

## **Gender stereotypes in popular culture: grounding gender stereotypes through the romantic comedy movie “The ugly truth”**

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### **Abstract.**

Whether we want to admit it or not, gender stereotypes underlie men’s and women’s perceptions of each other and influence the outcomes of their relationships to a significant extent in modern society.

The romantic comedy movie entitled “The Ugly Truth” (2009) was chosen as the object of analysis for the presented study because of its identity as a popular culture product and because of its interspersed examples of gender stereotypes conforming to the hegemonic masculinity view.

The main objective was to find out through what particular stereotypes the hegemonic masculinity view gets implanted into popular culture products, which in turn implant and ground it into people’s mindsets and behavior.

Conclusively, the analysis demonstrates that the stereotypes of hegemonic masculinity are still a powerful driver for the functioning of modern society, while stereotypical thinking in general is also a deeply ingrained coping mechanism that allows both men and women to function in the hegemonic masculinity-driven version of society.

**Keywords:** gender, stereotype, grounding, masculinity, dominance.

### **I. Introduction**

The gender stereotypes and misconceptions explored through the 2009 romantic comedy “The Ugly Truth” were chosen for analysis for the purposes of this paper. The analysis was based on this particular movie for 2 main reasons – firstly – because it is perpetuated by gender stereotypes, and secondly – because it places the stereotypes it explores in a contemporary cultural setting, ultimately demonstrating that although people constantly reinterpret stereotypes to fit the needs of their respective contemporary setting, stereotypical thinking in general is a deeply ingrained coping mechanism that drives society and, to a great extent, allows it to function the way it does.

### **II. The Movie**

#### **1. General information**

“The Ugly Truth” is a romantic comedy released in 2009, starring Katherine Heigl and Gerard Butler and directed by Robert Luketic. Most generally, as Matt Sullivan from In Touch Weekly defines it, the movie is “a sassy, sexy, screwball comedy” that deals with the always topical “battle of the sexes”.



## 2. Plot summary

The movie's plot revolves around the interaction and eventual relationship between the two main characters – Abby Richter (Katherine Heigl) and Mike Chadway (Gerard Butler).

**Abby Richter** (Katherine Heigl) is a morning TV producer, whose show faces the threat of being cancelled because of its poor ratings; coming home from a disastrous date one evening, she happens to see a segment of the local television show "The Ugly Truth" featuring **Mike Chadway** (Gerard Butler), whose cynicism about relationships prompts Abby to call in and argue with him on-air; the next day she discovers that the station owner has hired Mike to do a segment on her show in an attempt to increase its ratings.

At first, the two have a rocky relationship; Abby thinks Mike is crass and disgusting while Mike finds her to be naive, neurotic and a control freak. Nevertheless, when she meets the man of her dreams, a doctor named **Colin** (Eric Winter) living next to her, Mike convinces her that by following his advice she will improve her chances with Colin. Abby is skeptical, but they make a deal: If Mike's management of her courtship results in her landing Colin, proving his theories on relationships, she will work happily with him, but if Mike fails, he agrees to leave her show.

Mike succeeds in both improving the ratings and successfully instructing Abby to be exactly what Colin would want through a number of guiding tips, but as the two get to know each other better in the process, they ultimately fall in love and get together.

## 3. Character presentation



**Abby Richter** is presented as an independent, but lonely career-woman (TV producer), who is in search of the ideal relationship. She is a perfectionist, meticulous about the slightest details, whose constant need to control the situation borders on obsessive-compulsive disorder, as is suggested by her control freak approach to dating, as well as by the fact that she has turned her search of the ideal relationship into a desperate quest not just for a normal, ordinary guy, but for the man who happens to fit a 10-item checklist profile she has compiled to be guided by in recognizing the ideal partner for herself. By the end of the movie it is hinted at that in compiling such a checklist of criteria Abby had actually been influenced by the widespread stereotypical fairy-tale scenario, as well as by following self-help book pieces of advice, whereas the particular items she has selected to include in her checklist suggest that the ideal man she is looking for is actually a male version of herself – a fact, which in its turn suggests that Abby is subconsciously afraid to step outside her comfort zone and hence needs to resort to a predictable (fairy-tale) scenario or script that she can adhere to and maintain control over.

