Challenging the 'Dumb Blonde' Stereotype: A Feminist and Intersectional Analysis of Gender and Professionalism in *Legally Blonde* (2001) Movie

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"Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight."
- 1 Peter 3:3-4 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

This study examines how *Legally Blonde* (2001) depicts femininity using a qualitative content analysis: intelligence, and gender dynamics by applying feminist criticism, *gender performativity* by Judith Butler (1990) and *intersectionality* frameworks by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). In addition, the elements of the visual narratives *(cinematography)*, such as: camerawork, tones of colors were analyzed. As the result: **1)** It reveals how the movie subverts traditional gender stereotypes by showing Elle Woods' transformation from being perceived as a *"dumb blonde"* to a competent lawyer, challenging societal expectations that femininity equates to a lack of intelligence. **2)** It highlights the challenges women face in male-dominated professions, as seen in Elle's experience navigating *Harvard Law School* while maintaining her feminine identity. **3)** It focuses on how Elle's success illustrates that professional competence and femininity are not mutually exclusive, as her journey critiques the rigid expectations placed on women in professional spaces. This research offers a detailed perspective on gender roles in media, highlighting how movies can either question or uphold societal expectations related to gender and career achievement.

Keyword: *Legally Blonde (2001), Feminism, Gender Performativity, Patriarchy, Gender Roles*

INTRODUCTION

Movies, as a form of media, play an increasingly significant role in modern literature, reflecting societal norms, attitudes, and conflicts while offering accessible interpretations of complex human experiences. As visual narratives, they blend storytelling with symbolic elements, often addressing cultural, political, and gender-related issues. *Legally Blonde (2001)*, directed by Robert Luketic, offers a powerful platform for analyzing gender dynamics, particularly through the lens of feminist criticism. The movie highlights important issues like gender stereotypes, making feminine traits seem less valuable, and the difficulties women face in jobs mostly dominated by men. These problems reflect real-life situations, as women everywhere still deal with society's expectations, discrimination, and the lack of respect for femininity in the workplace. According

to the Catalyst Report, *"Women in male-dominated industries face pervasive stereotypes and often engage in underappreciated tasks, leading to burnout and high levels of stress."* (Catalyst, 2023). Women in male-dominated industries face pervasive stereotypes, such as being seen as less capable leaders. They often take on tasks like organizing or helping others at work, which are not recognized or rewarded. This can lead to exhaustion, and many report feeling stressed, anxious, and unsure of their abilities Occupational segregation and lack of mentoring exacerbate the challenges, with women disproportionately holding lower-paying jobs while being underrepresented in higher-paid industries.

Beyond its humorous and lighthearted portrayal, *Legally Blonde (2001)* movie, carries significant extrinsic value as a commentary on gender and societal expectations. The movie challenges deeply ingrained stereotypes about femininity, especially the notion of the *"dumb blonde,"* by positioning its protagonist, Elle Woods, as a woman who defies these assumptions. Elle's journey from a fashion-driven socialite to a competent lawyer offers a critique of how women are often judged by their appearance, with her ultimate success serving as a challenge to patriarchal structures that dominate professional fields like law.

The film highlights Elle Woods, a character who initially comes across as concerned with appearances and clothing but unexpectedly ventures into a transformative journey of self-awareness and empowerment. Following her rejection by a partner who deemed her *"too blonde,"* Elle decides to enroll in *Harvard Law School* with the intention of reclaiming his affection. Nevertheless, she gradually uncovers her own capabilities as she navigates the competitive and predominantly male arena of law, ultimately surpassing the expectations imposed upon her. A critical theme within the narrative addresses the ways in which women are often stereotyped and marginalized based on their physical appearance. Elle's evolution from a fashion-centric socialite to a proficient attorney challenges these stereotypes, establishing Legally Blonde as a critique of the interplay between gender, intellect, and professional efficacy.

