

Feminist Analysis of Beauty Privilege and Marginalization in Wicked (2024)

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A B S T R A C T

This paper explores how the film *Wicked* (2024) constructs beauty privilege by contrasting the representations of Glinda and Elphaba, focusing on the interplay between physical appearance and power relations. Through a qualitative analysis of representation, the study investigates both visual and textual components in pivotal scenes, drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation alongside Naomi Wolf's feminist perspectives. The results indicate that Glinda's alignment with conventional American beauty ideals affords her social acceptance and narrative dominance, whereas Elphaba's unconventional looks lead to her marginalization despite her eventual defiance. *Wicked* (2024) both upholds and critiques established beauty hierarchies, illustrating how beauty functions as a political tool that influences identity formation, power structures, and social legitimacy within contemporary Hollywood cinema. Few studies explore how beauty advantage creates "othering," especially in molding Elphaba's marginalization in *Wicked* (2024), despite earlier research on beauty standards in movies.

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INTRODUCTION

In modern media culture, particularly within Hollywood movies, beauty standards function as a potential ideological framework that influences social structures and governs the portrayal of women. In narrative and cultural contexts, physical beauty serves as a type of symbolic power that establishes exposure, acceptability, and validity in addition to being aesthetically pleasing. Beauty privilege is a social phenomenon in which individuals who are considered physically attractive and conform to prevailing beauty standards receive preferential treatment across various aspects of life (Johnston & Foster, 2025). Discrimination based on attractiveness operates in two contrasting ways. Attractive individuals are often granted advantageous treatment, as their beauty is perceived as a reflection of positive character and behavior. Conversely, those deemed less attractive are subjected to negative treatment, since unattractiveness is frequently associated with undesirable traits (Fadhilah et al., 2023). Individuals who benefit from beauty privilege may eventually internalize these advantages and develop irrational behaviors. In contrast, those who do not meet established beauty norms are compelled to exert greater effort to prove themselves (Fadhilah et al., 2023). Because beauty is inherently subjective, what one person finds attractive may not hold the same appeal for another. Nevertheless, a set of cultural standards and metrics such as body weight, skin color, hair type, and facial features is often mobilized to assess physical attractiveness (Jocelyn, 2024).

Even in advanced industrial societies such as the United States, gender-based discrimination persists, affecting women in diverse spheres of life. Studies indicate that a majority of women report having experienced gender discrimination in the form of unfair treatment, social exclusion, and stereotyping (SteelFisher et al., 2019). Beyond lived experience, this phenomenon is also reproduced in popular media, particularly film, which

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frequently portrays women in ways that reinforce gendered beauty standards and social hierarchies. In the American context, traits such as symmetrical facial features, straight hair, slender bodies, fair skin, and delicate femininity have long dominated ideals of beauty. These traits define what is celebrated as “beautiful” and determine who benefits socially and culturally. Over the past two centuries, beauty culture has been shaped by iconic figures such as Kate Moss and Marilyn Monroe, alongside men such as Brad Pitt and Marlon Brando, whose appearances were regarded as superior and exceptional (Marrinan, 2020). Despite social movements advocating for diversity and inclusivity, American audiences remain inundated with imagery that privileges whiteness. Those born into white, Western cultural identities are often perceived themselves as inherently more attractive than those who do not share these attributes.

The construction of beauty standards is strongly influenced by popular culture, including social media, film, advertising, and television, all of which emphasize physical appearance as a marker of social desirability. Mass media, whether print or electronic, operate as an unidirectional channel of communication, making direct audience response impossible while still producing profound social impact (Mustofa, 2022). Among these, film holds a particularly influential position as a medium that integrates narrative and visual representation to convey meaning. In line with (Hall, 1997b) theory of representation, the media do not merely reflect reality but actively produce meaning through signs, images, and discourse. Gender and physical appearance are thus central ideological themes embedded within cinematic representation.

Within this context, Hollywood cinema significantly influences the construction of beauty ideals across leading film studios. Disney, particularly through its animated films, has played a key role in promoting these standards by creating characters like Cinderella, Elsa, Aurora, and Barbie figures consistently depicted with light skin, straight hair, slender bodies, symmetrical facial features, and narrow noses, thus reflecting American beauty ideals. Similarly, Universal Pictures, Warner Bros, and other prominent studios have reinforced these conventions through their fantasy stories and musical adaptations, establishing widespread industry norms for beauty. Characters who embody these ideals are typically cast as protagonists across various studios. In contrast, those who diverge from these standards, such as Maleficent in Disney films or other atypical characters in productions from different studios, are frequently portrayed as antagonists or marginalized roles.

