

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the study by outlining the background of the research, the formulation of research problems, the objectives, a review of relevant previous studies and the significant of the studies.

1.1 Research Background

Women's lives and images have been shaped and portrayed in society (Mulvey, 1975). Women are not seen as important or equal to men because of the construction that has been made for them. Movies in this case play an important role in shaping perspectives on things in society (Gauntlett, 2010). Women are portrayed as passive objects who only play an additional role and do not have any influence in the story. This reinforces portrayals that not only mirror reality but actively shape it (Hall, 1997).

People tend to accept what they see as truth, making media a powerful force in shaping perceptions of gender (Dines & Humez, 2011). Movies, as one of the most influential forms of media, often reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms that define women's roles. While many films appear to promote women's empowerment, they still frequently sustain stereotypes portraying women as passive, sexualized, or less competent. This continuous depiction burdens women, reducing them to objects within a patriarchal structure.

Patriarchy is a deeply rooted social system that historically positions men as the primary holders of power in both public and private spheres, while systematically subordinating women (Walby, 1990). Developed through cultural, economic, and political structures, patriarchy legitimizes male dominance by assigning men leadership roles in families, governments, and institutions, while confining women to domestic spaces or objectified social positions. This deeply rooted system not only sustains male authority but also shapes societal perceptions of women as passive and inferior.

Within this structure, men not only hold power but also shape how women are perceived often as passive and less important. This dynamic extends into visual media, where gender imbalances are commonly reflected and reinforced. Significant disparities remain in both representation and portrayal of women. An analysis of over 2,000 advertisements between 2006 and 2016 revealed that men received four times more screen time and seven times more speaking roles than women, indicating a persistent gender gap in commercial media (Geena Davis Institute, 2017).

Analysis of the top-grossing films in 2018 across 20 nations shows that female characters were depicted in revealing outfits far more frequently than male characters (30% versus 7%), which highlights the continued sexual objectification of women, including those in powerful positions. (Geena Davis Institute, 2019).

Beyond representation, this objectification has measurable psychological effects. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) found that media depictions which emphasize appearance and sexuality contribute substantially to low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, depression, and academic struggles among teenage girls (American Psychological Association, 2007).

This portrayal reflects Laura Mulvey's idea of the Male Gaze, which describes the objectification of women from a patriarchal lens within the narrative and visual elements of media. According to Mulvey (1975), men in films are often positioned as active agents, while women are placed in passive roles, existing primarily to satisfy male desire. The theory highlights how the camera, the male characters, and even the audience are positioned to look at women from a masculine, objectifying perspective. Women are thus seen not as subjects with agency, but as objects. and this structure reinforces gender inequality by denying women control over their own representation.

Film serves as a primary medium where The Male Gaze is most evident, as seen in the popular feminist movie *Legally Blonde* (2001). Grossing over \$141 million on an \$18 million budget, the film was a major commercial success (Box

Office Mojo, n.d.). It also left a strong mark on fashion costume designer Sophie de Rakoff noted that the color pink became synonymous with the film, reflecting its lasting influence on pop culture (Rambarran, 2021).

Legally Blonde (2001) is widely celebrated as a feminist film that charts Elle Woods's transformation from a stereotypical "feminine" woman into a successful lawyer, challenging gender norms in a male-dominated profession (Ferriss & Young, 2008). However, through a critical lens, the film also reveals underlying patriarchal elements. Elle's femininity is often objectified through The Male Gaze, which emphasizes her appearance over her intellect. While she overcomes obstacles and proves her competence, she is still judged by patriarchal standards highlighting the tension between empowerment and objectification. The film ultimately reflects how even empowering narratives can subtly reinforce male-defined values of success and female worth.

Previous studies have explored the concept of The Male Gaze in film, particularly in relation to how the representation of women in Hollywood reinforces or challenges patriarchal structures. For instance, He (2024) discussed how *Legally Blonde (2001)* promoted female empowerment, solidarity, and mentorship while critiquing gender bias in male-dominated professions. Similarly, Sinurat & Prihandini (2024) analyzed gender inequality in the film, highlighting issues of subordination, stereotyping, and violence, despite its feminist undertones.

However, much of the existing research on *Legally Blonde* focuses on the positive aspects of the film, overlooking the underlying patriarchal elements and the subtle presence of The Male Gaze. While some studies suggest that The Male Gaze has diminished in modern films due to the rise of gender equality and feminism, they fail to examine how visual elements such as camera angles, color, and costumes may still reinforce patriarchal perspectives. This gap in the literature motivates the current research, which aims to offer a fresh perspective by analyzing how The Male Gaze persists in *Legally Blonde (2001)*, despite its feminist narrative.

In this case, this research is entitled The Male Gaze in Robert Luketic's *Legally Blonde* (2001): A Critical Examination of Patriarchal Structure. In this study, the aims are to analyze how the male gaze is interpolated and how patriarchal structures are reinforced by the male gaze in Robert luketic *Legally Blonde* (2001).

1.2 Statement of Problem

1. How is the male gaze interpolated in Robert Luketic's *Legally Blonde* (2001)?
2. How are patriarchal structures reinforced by the male gaze in Robert Luketic's *Legally Blonde* (2001)?

1.3 Research Purposes

In relation to the formulation of the problem, this research has two objectives to be achieved:

1. To examine the ways in which Robert Luketic's *Legally Blonde* (2001) interpolates the male gaze.
2. To analyze how patriarchal structures are reinforced by the male gaze in Robert Luketic's *Legally Blonde* (2001).

1.4 Research Significances

This study aims to broaden insights and discussions on the Male Gaze theory, particularly in its application to visual media such as film. By using *Legally Blonde* (2001) as the main object of analysis, this research is expected to provide a perspective that the Male Gaze can coexist within a film that promotes women's empowerment, as well as to offer an understanding of how patriarchal ideology may be reinforced through cinematic representation.

Practically, this study is expected to provide knowledge and serve as an eye-opener for general audiences, encouraging them to be more critical of the dominant patriarchal perspectives. At the same time, filmmakers are expected to become more deliberate in promoting women's empowerment through their works. By understanding these dynamics, this research also aims to inspire and open pathways for further discussions and studies on the Male Gaze.