Despite the extensive feminist analysis of media and movies, research specifically addressing *Legally Blonde (2001)* remains limited. Previous studies, such as Jane Brown's (2010) article *"Gender Stereotypes in Popular Cinema: A Study of 'Legally Blonde' Using Gender Performativity Theory"*, focus primarily on how Elle's journey fits into Judith Butler's theory of gender *performativity*. Brown's research highlights how Elle *"performs"* femininity and how this performance is received and critiqued by the patriarchal society at Harvard Law. The results indicate that Elle reclaims feminine traits and challenges gender roles, but the study does not fully address the systemic barriers women face in male-dominated professions, particularly how these barriers intersect with femininity and societal expectations.

This study aims to bridge that gap by expanding the analysis to include Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and examining how Elle's journey reflects the broader struggle of women facing multiple axes of discrimination *(e.g., gender, appearance, and professional identity)*. By exploring the binary opposition of *Intelligence* vs. *Appearance*, this study aims to uncover how *Legally Blonde (2001)* simultaneously subverts

and reinforces societal stereotypes, contributing a more detailed understanding of gender dynamics in popular media. Likewise, this research examines the portrayal of femininity in Legally Blonde from Judith Butler's standpoint that gender is a performance carried out through our conduct; additionally, it embraces Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework concerning the intersection of multiple identity aspects, like gender and race, and their ramifications on personal experiences. It investigates the portrayal of femininity in Legally Blonde. As per Butler, gender is neither a natural nor a permanent characteristic, but rather something we *"perform"* based on the roles and behaviors society expects from us. In the case of Elle Woods, her embodiment of traditionally feminine traits is initially perceived as a weakness, but she later subverts these expectations by excelling in a male-dominated space without abandoning her femininity. The concept of intersectionality as articulated by Crenshaw will be employed to examine the ways in which Elle's identity as a "blonde" female interacts with the obstacles she encounters within a professional environment, thereby providing a more nuanced comprehension of how intersecting identities shape individuals' experiences of both discrimination and empowerment.

Scholarly works on feminist movie criticism have explored how popular cinema often perpetuates or challenges gender stereotypes. Mulvey's (1975) argued that the *"male gaze"* is prominent to better understand how women are often objectified and seen through a male-dominated perspective. In her article *"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema",* Mulvey explained that women in movies are frequently portrayed as objects of desire, existing mainly to satisfy the male viewer's pleasure. While Legally Blonde may initially conform to this trope with Elle's portrayal as a *"dumb blonde,"* it ultimately subverts the male gaze by allowing Elle to emerge as a multi-dimensional character who commands respect in both feminine and professional spaces. Additionally, Butler's (1990) work on gender performativity in Gender Trouble provides essential insights into how Legally Blonde questions the performative nature of femininity and the expectations tied to it.

This study will explore how Legally Blonde subverts traditional gender stereotypes through its portrayal of Elle Woods and challenges societal expectations about *appearance* and *intelligence*. By employing the theoretical frameworks of gender performativity and intersectionality, this research seeks to address the ways in which the movie critiques the intersection of gender, appearance, and professional competence. Hence, this study is to reveal Legally Blonde critiques on stereotypes of femininity and the *"dumb blonde,"* it also reinforces certain gender norms by placing value on Elle's appearance and aligning her success with her eventual acceptance into the patriarchal space of law. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the related issue between gender, societal expectations, and professional success. Applying feminist theory to analyze Legally Blonde, this study will add to the ongoing discussion about how gender is shown in media and what these portrayals mean in real life. The findings are expected to highlight how popular movies can both challenge and perpetuate existing gender norms, offering valuable insights for both feminist movie criticism and the broader discourse on gender equality.

