McRobbie (2009) critiques as postfeminism's tendency to "undo" feminism by repackaging empowerment as personal responsibility. Women are free to choose, but their choices are made in a landscape still structured by patriarchal logic and capitalist motives. Julie's constant transitions, between careers, partners, and identities, Barbie's existential journey, peaking in her choice to become human and pursue lived experience, and Bella's engagement with education, and philosophy, reflect this narrative to become a better, and freer version of oneself.

Nonetheless, *Barbie* and *Poor Things* offer brief but meaningful glimpses of female solidarity and community support. These moments complicate the dominant neoliberal narrative of self-reliance, suggesting that personal growth can also emerge from shared experiences and mutual support. Still, the broader representation remains largely individualistic, aligning with postfeminist values that prioritize self-expression over systemic change. The emphasis on self-discovery over solidarity and collectivity reveals a core contradiction in contemporary representations of agency. While these films portray the complexity of female subjectivity, they do not focus on the political dimensions of structural oppression. Moments of female friendship and support do appear, but they seldom develop into sustained collective action and even when solidarity is present, the protagonist's evolution remains centered on individual growth. The result is a portrait of empowerment that is rather introspective, mirroring the post-#MeToo cultural climate, where both individual and collective dimensions are emphasized to create meaningful

changes (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018, pp. 1212-1213). In the end, it aligns with the "me" in the name of the movement which shows that, although collective effort was crucial to its success, the core of the movement relied on personal stories and individual journeys that became united, supporting merely Tambe's (2018) critique on #MeToo.

Finally, the comparison between mainstream and independent cinema offers valuable insight into how industry context shapes representations of female agency. *Barbie* represents a mainstream production and commercial success; *The Worst Person in the World* represents European independent cinema; and *Poor Things* occupies an ambiguous space between the two. Yet, despite these different production contexts, all three films exhibit similar thematic patterns. This suggests that both the aesthetics of the female gaze and the logic of postfeminist individualism have permeated contemporary filmmaking across the commercial–independent spectrum. Rather surprisingly, however, *The Worst Person in the World* offers the most individualistic portrayal of female agency. Julie's journey is characterized by emotional solitude and personal decision-making, with minimal engagement in female friendship or collective support. Her development unfolds largely in isolation, driven by introspection and romantic relationships rather than any sense of shared feminist consciousness. In contrast, *Barbie*, despite being a highly commercial and mainstream film, places a stronger emphasis on collective empowerment and the fight of postfeminist ideals. The narrative centers not only on Barbie's personal transformation but also on the importance of female solidarity, particularly through her connection with Gloria and the coordinated efforts of the Barbies to reclaim their agency. This inversion of expectations challenges the common assumption that independent or arthouse films are inherently more politically or socially progressive (Boora, 2024, pp. 21-24). Instead, it reveals that collective feminist ideals can be powerfully articulated within mainstream cultural products, while independent films may at times reaffirm neoliberal notions of self-managed agency. Perhaps more crucial than the distinction between mainstream and indie cinema is the gender of the director and the gaze they bring. *Barbie*, directed by Greta Gerwig, demonstrates how a feminist perspective can reshape even highly commercial narratives to reflect more collaborative, critical forms of female empowerment.

5.2 Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

This study, while offering valuable insights into the representation of female agency in post-#MeToo cinema, has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the analysis focused on only three films, all produced within Euro-American cultural contexts. While these works provide rich and contrasting portrayals, they cannot capture the full diversity of global cinematic narratives, particularly

those emerging from non-Western traditions. Second, the study approached gender as the central analytical category. Dimensions such as race, class, sexuality, and disability were not deeply explored, largely due to the homogeneity of the films' protagonists, who are predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual women. While *Barbie* and *Poor Things* offer brief glimpses of intersectional themes through secondary characters, these moments remain peripheral and do not significantly change the central narrative of agency, which continues to be framed through a largely white, individualistic lens. This restricts the analysis from addressing how agency is differently represented and experienced across varied identities, confirming the limitations of postfeminist portrayals in addressing the full spectrum of women's experiences (Gill, 2007, p.149).

Moreover, the research focused only on content analysis, not including how viewers interpret and engage with these narratives. Adding audience reception could reveal whether portrayals of agency are understood as empowering, problematic, or reflective of postfeminist values. While thematic analysis was effective in identifying recurring patterns, its interpretive and subjective nature has certain limitations as it emphasizes what the films depict, but not how these portrayals are received.

To address these gaps, future research could include intersectional analyses that explore how gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, and disability; transnational comparisons of films from regions such as Bollywood, and East Asian cinema to examine how different cultural contexts mediate agency; audience reception studies to assess how viewers engage with and interpret representations of female autonomy; research tracking shifts in agency portrayal before and after the rise of #MeToo; production studies focusing on how gender dynamics behind the scenes influence content; and comparative analyses of films associated with different feminist waves to identify what is genuinely new or recurring in cinematic constructions of agency. Together, these directions could expand the current understanding of how female agency is negotiated, represented, and received in contemporary cinema.

