

## **The Duality of 2008's Sexiest Man: Why Hugh Jackman Can Play The Wolverine and Peter Allen**



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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the construction and commodification of hegemonic masculinity through the celebrity persona and performances of Hugh Jackman. Drawing on R.W. Connell's framework of hegemonic masculinity, it analyses Jackman's portrayals of two contrasting characters, Logan (*The Wolverine*) and Peter Allen (*The Boy from Oz*), to explore how masculine desirability is culturally encoded through traits such as virility and usefulness. While Logan embodies hypermasculine ideals of strength and emotional repression, Peter Allen challenges normative masculinity through his queerness and flamboyance, yet remains desirable due to his success within capitalist and sexual frameworks. The paper also investigates Jackman's strategic navigation of masculinity in celebrity culture, especially within online fandoms and platforms like TikTok, where his persona is shaped and reinforced through the reciprocal relationship between celebrity branding and audience desire. Ultimately, it argues that Jackman's career reflects a broader trend of profit-driven male sexualisation that, while distinct from the historical objectification of women, raises urgent questions about boundaries, consent, and cultural commodification in the digital age.

### **Keywords:**

*Masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, celebrity, fandom, social media*

### **Introduction**

The career of Hugh Jackman has spanned over three decades with work completed in mediums from musical theatre and television to blockbuster

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film franchises. Through Jackman's work in entertainment, his undeniable status as international sex-symbol has been well-established. Jackman's performances have been intrinsically linked to his popularity as a celebrity, notably culminating in the sphere of commercial literature with his award as *People Magazine's* 'Sexiest Man Alive' in 2008 and, more recently, with the fan-dubbed 'Hugh Jackman Renaissance' taking place in online fandom spaces such as TikTok. These associations between Jackman's work and his sex-symbol status play a significant role in shaping the cultural significances of his own presentations of masculinity, as evidenced in the characters he chooses to play, as well as the influences that these characters have on popular media's sexualisation of the male celebrity.

With academia on hegemony originating in discussions surrounding class relations, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) write that 'the idea of hegemony would be reduced to a simple model of cultural control' (p. 829). The definition of what is hegemonically masculine is shifting over time. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) inform us that hegemonic masculinity, in its simplest form, 'embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men' (p. 832). Within academic discussion in recent years, there has been criticism of masculinities and a push towards the redefinition and expansion of what is considered to be affective to the study. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue, 'understanding of hegemonic masculinity needs to incorporate a more holistic understanding of gender hierarchy, recognizing the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics.' (p. 848). Using Connell's (2005) framework of hegemonic masculinity, this paper explores Jackman's performances of The Wolverine and Peter Allen to analyse the cultural duality surrounding ideas of desirable masculinity and expressions of desire for masculinity in modern media.

### **The Masculine Desirability of The Wolverine**

The Wolverine (Logan Howlett) is a super anti-hero character from the *X-Men* film franchise, whose character originated in Marvel comics in 1974. One of the most recognizable characteristics of the on-screen Wolverine, apart from the adamantium claws, is his embodiment of traditional, white hegemonic masculinity. Jackman's performance is largely influenced by the comic books that preceded the film franchise, and the character of Wolverine, in both comic and film, is depicted as displaying expressions of violence, apathy in the face of brutality, and emotional stagnation. These characteristics, while seemingly undesirable and perhaps threatening to an audience, are the base on which the sexualisation of this character is built. Through an idealised framing of this hyper-masculine behaviour, his violence is perceived as protective instinct, his apathy towards brutality is viewed as stability under pressure, and his repressed emotional state is

deemed internal strength. According to Epstein 'the hegemonic ideal of masculinity may be the white, middle-class, heterosexual, family man, living with his wife and child' (Epstein, 1998, p. 53), making Wolverine's whiteness yet another of his masculine qualifications. The construction of the character Logan, who possesses these traits and aligns with the aesthetics of white hegemonic masculinity, results in a Wolverine whose worth and desirability are fully reliant on his ability to be useful and virile, as these are the traits on which a successful performance of hegemonic masculinity depends.

The importance of usefulness and virility to the desirability of the Wolverine cannot be overstated, with Brown (2022) arguing that in later films, such as *Logan* (2017), 'Wolverine's age, domestication, refusal to use his skills, and general signs of failure are framed as an emasculation' (p. 706). This attribution of worth is also echoed in fan spaces, often resulting in fan made TikTok edits, fan fiction, and fan art that frequently overflows into desire for and sexualisation of Jackman himself, highlighting his perceived sexual prowess, strength, and masculine capability. With the sexualisation of The Wolverine predominantly constructed through the heterosexual white female gaze, it is perhaps no great surprise that expressions of virility and usefulness are sought after. Acquiring a partner who embodies these traits, essential to performances of hegemonic masculinity, provides women with the social capital historically required to legitimise the perceived superiority of the heterosexual white female class with Hamilton et al. (2019) describing 'gender as an independent structure of domination; consequently, femininities that complement hegemonic masculinities are treated as passively compliant in the reproduction of gender' (p. 315).