Binary Opposition

INTELLIGENCE	APPEARANCE
In *Legally Blonde*, Elle Woods' intelligence is revealed through her ability to succeed in the academic and professional world, particularly in the male-dominated field of law. Her intellect is highlighted in scenes where she defies expectations by excelling at Harvard Law School. *"You got into Harvard Law?"* - *"What, like it's hard?"* This line reflects how Elle subverts the stereotype of women, particularly those who embrace femininity, being perceived as less competent. (Butler, 1990, p. 54) Her success serves as a critique of gender norms that equate femininity with a lack of intelligence.	Elle's appearance, particularly her *"blonde"* stereotype, is used to diminish her abilities and reduce her to superficial judgments. *"You're breaking up with me because I'm too... blonde?"* highlights the societal tendency to judge women based on their looks rather than their capabilities. However, the movie subverts this expectation, showing that appearance is not an indicator of intellectual worth. (Butler, 1990, p. 68) Elle reclaims her femininity, showing that being fashionable and intelligent are not mutually exclusive.

METHOD

By implementing a qualitative strategy alongside content assessment, this analysis examined the *Legally Blonde (2001)* movie from a feminist point of view. It focused on two contrasting ideas: Judith Butler's theory of *"performativity"* and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of *"intersectionality."* These ideas helped explore how the movie shows femininity and gender roles, how they are shaped, performed, and challenged throughout the story. The study also considers the binary opposition of intelligence vs. appearance, exploring how these concepts intersect to reflect broader societal attitudes toward gender.

The main data for this research were collected from specific scenes and dialogues in Legally Blonde. The focus is on important moments that highlight gender stereotypes, the downplaying of feminine traits, and the difficulties women encounter in male-dominated environments. This included the extraction of relevant quotes from the movie subtitles that highlight the protagonist's experiences with gendered expectations, as well as analyzing pivotal scenes where Elle Woods subverts or conforms to societal stereotypes about femininity and intelligence.

This research centers on two principal concepts, one being *'gender performativity,'* a term articulated by Judith Butler in 1990, which posits that gender roles are manifested through actions that align with societal expectations. This concept is employed to examine the character of Elle Woods, specifically analyzing her enactment of femininity and the evaluations it receives within a professional context. At the same time, 'intersectionality' reveals how a person's identity, incorporating elements like gender expectations and economic standing, significantly influences their unique experiences of both bias and advantage (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1991). This investigation explores the ways in which Elle's identity as a *"blonde"* woman intersects with her encounters in the predominantly male law.

The data were studied using thematic analysis, which looks for repeating ideas about gender stereotypes, the connection between *appearance* and *intelligence*, and the difficulties women face in workplaces dominated by men. The analysis process involves coding dialogue and scenes based on themes of stereotyping, gender expectations, and professional challenges. Additionally, binary opposition analysis is used to explore the contrast between intelligence and appearance as presented in the movie, framing the critique of societal norms. Expert commentary from scholars like Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw provides theoretical context and depth to the findings. This qualitative analysis aims to offer insights into how *Legally Blonde* addresses and critiques societal expectations of femininity, particularly in relation to professional competence. By using both theories, gender performativity and intersectionality, this study gives a more detailed view of how the movie shows gender roles, adding to the larger conversation about how gender is represented in media.

DISCUSSION

1. The Subversion of Traditional Femininity in *Legally Blonde*

The character of Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* serves as both a reinforcement and a subversion of traditional gender stereotypes, particularly through her portrayal as a *"blonde."* From the beginning, Elle is confronted with the societal stereotype that blonde women are less intelligent or serious, a common trope that reduces women to their physical appearance. In the line, *"You're breaking up with me because I'm too... blonde?"* (00:08:10), Elle questions her partner's decision to leave her, which is based on her outward appearance. This moment reflects the widespread stereotype that associates blondes with shallowness or lack of intelligence. According to Judith Butler, gender is socially constructed through categories like *"blonde,"* which often reduce individuals to surface-level characteristics, stripping away their uniqueness and complexity (Butler, 1990, p. 54). This stereotype forces Elle to question her own worth, illustrating how societal expectations can diminish a woman's perceived value based solely on appearance.

