

# **National College of Ireland**

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## **The Representation of Women in Films & The Impact it has on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Society.**

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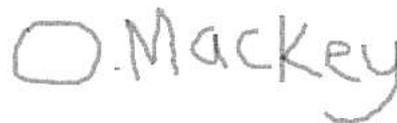
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# **The Misrepresentation of Women in Films, does it have an impact on 21<sup>st</sup>-century society?**

## **Introduction to the idea**

This research paper will primarily focus on the treatment of women in movies as the focal source of media. Hollywood holds much power over public consumption of media; movies like any other media can influence public opinions. So, it begs the question if movies are still displaying an outdated, stereotyped, and inadequate representation of women, does it have a knock-on effect? This research will explore this concept further by exploring via various medians of analysis with a combination of interview responses.

The author of this research is taking the stance that the media does have an impact on today's society. Engrained societal stereotypes may have a significant effect on the production of films, which in turn can have an impact on the target audience consuming the media. This will be discussed in depth throughout this research,

## **The Research Question**

The research question focuses on the misrepresentation of women in movies and the impact it has on today's society. It will focus on the outdated norms which are scripted into films; these ideas are trickled down through various media—reinforcing the idea that the media has an ongoing impact on the views of today's society, as they can sculpt the information being depicted. As the media is a broad, consuming concept consisting of everything from printed media to online articles to films and podcasts, the site of study will focus on film.

The films were selected as the focus for this dissertation due to the sheer amount of information provided within them, as they can provide valuable insight into the issues and concerns in their storyline. *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Legally Blonde* were both selected due to stereotypes that exist within the storyline due to the relevant information that they contain when discussing this topic; for example, cultural norms, stereotypes, and sacrifices women make during their career.

## **Literature Review**

### **Marriage Bar**

This research will primarily focus on the media's depiction of women; there is no denying that media play a vital role in society by promoting and sharing information via various means such as movies, radio, TV or newspaper/tabloids. Society is progressing into the new and unexplored world of social media, which is ever-changing, which brings up the idea that the portrayal of women in the media is a complex topic. Kumari & Joshi (2015), discuss the way women are treated by the media, while their studies are focused on the Indian culture, the context is still relevant. They highlight how women of the 21st century have excelled and reached so many milestones that previous generations were not able to, but has the image of women changed in the media? Landmarks such as the Irish marriage ban, Irish women once they were married were forced to give up their career.

*"For the government, the Marriage Bar was primarily a cost-saving initiative – if women were forced to retire on marriage, they would not remain in the service long enough to rise very high in the salary scale. The bar also reflected social attitudes that it was a husband's duty to support his wife, and a married woman's place was in the home" (Bambrick, 2019).*

This marriage bar was not lifted until 1973 for civil servants, as there was a shift on the public's opinions on women. It was not till 1977 when it was finally lifted in the private sector, as the European law was introduced, making it illegal. Ireland was one of the last countries who lifted this law, meaning we are living during a time where there are women still alive now who lived through this ban. It highlights that women were only taken seriously in the workplace just under 50 years ago, due to the changing in the public's opinion on women.

## **Cultural Norms**

No matter what form of media, they can communicate different versions/images of women, whether it be stereotypes, unrealistic or limited perspectives such as the underrepresentation of women in the media. Wood's research is from 1994, but even still now in 2020, her research is still relevant and predominant in the media today. Cultural norms play a significant role in the formation of women in the media.

*“Cultural views of gender are depictions of women as sex objects who are usually young, thin, beautiful, passive, dependent, and often incompetent and dumb. Female characters devote their primary energies to improving their appearances and taking care of homes and people. Because the media pervade our lives, the ways they misrepresent genders may distort how we see ourselves and what we perceive as normal and desirable for men and women.”*

(Woods, 1994).

The media is not acting of its own accord; it reflects society. The media can be a double-edged sword; it can either reinforce the already existing gender stereotypes that exist within society. Alternatively, it can act as a voice of reason and empowerment, highlighting the level of systematic discrimination that women are faced with every day. The gender imbalance that exists can create and perpetuate harmful societal stereotypes; media must change how it reflects onto the world. Change begins within, this was evident in the BBC, as they started a new initiative called the 50:50

## **The BBC 50:50 initiative**

The BBC is a media production company based in the UK. The 50:50 project was born with the idea to promote more women in the media. Two journalists created this initiative intending to be not only inspirational but also achievable monthly. Rattan et al. (2019), explored this concept further, through interviews, they found three key concepts that stood out in the BBC when trying to achieve this target. The foundation of the project claimed he was tired of trying but not making any progress. Wanting to change but seeing the concrete reality of change are two different things, because of this change must start with the individual. A keynote from the research was shifting from 'this should be different' to 'what could I be doing

to help this problem'. Atkins focused on the behind the scenes production that happens at the BBC, from story writers to producers and reports. Atkins focused on changeable behaviours, the data collection of this project was very straight forward, "*the team had to do was record the gender representation of contributors each day (initially on a post-it note, which eventually got entered into in a spreadsheet), and track their progress toward the goal of hitting 50:50 monthly*" (Rattan et al., 2019).

From the data collection, the team were able to pull together more, and more statistics from the company to highlight where improvement was needed, some groups claiming to have efficient representation were surprised to find they only have 30%. As the data collection was so minimal, and it is effort-free as it became embedded into an everyday routine for the staff. "*Data serves as an essential check on one's gut instincts, countering overconfidence, sustaining motivation, and encouraging goal pursuit.*" (Rattan et al., 2019). This project aims to encourage people; it was an opt-in project which only celebrated success. It is noted that the 50:50 project only reports on gender representation within the BBC, it does not solve the gender imbalance, but it does shine light onto how change can be formed across all professions with a tangible and straightforward means.

## **Stereotypes**

Stereotypes are rampant in the media and everyday life; the age-old question is, does the media portray the real-life version of women, or is it depicting a version that they want the public to interpret? Stereotypes can be anything; in this research, it will be focused on gender stereotypes. Gender stereotyping is "*Practice of ascribing to an individual woman or man specific attributes, characteristics or roles on the sole basis of her or his membership of the social group of women or men.*" (Cusack, 2013). For example, men specific attributes would be any character that relates to masculinity, such as courage, leadership, and assertiveness.

