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Hegemonic Masculinity and *The Vampire Diaries*

Introduction

In a constantly changing and critical world, gender stereotypes are a persistent topic. Instead of society evolving and deciding to leave gender labels behind them, the stereotypes grow and stay with the changing world. One topic pertaining to gender that has evolved over time is the topic of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a predominant topic in both reality and fiction, such as television and movies. In general, the idea of hegemonic masculinity is a socially constructed ideal of a male or characteristics that make the “perfect” male.

In our Television Criticism class, we first learned about hegemonic masculinity while looking at famous baseball pitcher, Nolan Ryan. In an article written by Nick Trujillo, he analyzes the print and television representations of Nolan Ryan as the archetypal male athletic hero in American culture (Trujillo, 1991). Within this research done by Nick Trujillo, he described five features or attributes of hegemonic masculinity that a male would have to meet to be considered “masculine” or “the perfect male”. The five features of hegemonic masculinity are physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality.

Within my paper, I used quite a few different sources that explored hegemonic masculinity within television series in previous scholarly articles which were a great reference for me to use while researching this topic. One key finding was from an article that compared the

different male characters in *How I Met Your Mother*. One of my biggest findings from this article was the idea that although no one male character displayed all the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, they “work together to expose masculinity as a constructed gender” (Thompson, 2015). After reading this article and looking at the text I chose to analyze, I anticipated that the characters from the show will have similar findings that not one character will portray all the features of hegemonic masculinity.

Another strong discussion that chooses to explore with my specific text is the third characteristic of hegemonic masculinity; familial patriarchy. In an article written by Marjolein Lotte de Boer, she examines how male fictional characters are rarely displayed infertility experiences (de Boer, 2020). The television show that I chose to analyze makes it very clear to the audience that specific male characters are not able to have children or a family. This will be a main focus on the certain characters I chose to analyze with the lens of hegemonic masculinity.

Program Information

The text or show I have chosen to analyze for this paper is the series *The Vampire Diaries*. The television show was developed by Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec but is based on the book series *The Vampire Diaries* written by L. J. Smith. *The Vampire Diaries* is categorized in the mystery genre and has 8 seasons that started in 2009. The show has two spin-off shows that developed from it; *The Originals* and *Legacies*.

The Vampire Diaries is set in the town of Mystic Falls, Virginia which has a supernatural history. The show follows the life of the main character Elena Gilbert, a popular sophomore in high school who has just lost both of her parents in a car accident she was also in. Elena falls in love with the new kid to school, Stefan Salvatore who happens to secretly be a vampire who is actually 162 years old. Stefan and his vampire “bad boy” brother, Damon, are actually one of the

founding families of Mystic Falls but hide their secret from everyone and try to live a somewhat normal life.

We are introduced to a small group of teenagers that are all friends who live in Mystic Falls and slowly start experiencing the supernatural history that is coming back. Throughout the eight seasons, the group of teenagers grows and goes through quite a lot. From vampires, werewolves, witches, and hybrids, this show definitely encapsulates the supernatural teen drama series.

Lens

As I mentioned before, the approach or lens that I will be using while analyzing *The Vampire Diaries* is hegemonic masculinity. There are quite a few different scholarly articles that approach this lens differently. These articles I have chosen have been a theoretical framework for me to apply in my own research.

Through my lens, I wanted to explore the hegemonic masculinity of three male characters in *The Vampire Diaries*. With this approach, I used the five attributes of hegemonic masculinity from researcher Nick Trujillo to examine the chosen characters while keeping in mind other research articles' ideas that masculinity relates to power structures (de Boer, 2020). While looking at male characters in my show, some vampires, some normal there definitely is a fight for power and who is stronger which took an interesting turn in my examination.

To really understand hegemonic masculinity and what I was looking for in the male characters, one must understand the five features of masculinity. Nick Trujillo gives great insight into the definitions of the five features in his article "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture". The first feature is

physical force. Physical force refers to how strong a male is and his ability to display it.

Something such as getting into a fight can be seen as masculine physical force.

