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DECODING GENDER INEQUALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF SURABAYA FEMALE ATHLETES' RECEPTION IN *YOUNG WOMAN AND THE SEA (2024)*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines female athletes' interpretations of gender inequality in the film Young Woman and the Sea using Stuart Hall's reception theory and Simone de Beauvoir's concepts of transcendence and immanence as supporting theory. Employing qualitative reception analysis, the study involved five female athletes selected based on their swimming experience, age, and competition background. The findings show that participants interpreted the film as a strong representation of gender inequality in sports through patriarchal restrictions, gender discrimination, media objectification, institutional discrimination, and stereotypes regarding women's competence and leadership. Most participants occupied a dominant hegemonic reception, while several adopted a negotiated reception influenced by personal experiences and contemporary perspectives. The study further reveals how female athletes relate the film's portrayal to their own struggles against traditional gender expectations. Ultimately, the film functions as a reflective medium that raises critical awareness of structural gender inequality within sports culture.

***Keywords*: Gender Inequality, Audience Reception, Female Athletes, Young Woman And The Sea**

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INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality refers to disparities that arise when women and men do not enjoy equal rights, responsibilities, or opportunities, and when access to social, economic, and personal advancement is shaped by gender-based bias (Shang, 2022). Gender inequality in swimming remains a persistent global issue that operates across athletic, media, economic, and coaching structures. Despite comparable performance and medal achievements, women athletes continue to experience unequal pay, limited institutional support, inadequate facilities, and severe underrepresentation in sports media, receiving only around 4% of global coverage (Cooky et al., 2015; Fink, 2015). These disparities are sustained through patriarchal discourse and gender stereotypes that persist despite the formal presence of gender equality policies, whose implementation remains largely symbolic rather than transformative (Evans & Pfister, 2021).

Inequality is further entrenched at the coaching level, where female coaches are positioned as outsiders within male-dominated networks and subjected to "damaging narratives" that question their competence, forcing them to navigate a double bind between masculine-coded professionalism and feminized expectations (Graham & Blackett, 2022). Economically, elite swimming institutions continue to undervalue women's athletic labor through compensation and revenue distribution systems that prioritize organizational profit over athlete welfare, while female swimmers disproportionately bear the financial costs of training and competition, limiting long-term career sustainability (Harris & Dulin, 2024). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that gender inequality in swimming is not incidental but structurally embedded, reproduced through interconnected cultural, institutional, and economic mechanisms.

Disciplines like swimming were deeply rooted in historical exclusion in the 1920s (Terret T., 2013, cited in Castan-Vicente, 2023). This legacy is vividly portrayed in the film *"Young Woman and the Sea,"* which tells the story of Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel. Directed by Joachim Ronning and based on the book by Glenn Stout, the film combines historical narrative with personal triumph, presenting not only Ederle's groundbreaking athletic achievement but also her role in challenging patriarchal norms in the late 1920s. The film highlights gendered barriers such as restrictions on women's participation and appearance, as well as broader assumptions about women's physical capability and social roles. As a cultural product, the film does not merely "tell a story" about inequality, but it actively participates in producing meanings about women, sport, and power. However, these meanings are not fixed; they are subject to interpretation by audiences whose social positions and lived experiences shape how such messages are understood. Therefore, the film provides a relevant site for applying Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model to examine how female swimmer athletes decode representations of gender inequality, whether through dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings (Hall, 1973).

Recent audience-based research shows that gender and feminism in film are not received uniformly because viewers actively negotiate meanings. For example, Wardani, Cahyo, and Meyrasyawati's audience reception study on *Damsel* applies Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model and demonstrates three decoding positions: some viewers take a dominant-hegemonic reception and agree the film conveys feminist values, others negotiate the message by questioning its realism due to the heroine's "overpowering" portrayal, and oppositional viewers interpret the film less as empowerment and more as a depiction of women's suffering within patriarchal structures (Wardani et al., 2025). This study confirms that feminist representation is polysemic and that audience meaning-making can diverge from the filmmaker's intended message.