In this scene from *Legally Blonde*, the cinematography emphasizes the theme of challenging societal expectations about femininity and intelligence, particularly within male-dominated spaces like *Harvard Law School.* The close-up shot of Elle Woods, with her confident expression and bright appearance in focus,

highlights the tension between how others perceive her and her self-assurance in her own abilities. This framing allows the audience to connect emotionally with Elle, showcasing her as both misunderstood and confident, reinforcing the movie's message of breaking stereotypes. The bright and soft lighting reflects Elle's optimistic personality, contrasting with the more serious, muted tone of the law school environment, and

highlighting her blonde hair and vibrant appearance. The use of color distinguishes her from the darker, more subdued surroundings, symbolizing the clash between femininity and traditionally male-dominated intellectual spaces. *"Patriarchal structures in professional settings often create invisible barriers for women, where traits associated with femininity are dismissed as incongruent with leadership and competence."* (Connell, 2005, p. 130) This quote highlights how patriarchal values within professional fields often undervalue feminine traits, aligning with the broader issue in Legally Blonde where Elle Woods' femininity is initially viewed as incompatible with professional success. Elle's fashionable yet professional attire, paired with glasses, symbolizes her growing competence as a law student, further challenging the stereotype that femininity and intelligence cannot coexist. Through its use of framing, lighting, color, and costume, the cinematography in this scene effectively supports the movie's central message: that women can embrace their femininity while excelling in professional spaces, thereby defying societal expectations.

However, as the movie progresses, Elle subverts this stereotype by succeeding in *Harvard Law School,* proving that her intelligence far exceeds the expectations set by her appearance. The movie further addresses the trivialization of feminine traits through humor, as seen in Elle's line, *"Exercise gives you endorphins. Endorphins make you happy. Happy people just don't shoot their husbands."* (01:04:30). While this line is humorous, it simplifies serious issues related to femininity and fitness, suggesting that maintaining one's appearance can solve deeper emotional problems. As Butler suggests, humor can often hide more significant social issues, in this case reinforcing the stereotype that women's concerns are superficial (Butler, 1990, p. 68). This comedic approach masks the societal pressure on women to maintain certain physical traits while ignoring the more profound challenges they face.

Legally Blonde challenges the conventional *"dumb blonde"* stereotype by allowing Elle Woods to retain her feminine traits while excelling in a traditionally male-dominated field. However, it also highlights how humor and appearance-related concerns can overshadow more critical aspects of gender dynamics, thereby reinforcing some of the very stereotypes it aims to challenge.

2. **The Representation of Women in Male-Dominated Professions in *Legally Blonde***

In this scene, the movie showcases the contrast between Elle Woods' bold femininity and the traditionally serious, male-dominated environment of *Harvard Law School.* The wide shot captures Elle confidently arriving in her flashy pink outfit, driving a sleek black Porsche, further emphasizing her flamboyant and unapologetically feminine persona. The color palette here is significant, with Elle's bright pink attire standing out against the muted, neutral tones of the surroundings, symbolizing how she doesn't conform to the usual expectations of a law student. The positioning of the people in the background, who are dressed in darker, more subdued clothing

and are observing Elle, highlights how out of place she seems in this environment, visually representing the stereotype that femininity, particularly one as pronounced as Elle's, doesn't belong in such serious, intellectual spaces. The cinematography in this scene underscores the tension between appearance and competence, aligning with the movie's central theme that women should not have to abandon their feminine traits to be successful in professional spaces.

In *Legally Blonde*, the movie addresses the challenges women face in male-dominated professions by juxtaposing traditional feminine traits with the expectations and barriers women encounter in professional settings. From the outset, Elle Woods' character is presented through a lens that reinforces conventional gender roles, such as consumerism and superficiality, which society often associates with femininity. In the line, *"Oh gosh, I have to go shopping."* (00:03:11), Elle reinforces the stereotype that shopping and appearance are central to a woman's identity, an expectation deeply ingrained in gender norms. As Judith Butler suggests, gender identity is performed through repeated acts like language and gestures, which solidify these societal expectations (Butler, 1990, p. 45). In this case, Elle's focus on shopping reflects the narrow roles traditionally afforded to women, particularly when juxtaposed against the professional and academic demands of law school.