The second feature is an occupational achievement. Occupational achievement refers to the wealth and money of the male. To have occupational achievement one must be good at their job, and ideally have received awards or been recognized for their success. Another key part of occupational achievement is that the male is wealthy and makes a lot of money. In *The Vampire Diaries*, none of the main characters I will be analyzing have actual jobs due to their supernatural abilities and characteristics. For occupational achievement, I will be looking at their attributes of being supernatural beings and how “successful” and empowered they are through it.

Familial patriarchy is the third feature of hegemonic masculinity. Familial patriarchy simply means that the male has a family, preferably a wife and at least two kids. The father should be seen as the decision-maker and the head of the household. The male should also be in charge and responsible but also be known as a family man who truly cares for his family.

The fourth feature of hegemonic masculinity is frontiersmanship. When a male is thought of as a “cowboy-like” white male it is considered frontiersmanship. This can also be thought of as toughness or just whiteness as well.

Finally, the fifth feature of hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality. The sexuality that seems to rule the generation is considered to be normal, natural, and good sexuality. In this generation being “straight” or a male finds himself sexually attracted to the sexual relationship with women. This feature also asks the males to not only have these heterosexual views but also put them on display and make it known to people around them that they are sexually attracted to women.

Throughout *The Vampire Diaries*, the male characters display a wide range of meeting the hegemonic masculinity characteristics and stereotypes in society. “Fictional television can be seen either as an influence on, or reflection of, culture—the shared norms, values, and beliefs held by a society” (Hatfield, 2010). Analyzing the characters of *The Vampire Diaries* will bring light to the representation of males in fictional television shows and show whether or not it reinforces or challenges society’s status quo. From humans, hybrids, werewolves, and vampires, I expect to find differences in each when comparing them to the five features of hegemonic masculinity.

Analysis/Interpretation

While analyzing *The Vampire Diaries* I will be choosing two male characters and 1 female character that the audience is introduced to within the eight seasons of the show. I specifically choose three different “species” of characters to see how the show displayed and defined the specific character. For each character, I will examine how they embody and portray the five features of hegemonic masculinity. The three characters I will be analyzing are Damon Salvatore, Niklaus (Klaus) Mikaelson, and Katherine Peirce.

First, Damon Salvatore. Viewers are first introduced to Damon Salvatore in the last few minutes of season 1, episode 1. One of the first impressions of Damon is that he is the dangerous, mysterious, older brother to Stefan Salvatore who hates that Damon has found him. Damon Salvatore is probably one of the characters that have had a huge character change or development. Damon is a vampire who is seen as tough, and resilient, yet has a caring side most don’t see.

Damon Salvatore

Physical Force and Control

The first feature of hegemonic masculinity, physical force, and control, is the most prominent masculine feature that Damon embodies. Damon Salvatore is a 170-year-old vampire who is portrayed as the older brother who no one wants around because of his dark past. Damon is shown to be a character that does not have any sympathy for human life and will do whatever it takes to show his strength and power.

There are many examples of how Damon displays his power from verbal aggression and dominance to physical aggression showing his dominance. In season 1, episode 13 of *The Vampire Diaries* during a conversation between Stefan and Elena, Stefan said, “Damon has no regard for human life, he enjoys inflicting pain on others”. This describes the physical force and control of Damon quite well. Damon is one who never wants to show his affection so instead continuously uses force and control to hide actual emotions. I would say that Damon would definitely exhibit physical force and control.

Occupational Achievement

As mentioned earlier, Damon Salvatore is a vampire who is about 170 years old. In the show, *The Vampire Diaries*, supernatural beings are not shown having actual jobs but rather always fighting with others or trying to figure out issues. Damon Salvatore is seen to be a well-known vampire in the supernatural world. Damon constantly wins fights with other supernatural beings which can be considered a success in his “occupation”. Although we don’t see Damon making any money, he has an enormous house and a wealthy lifestyle. The character Damon definitely meets occupational achievement.