### **The Desirable Failure of Peter Allen**

The character of Peter Allen originates from *The Boy from Oz*, a jukebox musical documenting the life of the real Peter Allen, an Australian singer-songwriter, best known for his work writing for Judy Garland and Liza Minnelli. This flamboyant, queer, and emotional character may at first appear to be The Wolverine's opposite in every way, and the assumption would be to categorise Peter Allen as a failure under the requirements for masculine success that Logan Howlett embodies. Acknowledging and distancing himself from the failed masculinity of this queer character, Jackman's approach to playing Peter Allen was never to evoke a response of sexualisation from the audience, but instead to infantilise him in an effort to negate the effects of possible bias against homosexual characters among the audience. As Jackman himself suggested, 'The key to playing Peter is that you can't think of him as a gay man, because as a straight man it will send you off in the wrong direction. You have to think of him as a little kid' (Stockwell, 2003, quoting Hugh Jackman, p. 40). However, the 'failures' of Peter Allen to conform to stereotypes of masculinity through expression of camp and homosexuality are quickly overshadowed by Allen's successes in

utility and virility. However, in the matters of usefulness and power, key measures of success under the constraints of hegemonic masculinity that are therefore seen as desirable characteristics of the sexualised male celebrity, Peter Allen is undeniably successful.

Through Allen's financial achievement under capitalism, he has achieved a form of usefulness highly valued in cultures of hegemonic masculinity. Meanwhile, Allen's success in the realm of virility is confirmed due to the character's portrayal as possessing a high sex drive, having many sexual partners, and having engaged in at least one heterosexual relationship. While it is Peter Allen who meets the requirements for masculine success, the portrayal of his character in *The Boy from Oz* lends hegemonic masculine capital instead to Hugh Jackman. Through Jackman's carefully protected and crafted image, the portrayal of Peter Allen becomes Jackman's own success, adding to his social capital and implying a masculinity that can make even masculine 'failure' desirable, when in truth, Peter Allen may be viewed as a hegemonic success in his own right.

### **Masculine Sexualisation: Celebrity Culture and Social Media**

Both broader cultural conditions and spheres of celebrity sexualisation existing within the social media platform TikTok can cohesively account for Jackman's ability to effectively play such varied representations of masculinity without compromising his own image. Following the theory put forward by Payne (2009), Jackman engages in 'the embodiment of specific forms of cultural capital [...] the over- performance of a recuperative ordinariness: the panicked construction of a stable ground of masculinity as a point of origin and necessary return' (p. 296). Jackman elects to play characters that, despite requiring wide acting range, are still hegemonically successful and thus pose little to no threat to his own public persona's masculinity, upon which much of his career success relies. To this end, the production of hypermasculine promotional materials is utilised by Jackman to preserve the idealised masculine image crafted for his celebrity success, for example, *People Magazine's* 2008 'Sexiest Man Alive' cover and, more recently, his acknowledgment and engagement with the sexualisation of his characters and persona on TikTok.

Exploration into the online fandom surrounding Jackman's work illuminates a link between the public desires of his fandom and the choices to either cater to or refute these desires made by Jackman and his PR team. These interactions form a unique symbiotic relationship between celebrity, character, and audience within the realms of social media, fandom and pop culture. This relationship has a profound effect on the representations of masculinity that are made readily available to the wider public and are, over time, accepted and upheld as the norm for gender behaviours and expressions. Through this reinforcement of gender norms, driven by profit

and celebrity culture, white hegemonic masculinity is continually upheld as the unattainable, yet ultimate object of desire.

## Conclusion

In a society which values money over all else, and where 'clicks' generate profit, it is unsurprising to see the highly lucrative sexualisation of male celebrities being rampantly encouraged on social media. With characters constructed to fulfil the desire and fantasy of white, heterosexual women now seemingly insufficient (Hamilton et al., 2019, p. 328), the sexualisation of the male celebrity himself is offered as an alternative. As Tufekci (2019) argues, recommendation algorithms are partially responsible for the radicalisation of groups online, isolating single signals of user wants and delivering increasingly extreme versions of content tied to that signal over time. When applied to this case, when does a 'thirst tweet' become harassment? When does a fan edit become non-consensual porn? When the boundaries of what is and is not permissible to say and do online regarding male celebrities are challenged with every opportunity for profiteering, when does pop culture become cultural carnage?

While representations of violence, emotional stagnation, camp, and homosexuality are vital to the performative nature of masculinity in the characters of Logan Howlett and Peter Allen, it is the characteristics of virility and usefulness that, shared by these characters, ultimately determine their hegemonic masculine successes. Thus, they become culturally and economically safe characters for Hugh Jackman to embody as an actor whose financial and celebrity success relies on his masculine social capital. This reliance is a case study in the for-profit sexualisation of the male celebrity among social media users and pop culture fans. It cannot be ignored that those who participate in this culture of sexualisation of the male celebrity are predominantly white, heterosexual women, offering potential avenues for future research into the complex racialised and gendered dynamics of the sexualisation of hegemonic masculinity. While this sexualisation of the white male celebrity does not carry with it the historical weight of gendered oppression that accompanies the objectification of the female celebrity, it does reveal an increasingly aggressive and commodifying attitude towards the masculine, one that, if not curtailed soon, will surely result in carnage, cultural or otherwise.

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