Such representations continue to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes throughout Hollywood productions, leading feminist scholars to critically examine how mainstream American cinema portrays women. Studies reveal that female leads in major studio films, especially within the fantasy and musical genres, are often depicted as submissive, kind-hearted, and primarily valued for their physical appearance (England et al., 2011). This trend is consistently observed across Disney’s animated princesses, Universal’s musical adaptations, and heroines from other studios’ fantasy films. Children’s interactions with these characters from various studios have been found to affect their self-image and perpetuate gender stereotypes. As noted by (Coyne et al., 2016), Hollywood's portrayal of beauty not only serves an entertainment function but also influences enduring social values, there by exerting a cross-studio impact on audience perceptions.

Scholarship on beauty privilege emphasizes its function as a form of “capital” that generates social, economic, and relational advantages (Hamermesh, 2011). Those who align with beauty standards gain greater access to employment opportunities, higher earnings, and social acceptance. In contrast, individuals who fall short of such standards often face marginalization (Marrinan, 2020). This dynamic is reinforced by the “halo effect,” whereby individuals are positively evaluated based solely on their appearance (Sindakis & Agarwal, 2022). Film narratives reproduce these dynamics, with protagonists frequently depicted as conforming to beauty ideals, while antagonists are associated with physical unattractiveness.

The film *Wicked* (2024), produced by Universal Pictures and adapted from Gregory Maguire’s novel as well as the renowned Broadway musical, provides a valuable case for examining beauty privilege in Hollywood’s modern portrayal of women. As a significant

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studio musical adaptation, *Wicked* (2024) upholds the industry's ongoing engagement with beauty standards while also potentially introducing fresh insights into female agency and power relations. The story contrasts two witches, Glinda and Elphaba, whose differing physical appearances shape their social status, mirroring wider Hollywood tendencies to develop characters according to their conformity to or divergence from conventional beauty ideals. Glinda, with her fair skin, blonde hair, and conventionally feminine features, is celebrated and admired by society. In contrast, Elphaba, characterized by her green skin and dark attire, is perceived as deviant and less acceptable. This stark contrast creates tension within the storyline, as Elphaba's marginalized status reflects broader societal biases against those who do not conform to dominant beauty norms. Despite her moral complexity and depth, Elphaba is consistently overshadowed by Glinda, whose conventional beauty affords her widespread acceptance. The interactions between these characters underscore the extent to which beauty privilege shapes social relations, identity formation, and access to recognition.

Wicked (2024) was selected as the focus of this research due to several factors: (1) its explicit juxtaposition of two female protagonists who occupy contrasting positions within beauty hierarchies; (2) its significance as a contemporary Hollywood musical adaptation that exemplifies current industry practices regarding female representation; (3) its considerable cultural impact and potential to shape audience perceptions of beauty ideals; and (4) its relative lack of scholarly attention within academic film criticism.

Previous research has used (Hall, 1997b) theory of representation and (Wolf, 1991) feminist framework of *The Beauty Myth* to analyze women's representation and beauty ideology in popular Western films. For example, (Coyne et al., 2016) analyzed the relationship between animated heroines' moral goodness and physical beauty, while (England et al., 2011) examined gender role constructions in the Disney Princess series. These studies demonstrate the patriarchal ways in which beauty standards govern women's social acceptance. Few academics, however, have used Hall and Wolf's frameworks to analyze *Wicked* (2024), a Universal Pictures film that retells the traditional Wizard of Oz story from a contemporary feminist perspective. Despite extensive studies on beauty standards in Hollywood films, little attention has been given to *Wicked* (2024), particularly in examining how beauty privilege is constructed through both visual and narrative representation using Stuart Hall's and Naomi Wolf's frameworks. Few studies have critically analyzed how beauty advantage operates as a process of "othering" that consistently marginalizes female characters, despite the fact that earlier research has addressed beauty standards and gender representation in movies. By examining how Elphaba is portrayed as "the other" in *Wicked* (2024), this study fills this vacuum by demonstrating how narrative discourse and visual representation perpetuate exclusive beauty standards and power dynamics.