A critical point to this discussion is "*To move forward; we must understand and acknowledge how stereotypes and biases cloud our beliefs*" (Sandberg, 2014). As consumers of media, the public needs to be educated on the idea that what we consume can change/form our opinions on topics. It is up to the consumers of media to decide what is and is not acceptable in media in the 21st century.

Women in entertainment can be anyone from Hollywood movie stars, singers to TV presenters and comedians, and each faces their share of criticisms from the media. Women are fiercely criticized by the media when things go wrong, whether it be a fashion review or questioning their ability to do their job. Criticisms do not always have to be outrageous statements often at times all it takes is something simple to imply that a woman's ability to do their job is a question. In a report from Pirozzolo (2020), she illustrates the type of questions which women are often subject to in the workplace aim to undermine their ability to succeed in their profession. These questions are inappropriate and repeatedly aimed at women; these include questions like are you married? Are you planning to have children? Furthermore, how do you plan to balance your work and home life? Very rarely would a man be subjected to these types of questions; it once again highlights the sacrifices women are expected to make.

### **Success, Reward and Outcomes**

A woman can be successful, or she is flawed, she cannot be both. It brings up the idea of success and likeability in women. Success and likeability have been an issue for women both in the media and in their everyday life. Women are either depicted as being able to obtain the dream job but lack their personal goals or vice versa, "*The stereotype of working women is rarely attractive... successful working women are so consumed by their careers that they have no personal life*" (Sandberg and Scovell, 2015). This theme is evident in a vast amount of media such as *Sex & The City* and *The Devil Wears Prada*. Women are punished for being successful via social penalties. Social penalties are outcomes such as rejection, being unliked, judged for their commitment to family life.

This trend can be seen clearly in the media; women can never fully satisfy the narrative the media is trying to display. They cannot be successful in all aspects of their life, without facing backlash and criticism. In *Sex and the City*, the character Miranda is a successful lawyer who dates a bartender Steve, there is an interesting power dynamic between these two. Miranda financially makes significantly more than Steve, and it creates some issues between them, it eventually leads to the breakdown of their relationship, Miranda feels like she is being punished for being successful. Whereas it is the other way around in *Carrie & Big's* relationship and

they do not have the same problems. *“Men are continually applauded for being ambitious and powerful and successful, but women who display these same traits often pay a social penalty”* (Sandberg and Scovell, 2015). The Heidi / Howard case study highlights this power dynamic in the business world, in which a class was a case study the only difference being the name was changed on some. The results showed that while both Howard and Heidi were respected, the audience preferred Howard as he came across more likeable. Likeable and success are linked which is evident in the case study,

*“The essence is that research has demonstrated a negative correlation for women between power and success. For men, the relationship is positive; i.e., successful men are perceived as more powerful and are revered. A fundamental challenge to women's leadership arises from the mismatch between the qualities traditionally associated with leaders and those traditionally associated with women.”* (Katsarou, 2019).

Heidi appeared as selfish; this supports the ideologies that *“When a woman is successful, people of both genders like her less.”* (Sandberg and Scovell, 2015). As a society, we focus on stereotypes; Heidi did not fit the status quo. It is an institutional barrier to the success of women; stereotypes are so engraved within society; when a woman is successful, she is discredited in every way possible. Heidi was disliked due to her *“Aggressive personality”* (Sandberg and Scovell, 2015), and she was also judged more harshly for her behaviour and mannerisms in comparison to Howard Katsarou, (2019). Being a woman in business is complex if they act like the stereotypical societal ways which are expected from them; they are at a disadvantage. However, if women defy and break the societal norms of what is expected from a woman, they also face punishment, it is a continuous battle.

## **Methodology Section**

### **Introduction**

As stated in the literature review section of this research, the primary focus is on the misrepresentation of women in the media and the knock-on effect it has on society in today's worlds. Various forms of data collection must be carried out to understand and expand on this topic. The method selected for this exploration is a combination of interviews and movie analysis. The aim is to produce data which can be reviewed and analysed to give an updated insight into gender representation in the media. The general hypothesis aims to uncover and dig deeper to see if women carry unconscious biases that were rooted in them via the media through the means of movies/films.

### **The Research Question**

This research is taking the stance of a visual analytic approach with the aim is to produce real-world knowledge about social constructs and the shared views of a group of people such as the interviewees. The research falls into the category of qualitative research. Qualitative research takes a naturalistic approach as it follows real-world situations. It is best used for cases that relate to cultures, people and in general social science-related areas as it offers rich information to the researcher. The data collected throughout this body of research is interpretive. It has a dual focus, firstly on the movie analysis alongside interviews with women who work in different media organizations. The aim is to understand if the misgender representation of women in the media does impact 21<sup>st</sup>-century women.

Personal insights and responses are critical to the inquiry of the topic at hand, and it allows for the data to be effectively analysed. The aim is to produce real-world knowledge; qualitative research is mostly expressed in words and uses open-ended questions to gather data and information which will hopefully help to prove or disprove the aims of the study.

This research employs a semi-structured interview with thematic analysis. This method was selected as the most appropriate means to explore this topic and due to the ability to be able to collect valuable information that will be helpful for analyses. The researcher is taking the stance that the misrepresentation of gender in the film industry does have ongoing impacts on women

today. Through the means of data collections stated above, the researcher hopes to prove their stance on this topic.

### **Bechdel Test**

The Bechdel test is an excellent means of testing gender representation in movies, and it is simple and easy to understand. It consists of three main tasks, has at least two named female characters that have a conversation with each other which has to be about something other than a man. Alison Bechdel designed the test in 1985 as discussed by Selisker (2015), across the entire film industry this test has been implemented, in Swedish cinemas the Bechdel test score is displayed alongside the film warnings. It has been applied to other forms of media such as TV shows and books. This test opens the discussion on gender representation in the media industry further, allowing for a more academic conversation surrounding the topic.

