The Construction of Gender in the *Twilight* Saga

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Abstract

The *Twilight* saga chronicles the romance between vampire Edward Cullen and teenager Bella Swan. The series disseminates nontraditional gender representations of Bella as the sexual aggressor and Edward as committed to heterosexual monogamy and premarital chastity. Nevertheless, the subversive potential of such representations is greatly undermined by traditional portrayals of Bella as irrational and unable to control her emotions and desires whereas Edward is presented as rational and self-controlled.

This paper investigates gender representations in the *Twilight* series. My analysis will demonstrate how Edward constructs his masculinity through the practices of heterosexual monogamy and the heroic protection and rescue of Bella. In contrast, Bella accomplishes femininity through performing a vulnerable victim role and placing heterosexual romance before all other interests and pursuits. In spite of some progressive gender representations, the series' dominant message is that women are dependent, vulnerable, and relationally-oriented while men are independent, powerful, and heterosexually monogamous. In the process, the series sustains rather than undermines patriarchy.

Introduction

The immensely popular *Twilight* saga chronicles the romance of Isabella Swan (Kristen Stewart) and Edward Cullen (Robert Pattinson). Bella Swan is an ordinary teenager who reluctantly relocates from her mother's home in Phoenix, Arizona to her father's place in Forks, Washington. Bella's life is completely transformed after she meets and eventually marries vampire Edward Cullen. By the end of *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008), Bella decides that she wants to trade her mortal existence for an immortal one in order to spend eternity with Edward. In short, the series offers a retelling of a traditional Cinderella story where an economically underprivileged young woman falls in love with a wealthy "prince" who not only provides her with upward class mobility but also brings a sense of completeness to her life.

This paper concerns representations of *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasized femininity* in the *Twilight* saga. The first section of the paper discusses the paper's theoretical framework and data analysis procedures. The article then discusses the main *gender practices* which constitute

hegemonic masculinity and *emphasized femininity* in the series. Results of the analysis indicate that while the films offer some progressive representations of gender, they ultimately recycle a very traditional romance narrative and in the process reaffirm patriarchy.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity

This paper adopts a broadly social constructionist view of gender and thus conceptualizes gender as a fluid construct that individuals actively accomplish, *craft*, *do*, or *practice* within specific institutional and interactional contexts (Kondo, 1990; Martin, 2003, 2006; Dasgupta, 2012; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Particular institutional and social contexts offer *gendered practices* or *gendering practices*; that is, specific repertoires of social actions and behaviors that individuals can enact, resist, or even reformulate as they *practice* gender within social interaction (Martin, 2003, 2006). Practicing gender is the literal event or "the doing, displaying, asserting, narrating, performing, mobilizing, maneuvering" of gender within specific interactional contexts (Martin, 2003, p. 354).

Although social actors possess agency to construct or practice various forms of masculinity and femininity, individual agency can be curtailed by factors such as race and class position as well as sexuality. As a result, heterosexuals from privileged race and class positions practice more powerful forms of masculinity and femininity than less privileged individuals (Messerschmidt, 2012, p. 34). Power is thus inextricably linked to practicing gender, so individuals who are unable to embody situationally appropriate forms of gender are regarded as *gender deviant* and can face social sanction or denigration (Klein, 2012; Messerschmidt, 2012). Nevertheless, power is never unidirectional and absolute but multidirectional and fluid, so individuals shift between occupying various degrees of powerfulness and powerlessness (Messerschmidt, 2012, Weedon, 1996).

The active accomplishment of gender occurs in conjunction with sexuality.   *Sexuality* encompasses all forms of erotic desires, practices, relationships and identities (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. xi; Jackson & Scott 2010, p. 83; Messerschmidt, 2012, p. 188). Like gender, sexuality is a fluid construct that exhibits variation and diversity. Nonetheless, heterosexuality is often the privileged form of sexuality in many contexts within United States society.