Familial Patriarchy

Before starting this paper, I knew that the one feature of hegemonic masculinity that characters would lack would be familial patriarchy because vampires are not able to have

children in the show. Damon is in love with a human who was always dreaming of having a family. The knowledge that he would not have children of his own because of his supernatural abilities always took a toll on him. Due to this, Damon would not meet the familial patriarchy feature of hegemonic masculinity.

Frontiersmanship

Damon Salvatore was born in 1487. When the audience sees flashbacks to his human life, he would meet the frontiersmanship feature. Human/ young Damon would constantly be working for his family, or serving in the military. He would fend for himself and display a sense of whiteness, even to “current day” in the show.

Heterosexuality

It is quite clear to the audience that the character Damon Salvatore is heterosexual. He is always one to comment on the characteristics of females, their looks, and how they act. Damon also consistently pursues to be in a relationship with Elena throughout the seasons. Damon Salvatore does meet the heterosexuality feature of hegemonic masculinity.

Niklaus (Klaus) Mikaelson

Physical Force and Control

Klaus Mikaelson is the strongest supernatural being the audience sees in *The Vampire Diaries*. Klaus is known as a hybrid which is a combination of a werewolf and a vampire. Because of this, it makes him stronger than any other supernatural character on the show. Klaus is also known to be the most brutal creature. Lines like “I’m going to allow you five seconds before I rip your heart out of your chest” from season 3, episode 6 is just one example of many proving how strong and controlling Klaus Mikaelson is.

Occupational Achievement

Just like Damon, Klaus is a supernatural being who does not have an actual job. Klaus does have many followers though who will do whatever he says. He is also one of the “original” family members which makes him the oldest vampire and most feared and makes people do whatever he says. Klaus is seen as a leader to some and the biggest rival to others, yet just about every person will listen to him and do what he says.

Familial Patriarchy

Since Klaus got mixed in with a magic hybrid spell, he is the only supernatural being who was able to conceive a child while being a vampire and werewolf. Klaus had a one-night stand with another supernatural being, Hayley, and ended up having a daughter named Hope. Klaus and Hayley co-parent Hope but are not together. When Hope is born, Klaus completely swoons over her and will do anything to keep her safe. A line from the spin-off show *The Originals* in season 4, episode 12 shows Klaus saying “From the moment I saw you, I wanted nothing more than to be worthy of being your father”. Despite not having an actual wife, Klaus truly embodies being a father and is proud to be one. For this reason, I would say that Klaus fits the familial patriarchy feature.

Frontiersmanship

As mentioned before, Klaus is one of the oldest vampires along with his siblings. He was born in 977. Growing up, his family and him had to hunt for food and lived very sparingly. A life like this can be seen as being cowboy-like and represent a certain toughness in Klaus. I believe frontiersmanship can be seen in the character Klaus.

Heterosexuality

Throughout the seasons, Klaus is seen pursuing a specific vampire, Caroline. Though Caroline doesn’t give in, Klaus is seen with multiple “flings” or girlfriends. In addition to this,

after a relationship with a female, Klaus has a daughter. Klaus Mikaelson fits into the heterosexuality feature of hegemonic masculinity.

Katherine Pierce

Physical Force and Control

Being over 500 years old, Katherine Pierce is one of the strongest vampires. Katherine is always one to use physical force and aggression to get what she wants. Katherine is always the first one to start a fight and has no issue using verbal or physical force either. I would definitely say that Katherine Pierce embodies the first feature of physical force and control

Occupational Achievement

Katherine Pierce is a very demanding woman who has been a vampire for a very long time. With this in mind, Katherine has a following of people who will listen to anything she says. Katherine is also a very tough and strong vampire who rarely loses a fight which can help prove her success in occupational achievement.

Familial Patriarchy

Before Katherine was turned into a vampire, she had a daughter that was taken away from her immediately after birth. Katherine did not know her daughter was alive or turned into a vampire until she was 500 years old. After meeting her daughter, Katherine did everything to protect her. In season 5, episode 15 Katherine says “Nadia was the only person in this world who really loved me...”. This is just the beginning of Katherine showing a “soft spot” when it comes to her family.