Similarly, Trisnawati, Adiarti, and Agustina's film audience study on *The Intern* shows that viewers can identify gender stereotypes and also recognize their "dynamic" shifts across the narrative, with interpretations shaped not only by scenes and storyline but also by the audience's prior knowledge and lived exposure to gender issues (Trisnawati et al., 2021). Importantly, the study indicates that watching a film may even increase viewers' awareness and sensibility toward gender stereotypes, highlighting how reception is connected to social experience rather than determined solely by the text. However, although these studies strengthen the argument that audiences actively decode gender ideology in film, they largely focus on general viewers and non-sport contexts, leaving limited attention to how female athletes, as audiences with direct experience of gender inequality in sport, interpret sports-related narratives.

Taqwa, Firdaus, and Khissoga (2024) examine *Young Woman and the Sea* using Naomi Wolf's power feminism and interpret Gertrude Ederle's success as a form of women's resistance within a male-dominated social order. Their study highlights how the film constructs empowerment through agency, defiance, and the breaking of restrictive norms, positioning the narrative as a critique of patriarchal ideology (Taqwa et al., 2024). Although this work is important for identifying feminist themes and forms of inequality depicted in the film, the analysis remains primarily text-centered. As a result, it does not examine how audiences, especially women athletes, interpret or negotiate the film's meanings in relation to their own lived experiences within contemporary sports structures.

While existing studies have discussed gender inequality in sports cinema through representation-focused frameworks and empowerment-based readings, they have paid less attention to the interpretive process through which meaning is produced by audiences. This limitation is significant because films are polysemic, and the meanings of gender inequality may be received differently depending on viewers' social positions and experiences (Hall, 1973). For female swimmer athletes, their embodied experience of training, competition, institutional support, and gendered expectations may shape distinctive dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings when watching a film that depicts inequality in swimming. Therefore, this study extends prior research by applying Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model as the main framework to examine how Surabaya female swimmer athletes decode *Young Woman and the Sea* (2024).

Stuart Hall's reception theory provides the foundation for understanding how audiences actively interpret media texts rather than passively accepting their messages (Hall, 1973). In this

context, the film Young Woman and the Sea is viewed as an encoded cultural text that carries dominant meanings about gender inequality. Female swimmer athletes, as the audience, may decode these messages in a dominant hegemonic reception: Audiences fully accept and decode the media's intended meaning and ideology. Negotiated reception: Audiences partially accept the encoded meaning while modifying or rejecting certain aspects based on personal viewpoints. Oppositional reception: Audiences understand the intended meaning but reject it entirely, constructing an alternative interpretation influenced by their own values, culture, and experiences (Hall, 1973). To deepen the interpretation of participants' readings, this study uses Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism as a supporting lens. Beauvoir's concepts of women as the "Other," as well as the tension between immanence and transcendence, help explain how athletes' interpretations reflect themes of constraint, agency, resistance, and self-definition (Beauvoir, 2011). In this way, the study aims to examine not only how female swimmer athletes perceive and interpret the representations of gender inequality depicted in Young Woman and the Sea (2024), but also how they relate the film's portrayal of gender-based struggles to their own lived experiences within the context of sports. This study argues that *Young Woman and the Sea* represents gender inequality in swimming not merely as institutional discrimination but as an existential struggle for freedom and authenticity, as interpreted by female swimmer athletes through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism.

METHOD

Respondents

In selecting the participants, prior to the in-depth and semi-structured interview involving female swimmers aged 19–25 in Surabaya, the researcher first conducted a preliminary survey of 12 female athletes. Using purposive sampling, five female athlete participants were selected following a preliminary survey based on their swimming experience, age, and competitive background. The participants were then asked to watch Young Woman and the Sea (2024). The selection of female swimmer athletes as participants is grounded in their experiential proximity to the issues represented in the film, as their engagement in competitive swimming provides them with contextual knowledge of training structures, institutional support, and gendered expectations within the sport. This positions them as a distinct interpretive community whose readings of gender inequality may diverge from those of general audiences, thereby enabling a more nuanced analysis of meaning-making processes.
Furthermore, Surabaya was selected as the research site due to its status as a major urban center with well-developed sports infrastructure and active participation in regional and national-level competitions, which facilitates access to athletes embedded within competitive environments and exposed to broader structural dynamics of sport. Accordingly, the focus on female swimmer athletes in Surabaya allows this study to generate contextually situated insights into the interpretation of gender inequality within a specific sociocultural and institutional context.