Heterosexuality is frequently viewed as a monolithic entity, yet this conceptualization of sexuality ignores the dynamic and fluid nature of erotic desires and practices. While heterosexuality clearly occupies a superior position in relation to homosexuality, only certain manifestations of heterosexuality are legitimized while alternative forms are delegitimized. Many contexts within United States society tend to privilege a form of reproductively-oriented, monogamous heterosexuality that is stereotypically associated with stable nuclear families (Cameron & Kulick, 2006, pp. 9-10; Jackson & Scott, 2010, pp. 88-89). Consequently, alternative forms of

heterosexuality such as celibacy or promiscuity are regarded as deviant and delegitimized (Cameron & Kulick, 2006, pp. 9-10).

Masculinities and femininities form a complementary, yet hierarchical relationship where masculinities are always superior to femininities (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2010, 2011, 2012; Schippers, 2007). In the hierarchy of masculinities, *hegemonic masculinity* always occupies a superior position vis-à-vis alternative masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1987, p. 187; 1995, p. 78; Messerschmidt, 2011, p. 206). Messerschmidt has expanded Connell's *hegemonic masculinity* or "that form of masculinity in a particular social setting that structures and legitimates gender relations hierarchically between men and women, masculinity and femininity" (Messerschmidt, 2011, p. 206). Hegemonic masculinities incur intelligibility through their relationship with subaltern masculinities and emphasized femininity or "a form of femininity that is practiced in a complimentary, compliant, and accommodating subordinate relationship with hegemonic masculinity" (Messerschmidt, 2011, p. 206).). Crucially, emphasized femininities and hegemonic masculinities incur intelligibility only through the formation of a hierarchical relationship and thus are meaningless unless theorized as relational concepts (Messerschmidt, 2011, p. 206). Although hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are culturally celebrated and idolized, individuals possess agency to accept, contest, and even reformulate these archetypes through mobilizing alternative gender practices (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2010, 2011, 2012).

Data Analysis

I utilized *open coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze film versions of the *Twilight* series (Condon, 2011, 2012; Hardwicke, 2008; Slade, 2010; Weitz, 2009). First, I viewed the entire series on DVD and compiled detailed notes. Next, I conducted a line-by-line analysis of each film and thematically identified recurrent gender practices that male and female characters engaged in. Results of the analysis indicate that the main female characters utilize these practices to form an accommodating subordinate relationship with the men and thus reproduced the hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity relationship.

Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to both femininities and nonhegemonic masculinities. This paper focuses on femininities in response to Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005, p. 848) call for more femininities research. We must nevertheless acknowledge that the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities is crucial to the construction of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Emphasized Femininity in the *Twilight* saga

This section outlines the embodied social actions that constitute hegemonic masculinity in

the *Twilight* saga. Specifically, the paper discusses how reproductively-oriented heterosexual monogamy and the protection of women constitute hegemonic masculinity. In contrast, emphasized femininity is constructed from embodying a vulnerable victim role and conforming to a *relational imperative* (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). There is, however, a fundamental difference between the series' representations of Edward and Bella. While heterosexual romance is one component of Edward's identity, the series notably defines him in other ways such as intellectual, multilingual, and musically talented. On the other hand, the saga represents heterosexual romance as the key to personal fulfillment for Bella. The series thus champions a very traditional gender ideology that women and femininity are primarily defined through the formation of monogamous heterosexual relationships. As a result, Edward and Bella can be viewed as forming the complementary yet unequal relationship that constitutes hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Heroic Protector and Rescuer

Hegemonic masculinity can be constructed through assuming the role of heroic rescuer or protector of an emphasized feminine victim (Messerschmidt, 2010). A protector role is ideologically connected to a traditional patriarchal household where the father's masculine superiority stems not from repressive domination but from a willingness to incur risks and make sacrifices for the family (Messerschmidt, 2010, p. 112). In *Twilight* (Hardwicke, 2008), Edward protects Bella from a collision with a moving van. When Bella is later accosted by a group of delinquents Edward appears and scares them away. Finally, Edward prevents the vampire James from murdering Bella and again serves as her savior. In of these examples, the series constructs a strong male and weak female dichotomy and contributes to the empowerment of men and masculinity and subordination of women and femininity.