**Mike Chadway** is presented as the TV host of a local show (“The Ugly Truth”) dealing with relationships. He is crass, skeptical and straightforwardly cynical about relationships and he is an ardent supporter of the ideas that “**Men are simple**”; that they are incapable of growth or change and that “**Men are very visual**”, i.e. that all they are interested in a woman is her looks, and all they ultimately want from her is sex. By the end of the movie it is revealed that the reason Mike is convinced that there is no such thing as “a good relationship” is based on his experience with various types of women (“**call-dependent girls, unfaithful girls, depressed girls, narcissistic girls, phony girls, girls who it turned out didn’t actually like me...**”), leading him to give up on trying to find love and romance in commitment and start engaging only in casual sexual relationships.

The way the two main characters are presented reveals that actually both of them rely heavily on stereotypes when it comes to approaching relationships with the only difference that whereas Abby takes up the ready-made stereotypical fairy-tale scenario and tries to apply it to real-life situations, Mike draws up his own stereotypical generalizations about men and women on the basis of his own relationship experience. Nevertheless, both of them end up trying to conform to the same even greater stereotypical scenario – the hegemonic masculine heterosexual view of society that asserts male domination and female objectification.

#### 4. Key scenes and underlying stereotypes

##### TV SHOW SCENE



##### Scene Transcription:

**Mike (on TV):** *And we're back with "The Ugly Truth", where tonight we're gonna be talking about what it is men and women really want in relationships. Now, I've been looking through some books – "Smart Women – Foolish Choices" – huh?!? (throws it in the trash), "Men Who Love Women Who Hate Them" – huh?!? (throws it in the trash), and "Women Hating Men Who Loved Women Who Hate Loving Men" – huh?!? (throws it in the trash). Billions and billions wasted on psycho-babble bullshit! Now listen up, ladies, 'cause I'm only gonna say this once and it is just three little words – MEN ARE SIMPLE! (sets the trash can on fire). We cannot be trained! All this men-are-from-Venus crap is a waste of your time and money. If you wanna be a lonely hag – then that's fine – keep reading these stupid books. But, if you want a relationship – then here's how you get one – it's called a stairmaster! Get on it and get skinny, and get some trashy lingerie while you're at it, because at the end of the day all we're interested in is looks! And no one falls in love with your personality at first sight – we fall in love with your tits and your ass, and we stick around because of what you're willing to do with them! So – if you wanna win a man over – you don't need 10 steps – you need just 1 – and it's called A BLOWJOB!"*

**Underlying Stereotypes:**

Men are simple.

Men are primal. (*"We cannot be trained."*)

Men are only interested in sex and women should reduce themselves to sexual objects for giving visual and sexual pleasure to men, if they want to be in a relationship.

**Stereotype Analysis:**

All 3 stereotypes listed above are characteristic of the hegemonic masculine heterosexual view of society, which Mike Chadway clearly seems to support and conform to, consciously or not. According to the hegemonic masculine heterosexual view society should definitely be male-dominated and male-centered, i.e. women should be seen as nothing more than objects or toys that should be subordinated and owned by men with the sole purpose of giving men all kinds of pleasure, whereas all men should be seen as possessing "an innate manhood" simply because they have penises, besides being identified solely through their constant sex craving and sexual prowess. Or, as a student from the University of Colorado at Boulder puts it, "in a heterosexual masculine society women exist "to appear" for men, who are required to "act" upon those appearances; women are sexual objects, whose only goal is to be attractive for men. If a woman appears sexy according to societal standards, men must attempt to have sex with her." What is more, a lot of women "tend to consent readily" to the masculine hegemony. Most of them are not even aware that merely by striving to appear in a certain way, they already "act as subordinates." (<http://www.sexandgender.net/2010/07/02/the-ugly-truth-film-analysis/>)

**SHOPPING SCENE – MIKE'S RULES OF DATING + TRANSFORMING ABBY'S LOOK**



**Scene Transcription:**

**Mike:** *Rule № 1 – never criticize.*

**Abby:** *Even if it's constructive?*

**Mike:** *Never. Men are incapable of growth, change or progress. For men self-improvement ends with toilet training. And Rule № 2 – laugh at whatever he says.*