Instruments

Several researcher-selected scenes depicting gender inequality were analyzed based on their relevance to the study's objective of examining audience interpretations of the representation of women athletes in the film. The scenes were purposefully chosen because they strongly convey the film's preferred meanings concerning various forms of gender inequality experienced by female athletes. Within Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, preferred meaning refers to the dominant message intentionally encoded within media texts for audiences to interpret (Hall, 1973). Accordingly, these scenes were considered significant because they explicitly illustrate gender inequality, including patriarchal restrictions, gender discrimination, media objectification, institutional discrimination, and gender stereotypes experienced by female athletes.

Procedures

Data were collected through individual in-depth and semi-structured interviews. During the interview process, participants were asked to watch Young Woman and the Sea (2024), then shown the researcher-selected film clips and asked to respond to guided questions regarding whether they

perceived gender inequality in the scenes, their level of agreement with the film's representation, and the extent to which these portrayals related to their personal experiences as female athletes.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model, categorizing participants' interpretations into the dominant hegemonic reception, negotiated reception, and oppositional reception influenced by their own values, culture, and experiences (Hall, 1973). This framework was employed to examine how participants decoded the film's representations of gender inequality. The analysis was then extended to explore the extent to which these interpretations were connected to the participants' lived experiences, particularly whether they identified parallels between the film's portrayal and their own realities as female athletes. In this stage, participants' reflections on personal experiences of gender inequality were further interpreted through Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Feminism (Beauvoir, 2011), in order to analyze how themes of constraint, agency, and self-definition emerged in their meaning-making processes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using Stuart Hall's reception theory, the findings reveal that the majority of participants occupied a dominant hegemonic reception position, as they accepted and recognized the film's intended message regarding the existence of gender inequality in sports, particularly in swimming. These participants largely agreed with the film's portrayal of patriarchal restrictions, gender discrimination, media objectification, institutional discrimination, and gender stereotypes experienced by female athletes. Meanwhile, several participants adopted a negotiated reception position, acknowledging gender inequality while simultaneously interpreting certain aspects of the film through the lens of their own experiences, contemporary sporting conditions, and perceptions of social progress. Although these participants generally accepted the film's central message, they also modified or contextualized its meaning based on their personal perspectives. Furthermore, no participants occupied an oppositional reception position, indicating that none rejected the film's representation of gender inequality. This finding suggests that Young Woman and the Sea was broadly perceived as an accurate and credible depiction of the gender-based challenges faced by women in swimming and competitive sports.

Table 1. Female Athletes' Interpretation

No	Scene	Code	Gender Inequality	Audience Receptions
1	Parents' argument about Trudy and Meg's swimming education.	PR	Patriarchal restriction based on stereotype and gender bias.	P1: Dominant hegemonic reception P2: Negotiated reception P3: Negotiated reception P4: Dominant hegemonic reception P5: Negotiated reception
2	Officials mocked Trudy and Meg in the training pool.	D/M	Discrimination/marginalization caused by gender stereotypes..	P1: Negotiated reception P2: Dominant hegemonic reception P3: Dominant hegemonic reception P4: Dominant hegemonic reception P5: Dominant hegemonic reception
3	Reporters ask about Trudy's personal life instead of achievement.	MO	Media objectification of women's accomplishments.	P1: Negotiated reception P2: Dominant hegemonic reception P3: Dominant hegemonic reception P4: Dominant hegemonic reception P5: Dominant hegemonic reception
4	Coach/ official prioritizes the male category; female	ID	Institutional discrimination	P1: Negotiated reception P2: Dominant hegemonic reception P3: Dominant hegemonic reception

	athletes' access to the training facility is restricted/ignored			P4: Dominant hegemonic reception P5: Dominant hegemonic reception
5	Coach/official implies women are "not ready/too weak"; dismisses performance evidence	GS	Descriptive Gender Stereotyping	P1: Dominant hegemonic reception P2: Dominant hegemonic reception P3: Dominant hegemonic reception P4: Dominant hegemonic reception P5: Dominant hegemonic reception