Despite these initial portrayals of traditional femininity, *Legally Blonde* subverts these gender expectations by showcasing how these feminine traits can coexist with professional competence and intelligence. Elle's association with pink, often dismissed as foolish, becomes a symbol of her confidence and identity. When she says, *"Whoever said orange was the new pink was seriously disturbed."* (00:47:21), Elle embraces her femininity unapologetically. As Butler notes, femininity is frequently trivialized, but reclaiming and redefining it can serve as a powerful act of resistance against societal norms (Butler, 1990, p. 70). By maintaining her style and personality throughout her legal journey, Elle challenges the notion that professionalism requires the abandonment of traditionally feminine characteristics.

The movie further addresses the biases women face in male-dominated professions through the iconic line, *"You got into Harvard Law?"* - *"What, like it's hard?"* (00:12:57). This line challenges the assumption that women like Elle, who embrace their femininity, are not capable of succeeding in prestigious, traditionally male-dominated spaces like Harvard Law. This expectation reflects the broader societal belief that academic rigor and professional competence are inherently masculine traits. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality emphasizes that breaking gender norms in professional spaces is crucial to deconstruct power structures that limit women's participation (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1250). By excelling at Harvard while staying true to her feminine identity, Elle not only subverts these expectations but also highlights the unnecessary association between masculinity and success.

Legally Blonde portrays the challenges women face in male-dominated professions by first presenting and then dismantling the stereotypes tied to femininity. *"Cultural narratives that tie women's value to their*

appearance reinforce gender stereotypes that persist in both media and real-world professional contexts." (Goffman, 1979, p. 88) It supports the analysis of how Legally Blonde portrays cultural stereotypes, especially the notion that women are often judged by their appearance in both media and professional spaces. While Elle initially embodies traditional gender roles, her success in law school challenges the idea that women must conform to masculine norms to thrive in professional spaces, offering a nuanced commentary on the balance between gender identity and professional competence.

3.   The Intersection of Femininity and Professional Competence in *Legally Blonde*

Elle Woods' transformation challenges societal expectations about femininity and intelligence, particularly within male-dominated spaces such as law school. At the beginning of the movie, Elle's view of law school reflects a common stereotype that intellectual and professional environments are inherently masculine, rigid, and devoid of any elements associated with femininity or fun. When she says, *"Law school is for people who are boring and ugly and serious"* (00:26:45), she expresses the expectation that women like her who embrace their appearance, fashion, and joy do not belong in such spaces. Elle's initial perception reveals the broader societal assumption that these spaces require a rejection of femininity to be taken seriously. However, as the movie progresses, Elle defies this expectation by bringing her unique personality into the academic world, showing that one can be both joyful and intelligent. Judith Butler's work on gender subversion emphasizes that breaking gender norms can challenge the established power structures that restrict participation in these fields (Butler, 1993, p. 89). Elle's decision to remain true to her identity while excelling at Harvard represents a subversion of these norms.

Furthermore, Elle's transformation from a seemingly superficial woman to a competent and successful lawyer directly challenges the belief that women must forgo traditionally feminine traits to succeed in male-dominated environments. In the line, *"I've decided that I want to pursue a career in law. I'm fully comfortable using legal jargon in everyday life"* (00:44:30),
Elle confidently declares her decision to embrace her career in law while staying true to herself. This marks a significant shift in her character, from someone perceived as superficial to a respected professional. However, Elle never abandons her femininity in the process, which challenges the societal dichotomy between being feminine and being intelligent or

Too bad. I thought you were
a law student who wanted to be a lawyer.

competent. As Butler points out, the coexistence of femininity and competence disrupts the false assumption that these traits are mutually exclusive (Butler, 1990, p. 84). Elle's journey showcases that women do not have to sacrifice their femininity to gain respect in professional fields.