The website [bechdeltest.com](http://bechdeltest.com) reviews and ranks thousands of movies every year based on whether they pass the test. It provides some shocking figures which provoke thought over how simple the test is versus how many films pass the test. According to the website, out of the " 8076 movies in the database only (57.6%) of which pass all three tests, 821 (10.2%) pass two tests, 1785 (22.1%) pass one test, and 819 (10.1%) pass no tests at all" (Stats and graphs - Bechdel Test Movie List, 2020). The Bechdel test is not genre-specific either, movies from every genre have passed and failed this test for example movies like 'Frozen', 'Sister Act' and 'Bridesmaid' and even 'Mad Max: Fury Road' passed. Films such as 'Finding Nemo', 'La La Land' and 'The Avengers' did not pass the test.

While no test is perfect, the Bechdel test has faced criticism over the years. As reported in Rosenberg (2018), that the bar is set very low on the impact the Bechdel test has, as films can pass the test with a single line of dialogue, even more, shocking is that movies still fail. Rosenberg (2018) goes on to discuss that if all Hollywood producers had to do was add five extra lines of dialogue into any film it just highlights "Hollywood's *desire to wring as much profit out of feminism with as little effort as possible.*" (Rosenberg, 2018). In a report from Ellis, (2016), she furthers the research that Rosenbergs (2018), has already explored, she highlights how often a lousy movie can pass the test while a critically acclaimed film can fail. Ellis (2016), raises an interesting point that discussing men and relationships does not make a film un-feminist; the discussion does not always have to be subjective to that nature.

During the movie analysis, this test will be employed to understand if the two female-focused movies that are up for discussion pass this test. As previously stated, passing the test does not always indict that the film is a progressive movie regarding gender representation, but it does give a good benchmark idea. The test results will be implemented into the analysis section of this research, to either back up the misrepresentation claim or to highlight that the movies selected are not unbalanced in the eyes of this means of analysis.

## **Data Collection**

### **Interviews**

Interviews will then be analysed to establish if there is a pattern and to see if each individual shares a group belief, whether it be conscious or unconscious. The data from the interviews will be examined, identifying critical themes/thoughts from each interview. Each subject will be reviewed to gain a great understanding and to see if the prior research done previously in the literature reviews support or disproves the topic.

Due to the ongoing global pandemic, face to face interviews has been suspended. It was replaced with email interviews as the next available means of communication for both the interviewee and the interviewer. Traditionally, face to face interviews is the most common. However, with the advances in technology in recent years, it has created multiple options for researchers such as video calls, email interviews or even text messages. There are advantages and disadvantages to using email interviews as a means of data gathering. Hawkins (2018), discusses these advantages and disadvantages. A keynote from the readings is that each research should assess various factors such as aims of the research, time, accessibility, and the relative comfort level of the subject in question.

*"A major advantage of the email interview is that it offers a convenient and practical alternative to overcome geographical barriers and financial concerns that hinder face-to-face interviews" (Hawkins, 2018).*

As emails are becoming more and more embedded into people's lives, it allows for easier and quicker scheduling of participants. Email interviews also allow for increased access to a larger pool of participants, as global barriers are not an issue anymore. As it is an email interview, it will enable respondents to reply at a time that is convenient for them. Hawkins (2018), makes an interesting point that as respondents are controlling the interview and the amount of information they want to share, it puts them in charge of the interview. The participant may feel more comfortable and share more details as they are not feeling pressed for the information. Interview emails also allow for clarification later, when analyzing the data, and the researcher needs further guidance, they can quickly email the participant again asking for clarification. Another added advantage of the email interview is the time saved when it comes to transcribing traditional face to face interviews.

A drawback of email interviews is the lack of social interaction. It can create a barrier, being able to notice body language or tone of voice. Being able to dig a little deeper with the responses is not available with email interviews. As written interviews on average take time, it may lead to shortened answers. Another drawback of email interviews could be the age bracket of each respondent; younger generations are often more technology savvy than the older generation. Depending on the research topic, this is something researchers must bear in mind.

### **Interview Questions**

These interviews have been formed in a semi-structured manner, and they contain ten questions which were developed based on the themes discussed in both the literature review and the movie analysis to ensure they tie in together. The semi-structured approach was selected for this research since questions can be prepared ahead of time; it allows the interviewer to be in charge and understand how they want the interview to progress. Semi-Structured interviews also allow for open-ended responses, meaning the interviewee can give a more in-depth answer to questions, allowing for a full, well-rounded approach. The aim was to host the interview between 30 – 45 minutes, but as they were sent via email, it gives the correspondent more time to evaluate their answers.

The questions were formed from the initial literature review alongside the movie analysis; the questions cover a range of topics. As discussed below in the movie analysis section, a coding

system was formed to create the interview questions, establishing reoccurring patterns. Based on the information gathered, a line of questioning was formed. These questions aimed to get a response to various aspects of this research. As this study focuses on gender representation in the media, the topics included questions based around the interviewees' input, such as their favourite movie as a child and what does success mean to them. Other questions explored the aspect of societal stereotypes and how they affect the media landscape and what changes they hope to see being implemented.

### **Sample Group**

The sample group selected for this data gathering is focused on women who work in the media. This sample group was chosen due to their in-depth knowledge of the media industry, as it is the primary source of employment, they also have qualifications in this field of research. Women were also selected for this sample group to gain insight; the researcher is trying to figure out if women actively know there is a misrepresentation in the media. This study aims to raise awareness, and it also wants to open the discussion, allow for reflection and for action to be taken where needed to alleviate the issues discussed.

Participants were selected based on their gender; this is a women-only sample group as the issues being discussed relate mostly to only women. The justification for a women-only sample group was to gain a more in-depth insight into how ingrained the misrepresentation of women in the media is. Women would experience the stereotypes explained in the literature review on a first-hand basis; therefore, their experiences would be more valid and appropriate when discussing this topic. All genders should interpret the research as the only way to move forward is to be educated on the issues on the table.

The aim is to get a well-rounded response, as this topic applies to all women. All women have a valid response on this topic. The media is an all-consuming platform, which causes onset on issues that exist within society. This research aimed to conduct multiple interviews, three participants agreed, but unfortunately, due to work obligations and other commitments, only one woman was able to participate.