Female Athletes' Interpretation of Gender Inequality

Scene 1

The first scene portraying the argument between Trudy and Meg's parents regarding swimming lessons reveals how audiences interpret gender inequality differently based on their personal experiences, cultural values, and social perspectives. Using Stuart Hall's reception theory, the findings indicate that the audience responses can be categorized into dominant and negotiated reception positions. Most participants acknowledged the existence of gender inequality within the scene, although several respondents interpreted the father's actions as an expression of parental concern rather than purely discriminatory behavior.

Participants in the dominant hegemonic reception fully agree that this scene depicts gender inequality based on patriarchal restrictions. **Participant 1** interpreted the prohibition against swimming practice as a form of unequal educational opportunity for girls. This interpretation was reinforced by her personal experience of facing parental rejection due to the perception that women's swimsuits conflicted with religious norms. This interpretation aligns with existing studies on gender and sports participation, which suggest that girls' opportunities for athletic development are often constrained by both institutional structures and family-related limitations (Dolance & Messner, 2003).

Similarly, **Participant 4** emphasized the father's statement that swimming was *"when the dads say it's indecent for a girl…"(Interview with P4, May 11, 2026)* as clear evidence of patriarchal values that restrict women's participation in sports. This is aligned with research by Musto (2014), which found in a study of coed youth swimming that gender practices in sport are strongly influenced by expectations of hegemonic femininity, with fathers and peers actively discouraging behaviors seen as crossing gender boundaries. The respondent further connected this issue to the limited media exposure of women's sports, arguing that society often perceives women's athletics as less important than men's sports. This media-structural reading aligns with feminist media studies, which consistently documents the marginalization of women's sport in mainstream media as both a symptom and a reinforcement of gender hierarchy (Cooky et al., 2015)

In contrast, participants occupying the negotiated reception partially accepted the representation of gender inequality while simultaneously offering alternative interpretations. **Participant 2** viewed the father's prohibition primarily as parental concern rooted in social norms and fear of societal judgment, as said by participant 2,"*In my opinion, this is more about a parent's concern, actually. As a father, even though he was prohibiting her, he was still thinking about his child's well-being.*"*(Interview with P2, April 30, 2026).* **Participants 5** justified the father's doing because of his concerned about the swimwear, "*Back then, tight clothing for women was uncommon, since women usually wore long and modest clothes. So perhaps the father was afraid that his daughter would be judged negatively by other people*."*(Interview with P5, May 13, 2026)* this reveal that the participant acknowledged patriarchal elements in the father's behavior, they believed his actions were motivated by anxiety over how society might perceive his daughter, especially regarding women wearing swimsuits.

Within the negotiated reception, **Participant 3** expresses slight disagreement with the encoded meaning by minimizing the gender aspect of the scene, interpreting the conflict as unfair treatment between siblings rather than explicit gender inequality. As the participant said: "*In my opinion, it was more about the comparison between the older sister and the younger brother. So I do not think there was gender inequality, it just felt more unfair in general*"*(Interview with P3, May 05, 2026*). However, the pivotal conflict in this scene arises when the father rejects the daughter's idea of swimming lessons and immediately suggests giving them to the son instead, showcasing clear gender bias. This sibling dynamic aligns with research by Tucker et al. (2003), which demonstrates that unfair treatment among siblings is often deeply linked to gender, with mothers spending more time with daughters and fathers spending

more time with sons. Therefore, while participant 3 explicitly denied the presence, their focus on parental favoritism inadvertently validates the film's encoded message. These negotiated receptions reflect Hall's argument that audiences are active interpreters who do not always consume media messages exactly as intended. Instead, they reinterpret messages through their own cultural background and lived experiences (Hall, 1973)