Although public awareness of beauty-based inequalities is gradually increasing, scholarly engagement with their representation in popular film remains limited. *Wicked* (2024) thus provides a critical lens for examining how beauty functions both as a form of social power and as a mechanism of patriarchal reproduction. This study interrogates the dynamics of beauty privilege and character marginalization through a feminist perspective, emphasizing beauty's role as a social privilege that governs legitimacy, acceptance, and positionality. Moreover, it explores how narrative structures and visual representations both reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes, while foregrounding the struggles of female characters as they negotiate appearance-based judgments in their pursuit of autonomy and acceptance within a patriarchal society.

METHOD

This study utilizes a qualitative research design centered on representation analysis to investigate the interplay between beauty standards, power relations, and character marginalization in the film *Wicked* (2024), featuring Ariana Grande and Cynthia Erivo. A qualitative is particularly appropriate for this inquiry, as it emphasizes the exploration of meanings, ideologies, and power structures embedded within cultural texts (Creswell &

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Creswell, 2017). This methodology facilitates a comprehensive and contextualized examination of gender portrayals, visual performances, and discourses within the film, moving beyond mere quantification of observable features.

The research employs a feminist film analysis framework that integrates visual analysis with textual interpretation, drawing on (Hall, 1997) theory of representation alongside (Wolf, 1991) radical feminist theory. This combined theoretical perspective enables an analysis of both the construction of meaning through visual symbolism and the patriarchal dynamics underpinning beauty standards in popular media.

The primary data source for this study is the 160-minute film *Wicked* (2024), produced by Universal Pictures. The main sources of information are chosen verbal and visual components that depict concerns of gender, power, and beauty, including scenarios, conversations, facial expressions, and symbolic images from *Wicked* (2024). Screen captures and careful observation of relevant movie scenes were used to get the data. (Wolf, 1991) feminist framework was used to analyze how beauty functions as a form of patriarchal control, and (Hall, 1997) theory of representation was used to categorize and interpret these scenarios. The analysis was done in three steps: (1) finding scenes that dealt with marginalization and beauty privilege, (2) analyzing their representational meaning using Hall and Wolf's theoretical frameworks, and (3) determining the ideological implications of the movie.

The authors implement specific requirements when choosing which scenes to use as data in analysis of the movie *Wicked* (2024). These criteria include scenes that depict direct interactions between Glinda and Elphaba, scenes that show how the people of Oz react to the two characters, scenes that include dialogues about physical appearance, and scenes that illustrate the dynamics of power relations based on appearance. This technique enables researchers to thoroughly investigate cinematic aspects like lighting, costumes, makeup, facial expressions, color composition, angle of view, and narrative context. Textual analysis was also performed on transcripts of dialogues concerning marginalization, power, and beauty (Rose, 2022). Visual research enables scholars to uncover the meaning inherent in visual representations through the use of cultural symbols, narrative elements, and cinematography. Therefore, the interpretation of crucial scenes in *Wicked* (2024) is used to analyze how visual structures like lighting, costumes, facial expressions, and character interactions depict beauty advantage and character marginalization.

By combining the two theories, this research seeks to uncover how the film *Wicked* (2024) not only displays visual differences between “ideal” and “different” characters, but also shapes narratives that reinforce or challenge established beauty standards. This analysis aims to show that beauty in popular culture is not only aesthetic, but also political, as an instrument to define who is worthy of love, trust and power, and who is marginalized.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines how the two main characters, Glinda and Elphaba, are employed in *Wicked* (2024) to create and contrast ideas of beauty. The portrayal draws attention to the profound impact that American beauty standards have on acceptance in society, power dynamics, and social position. It is clear through Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Naomi Wolf's feminist theory that the visual representation of the body, lighting, and social symbols in the movie scenes all influence character representation in addition to spoken narratives.

Glinda as the Beauty Privilege Representation

Glinda is shown as a graceful “heavenly being” in a pink dress with a crown on her head while she descends from the heavens in an air bubble in the film’s opening sequence. Even before she says a word, Glinda is positioned as a figure who is “ideal”, revered, and admired.



Figure 1. Glinda's Visual Representation of Conformity to American Beauty Standards (03:35)

The privilege that comes from fulfilling prevailing beauty standards is known as beauty privilege, and this image exemplifies it (Johnston & Foster, 2025). The portrayal of beauty privilege is established from the very beginning of Glinda's appearance through the scene where she arrives in a hot air balloon, and is further reinforced in other scenes when Glinda first arrives in Shiz and is immediately greeted with enthusiasm by a group of people. In that scene, they are seen spontaneously greeting her with admiring glances even though they had never interacted before she gains instant social acceptance. This demonstrates that Glinda's instant acceptance is not based on her competence or personal relationships but rather on her physical appearance, which aligns with dominant beauty standards.



