

The Extent of Gender Stereotypes and Hegemonic Masculinity Within Film Characters: The Power Structure Between Gender Social Groups

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ABSTRACT

Within the film, *Legally Blonde*, female stereotypes further encourage hegemonic masculinity through the implementation of differing female types and the placement of the men in power positions. The research paper explores specific camera angles and attire worn by the female characters along with the gender's behavior towards the other. The continuous representation of interactional cultural expectations highlights the concept of trading power for patronage between the protagonists of the film. The research also draws connections with the female characters and their categorization of desiring one-dimensional love. Overall, the female character's need to attend Harvard Law School with the goal to obtain marriage fuels the dialogue of hypersexualization and hegemonic masculinity in relation to women.

Introduction

Within cinema, the hypersexualized portrayal of female characters has continued to strengthen the ideologies of hegemonic masculinity. The aforementioned female type in the media reinforces the connection between a woman and her physical appearance, ingraining the necessity of beauty to the younger female audience. While being glorified for her good looks, the hypersexualized female will also be presented as intellectually inferior to the male characters all together. As a result, the women appear to be naive and focused on attaining the man's love or attention, which supposedly grants her value. The presence of homosocial interactions maintains the male's dominance over women to a greater extent through the component of sexual objectification. The media's distinct demonstrations between male and female have been normalized because of the gender stereotypes reinforced through cultural expectations of their roles in society. Specifically, in the film, *Legally Blonde*, the simultaneous portrayal of the hypersexualized female and her conformity to interactional cultural expectations further upholds female gender stereotypes and fuels hegemonic masculine ideologies which are supported through the works of Smith and Cook, Bird, and Risman.

Within works of media, there are two types of female characterizations, the traditional and hypersexual (Smith and Cook 14). In *Legally Blonde*, while the female sets are presented, the distinction between both are highlighted by the feud of the two different female characters. Elle Woods' gender conformity is further spotlighted through the presence of additional female characters in varying environments. Elle Woods, the protagonist of the film, aligns with the hypersexual female type in films through her continuous, "overemphasis on attractiveness and sexuality by the way of clothing (i.e., alluring attire)" (Smith and Cook 14). The camera's focus in the beginning of the film assists the sexual portrayal of Elle by concentrating on her pink high-heels and legs while she is preparing to meet her boyfriend for dinner. Additionally, when submitting her admissions video for Harvard Law School, the directors showcase her body in a pink glittering bathing suit which may be considered sexual attire. Smith and Cook define sexual attire as, "...attire that enhances, exaggerates, or calls attention to any part of the body from neck to knees" (Smith and Cook 14). In a situation when Elle has the opportunity to exhibit her achievements scholastically and within the community, her persona projects her beliefs on self-worth by assuming that the admission officers will

value her beauty and appearances when deciding her acceptance into an academic institution. In the submitted video to Harvard, she acknowledges her positions as Homecoming Queen, the president of her sorority, and her extensive expertise of fashion as her greatest accomplishments which all have connections to outer looks. However, the traditional female type in the film, Vivian Kensington, had been introduced to the film as the ideal woman for a prestigious man desiring to develop a family-name because of her conservative appearance and her, “character’s relational and parental status” (Smith and Cook 14). Vivian is interpreted as the antagonist in the film which promotes the importance of a woman maintaining her beauty in order to be liked and admired. Yet, since Elle is hypersexualized, her intelligence and character, as a whole, are undermined and overlooked.

The application of hypersexuality within the film continues with the recurring emphasis on physical impressions and its relation to the male gaze. In a scene, the nail technician, Paulette Bonafonte, negatively comments on her own stretch marks and increase in weight and Elle agrees with her. Smith and Cook’s findings state that, “The promotion of the thin, sexy ideal in our culture has created a situation where the majority of girls and women don’t like their bodies...” (Smith and Cook 13). Elle’s agreement with Paulette’s feelings of humiliation towards her weight supports the female’s toxic relationship with physicality and value. In the nail salon, Elle teaches the other women the “Bend and Snap” maneuver in order to get the attention of a love-interest through the sexual portrayal of their body (Luketic). The maneuver is meant to draw attention towards the women’s bust and glutes, enhancing the body part of the female between the neck and knees (Smith and Cook 14).