## **Movie Analysis**

The films will be analysed through the means of movie reviews, highlight and concreting on the key themes that are displayed through the movies selected. The movies chosen for this research were Legally Blonde, and The Devil Wears Prada. These will be discussed in detail, providing an introduction, movie summary and an explanation of the key themes within each film. Various interpretations can be used as a means of analysis, and contextual analysis will be the focus. Based on the research provided by Weng et al. (2009), instead of focusing on the audio-visuals of a film, they concentrated on the social relationships that exist within the film. This research follows the same line of thinking, which is a thematic analysis. This method allows the reader to gain a more in-depth insight into the issue at hand. The thematic analysis identifies common themes, idea's, topics, and patterns that exist in both the films and the interviews. It is a method of analysing qualitative data. Thematic analysis is subjective; it often relies on the judgement of the interviewee and the researcher. To progress with a thematic approach, the researcher watched the two movies selected for this study, taking notes throughout the entirety of the films. It allowed the researcher to get an overview of the topic.

Based on the notes taken and previous research that already exists, a coding system was established to find the common themes throughout the films. It allows the researcher to gain a condensed overview of the main points and common meanings that recur throughout the data. These themes are discussed and examined further down in the film analysis; these themes were combined with the interviewee response to gauge a full report. The interview questions were created under the topics which were established from the thematic analysis, which is also drawn from the literature review. Multiple themes were found throughout the investigation, but the central theme and the overall basis of this study are that they are female lead films. They are also iconic pop-cultural films, meaning a large proportion of the general Western audience would of either watched or be aware of these movies.

## **Limitations**

Face to face interviews have been suspended due to the ongoing global pandemic; this has created a limitation in accessing suitable clients to interview. This issue was overcome

using other medians available, such as email, video, and phone interviews. Another barrier that was presented during this research was the availability of interviewees. The author requested three separate interviews with three different women who work in the media. Only one was free to participate. The results will be materialized with a combination of interview responses and movie analysis.

Interviewee one was willing to participate, but due to ongoing work commitments; the interview was hosted via email. A drawback to this method of interviewing is the lack of power the author has conducting the interview. There is no way to pivot the interview if it is going off track, touching on irrelevant subjects, it is difficult to change the direction of interviewee answers. This was an issue that was encountered during the interview if this study were to happen again or to further the research is already done, in-person or video interviews would be a necessity to get the well-rounded response that the author is looking to obtain.

## **Analysis Section**

### **Introduction**

This section will describe the analysis used to gain greater insight into the treatment of women in the media. The premise of this research is the representation of women in movies and the stereotypes that exist alongside said films, and to see does it have a knock-on effect on society. This research is subjective; it is limited in response. Therefore, the findings in this paper are not a full, well-rounded reflection on societal opinions on this topic. The average person consumes up to 15.5hrs a day via traditional and digital media as reported by Wang Yuen (2019), this is a vast amount of time being spent shaping society's opinion on how we see the world. Although movies are prominently based on fiction, they still have an impact off-screen on how they form our reality. The research will primarily focus on women on screen rather than women in movie production. The media is a vast and ever-growing forum of communication; this research is based on the movie industry as it is a form of storytelling that is continuously growing. It has an ongoing impact as to how both men and women form their thoughts and beliefs on what is expected from women in the workplace.

The film version versus the reality can differ majorly; therefore, it is crucial to have an accurate representation to educate all genders on this topic. As stated by interviewee one, we are responsible for the media we consume. Based on already existing research, a pattern of behaviour should exist, which supports the findings in the literature review.

## Movies

In this research paper, the following films will be analysed. The Devil wears Prada and Legally Blonde as each of these explore different aspects of gender representation in the media. These movies are ingrained in pop culture, each with their target audience and conveying their plots but all as equally relevant as each other when it comes to gender representation. Legally blonde belongs in the young female target audience. The Devil wears Prada also has a female target audience, but the age range would be older in comparison. They both depict women in the working world, yet each has its stereotypes, problems, and representation of women. Each movie portrays different issues that women in society are faced with every day. These movies will be critiqued and analysed utilizing a media discourse analysis with a combination of interview responses.

Interviewee one was born in 1992; when asked about films that stood out to her, she believes that during her upbringing women in movies were often portrayed as helpless damsels in distress. Women were portrayed as weak characters who could not exist without the presence of a man. As she moved into her teens, the interviewee noted the change in women in films movies such as Laura Croft and Xena stood out to her as bold, brave, and confident women in movies. Interviewee one believes her generation was the last to experience the weak female characters as a constant in every film.

Films are a great escape; being able to be whisked away into an alternative storyline is a magical experience. Films hold a lot of power when it comes to storytelling; they either create a whole new world or re-enact one that already exists. As previously stated, they can also hold a lot of bias or stereotypes, as there is a respectful number of movies that defy gender stereotypes such as Moana, Brave, The King's Speech and Erin Brockovich. It begs the question of how are certain films still failing at this?

## **The Devil Wears Prada**

### **Introduction**

David Frankel directed the Devil Wears Prada in 2006, and it became a worldwide hit, based on the novel with the same name written by Lauren Weisberger. It grossed \$327 Million worldwide at the box office as quoted by The Devil Wears Prada - Box Office Mojo, (2020), making it one of the most significant grossing movies of 2006.

### **Summary of the Movie**

The movie is about a young college graduate, Andrea (Andy) played by Ann Hathaway, who lands a job as a personal assistant in one of the world's largest fashion magazines. Her boss is Miranda Priestly, played by Meryl Streep, who is known to be ruthless and cynical based on the iconic Anna Wintour editor in chief at Vogue. In a report from Scott (2006), Miranda is described as a mixture of pure terror and a measure of awe.

The focus of the film centres on the character Andy, who goes from being an outsider to becoming engulfed by the industry to finally walking away from it and taking a job at a traditional newspaper. Working in Runway magazine changed Andy's life and appearance as well as her insight into the fashion industry. As Andy becomes more competent at her job, falling deeper into her career, she gets promoted to first assistant taking over Emily Charlton's position played by Emily Blunt, who is at Miranda's beck and call. Emily idolized Miranda and resents Andy. Emily is exceptionally committed to her role in Runway magazine, putting her health to the test by going on an extreme diet before the trip to Paris. A response from interviewee one discusses the impact that media has on women's view of beauty. In recent years, Instagram has played a large part in promoting what 'beauty' is. Emily believed she needed to be a specific clothing size to be viewed as beautiful in the modelling industry.