Hi! Galinda, hi!

Figure 2. Galinda Arrival at Shiz Was Immediately Welcomed (14:02)

According to (Wolf, 1991) theory in *The Beauty Myth*, female beauty in popular culture is positioned as both a social capital and an aesthetic. Social capital is the aggregate of current or potential resources related to existing, permanent networks, which can be based, to a greater or lesser extent on institutionalized relationships of interpersonal respect and acceptance (Rogo & Baranovi, 2016) in this context, beauty is defined as the main asset for a person to gain benefits from how others perceive them. Beauty also becomes an aesthetic measure used by society to determine what they consider attractive and ideal. For example, in real life, women with fair skin, straight hair, and slim bodies get better opportunities and treatment than those

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who don't meet the dominant beauty standards. This portrayal is consistent with that notion. Although Glinda has not yet spoken, her visuals have already made her valuable. Because she satisfies the socially accepted "ideal" beauty standards such as white skin, a slim figure, long blond hair, a pink outfit, and a crown, she is admired and treated well.

The way that the people greet her and the light that surrounds her both demonstrate how visual appearance is given symbolic power. Appearance turns into a tool that opens doors to power, position, and acceptance. The concept of "good" or "honorable," according to representation theory (Hall, 1997), is created through the film's visual and social representations rather than being innately existent in Glinda. Meaning is not inherently attached to an object or individual but is produced through specific cultural practices – such as fair skin, femininity, and a neat appearance – which are then associated with positive values. In the scene where Glinda is welcomed, the audience is encouraged to accept the association between beauty and popularity as something natural. Through these two scenes, the audience's perspective is shaped to believe that individuals with such characteristics deserve a privileged position within the social structure.

The portrayal of Glinda in *Wicked* (2024) demonstrates how beauty serves as a luxury that makes it easier to gain societal acceptance. Glinda is portrayed as a popular, trustworthy and admired character because of her beauty, which complies with conventional aesthetic standards. Elphaba, on the other hand, faces rejection due to her appearance deviating from the prevailing ideal of beauty. Characters that do not meet these norms are typically ostracized in both reality and media depiction, which is consistent with (Hamermesh, 2011) findings that beauty has a direct impact on social position and opportunities.

Visual Marginalization of Elphaba

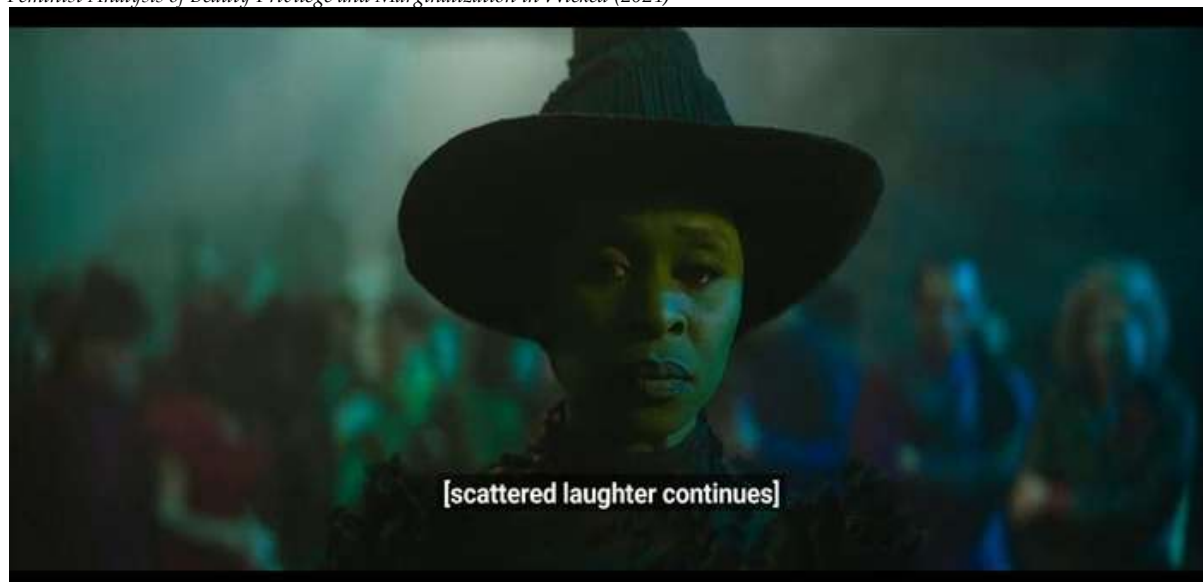
The scenario where Elphaba initially arrives at the school is a clear example of her marginalization. In this scenario, Elphaba is surrounded by a group of pupils in blue uniforms who are all shocked and staring at her with hatred and fear. The attention is drawn to Elphaba because of her remarkable physical peculiarities.