**Abby:** *What if what he says isn't funny?*

**Mike:** *That's irrelevant. A fake laugh is like a fake orgasm.*

**Abby:** *Fake orgasm is good?*

**Mike:** *No, but a fake orgasm is better than no orgasm at all.*

**Abby:** *Fake orgasm IS no orgasm...*

**Mike:** *Only to you. See, you're not the only person in the room, you know...Let's not be selfish...*

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**Mike:** *Rule № 3 – men are very visual. We have to change your look.*

**Abby:** *What's wrong with my look?*

**Mike:** *Abby, you are a very attractive woman, but you are completely inaccessible. You're all about comfort and efficiency.*

**Abby:** *What's wrong with comfort and efficiency?*

**Mike:** *Well, nothing...except no one wants to fuck it.*

**Shop assistant:** *Hello, may I be of assistance?*

**Mike:** *Yes, you may. We need some cocktail dresses, tight jeans and some bras that'll make my friend's breasts sit up and say "Hello" ...*

**Abby:** *They're not saying "Hello" now? What are they saying?*

**Shop assistant:** *Actually, they're giving off more of a passing nod, rather than an outright greeting...Hold on...why don't you try this on? I think this would be wonderful...*

**Mike:** *Ha-ha...now that is a bra! M-hm...boobies in this thing say "Put me in your mouth, I taste good!"*

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**Mike:** *Length (of a dress) is very important. We need short enough to see some thigh, but not so short to see vag...*

**Abby:** *M-hmm...*

**Shop assistant:** *Vag says you're trying too hard...*

**Abby (sarcastic):** *You think?*

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**Mike:** *Jeans are all about the curvature of the ass. You have...well, you have the raw material, now all you need is the proper presentation...*

**Abby:** *Did you just tell me I have a nice ass?*

**Mike:** *And Rule № 4 – never talk about your problems, 'cause men don't really listen or care.*

**Abby:** *Some men care...*

**Mike:** *No, some men pretend to care. When we ask you how you're doing – that's just guy code for "let me stick my dick in your ass".*

**Abby:** *Ugh...*

**Mike:** *Oh, I know you think Colin is above it all, but trust me – he's a guy – if he's even remotely into you, he's probably thought about each one of your orifices at least 10 times.*

**Abby:** *I love how you assume all men are as perverse as you are...*

**Mike:** *Oh, I don't assume...I know. Wait...we need to make one more stop.*

**Abby:** *What? I have tons of stuff...*

**Mike:** *Na-ah...we have to make your hair longer. Men like something they can grab onto other than your ass.*

**Abby:** *Ah...my hair is fine. There is nothing wrong with my hair.*

**Mike:** *Abby, a ponytail implies that you're either operating heavy machinery, or emptying the litterbox...Neither of those things inspires an erection.*

**Abby:** *Well...why is it my responsibility to inspire an erection? Why isn't that HIS job?*

#### *Underlying Stereotypes:*

Women are supposed to be sexually attractive objects.

Women are supposed to wear clothes and underwear that show off and accentuate certain parts of their bodies solely to give men visual pleasure and inspire their sexual fantasies.

Women have no identity other than their bodies.

Women should seek to please and satisfy men in every possible way.

#### *Stereotype Analysis:*

The Colorado University student's analysis of the beginning of the scene, where Mike instructs Abby how to behave in order to keep a man satisfied, seems to identify the underlying stereotypes correctly – "All the advice given is from the perspective that men control the sexual situation. The act of sex is a scenario in which men must perform at their best in order to be masculine. Mike is telling Abby that she must fake an orgasm during sex and if she doesn't fake it, she is selfish. Thus he suggests that it is the woman's responsibility to make sure the man feels like he is performing optimally. This is an example of men's dominance because it places blame solely on the female." (<http://www.sexandgender.net/2010/07/02/the-ugly-truth-film-analysis/>)

The objectification of women for the sole purpose of attracting and satisfying men in the male-dominated hegemony is clearly evident in the underlying stereotypes listed above. But what is also evident from Abby Richter's willingness to actually fit into the stereotypical hegemonic view in the transcribed movie scene is her desperation to get the ideal partner for herself once she has found a man satisfying her criteria. In other words, chasing after one stereotypical (fairy-tale) scenario leads her to fit herself into another stereotype that reduces her to nothing more than a pleasure-giving object for a man in the male-dominated hegemonic society.