Legally Blonde uses Elle's transformation to challenge societal expectations about femininity and intelligence. By remaining authentic to her personality and traits, Elle shows that success in male-dominated spaces is possible without abandoning one's feminine identity, thereby offering a critique of the rigid and outdated expectations placed on women in professional environments. In this scene from Legally Blonde, the cinematography reinforces the power dynamics and challenges Elle faces in the male-dominated legal profession. The low lighting and rich, dark wooden tones of the office setting create an atmosphere of seriousness and authority, representing the traditional and rigid nature of the legal field. The character is seated in a large leather chair, dominating the frame with his posture and positioning, which signifies his control and authority over Elle in this moment. His body language, with a relaxed yet condescending posture, visually conveys his dismissive attitude, which is further emphasized by the dialogue, *"Too bad. I thought you were a law student who wanted to be a lawyer"* (1:15:20). This shot highlights the gendered expectations and the professional hurdles women face, particularly when they are judged not by their abilities but by how they align with male-dominated norms. The placement of the male character in the foreground, along with his indifferent expression and control over the environment, visually illustrates the theme of how women, like Elle, must navigate spaces where their ambitions are questioned and undermined.

In this graduation scene from Legally Blonde, the cinematography plays a key role in visually reinforcing Elle Woods' transformation and the movie's central theme of self-belief. The close-up shot of Elle as she delivers the line, *"...you must always have faith in yourself,"* (1:35:21) captures her facial expression, showcasing her confidence and newfound sense of accomplishment. The use of soft lighting highlights her face, adding a sense of warmth and positivity, which emphasizes the personal growth she has undergone throughout the movie. The background, slightly blurred but framed by large windows, creates a sense of openness and future possibilities, symbolizing Elle's bright prospects after overcoming the barriers of both gender stereotypes and male-dominated spaces. The graduation cap and gown, traditionally associated with academic achievement, contrast with Elle's character at the beginning of the movie, when she is judged for her looks and

femininity. The composition of this shot, with Elle centered and standing tall, visually represents her journey from being underestimated to proving her intelligence and worth, correlating with the movie's overarching message that confidence and self-belief are crucial to overcoming societal expectations. *"The redefinition of femininity in media, when women succeed without sacrificing their identity, provides a powerful message of empowerment, challenging the traditional associations of weakness with feminine traits."* (hooks, 1984, p. 45) It aligns with Elle Woods' journey in *Legally Blonde*, where she embraces her femininity while succeeding in a male-dominated space, serving as an empowering narrative.

CONCLUSION

Legally Blonde serves as a powerful exploration and critique of traditional gender stereotypes, particularly focusing on the intersection of femininity, intelligence, and professional competence in male-dominated spaces. Throughout the movie, Elle Woods defies societal expectations by proving that embracing traditionally feminine traits does not preclude success in rigorous and intellectual environments. The movie challenges the pervasive *"dumb blonde"* stereotype, showing that external appearance and intelligence are not mutually exclusive, but can coexist in harmony.

Elle's transformation from a fashion-obsessed socialite to a successful lawyer critiques patriarchal systems that frequently evaluate women based on their appearance instead of their skills or intelligence. The movie not only challenges traditional gender roles but also brings attention to the broader societal challenges women encounter, particularly in male-dominated professions like law. Elle's experience in law school showcases the challenges of navigating spaces where feminine traits are trivialized and undervalued. Her ultimate success demonstrates that women do not need to reject their feminine identity to gain respect or excel in such environments, offering an empowering narrative for women who face similar struggles in their careers.

Additionally, the movie addresses how humor can be used to mask and undermine serious gendered issues, as seen in Elle's witty lines that often downplay more profound societal pressures on women regarding their appearance and behavior. While Legally Blonde successfully critiques certain gender norms, it also reinforces some expectations by placing significant value on Elle's appearance and her eventual acceptance into patriarchal spaces like Harvard Law. The movie presents a dual narrative: it encourages women to embrace their true selves, while also highlighting the persistent conflict between femininity and the patriarchal norms that continue to influence professional environments. This analysis highlights Legally Blonde's complex engagement with gender stereotypes, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how movies can simultaneously challenge and reinforce societal norms about gender and professional success.

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