[Students scream] Oh, Oz. [Students exclaiming]

Figure 3. Elphaba was surrounded by students who looked at her with expressions of wonder and fear (15:35)

The scene's visuals emphasize the difference between Elphaba and her surroundings by placing her in the middle of other kids with regular skin and blue uniforms. The scene's camera viewpoint further emphasizes Elphaba's loneliness. Furthermore, Elphaba is positioned as "other" because she does not meet the dominant beauty standards, as evidenced by the students' gaze direction.



[scattered laughter continue]

Figure 4. Elphaba came to the party in a different costume (1:10:50)

Elphaba's visual marginalization is also evident in another scene where she arrives at the party looking different from everyone else. In this scene, Elphaba is shown in dim lighting that contrasts with her surroundings, and her facial expression conveys discomfort, accompanied by the background sound of laughter and the silhouettes of other characters staring at her. This reinforces Elphaba's position as the object of ridicule by the other characters, thereby placing her as "the other" within the social structure. The treatment Elphaba experiences in this scene aligns with the findings of (SteelFisher et al., 2019) regarding the discrimination women face in the real world. Because she deviates from prevailing ideals of beauty, Elphaba is portrayed as someone who frequently faces discrimination, exclusion, and unfavorable evaluation, much like women do in public settings. This portrayal demonstrates how the media not only perpetuates but also reflects the systems of gender inequality that are already in place.

According to (Hall, 1997), representation is a practice of meaning. Meaning is derived from the character's positioning rather than the character itself. This analysis supports this theory. Elphaba is depicted as a visual representation of a departure from the prevailing standards of beauty in American society. Dark colors and low contrast shooting techniques have been utilized to visually represent Elphaba as "not beautiful," reflecting how the construction of beauty in movies is frequently used to control the value of women. The construction of beauty in movies supports (Ginting & Rahmijati, 2018) findings that female characters viewed as "not ideal" often portray themselves in ways reflecting social unworthiness or frailty. From (Hall, 1997) perspective, the notion of "difference" associated with Elphaba is not innate but rather constructed through her visual representation, specifically, her green skin – which is linked to negative connotations such as strangeness and abnormality. This process demonstrates how the media plays a role in reproducing exclusive social structures, in which individuals who do not conform to dominant standards face exclusion and delegitimization within the social sphere.

Furthermore, the theory presented in *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1991) that women who do not meet ideal beauty standards frequently face prejudice and social rejection is consistent with marginalization. The reception between Glinda and Elphaba upon initially starting school is very different in this film. When Glinda first arrived at school, she was welcomed and met with an admiring gaze, while Elphaba was met with a piercing gaze even disgusted stares from everyone. In the scene above, visual and audio elements such as dim lighting, dark tones, and the background sound of other characters' laughter reinforce Elphaba's position as the object of ridicule, thereby constructing her alienation and placing her outside the bounds of prevailing social acceptance.

Conditional Acceptance: Acceptance due to Competence

In the first scene of the film, Elphaba unexpectedly reveals her power. The Shiz University's leader, Madam Morrible, displays interest when the other characters are surprised and fearful. Madam Morrible even offers to suggest Elphaba for special instruction under the tutelage of the Wizard of Oz, the legendary wizard.



Madam Morrible: "I would like to teach you privately and take no other students."

Figure 5. Madam Morrible approached Elphaba and praised her abilities (24:00)

Elphaba's portrayal in *Wicked* (2024) demonstrates a clear trend of conditional acceptance. Because Elphaba's appearance deviates from the accepted ideals of beauty, she is disadvantaged from the start and treated differently from Glinda. The findings of (Damayanti et al., 2023) research on the *True Beauty* series, which show that female characters who adhere to beauty standards are more readily accepted by society while those who are deemed unattractive face prejudice, are comparable to this situation. Elphaba is finally acknowledged in *Wicked* when Madam Morrible and her surroundings start to value and benefit from her magical skills. Elphaba's acknowledgement in this scene shows that, although strength or competence only acts as compensation, creating a smaller window of acceptance, beauty continues to be the most important social capital.