In a slightly different manifestation of the masculine protector/rescuer narrative, the series depicts Edward as Bella's moral guardian and again infantilizes Bella. Regardless of Bella's continual requests that Edward transform her into a vampire, he refuses on the basis of concern for her soul (Slade, 2010; Weitz, 2009). Edward maintains that while his eternal damnation is inevitable, he is unwilling to share his fate with Bella. As a result, the series portrays Bella's request as "irrational, uninformed, and hasty" (McClimans & Wisnewski, 2009, p. 167) and thus presents her as immature.

The saga's representation of Edward as Bella's heroic protector and moral guardian reinforces a complementary and hierarchical relationship and thus disseminates images hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. The series presents Edward in the powerful role of wise patriarch who physically protects Bella and prevents her from making morally wrong choices. In

contrast, the series depicts Bella as physically weak and incapable of making morally correct choices. Edward is further empowered through his ability to transform Bella into an immortal vampire and his power to decide when the transformation occurs. For these reasons, Edward occupies the dominant hegemonic masculine position and Bella holds the subordinate emphasized feminine position.

Heterosexual Monogamy

Aggressive heterosexual prowess is a gender practice that is typically associated with hegemonic masculinity (Hollway, 1998; Kimmel, 2008; Pascoe, 2011); however, Edward trades heterosexual promiscuity for monogamy. While Bella communicates a desire for a sexually intimate relationship, Edward dismisses her wishes and refuses to engage in an extramarital sexual relationship. Edward's unilateral decision that the premarital relationship remains chaste is a further example of how he dominates Bella and controls the relationship. Although the portrayal of Edward as firmly committed to monogamy subverts the prowess trope, his possessive and controlling behavior sustain and legitimate the unequal relationship that constitutes hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity.

The series' depiction of Edward as desiring premarital chastity and Bella as the sexual aggressor can be seen as a subversion of traditional sexuality tropes and thus hierarchical gender relations. Rather than presenting Edward as utilizing aggressive heterosexual prowess to construct his masculinity, the series portrays him as relationship-oriented and thus more "feminine" than Bella who desires a sexual relationship. Nevertheless, the series fails to provide a progressive representation of female sexuality through presenting Bella's sexual desire as excessive and Edward as responsible for regulating her desire (McGeough, 2010, p. 90; Wilson, 2011, p. 113-114). Edward thus strictly defines the relationship's sexual parameters (Wilson, 2011, p. 127). Simultaneously, the *Twilight* saga contributes to sustaining a gendered stereotype that men are rational and thus able to control their own desires while women are irrational and unable to exercise self-restraint (Baxter, 2010, p. 44; McGeough, 2010, p. 100). In this way, the series reifies rather than challenges the unequal relationship definitive of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity.

Edward's firm commitment to premarital sexual abstinence is another manifestation of the heroic protector trope. Paralleling how Edward attempts to save Bella's soul, he also endeavors to maintain her "virtue" through the avoidance of premarital sexual relations. As Edward believes that vampires are soulless creatures, he expresses a strong desire to maintain her virtue through the avoidance of premarital sexual relations (Slade, 2010). Edward thus adheres to a very traditional moral code and continually rejects Bella's sexual advances (Slade, 2010).

The portrayal of Edward as the protector of Bella's virtue is problematic as it once again

infantilizes Bella and therein reaffirms patriarchy. The depiction of Bella's sexual desire as extreme can be viewed as a reflection of social anxieties about adolescent female sexuality (Platt, 2010, p. 80). In contemporary United States society, there is greater concern over the loss of adolescent female rather than male sexuality (Platt, 2010; Tolman, 2002). Consequently, the series portrays Edward as responsible for closely monitoring her desire and thus protecting her sexual innocence.

Emphasized Femininity

The Emphasized Feminine Vulnerable Victim Role

A vulnerable victim is the relational complement of the heroic protector/rescuer, so individuals can embody hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity through occupying these roles (Messerschmidt, 2010). *Twilight* presents Bella as an emphasized feminine victim in three interrelated ways.