As a result, the commitment to her job causes problems for Andy as she loses touch with her boyfriend and a group of friends. In the end, Andy realizes this career path is not one she wants to be part of, after seeing the ugly side that exists within the fashion magazine industry. While the plot is very simple and straightforward, Spiker (2012), discusses that Andy and Miranda symbolize two different roles of women in society.

## **Gender and Power.**

This movie depicts a compelling female lead story full of love, career choices and friendship sacrifices. It highlights how feminine power is effectively used to move forward in the place of work, yet other aspects of their lives, such as friends and relationships begin to crumble as they progress career-wise. It is an eye-opening insight into the complexities that exist from a female's perspective. As previously mentioned, Miranda and Andy depict two different versions of driven women. Miranda is displayed as a cold, ruthless and a self-centred boss while Andy is naive, awkward, and modest. As time progresses, she becomes more competent as she understands her role more.

They are miles apart in personality, yet they both face challenges which highlight vulnerability in each character, they both also encounter societal stereotypes. As Spiker (2012), explains, this movie is set in the fashion industry where being superficial is expected. In contrast, Andy has the girl next door, down to earth values which are not appreciated in the fashion industry. Women in the fashion industry are often portrayed as silly or frivolous, yet Miranda is forceful. She is not always pleasant, but a key element is that she is a woman in a high position job with power. Miranda is influential within the fashion industry; this is depicted when discussing new spring trends.

Women often fall into the trap of 'being nice', which can often be a problem. Often Women are fearful of not being liked, making the wrong decisions, and failing. As Sandberg (2014) said, without doubt, women would pursue professional success freely if these obstacles were not presented in modern society.

This movie revolves around women; the main characters are women, and so are the sub-characters. There are a couple of male characters such as Andrea's boyfriend, her co-worker Nigel and Miranda's boss and husband, while their screen time is minimal. This can be highlighted as an issue as the fashion industry is the female lead. Nigel is portrayed as a gay man within the fashion industry; it begs the question do men need to be gay to further their career in this industry? In an interview with Stanley Tucci who plays Nigel, explains that while Nigel is not displayed as written as outwardly gay, the character certainly is.

While this is based on American culture, Interviewee one discussing the media in the Irish context, the newsroom in her job is middle-class white men fill whitewashed and presenting roles. This is an interesting comparison; the only difference being the fashion industry is full of middle-class white women. She explains how the media cannot serve the views of the broad public as if it is only being written from the perspective of a white middle-class man. Their actions and attitudes have a substantial impact on the leading ladies' decisions such as when Andy's father also does not approve of her newfound career, giving Andy rent money to cover her bills. It highlights the power of the patriarchy "*follow the patriarchy, not the feminist career plan*" (Christoffersen, 2016).

As Spiker (2012), explains this movie is unusual in the portrayal of female characters as they use their power in the workplace effectively, like Sandberg (2014) discussed the idea of a successful working woman is often found unattractive this is a reflection of Miranda and the marital problems that exist within her relationship. Movies reflect stereotypes and this movie is no different.

### **Success, Likeability and Sacrifices**

Miranda has masculine, powerful energy which is depicted in a negative light from the offset, Women displaying male characteristics are disliked, As Sandberg (2014), explains that women downplay their achievement and accomplishments to protect themselves from being disliked. Miranda Priestly fits and dismisses this stereotype, she is disliked amongst her peers, but she also will not downplay her work ethic to appease others. This attitude has given Miranda one of the most feared reputations in the fashion industry. It both dictates the careers of those trying to make it in the industry and on a larger scale dictating the course of the fashion industry. While she is feared, Miranda is also respected amongst her co-workers, particularly by Emily and Stanley both, they both have such firm loyalty to Miranda even though they fear her.

Whereas Andy struggles to accept power and recognition because she wants to be liked by everyone. This reinforces the idea of the Heidi and Howard case study; there is a negative correlation between success and power for women in business. Andy believes in appeasing

everyone she must be liked; this often a struggle for all women. The institutional need to be liked; it is ingrained in society.

Andy suffers in her personal life as she excels in her career, a struggle many women are faced with daily. She finds herself losing connection with her friends and tensions increase within her relationship with Nate. Both her boyfriend and friends show concern when Andy begins to take a serious interest in her career, they downplay her job, dismissing it as a real career. It reinforces the idea that women should not pursue a goal/career if it takes away from the needs of the patriarchy as it disapproves of Andy's new source of independence.

Success is difficult to interpret, as it is a personal belief. Interviewee one defines her success as having a purpose in her job and being happy with her work-life balance. Something many struggles to achieve, her motto is to educate and entertain, given that her career is in the media it is an achievable motto. Of course, she acknowledges, that the financial element to any job is essential, being in a creative position often people undersell themselves. It is crucial to value her artistic ability with a reasonable salary.

The lack of support is based on what society views as to how women should hold power, and they fear she will turn into Miranda. *"Society tells Andrea "s of the world that women really should not have too much power because if you do, you will be portrayed as a Miranda."* (Spiker, 2012). Andy changed throughout the movie, this is due to the environment she is faced with at work every day, yet she is not supported by it. When Nate gets a new job and moves state, Andy is fully supportive of him. It emphasizes the double standards that exist between men and women.

Miranda is often used as an example for the queen bee theory, which she fits perfectly in some scenes and others she repels that concept. The Queen bee phenomenon is evident within the workforce, it is also apparent in movies, The "Queen Bee" syndrome *"describes a woman in a position of authority who views or treats subordinates more critically if they are female"* (Dudeva, 2018). Miranda holds Andy to a higher standard and expects more from her at times. A critical point made by Spiker (2012), is that when Miranda had to save her career instead of it being a typical patriarchy approach where there would have been a catfight scene. She acted professionally and *"exemplified the view that there is enough opportunity for success*

*for all women. Miranda did not destroy her competition. Instead, Miranda saved her own career while also promoting another woman" (Spiker, 2012).*

Andy sees a side of Miranda that is not shown at work, vulnerability. Miranda is a powerful woman, successful in her job alongside being a mother and a wife. She is wounded in her personal life, facing yet again another divorce after her husband left her. Not fussed by the negative press that she will receive as that has become part of life, she expresses concern for her children, as the media cannot hurt her anymore, but they can target her family unit. This scene examines the sacrifices a woman faces when she becomes successful.