It's yours. Open it.

Figure 6. Elphaba was the only one to receive an invitation (1:40:28)

Elphaba's acceptance is also evident in another scene where she is the only student to receive a special invitation, this moment appears to be a form of recognition and institutional acknowledgment of Elphaba. Considering her position of power, Madam Morrible's acceptance is conditional rather than an acknowledgment of Elphaba's real identity. Conditional acceptance is demonstrated by Elphaba's portrayal in *Wicked* (2024), which is consistent with Gill's (2016) thesis. Elphaba, who deviates from the prevailing ideals of beauty, is initially shunned but gains acceptance when her magical skills are known to others. Elphaba's conditional acceptance suggests that social acceptance of the film's female character is nevertheless constrained by specific circumstances, even though she deviates from conventional aesthetic standards. Therefore, the prevailing framework is still beauty privilege, and women who do not fit the mold are only acknowledged when they contribute significantly.

According to (Hall, 1997) theory, this is a particular kind of "manipulative representation", in which an individual is only assigned a position if they can be used and controlled by the dominating structure. Elphaba is viewed as a potential object of power as long as she is prepared to conform to the rules and regulations of power rather than as a sovereign subject. This situation is an illustration of representation that supports the notion that diversity is only acceptable in specific circumstances. Despite having access to a special area, Elphaba is nonetheless presented as "the other".

However, according to (Wolf, 1991) feminist theory, this scene demonstrates how valuable women like Elphaba, who "do not fit conventional beauty standards", can still be embraced by the public. The absurdity of the patriarchal system is reflected in this, women are granted space, but not as a sign of equality, but rather as a means of exploitation. Because the elite may profit from Elphaba's magical abilities, she is acceptable while not being accepted for who she is. *Wicked* (2024) depicts a contrasting dynamic, in *Barbie* (2023) symbolizes women's fight to overcome patriarchal structures (Pratiwi & Angela, 2024). Glinda is accepted through conventional beauty, whereas Elphaba is acknowledged only after her magical abilities are demonstrated. Both draw attention to the relationship that exists between how women are portrayed, power, and dominant societal norms.

Power Relations: Transitioning From Refusal to Acceptance

The change in the social dynamics of the characters in this scene is noticeable. From the beginning, Elphaba is looked at and laughed at because of her strange appearance and dance. However, this changes when Glinda, a popular and respected character, gives her symbolic recognition by inviting Elphaba to dance together in the middle of the party.



Figure 7. Elphaba and Glinda dance together in the middle of the students (1:16:03)

In this scene where Glinda dances with Elphaba, followed by everyone else dancing together around them. The stares and jeers that were initially directed at Elphaba gradually turn into singing and joyful laughter. Glinda is portrayed as a "social guarantor" who validates Elphaba's existence. This scene demonstrates how the system continues to control "different" women. Because of Glinda's influence, Elphaba is "accepted" rather than accepted for who she is. To depict an enjoyable interaction between Glinda and Elphaba, this scene combines low lighting with a spotlight on them. Elphaba's positioning in the middle of the crowd indicates that she is now seen as a member of the community and is accepted. This passage, however, demonstrates that Elphaba is accepted because of Glinda rather than because of herself. Therefore, it may be said that a female character who is seen as "ideal" must nevertheless work as a mediator in order for "different" women to be accepted.



Woman: Oh, hi, Elphaba. Man: Oh, hey.

Figure 8. Social interaction with Elphaba (1:27:13)

The acceptance of Elphaba is reinforced in the scene where she receives a brief greeting, indicating that she has achieved a certain level of social recognition. Unlike Glinda, who receives an enthusiastic response and efforts to build a connection, Elphaba receives a flat greeting and merely an acknowledgment of her presence.

Although female characters may appear to be increasingly included in public spaces, this inclusion does not necessarily translate into equitable reception. As noted by Yang et al. (2020), films with a higher proportion of female characters may achieve strong economic performance, yet they are often subjected to disproportionately harsh criticism. This dynamic reflects what Naomi Wolf describes in *The Beauty Myth*, women's representation continues to be evaluated through a patriarchal and visually normative framework. In this context, Elphaba's conditional acceptance at the party does not signify genuine inclusion, but rather exposes how patriarchal standards persist in shaping audience perception where women who deviate from idealized beauty remain vulnerable to judgment, even when they are momentarily embraced.