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Appendix A

figures 1 and 2.
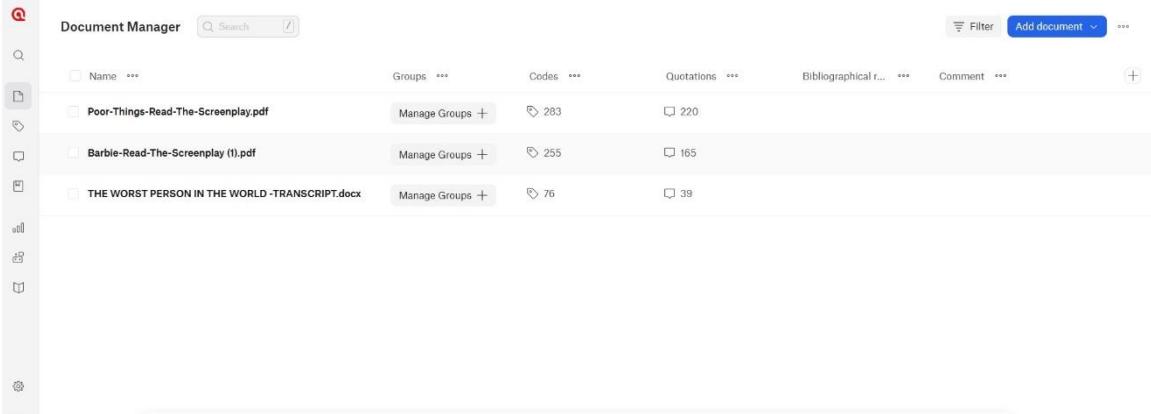
*Figure* 1: Number of initial codes and quotations per film (Atlas.ti)
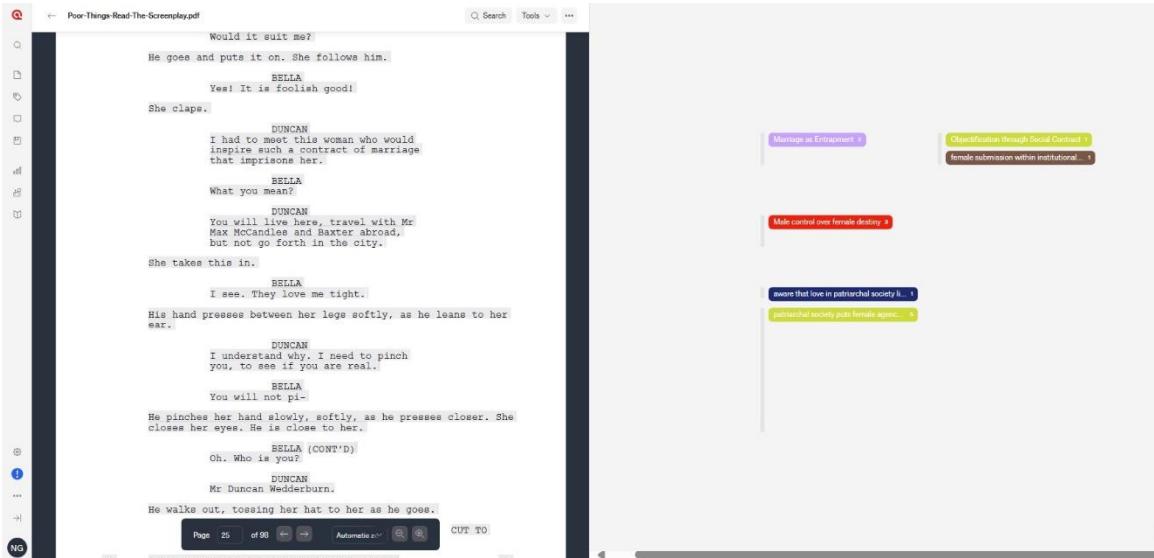
Figure 2: Example of initial codes applied to the transcript of *Poor Things*

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	OPEN CODES
1.A threat in patriarchal society that needs to be controlled	a. Explicit Control	Violence as a means of control Threat as a means of control Control through advice Control through confinement Control through bodily violation Control through regulation of reproduction Control through regulation of desire Objectification through science Sexual judgment as patriarchal control Marriage as a means of control
	b. Implicit Control	Romanticizing restriction Patriarchal protection as disguised control Restriction as a means of protection Surveillance masked as protection Control through rationality Ideological manipulation Psychological invalidation Manipulation as a means of control Mocking as a tool to confine female voice Manipulation through guilt Distrust of female decisiveness

	a. Rejection of performativity and externally imposed roles	Refusal of traditional femininity
		Rejection of motherhood expectations
		Discomfort with being objectified
		Resistance to being emotionally available
		Rejection of the "supportive woman" role
		Disengagement from beauty standards
		Breaking out of the "good daughter" role
		Setting boundaries in romantic relationships
2.A personal journey to self-discovery	b. Authentic self-reinvention through exploration	Existential awakening
		Intellectual awakening
		Emotional experiences
		Sexual/physical experiences
		Identity formation
		Female solidarity