## **Legally Blonde**

### **Introduction**

Based on the book *Legally Blonde* by Amanda Brown, it became a pop culture icon in the early 2000s. Directed by Robert Luketic in 2001, this iconic plot is based on a true story. Booth (2019), explains that Amanda Brown attended Stanford Law school since one of her favourite malls was nearby. It became a worldwide hit, bringing in \$141 million as reported by *Legally Blonde - Box Office Mojo* (2020), which led to the sequel *Legally Blonde two* and the recently announced third instalment of the franchise *Legally blonde 3*.

### **Summary of the movie**

This film follows the life of Elle Woods, a blonde sorority teenager who is deemed too blonde by her boyfriend Warner who is the son of the local governor. Warner breaks up with Elle, as he believes she does not fit his image as she is too 'dumb'.

To both teach Warner a lesson and win him back, Elle enrolls herself in the same university, Harvard Law School. Warner becomes engaged to Vivian whom he views as smarter than Elle. Along the way, the audience watches as Elle transforms herself by working hard and succeeding at school. As part of an internship, she is awarded a spot on a court case under the guidance of her professor Callaghan, using a combination of classroom learning and her knowledge of hair care Elle manages to solve the case. Which is ironic as it fits the stereotype which has been discussed previously, knowledge of hair care is often viewed as girly, which matches the dumb blonde stereotype which Elle is supposedly meant to follow.

Warner witnesses this and wants her back since Elle has proven herself and grown as a character, she rejects him realizing how shallow he is as he is more concerned about the image of his girlfriend rather than the reality in front of him. Throughout the court case, Elle finds herself in a new relationship with Emmett, who does not base his attraction on her looks. This movie follows the lines of a basic 'chick flick' movie, but it also covers some vital concepts such as feminism and stereotypes within the film industry.

## Feminism

Elle Woods is portrayed as this silly, rich, white, and blonde character with a love of the colour pink, and she is easy to dislike from the offset. As stated by interviewee one, Paris Hilton was an iconic socialite in the early noughties. Interviewee one explains how she may be viewed as the dumb heir; she was happy to allow this perspective of her to be displayed in the media. “*Paris plays up to people’s perceptions of her as a brain cell deficient socialite but has a much deeper voice when doing her business dealings and has made a fortune in her own right.*” (Interviewee one, 2020). Interviewee one felt the pressure being a teen in Ireland in the early noughties to be like Paris Hilton and the other fashionable socialites at the time to secure a spot in the media in Ireland.

At face value this film does not appear to be the feminist movie of the year as the story starts with Elle picking her career based on a boy, but as the story progresses it covers a range of essential elements. Set in the early 2000s, this period saw several similar rom-coms and satire comedies such as *Mean Girls*, *The Notebook* and *The Hangover*. The early 2000s was only the beginning of the third wave of feminism, this was a turning point in pop culture, the portrayal of women being helpless was growing old, and society was moving away from this trend. Third-wave feminism brought a new sense of confidence, even more, empowering than the last, it aimed for inclusivity and more feminist concepts. The word feminism is still a taboo topic, and it still has negative connotations towards it. However, it is a powerful movement that has allowed women to excel in many areas, each wave brings a new battle, building off the last wave but just altering the means of achieving it. *Legally Blonde* was produced at the cusp of the modern movement without knowing it had already begun to debunk the stereotypes that surround feminism.

Elle dedicates herself to her studies and learns she is passionate about law, allowing her to grow and better herself, instead of staying as the blonde airhead that she is depicted as, she becomes more independent and focused. A key element is that Elle never once sacrifices her femininity for success or power; she stays true to herself right down to the pink notebook. In the beginning, she was chasing Warner, but as the plot developed, Elle never loses herself for a man. Elle starts the movie chasing a man and ends the film with a man, but this story is not

about the men in her life, they are a mere side note of the plot. Which counteracts aspects of *The Devil wears Prada*, as Elle does not have to choose between her career or a partner.

### **Stereotypes**

*Legally Blonde* is full of stereotypes such as being a dumb blond-haired person, Elle Woods is far from a dumb blonde. Being feminine like Elle and liking pink, being attractive and caring does not make her stupid. Similarly, being like Vivian does not make her any less feminine either; they are just at two ends of the spectrum. Elle threatens Vivian by how comfortable she is within herself. Vivian looks down on Elle, believing she is superior and that she earned her place in Harvard. This stereotype is diminished as the story progresses. When Elle and Vivian become friends after discovering that Warner is shallow.

Elle displays beautiful balance feminine qualities such as being sweet, caring and kind alongside masculine qualities which are smart, secure, and independent. She is not all sparkle with no substance. This film rejects the idea that one can only be one smart or feminine, but like Sandberg (2014), stated they could never be both. Society struggles to accept that women are multifaceted characters; they can have all the qualities of a 'girly girl' but also be persuasive and successful in their career. Elle never rejects any of her personality to become a great lawyer - in fact, and she uses it to her advantage to solve a case, her knowledge of the fashion industry is the key to winning the case. When Elle was applying for her internship, she applied using bright pink paper which is easily identifiable, this bold move worked, and Elle landed the internship. She did not sacrifice her femininity to get the job. Men typically dominated legal professions; Elle highlights that women can compete with men in such a diverse area.

Elle is not shallow nor lacking in confidence, and her confidence is what brings her character to life, this storyline also highlights how vital women friendships are, debunking the idea that women are always in competition with each other. While Vivian felt that way at the beginning, she realizes that Elle is not trying to be anyone but herself, it shows that women can rise above personal differences and support each other. Elle is truly unapologetically herself; she never sacrifices her femininity to be smart or vice versa.