Scene 2

The second scene, in which officials and male athletes mocked Trudy and Meg and stated that the training pool was reserved only for men, while women should use a separate pool, further highlights the representation of gender inequality in sports. Compared to the previous scene, the audience responses in this scene showed stronger agreement regarding the existence of discrimination against women athletes caused by gender stereotypes. The audience reception in this scene demonstrates how sports institutions are portrayed as spaces shaped by patriarchal power relations. The separation between male and female pools symbolizes unequal access to resources and opportunities. Women are not only physically separated but also socially marginalized through ridicule and exclusion. This exclusion is driven by the fact that a woman's reputation is often shaped more by stereotypes and assumptions tied to her gender group than by her personal traits or accomplishments (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). In Hall's perspective, the dominant reception audiences decoded the scene exactly as intended by the media text: as criticism toward gender discrimination and the normalization of male superiority within sports culture.

Participants in the dominant hegemonic reception interpreted the scene as a clear representation of patriarchal attitudes and gender discrimination. **Participant 2** argued that inequality was "*very obvious*," especially through the official's dialogue that implied men should occupy a higher social position while women lacked a voice. The phrase "*because back then, the situation was very obvious. Men were expected to be above women, while women basically had no voice.* "*(Interview with P2, April 30, 2026)* is particularly significant, echoing Hall's concept of the preferred meaning as one that naturalizes existing social hierarchies. Similarly, **Participant 3** emphasized how male athletes and officials looked down on Trudy and Meg through mocking expressions and dismissive behavior. As participant 3 said: "*Women were given condescending smiles, as if looking down on them, because they thought those women would never be able to go to the Olympics as athletes."(Interview with P3, May 05, 2026*). According to the audience, the scene reflected stereotypes and gender bias that positioned female athletes as less capable and less deserving of recognition than male athletes. **Participants 4 and 5** also shared similar interpretations, arguing that the unequal treatment shown in the scene originated from socio-cultural stereotypes that normalize the assumption that women are weaker or less competent in sports. This is because such professions are commonly associated with qualities stereotypically attributed to men, while being perceived as incompatible with traits conventionally associated with women (Manzi et al., 2024).

Only **Participant 1** occupied the negotiated reception. The audience acknowledged using a temporal frame that such discrimination may have existed in the past, but believed that contemporary sports environments are now more equal. As participant 1 said: "*Maybe in the past, yes, but not anymore nowadays. Now men and women are mixed together, and even outfits like that have become normal."(Interview with P1, April 23, 2026*), the respondent explained that mixed-gender competitions and changing attitudes toward sportswear demonstrate progress toward equality. Rather than fully accepting the discriminatory message represented in the scene as relevant today, the participant negotiated the meaning by comparing it with present-day experiences where women and men increasingly share equal opportunities in sports competitions. From a critical standpoint, however, this temporal framing warrants deeper scrutiny. Cooky et al. (2021) argue that although significant advancements have occurred in women's participation and visibility in sports over recent decades, sweeping narratives of "progress" can mask persistent, deep-seated systemic issues. In this case, the participant's focus on visible milestones, such as the implementation of mixed relays and the normalization of swimwear, may inadvertently conceal the continued existence of more implicit or procedural forms of gender inequality. Ultimately, this negotiation perfectly reflects Hall's reception theory, demonstrating how audiences actively filter and reinterpret media messages through the lens of their own modern social contexts and generational experiences.

Scene 3

The third scene shifts the representation of gender inequality from institutional discrimination in sports spaces to media representation. In this scene, reporters focus on Trudy's personal life, relationships, and domestic identity instead of discussing her achievements as an athlete. Compared to the previous scenes, the discrimination presented here operates in a subtler form through the media's framing of women athletes. Using the framework of Stuart Hall's reception theory, most participants occupied the dominant hegemonic reception by recognizing that the media undermined Trudy's athletic accomplishments through gendered questioning and stereotypical assumptions about women.