**VERBAL CROSSFIRE SCENE – ABBY AND MIKE'S MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT EACH OTHER**



**Scene Transcription:**

**Abby:** ...Which should really come as no surprise, because men are completely unreliable. Take Mike Chadway, for instance – he up and quit the show without so much as a word. You think you know what men are gonna do; you think you know what men want to do. But when it comes right down to that moment when they actually need to step up and...I don't know...make a move – they chicken out. The big, strong, brave men that we've all been reading about in novels and watching in movies since we were 9 years old – that's a fallacy – they don't exist. Men are not strong, men are not brave, men are afraid! Even if they have a moment in a hotel elevator and it's totally romantic and full of potential – men are incapable of coping to it, because – why? – men are weak.

**Mike:** Let me tell you something about women. Women would have us believe that they are the victims, that we break their hearts for sport. But that's crap. They say they want true romance, they say they want true love, but all they want is a checklist: Is he perfect? Is he handsome? Is he a doctor? For you, men, who fit the criteria – don't kid yourselves, 'cause they're not sleeping with you. They're sleeping with a carefully calculated set of venal choices – money over substance, looks over soul, polish over principles. No gesture, no matter how real or romantic, will ever compensate for a really impressive list of credentials.

**Underlying Stereotypes:**

The stereotypes underlying the transcribed scene here are actually extended generalizations of the two characters' misconceptions about one another after they have both misinterpreted a situation (after they kiss in a hotel elevator, Mike goes back to Abby's room with the intention to admit his feelings for her, only to find out that Colin has come to surprise her; he decides to retreat, because he figures Abby wants to be with Colin, while she interprets this as Mike wanting to be with her, but 'chickening out' when it comes to admitting his feelings). Thus, the two respective misconceptions extended to stereotypes are:

Men are afraid of commitment.

Women don't know what they want.

**Stereotype Analysis:**

What is interesting to analyze about these final two stereotypes is not so much what they state, as the way they were arrived at. As pointed out earlier, they were the outcome, or rather – the conclusion to both characters extending generalizations about each other.

As Sander Gilman puts it, "stereotypes are a crude set of mental representations of the world, which perpetuate a needed sense of difference between the self and the Other and arise when self-integration is threatened; they are therefore part of our way of dealing with the instabilities of our perception of the world." (Gilman, S., 1985, "The Deep Structure of Stereotypes").

In other words, in this case both characters' misinterpreting the aforementioned situation leads to instabilities in their perceptions of the world, which in their turn lead to a need for both of them to resort to stereotypical representations of the other as a way of explaining and dealing with said misinterpretation-prompted instabilities (i.e. Mike's reaction in the situation did not follow through with Abby's fairy-tale scenario, so she resorted to the stereotype that men are afraid of commitment, in order to explain the lapse in her

own perception of the world; Mike on the other hand found himself perplexed as to what Abby actually wants after finding her 'walking checklist' in her hotel bedroom, so he also needed to resort to the stereotype that women don't know what they want, in order to resolve his own state of perplex and frustration). Then in the scene transcribed above things escalated even further when the two characters extended the stereotypes they had ascribed to each other to all men and women in general.

### III. Conclusion

On the whole, the movie "The Ugly Truth" employs and explores the characteristic stereotypes of the hegemonic masculine heterosexual view of society, while at the same time it also demonstrates that stereotypical thinking in general is a deeply ingrained coping mechanism that drives society and, to a great extent, allows it to function the way it does. Stereotypes, being the most easily accessible ways of dealing with the instabilities in a person's perception of the world as they arise, are powerful mechanisms that people resort to, most often unconsciously, in order to prevent their integrated selves from breaking apart when faced with an immediate threat of crashing down.

"Everyone creates stereotypes. We cannot function in the world without them. They buffer us against our most urgent fears by extending them, making it possible for us to act as though their source were beyond our control." (Gilman, S., 1985, "The Deep Structure of Stereotypes").

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