## **Classism & Feminism**

Elle befriends her nail lady Paulette through their love of beauty, Paulette is not sought after for her looks or intelligence in her eyes, she feels substandard in the world of beautiful women. Paulette comes from a working-class background - it shines some light onto the class stereotypes as she lives in a trailer park and never finished high school. Elle instils some well-needed confidence into Paulette, which can be seen during the iconic scene 'Bend and snap'. This newfound courage in Paulette allows herself to ask the postal worker on a date.

A fascinating insight from Alley-Young (2006), which once again depicts the different standards between the classes. In the end, Elle is offered a lucrative graduate program offer, while Paulette is married and pregnant. It sparks the conversation does feminism recognize the class inequality in society. In a report from feminism has failed working-class women (2013), they explain how feminism has failed the average working-class women by focusing too much on gender equality in high powered positions. The advances of women in senior positions mask the inequality of women in low wage positions. Working-class jobs are viewed as subpar jobs such as cleaning, waitressing, and beauty technicians. An interesting insight from Ferguson et al. (2019), that working-class academics are often first-generation college attendees, whose parents work in the jobs mentioned above. This is evident between Paulette and Elle, as it reinforces the idea that accomplishment for the working class is marriage and children while for the middle class, it is succeeding in their profession.

## **Findings Section**

### **Introduction**

An analysis of two movies cannot encompass a full reading into the way film effects the way people see the role of women but can indicate some of the stereotypes that are formed. Similarly, a thorough study would also gain more opinions through interviews to better understand the role of women in film as understood by women. As stated previously, the lack of interview participants was a limitation during this study if this study was to be held again a more in-depth analysis supplemented by other interviews with women who work in the media.

### **Movie Findings**

Based on the film analysis, each film had a combination of positive and negative effects that have an overall impact on the topic being discussed. To begin with, *The Devil Wears Prada*, touched on various stereotypes, all adding substance to the analysis. The key themes are not only relevant in the film but also today for women across the world. An important note from *The Devil Wears Prada* is that Miranda holds power throughout this storyline. At the same time, at times, she can be portrayed negatively; it does offer some inspiration to the audience. It is highlighting that women can hold a job of signification importance and be successful in their career. As seen in the character Andy, it is based on a person's morals on how they want to progress in that industry, but as a whole, the film does portray that women can have high achieving roles within an industry. This aspect provides a positive and harmful to the ongoing societal stereotypes that exist within society; it is highlighting the stereotypes that exist. However, it also conforms to said stereotypes.

*The Devil Wears Prada* also shines some light onto the ongoing sacrifices women often must make to succeed in said career. While this can be infuriating to watch unfold, it is a reality for many women, having to choose between family/ friends or a work commitment. At times, the opposite can be seen in *Legally Blonde* as Elle does not have to pick between a career and a partner. These movies, when compared against each other, they have some opposite views, but each is both critical to the analysis of this research. In *Legally Blonde*, the main themes focus on feminism, classism, and stereotypes. In some respects, Elle defies her stereotype of being a dumb blonde, as she graduates college and secures herself a blossoming graduate job.

On the other hand, Elle fulfils her stereotype of being a white middle-class woman, as discussed in the comparison of Elle and Paulette.

Although these films make a definite attempt to either highlight the issues / defy them, there is more than can be done within the film industry to excel past these societal stereotypes that are displayed. In recent years, we have seen a shift in films; movies such as Brave and Frozen are taking the world by storm. They are female lead films which do not overemphasize the need for a Prince Charming in every film. While this is an excellent move in the right direction, these films were only produced in 2012 – 2013, Less than ten years ago. The film industry was still slow on the uptake of these concepts. People understand that the damsel in distress is becoming more outdated as the years go on, when this topic was discussed with interviewee one, she believed if these large picture houses such as Pixar or Disney had produced these films two decades ago, the audience would have been there to consume them. They were too late in making this change, as she believes they were afraid to make such a bold move. Interviewee one believes in seeking change; change must occur inside the organizations; having a diverse staff will bring new ideas, stories, and opinions.

### **Representation in the Industry**

To represent the needs of the wider population who consume media, a more diverse production team is needed, as the views of a white male cannot accurately portray the feelings of a black female. An interesting approach was adopted during the production of Hamilton; the production followed the story of the founding fathers of America who were all white. This was not seen on the Broadway production; the race was not an element when casting each role, in the original ensemble men of colour portray Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Alexander Hamilton is played by a Latino man, as is John Laurens. It moved away from the typical textbook production that often would have seen a majority white cast portray this storyline. The same concept can be applied to the whole film industry, moving away for a traditional copy and paste technique and adapting into the new and bold era that we are in. By adopting a positive gender representation, it allows for the development of the concept if you can see it, you can be it. The same concept can be applied to misgender representation of women in the film industry.

## **Bechdel Test Findings**

Based on the Bechdel test stated above, both movies passed the test. They meet all the criteria required to pass the Bechdel test, which the researcher hoped for as these films are female lead blockbusters. It highlights how films can be produced to not always revolve around a man. These films passed the gender representation test, but they are still subject to gender stereotypes, it creates an interesting discussion point. Further research would need to be conducted to explore this topic further, overall though the Bechdel test served well during this research.

## **Conclusion**

While there is no clear answer to the research topic at hand, it is clear to see that there is some change happening within the media industry. As previously stated, one interview and two movie analysis cannot fully encompass the topic; they are not an overall reflection of societies views but more so an insight. The two films passed the Bechdel test, which is a step in the right direction for gender representation, but they also contained various societal stereotypes.

To understand the full extent of misgender representation in the film industry, a more in-depth study would need to be carried out. Based on the interviewee responses, a time for change has arrived, and there is an audience ready to consume inclusive media, for example, more films like Brave or Moana. This can be applied to all genres of film such as action, comedy and romance it does not have to be genre specific as all genders interpret all types of media. The findings also highlighted the link between gender representation and the effect it has on society. The issues discussed do not only affect characters in a movie, but they also have a lasting impact on society. Which, in turn, answers the research question, that the outdated stereotypes being displayed do affect the consumer, as proven with interviewee one.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A - Interview Draft Email

Thanks so much for agreeing to take part, as per my college guidelines for this dissertation, I have attached all relevant procedures that I have to disclose to you.

My name is Olivia Mackey and I am a final year student in Nation College of Ireland, studying Human resource management. I am doing my dissertation on the effects that media has on the representation of women, this will be primarily be focusing on the movie industry.