Legally Blonde also displays the prominent presence of hegemonic masculinity and the role of homosocial groups in relation to the hegemonic ideals. The interaction between heterosexual men in the homosocial groups consists of three elements: emotional detachment, competitiveness, and sexual objectification of women (Bird 121). In the opening scene of the film, a group of college frat boys are cheering when a young sorority girl passes them on her bike. Although the aforementioned type of behavior objectifies women, men are expected to act in this manner when in a group since, “masculinities that differ from the norm of hegemonic masculinity, however, are generally experienced as ‘private dissatisfactions’ ...” (Bird 123). Then, when Elle begins her journey at Harvard Law, she is shown wearing a pink bikini style bathing-suit while all the men who are playing sports on the field begin to surround and whistle at her. The objectification of both women in the discussed scenes maintains the male superiority because the men emotionally detach themselves from the women which, “helps remove the symbolic distance that enables men to depersonalize the oppression of women” (Bird 123). Elle also becomes objectified by her parents after announcing that she wants to attend law school. Her mother reminds her that she was first runner-up of the Miss Hawaiian Tropics contest and questions why she would throw that away. Her father then tells her that law school is for people who are, “boring and ugly and serious,” and that she is none of those things because she has beauty (Luketic). Her parent’s emphasis on her physical appearances and their disapproval of her journey to graduate school encourages hegemonic masculinity because it sexually objectifies Elle and in return, gives power to the straight male social group (Bird 123). Towards the end of the film, Calhoun, a Harvard Law professor, awards Elle with an internship in an attempt to seduce her. The interaction between the characters represents the male’s sexual objectification of the woman, recognizing her as an “other” or object and disregarding her worth as an individual beyond her physical appearance (Bird 128). Calhoun’s behavior further upholds the idea that women are inferior and unable to succeed in a professional field without male assistance or sexual favors. Therefore, the hegemonic masculinity presented in the media supports the male dominance over women while the sexual objectification of women allows for the men to feel accepted within masculinity.

In the film, gender inequality is portrayed through interactional cultural expectations and the implementation of masculine dominance. A level within the gender structure, interactional cultural expectations, discusses the concept of trading power for patronage (Risman 437). Although the protagonist in the film, Elle, may appear to be challenging gender stereotypes by succeeding in law school as a ditzy and overly feminine woman, her motivation through law school was fueled by her longing for marriage. In the beginning of the movie, there is an emphasis on Elle’s anticipation towards her engagement. In fact, the concept of marriage holds importance throughout the film. While Elle appears heartbroken and wrecked after the relationship ends, her ex-boyfriend’s engagement with a new

girlfriend also emotionally damages her. The importance of marriage in the movie allows for Elle to be portrayed as subordinate to Warner, the ex-boyfriend. Risman states, "... women accept subordinate status as 'B' members of clubs, in exchange for men's approval, ...benefits of patronage ... in exchange for their subordinate status" (Risman 438). When the woman's goals are displayed as short-sighted as a result of her desire for a man, it also encourages female subordination. Elle may be viewed as the female lead that long for one-dimensional love which depicts, "...a female lead pursuing a romantic relationship...female's romance is the primary focus of the plot..." (Smith and Cook 17). The plot of the film revolves around Elle's approval of Warner which becomes her reason for embarking on a mission to attend and succeed in Harvard Law. The need for his acceptance provides the man with power, fueling inequality. Gender inequality is also shown through individual identity which may be presented through media, literature, or parental roles (Risman 437). Through the listed outlets, audiences learn society's expectations of their behavior and interests. *Legally Blonde* mocks the gender roles and stereotypes embedded in society by developing Elle's persona as excessively feminine. Through the continuance of the film, Elle is seen with a pink wardrobe, bedroom, and notebooks. The portrayal of Elle as innocent and gullible while being particularly feminine further shows women as inferior and, therefore, maintains gender inequality.

The film, *Legally Blonde*, explores the topics of gender inequality and male dominance through gender stereotypes and the objectification of women. Elle's initial connection with her self-worth to her physical appearance reinforces the woman's necessity to maintain their beauty. In addition to the men sexualizing Elle throughout the film, male superiority is implemented when she is determined to receive admission into Harvard Law with the sole purpose of obtaining a marital relationship with Warner. She is simultaneously hypersexualized, introduced as naive, and as only desiring the love of a man which further conforms with the ideology of women being second class citizens. Ultimately, the portrayal of Elle's conformity to the interactional cultural expectations and gender stereotypes upholds hegemonic masculinity which is discussed through the works of Smith and Cook, Bird, and Risman.

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