As discussed, the series presents Bella as frequently involved in dangerous situations and thus disseminates an image of an emphasized feminine victim. The power imbalance between Edward and Bella is partly attributable to his vampiric state and near immunity from danger and her mortality. Nonetheless, the representation of an almost impenetrable, powerful male and significantly less powerful female allows the series to "emphasize the nobility of the male protector while championing female passivity, silence, subservience, and beauty" (Wilson, 2011, p. 143). The vampire-human dynamic enables the series to naturalize unequal gender relations.

Bella is empowered after she becomes immortal; however, there are problematic aspects of the transformation. As Bella is empowered by Edward's venom and her wife/mother role, the *Twilight* series fails to provide a progressive representation of female empowerment (Wilson, 2011). Bella's increased power is not the result of personal effort but stems from her attachment to a man and conformity to socially constructed notions of normative families (Wilson, 2011). In *Twilight*, women are empowered through self-sacrifice and heterosexual monogamous marriage.

In addition to the strong male and weak female binary, the series upholds a mature male and immature female dichotomy. *Twilight* extends Edward's parental role to the extent that he controls Bella through unilateral decision making which infringes on her freedom. For example, Edward listens to her conversations, follows her car, and even attempts to control her choice of friends. Rather than portraying Bella as displeased by his dominating behavior, the series presents her as pleased by his attentiveness (Platt, 2010, p. 82). In the process, the series naturalizes a regressive representation of women as infantile and emotionally dependent on a male patriarch.

Bella is also the "victim" of a nontraditional family. While *queer* is often viewed as a synonym for individuals who identify as gay or lesbian, the term can also refer to anyone who rejects heteronormativity by practicing gender and sexuality in unconventional ways (Baker, 2008, p.

195; Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 149; Kane, 2010, p. 105). As Bella's parents divorced and she grew up in a single parent household, her family fits this expanded conceptualization of queer. Edward therefore "rescues" Bella from her queer family and provides her with access to a traditional family, material wealth, and eternal life.

A Relational Imperative and Incomplete Woman Discourse

Social norms frequently construct women as sexually monogamous and relationship-oriented (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009, p. 593; Tolman, 2002, p. 5; Weedon, 1996, p. 35). Female sexuality is thus associated with a *relational imperative* or essentialist assumption that women desire stable heterosexual relationships and thus are uninterested in casual sexual encounters or permanent singlehood (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009, pp. 599-601). The relational imperative is underpinned by the problematic assumption that women are exclusively focused on and fulfilled by heterosexual romance.

Twilight presents Bella as initially eschewing but eventually exuding emphasized femininity. Bella resists emphasized femininity through expressing a disinterest in heterosexual romance and traditional signifiers of femininity such as clothing and makeup. Bella originally dislikes Forks, Washington and plans to attend a faraway college. Once Bella meets Edward, however, her disinterest in heterosexual romance drastically shifts to a strong desire to spend eternity with and ultimately die for Edward (Felker Jones, 2010, p. 39). For instance, Bella prioritizes her relationship with Edward over all other pursuits such as the cultivation of friendships and academic success (Platt, 2010, p. 74). Furthermore, Bella eventually loses interest in attending college and only decides to apply because Edward pressures her to. The decision to apply to college is thus for the purpose of maintaining a hold on Edward rather than personal or intellectual development (Reagin, 2010, p. 65). Significantly, while Bella initially expressed mistrust of and even opposition to the institution of marriage, she eventually embraces traditional marriage and motherhood and therein reifies heteronormativity (Kane, 2010, p. 112). Bella can be seen as embodying emphasized femininity through embracing heterosexual romance.