Participants in the dominant hegemonic reception interpreted the reporters' questions as dismissive and irrelevant to Trudy's accomplishments. **Participant 2** emphasized that the interviewer's attitude appeared degrading because the discussion shifted away from Trudy's athletic success. Although the respondent did not explicitly mention gender inequality, the observation that the reporters "*needed her, yet still belittled her*" *(Interview with P2, April 30, 2026)* captures a criticism of the interviewer's behavior aligned with the encoded meaning of the scene, namely the marginalization of women athletes through media discourse. Similarly, **Participant 3** argued that the reporters redirected the conversation toward topics commonly associated with women, such as relationships, marriage, cooking, and femininity, rather than focusing on her record-breaking achievements. As participant 3 said: "*Back then, the standard was that women belonged in the kitchen, or that women should only do things that were considered more feminine." (Interview with P3, May 05, 2026*). According to the respondent, this reflects stereotypes that women should prioritize domestic and feminine roles over athletic accomplishment. This is in line with women athletes receiving more media coverage in sports that were viewed as more feminine or fitting traditional gender norms (Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

Participants 4 and 5 also interpreted the scene as evidence of unequal media treatment toward women athletes. **Participant 4** criticized the reporters for giving more attention to Trudy's possible romantic relationships instead of providing space for her to discuss her accomplishments. The respondent viewed this as an example of limited media coverage for women athletes, where women's achievements receive less serious recognition than men's achievements. Likewise, **Participant 5** said, "*They were more focused on Trudy's personal life rather than supporting or appreciating her achievements*."*(Interview with P5, May 13, 2026).* They argued that the media seemed more interested in Trudy's personal life than in celebrating her success, indicating that women athletes are often objectified through personal narratives rather than appreciated for their professional capabilities. Feminist scholars have consistently criticized the objectification of women in media, contending that it fosters a culture where women are mainly valued for their looks and sexual accessibility (Pasha, 2023).

In contrast, **Participant 1** occupied the negotiated reception. The respondent considered questions related to domestic roles as "*It's natural because that's the nature of women*" *(Interview with P1, April 23, 2026*), reflecting acceptance of traditional gender expectations. The participant explained that women are still expected to possess domestic abilities such as cooking and housekeeping, even when pursuing sports careers. However, the respondent also shared personal experiences of being labeled "*tomboy*" for prioritizing swimming, which suggests awareness of how women athletes are judged for deviating from conventional femininity. This is in line with research by Adams et al. (2005) reported that female athletes, especially those involved in competitive sports or who resist compulsory heterosexuality, often fall outside traditional norms of femininity and are labeled with terms like "tomboy" to highlight their divergence from gender expectations. This illustrates Hall's concept of negotiated reception, in which audiences partially accept dominant cultural values while simultaneously recognizing contradictions within their lived experiences (Hall, 1973).

Scene 4

The fourth scene further develops the representation of gender inequality by highlighting unequal access to training facilities, resources, and institutional support between male and female athletes. Unlike the previous scene, which focused on symbolic marginalization through media

discourse, this scene emphasizes structural inequality within sports institutions. Male athletes are prioritized in terms of training opportunities, facilities, nutrition, and coaching attention, while female athletes are ignored or treated as secondary participants. Through the perspective of Stuart Hall's reception theory, most participants occupied the dominant hegemonic reception by recognizing the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities toward women athletes.

Participants in the dominant hegemonic reception strongly interpreted the scene as a representation of systemic gender discrimination in sports. **Participant 2** stated that the inequality was "*very obvious, the facilities are provided only for the men.*" "*(Interview with P2, April 30, 2026)* while women struggled to even find space for training. The respondent further connected this issue to broader forms of inequality, including the lack of women in leadership positions, limited investment in women's sports, and the persistence of gender stereotypes. Similarly, **Participant 3** argued that women athletes were deliberately restricted from training due to assumptions that male athletes were more profitable and valuable. "*Because at that time, there were more men, and it seemed more feasible and profitable than supporting women. There was a lack of investment and resources, because in the film, the women received limited facilities...*" "*(Interview with P2, May 05, 2026).* According to the respondent, this reflects unequal investment and the perception that female athletes are less worthy of support.