Frontiersmanship

Once again, Katherine is one of the oldest vampires meaning she grew up and experienced completely different times. When seeing flashbacks of her old life, it is clear to see

that she and her family express a certain toughness and whiteness to them while living on a farm and fending for themselves. Katherine also believes that she wouldn't be the powerful woman she is if it wasn't for that background.

Heterosexuality

We first meet Katherine Pierce through the two Salvatore brothers, who when they first met Katherine in 1864 dated her. Katherine consistently pursued relationships with both men at the same time as well as others. Flashbacks remind the audience that they did have a daughter before as well. For these reasons, Katherine does portray the hegemonic masculinity feature of heterosexuality.

Evaluation

Throughout *The Vampire Diaries*, there are many characters that display and are great examples of hegemonic masculinity. By analyzing three specific characters, I was able to get a better understanding of how *The Vampire Diaries* portray gender and gender characteristics. While keeping research from scholarly articles I was able to bring together an evaluation of hegemonic masculinity in *The Vampire Diaries*.

After analyzing *The Vampire Diaries*, I would say that it both perpetrates and challenges hegemony. All three characters that I choose were strong, resilient, and respected characters in the show which made reinforcing hegemony clear. The women I choose to analyze had more prominent features of hegemonic masculinity in the show than the two analyzed male characters. Author Jeremy Butler wrote, "Gender is defined as a constructed performance, act, or corporeal style-meaning a style of the body-and not dependent upon genitalia" (Butler, 2018). This quote from the book is why I choose to analyze the female character, Katherine Pierce, because of the strong ties she has to hegemonic masculinity by the way she carries herself. With the support of

Jermei Butler, I found more hegemonic traits in Katherine than I did in the characters, Damon or Klaus.

I kept in mind the findings and discussion points of our other class textbook for analyzing the show. Our textbook offers the idea that the idea of power is hegemony and is the dominant way of life in a society that seems natural to most (O'Donnell, 2016). While examining *The Vampire Diaries*, I realized that normalcy had a different meaning in the fictional show than in our real society. For example, in the television show, it was normal for the main characters to not have families and for the vampires to not be able to have children. The focus of the familial patriarchy was more on finding a group of people that are like family or finding a significant other to be your family. An article written by Marjolein Lotte de Boer, states that “Male infertility is (understood as) posing a threat to men’s ability to live up to normative, hegemonic masculinity...” (de Boer, 2021). During my interpretation of hegemonic masculinity in *The Vampire Diaries*, I would have to say that this idea from de Boer is quite true. All three characters that I analyzed were missing the familial patriarchy feature of hegemonic masculinity.

When it comes to the occupational achievement analysis, it was a little difficult to determine with the specifically chosen text. The television show *The Vampire Diaries*, as I mentioned previously, follows the life of a group of high school teenagers who are a mix of humans, vampires, werewolves, and witches. Throughout the eight seasons, the group graduates high school and moves to college but besides being a student, none of the main characters are really seen as having a job which makes occupational achievement difficult to analyze.

The article written by Lisa Cuklanz and Ali Erol was helpful when hitting this roadblock in my interpretation of *The Vampire Diaries*. Throughout the article, there is a discussion of hegemonic masculinity in fictional television which offers a new perspective on masculinity.

Cuklanz and Erol suggest changing the perspective of a needed feature of hegemonic masculinity based on the changes in norms of masculinity over time (Cuklanz & Erol, 2021). With this in mind, after the analysis of the show, I viewed occupational achievement as how well the character was at being a supernatural being essentially. With this view in mind, all three characters easily achieved “occupational achievement” in hegemonic masculinity.

Conclusion

Overall, hegemonic masculinity can definitely be seen in the television show *The Vampire Diaries*. While only choosing and analyzing three characters, there is strong evidence in the environment of the show and why they form characters that hegemonic masculinity is a part of both male and female characters. Findings from my analysis suggest that hegemonic masculinity is not just one male-centered power concept, but a constantly changing idea in society and fictional television shows and movies.

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