

Research and Identity

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The process of researching how hegemonic masculinity is embedded in the culture of media was incredibly difficult due to its normalized nature. For periods, stemming even from the early 1900's, the "ideal" man has pervaded the minds of young boys to create a hierarchical society, where the men must be the alpha and all others who do not fit those qualifications fall under a negatively coded feminine label. I wanted to explore the importance of films like Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* trilogy, where traditional feminine characteristics are utilized as signs of hope and guidance in a fight against toxic masculinity within the fantasy genre.

Using the criticism of popular culture and social media perspective defined by Kristen Hoerl, the first step was to find previous scholarly research describing the typical desired male attributes that created the hegemonic culture we presently witness in men displaying toxic masculinity. Through the application of the CSUSM Communication & Mass Media Complete database, I researched the recurring traits of males that have been witnessed within peer-reviewed journals in a broad span of contexts including same-sex relationships, films, presidential press, and military interviews. My research then condensed the characteristics that society has deemed positive displays in men being the rejection of femininity, aggression, and heteronormativity. I then sought out to discover how these elements were also embedded in media, particularly fantasy works, but it wasn't as simple as I initially had thought.

The origins of the fantasy genre in relation to early Anglo-Saxon works, and further refining during the WWII period, created an unchallenged depiction that cycled throughout productions. Diverging from the norm was discouraged as the media productions reflected what E. Anthony Rotunda calls "boy culture" in his book *American Manhood: Transformations in*

Masculinity from The Revolution to The Modern Era. Rotunda's book was a prominent source for building upon the history of the origins of masculine culture and explaining why men act the way they do. Yet despite the explanations and the acknowledgement that these elements contribute harmful behavior towards men and minorities, the media still presents the same heroes in similar fashions. Therefore, I could not garner enough information based on the focus of male depictions alone and instead had to shift to female characters and masculinity in general.

My argument instead was built on the representation of masculinity within the media, regardless of gender, and how it's used as a tool in female characters to present a "strong" individual to alleviate complaints of lack of prominent female characters, while still adhering to villainizing femininity. Through the same database, I then researched the history of women in media and current representations, which was usually accompanied by information on sexism and masculinity as empowerment. This alternative highlighted not only the pedestal that masculinity is placed on, but also how research surrounding gender roles has focused only on females and ignores the true root of the issue with sexism stemming from the lack of change from enforcing men to be dominant and violent.

Branching from the concepts of Rotunda's book, using the aid of popular media sources, and contributing my own preexisting knowledge of the genre, I then analyzed and dissected the three films to demonstrate the major ways that they combatted the typical portrayals seen in popular films and television. Social constructs in reality and fiction interweave to create a society in which we live in, but also strive to either achieve or avoid. By understanding previously praised movies, characters, and their repetitive tropes, my interpretive analysis serves as an introduction towards shifting the conception of a narrow-minded perspective in "positive" male role models to show that femininity can be redefined in a way that embraces males and

minorities who are insecure and suppressed in current hegemonic culture. *The Hobbit* trilogy is in no way perfect, and I call out these failings as well, but understanding these flaws instead of ignoring them introduces a whole new debate previously ignored. I knew in the beginning the goal of my analysis and was surprised at the lack of conversation when it finally came to researching. Jackson's movies are an indicator that society is evolving in a way that has potential to embrace further diversity. One light amongst a sea of dark is a beacon of change. The more lights that turn on, the brighter our future can be.