Firstly - I have attached the consent form to undertake these interviews, I have also attached the interview questions. While obviously face to face interviews can not be carried out at the moment, please let me know what medium would suit you.

All interviews will be conducted ensuring that participant anonymity is protected. There is no pressure on completing this and if you wish to withdraw at any point that is not a problem.

Please review the questions and either email me back a response at your own pace, feel free to expand on any answers you have, the more input the better but once again there is not obligation. If you like we can do a video call / phone call discussing the questions let me know and if you need any clarification on any of the questions please don't hesitate to reach out and ask.

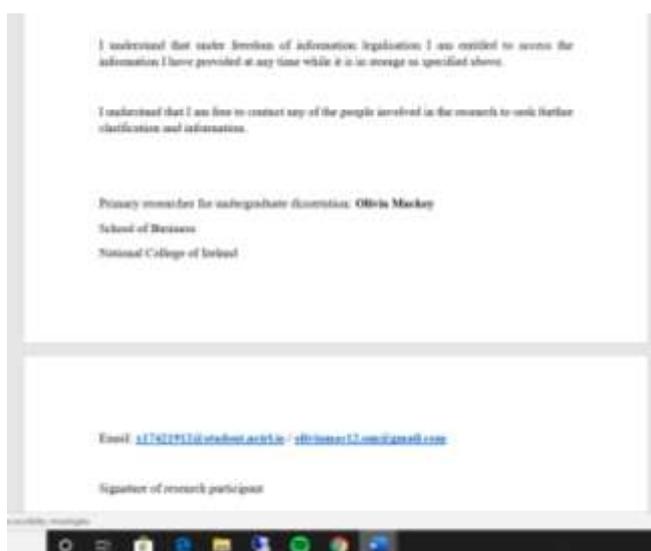
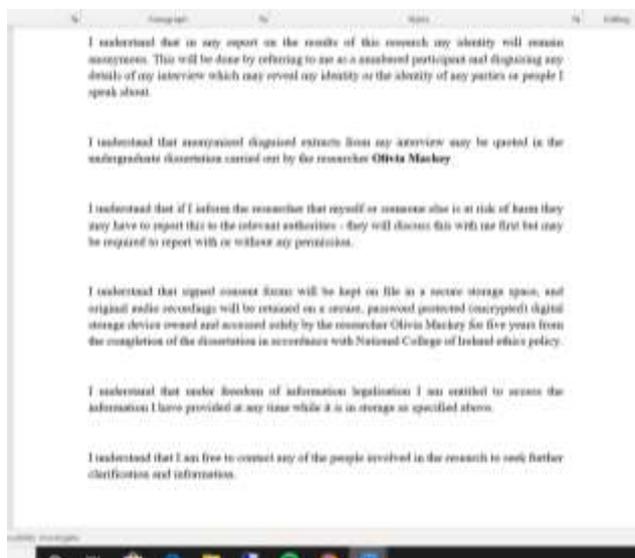
I hope you have a lovely week and stay safe.

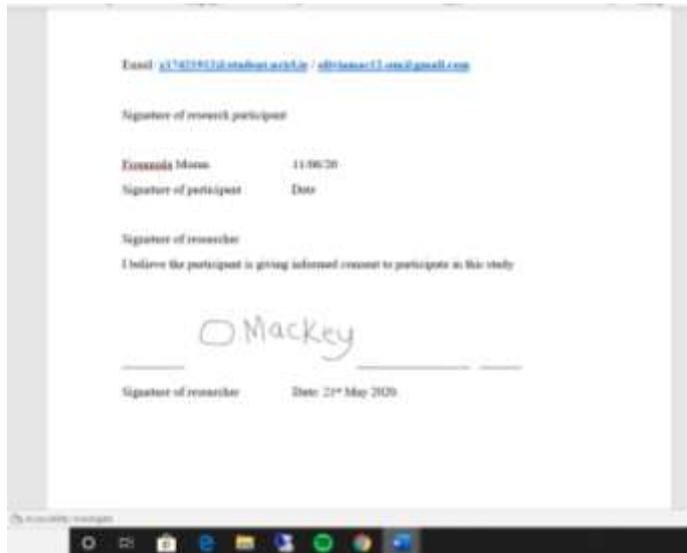
Kind Regards,  
Olivia

### Appendix B - Interview Consent form



The image shows a screenshot of a document titled "Interview Consent Form". At the top, it says "Interview No 1" followed by a blank line. The main title is "Interview Consent Form". Below that, it states "A study into the effects that media has on the representation of women in society." The next paragraph describes the study: "The study will primarily focus on the film industry, exploring the concept of the representation of women. It will look at areas like success and identity in women, gender stereotypes and societal norms. The aim is to uncover if the representation of women in the media has an impact on society whether that be positive or negative. Does the media representation affect women's career choices / make them doubt themselves? Are there any recurring themes? Is the media responsible for our cultural norms or do they just depict the reality back to us?" The following sentence says "This will be analysed with a combination of interview responses and a media analysis." Below that, it says "Consent to take part in research" and "I (Participant) freely and voluntarily agree to participate in this research study." At the bottom, it says "I have had the above purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had". The document is shown on a computer screen with a Windows taskbar at the bottom.





## Appendix C - Interview Questions

What was your favourite movie as a child?

Was there a movie that stood out to you that depicted women? - positive (inspirational) or negative (provoked)

Do you think representation of women in the media affects society in everyday life - if so how?

Do you think it is time for change within the media industry - if so, what change would you like to see?

Do you think that change could be implemented into your current workplace / day job?

What does success mean to you?

Do you think the media has a negative impact on the way society views successful women?

Do you think there are still societal stereotypes surrounding women in the media? Such as movie clichés etc.

In your opinion, do you think that the media affects societal norms or vice versa? For example, the media creates the norms and we as society accept & implement them or the opposite way around.

Movies such as 'Brave' (2012) and 'Frozen' (2013) depicted a strong female lead - which they were praised for being the first of their kind in this genre. Do you think this is a result of society moving forward and not identifying with the outdated concept that is usually displayed, and were they too late in making this change?