To be accepted by the system, women who do not suit the dominant standards must still adjust socially, as (Wolf, 1991) has shown. One way to achieve this is by associating with women who fit the beauty standards. This dynamic illustrates how the allocation of societal values is still based on beauty standards. Elphaba's acceptance resulted from the intervention of a person who fit those criteria Glinda rather than from a change in how people view beauty. This illustrates how women who don't conform to the prevailing standards of beauty may only obtain social acceptance by being mediated or validated by those who do. As a result, the beauty myth still functions as a control mechanism that establishes who is deserving of acceptance and under what circumstances.

Hall, (1997) claims that the word "foreign" in Elphaba has been substituted with the word "acceptable," which is still part of the prevailing discourse. Elphaba's perception by

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social groups is altered by Glinda's recognition as a very legitimate character, which acts as an authorizing discourse. Nevertheless, this shift just weakens the bounds of the binary opposition (beautiful/not beautiful, normal/not normal). To put it another way, Elphaba's acceptance is partial and does not completely upend the current order because she is still in a "marked" position. The portrayal of Elphaba in *Wicked* (2024) is comparable to the way women resist in *Wolfwalkers* (2020). In contrast to Robyn and Mebh, who challenge patriarchy through language and unity (Fitriyani et al., 2025), Elphaba uses her magical abilities to navigate her initially low social status. Both films demonstrate that popular media, although employing distinct narrative techniques, contribute to the reconstruction of feminist discourse by presenting women as agents of resistance.

Beauty Comes First

Beauty is not only positioned as a benefit but also as a tool of power, as demonstrated in the scene where Glinda dresses Elphaba in front of the mirror. Glinda is "reshaping" Elphaba in this scene to fit in with the prevailing aesthetic standards. Recent studies have shown that the cosmetics business and social media sites like Instagram have a significant role in maintaining gender hierarchies, promoting an idealized image that is becoming more difficult to achieve, and sustaining the idea of beauty (Putri et al., 2023).



Figure 9. Glinda is trying to dress up Elphaba (1:25:28)

In this film beauty serves as a political tool in addition to being aesthetically pleasing. According to (Wolf, 1991), even the beautiful are constrained by social and moral norms, and the beauty of myth is utilized to control and restrict women's activities. Women who conform to ideals of beauty are not always free, they serve as agents and symbols of a system that restricts other women (Wolf, 1991). In the current study, beauty myths in the social media and cosmetics industries, physical transformation is frequently framed as a requirement for social approval rather than an expression of personal autonomy (Putri et al., 2023).

Hall, (1997) would describe this as a hegemonic practice of meaning reproduction, in which Glinda's social symbols are continuously used to spread "good" and "feminine" meanings in order to punish the "different," such as Elphaba. In this scene, Elphaba uses the mirror as a metaphorical tool that doubles her vision, allowing her to see both herself and how she is "monitored" and "shaped" by the dominant culture.

Visual Discrimination and Body Stigma in the Representation of Elphaba

In this scenario, Elphaba escapes with Grimmerie after refusing to submit to Madam Morrible's authority. In retaliation, Madam Morrible publicly denounces Elphaba by portraying her as a threat and deliberately using her physical characteristics especially her

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green skin as visible "evidence" of immorality. Elphaba's body is politicized and created as a symbol of evil through this conduct in a patriarchal discourse that links physical otherness to innate wickedness.

Madam Morrible : "She is evil, responsible for the mutilation of these poor innocent monkeys. Her green skin is but an outward manifestation of her twisted nature. This distortion. This repulsion. This wicked witch."



Figure 10. This scene depicts Elphaba attempting to escape and refusing to surrender to Madam Morrible (2:17:20)

The comparison of Elphaba's body to a visual representation of evil appears obvious at this moment. Such a comparison serves as a systemic illustration of how the "inappropriacy" of women's bodies, non-respect to current standards, is framed as something abnormal, even harmful, rather than merely a verbal assertion.

In this particular instance, the claim that "She is evil" highlights the extent to which the prevailing representation system forces many female characters to take on an identity against their will. According to (Hall, 1997) hegemonic encoding is a form of meaning that continually evolves in the media and is established from the outside. On the opposite side, Elphaba rejects cultural and moral standards based on appearance.