As discussed, the series disseminates a representation of Bella as the sexual aggressor and thus subverts the passive female sexuality trope. Notwithstanding, rather than challenge orthodox notions of gender and sexuality, the series presents Bella as single-mindedly committed to Edward and therein sustains heteronormativity through the normalization of heterosexual monogamy and marriage (Wilson, 2011, p. 108). The fact that an adamant opponent of marriage eventually embraces the institution proffers a very traditional message that love, marriage, and motherhood are nonnegotiable elements of femininity and thus goals that all women should pursue (Wilson, 2011, p. 43).

Discussion

        The results of this analysis indicate that the *Twilight* series disseminates very traditional images of masculinity and femininity. Recent research findings demonstrate that contemporary adolescent femininity is no longer associated with submissiveness, docility, and passivity but defined through self-control, determination, competition, athleticism, and the exhibition of heterosexual appeal (Messerschmidt, 2011, p. 226). Rather than provide a more accurate portrayal of contemporary adolescent femininity, *Twilight* draws on the heroic protector/rescuer and emphasized victim dichotomy to sustain and legitimate hierarchical gender relations.

        Regarding sexuality, the *Twilight* series originally challenges the "missing discourse of desire" (Fine, 1988, p. 29) by presenting Bella as sexually active and thus rejecting the passive sexuality trope. Social norms dictate that girls exhibit heterosexual desirability yet deny them sexual desire (Tolman, 2003, p. 100). Girls who are viewed as in possession of excessive sexual desire are labeled "sluts" or "whores" while those regarded as unreasonably inactive are "sex spooks" or "virgins" (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009, p. 598; Messerschmidt, 2011, p. 227). Women are victims of a *sexual double standard* because heterosexual prowess confirms hegemonic masculinity yet disconfirms emphasized femininity (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009, p.593; Jackson & Scott, 2010, p. 96). Therefore, young women are expected to exhibit a moderate degree of heterosexual desirability but not expected to have sexual desire. Rather than attempt to dismantle the slut/spook or virgin/whore dichotomy, *Twilight* presents Bella's sexual desire as excessive and Edward as responsible for policing that desire (McGeough, 2010, p. 90).

        Reflecting my earlier discussion of sexuality, reproductively-oriented, monogamous heterosexuality is clearly the privileged form of sexuality in the *Twilight* saga. Premarital sexual abstinence is a pervasive message throughout the entire series. Furthermore, nonheterosexual individuals are noticeably absent from the series. Most of the characters in the series are either involved in a monogamous heterosexual relationship or desire to be involved in one.

        The *Twilight* series misses another opportunity to challenge gender hegemony by portraying Edward as multitalented and Bella as completely fulfilled through a heterosexual romantic relationship (Felker Jones, 2010, p. 69; Platt, 2010, p. 74). Not unlike Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*'s (Trousdale & Wise, 1991), Bella is intelligent and disinterested in both heterosexual romance and exuding feminine desirability. By the end of the first film, however, Bella has shifted from a character who challenges many elements of emphasized femininity to one who practices emphasized femininity. The series could have celebrated Belle's uniqueness and thus provided a positive portrayal of a nonemphasized form of femininity; however, *Twilight* portrays gender

nonconformity as ephemeral and ultimately presents Bella as a gender conformist.

The *Twilight* saga is a prime example of how a state of gender hegemony is accomplished not through brute force and coercion but by persuasion and gaining the populace's consent (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, pp. 841, 846; Messerschmidt, 2010, p. 26, 35). Reagin (2010, p. 183) maintains that the juxtaposition of traditional and subversive gender representations is an interesting feature of the series. At the same time, such hybrid gender representations render gender hegemony implicit and problematically construct a modern day Cinderella narrative as the path to fulfillment for women.

Conclusion

This paper has traced representations of *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasized femininity* in the *Twilight* saga. Although the series provides some progressive gender representations, the dominant narrative is that women are ultimately fulfilled through marriage, motherhood, and complete devotion to heterosexual romance. Any subversive potential of the nontraditional gender representations is undermined by the dominant narrative that women are financially and emotionally dependent on men. Therefore, Bella and Edward embody and enact the hierarchical yet complementary relationship definitive of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity and reaffirm rather than challenge the status quo.

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