Hall, (1997) theory states that narrative is a type of discourse practice that uses language and images to convey meaning. In addition to being a physical trait, Elphaba's green complexion, which is very inconsistent with Oz's standards for female beauty, is also utilized to symbolize her moral failings and character. This procedure demonstrates that meaning is created through repeated depiction in social structures and the media rather than being an intrinsic quality of an object.

Furthermore, Elphaba is a victim of a patriarchal aesthetic system that restricts women's existence to particular standards of beauty, as it can be seen through the feminist lens of Wolf. Then, because Elphaba's body deviates from the ideal of beauty, it is linked to evil, mayhem, and a danger to social order. Such a depiction reflects (Wolf, 1991) critique that beauty standards are created not to liberate women but to control and subjugate them. This scene's analysis consequently demonstrates that *Wicked* (2024) reproduces and challenges ideological tropes about women's bodies in addition to presenting a fictional event. Elphaba's visually distinct body serves as a narrative device to raise questions about who decides who is "good" or "evil."

Character visualization in *Wicked* (2024) demonstrates how entertainment media appropriates well-established patterns of gender representation in digital media: characters who do not fit these standards are frequently linked to conflict or danger, while characters who are conventionally beautiful are given positive images and stories of peaceful leadership. The representation of characters in *Wicked* (2024) is consistent with studies (Popa & Gavriliu,

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2015), which show that these narrative patterns are frequently repeated in digital media, upholding beauty privilege while marginalizing characters that are viewed as "other".

Disagreement With Dominant Standards

Elphaba's first flight marks the pinnacle of her visual metamorphosis. She eventually stops hiding who she really is after going through periods of marginalization, rejection, and unfavorable characterization. Flying is a symbol of freedom from a repressive societal structure in this scene. Despite having to deal with the stigma of being a "criminal," she no longer gives in to the need to "fit in."



Figure 11. Elphaba flies away from Oz, rejecting the system that controls her identity and body (2:30:30)

Hall, (1997) argues that the scene in which Elphaba flies away from Oz illustrates her attempt to provide her physical appearance, which had been seen as "weird" or "dangerous," a true purpose, Elphaba rejects physical, Judgment, and erroneous recognition. She gives herself a new significance as a free subject.

Elphaba's decisions in that sequence, on the other hand, are the highest point of resistance to the beauty myth, according to Wolf. In order to match the dominant conceptions of beauty, Elphaba no longer seeks acceptance. Oz's patriarchal culture has given her a feminine visual appearance, but she refuses to be an object that can be controlled. Women who refuse to submit to beauty standards are often labelled as wild, dangerous, or insane. Nevertheless, that is precisely where freedom begins (Wolf, 1991).

This particular incident highlights that transformation is even more profound than an evolution in status in society or societal acceptance, it involves the release of the body from the meanings that the system has established. Elphaba decides to give herself a new purpose to become free instead of becoming beautiful.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the film Wicked not only provides visual entertainment but also demonstrates how the representation and interpretation of female characters are influenced by appearance-based power relations, or beauty privilege. Through visual and textual analysis of the characters Glinda and Elphaba, it was found that beauty functions as a form of symbolic capital that determines social position, morality, and the legitimacy of power within the film's narrative. Using feminist theory from Naomi Wolf and representation theory from Stuart Hall, the study reveals that beauty standards shape how characters such as Glinda and Elphaba are positioned within the film's social structure and narrative, as well as how audiences perceive them. These findings reinforce (Wolf, 1991) argument that beauty standards operate as a

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patriarchal mechanism to regulate and subordinate women, even within narratives that appear progressive. The film constructs women who resist dominant systems, such as Elphaba, as threats, while women who conform to idealized standards, such as Glinda, are granted legitimacy and access to power. From (Hall, 1997) perspective, the meaning attached to women's bodies in the film is not natural or neutral, but socially constructed through visual symbols that reflect dominant ideologies. Therefore, beauty in film should be understood not merely as an aesthetic concern but as an ideological instrument that determines who is permitted to speak, who is marginalized, and who is positioned as "the other." In the context of popular culture, these representations significantly influence how society understands women's roles, bodily value, and the boundaries of gender identity. The conclusions of this study are also consistent with empirical evidence on gender discrimination in the United States presented by (SteelFisher et al., 2019) which demonstrates that women's portrayals in film parallel their real experiences of exclusion, highlighting how popular media continues to reproduce unequal social patterns despite seemingly progressive narratives. Overall, this study contributes academically to feminist studies and representation theory by examining how beauty standards function in the marginalization of particular groups.

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