Participants 4 and 5 also viewed the unequal treatment as unfair and discriminatory. **Participant 4** criticized the coach for failing to support all athletes equally, despite both male and female athletes sharing the same goal of winning competitions. The respondent believed that separating training opportunities based on gender contradicted the idea of teamwork and fairness in sports. Meanwhile, **Participant 5** emphasized that the inequality was visible not only through training access but also through differences in food, accommodation, and overall support. "*Maybe there was a lack of resources or funding. So perhaps these women were only sent to compete, but there simply was not enough funding to train them properly. "(Interview with P5, May 13, 2026).* According to the respondent, female athletes appeared to be sent merely as participants rather than serious competitors, while male athletes received intensive preparation and proper facilities. This response demonstrates how audiences recognized gender inequality as operating structurally through unequal allocation of institutional resources.

Only **Participant 1** occupied the negotiated reception. Similar to previous scenes, the respondent acknowledged that such discrimination may have existed in the past but considered it less relevant in contemporary sports settings. Male and female athletes often train together and receive similar facilities. *"But since this film is set in the 1920s, it makes sense, because it's very different, right? The past and the present are completely different."(Interview with P1, April 23, 2026*). However, the respondent still accepted that the scene accurately represented the conditions of the 1920s. According to the participant, modern training environments are generally more inclusive. This negotiated reception illustrates Hall's argument that audiences reinterpret media messages using situated logic according to their own present-day experiences and social context (Hall, 1973).

Scene 5

The fifth scene continues to represent gender inequality by questioning women's competence and leadership in sports. In this scene, sponsors and officials undermine the abilities of female coaches and athletes by implying that women are not capable enough to train or lead successful athletes. Even though Trudy has already demonstrated athletic potential, her achievements and readiness are dismissed due to assumptions about gender. Compared to the previous scene, which emphasized unequal facilities and institutional support, this scene focuses more directly on the devaluation of women's authority, expertise, and capability within sports culture. From the perspective of Stuart Hall's reception theory, all participants occupied the dominant hegemonic reception by recognizing gender inequality in the dialogue and the discriminatory treatment of female coaches and athletes as the reference code (Hall, 1973).

Participants interpreted the scene as reflecting stereotypes that women are less competent in leadership and athletic development. **Participant 1** connected the scene with historical realities in which coaching positions were dominated by men, while women were associated primarily with domestic responsibilities. As participant 1 said: "*Back then, women were often underestimated, and there were*

also too many male coaches. People would say things like, Why would women do something like that? Just stay quiet, cook, and do other household things."(Interview with P1, April 23, 2026). According to the audience, women in the past were often underestimated and discouraged from pursuing professional roles in sports. Although the respondent acknowledged that conditions have improved today, the interpretation still aligned with the encoded message that patriarchal stereotypes once restricted women's opportunities in coaching and sports leadership.

Similarly, **Participants 2, 3, 4, and 5** recognized the discriminatory nature of the sponsor's actions and dialogue. **Participant 2** said, "*Especially since Trudy was an athlete, she could not freely choose her own coach because she was restricted by the sponsor.*" *(Interview with P2, May 05, 2026)* The participant argued that the inequality was clearly represented through conversations between the characters, particularly the sponsor's attempt to pressure Trudy into changing coaches despite her achievements as an athlete. **Participant 3** emphasized that the sponsor appeared unwilling to trust a female coach, reflecting the lack of women's representation in leadership positions and the belief that women were incapable of producing successful athletes. According to the audience, women at that time were considered inferior, which prevented them from being fully supported or recognized within competitive sports. This resistance highlights what researchers call the structural gap between stereotypes about women and the qualities seen as essential for success in masculine roles. Ultimately, this leads to the expectation that women are inadequately prepared and unlikely to succeed in competitive sports (Heilman, 1983).

Participant 4 focused on the sponsor's metaphor comparing women coaching women to "*a lion training another lion*,"*(Interview with P4, May 11, 2026),* interpreting this statement as openly degrading toward female coaches. The respondent questioned why women were assumed to be incapable of leading athletes successfully, arguing that such perceptions stem from continuing gender bias and limited female representation in leadership roles. Likewise, **Participant 5** interpreted the sponsor's behavior as evidence that institutional actors were more concerned with maintaining traditional authority structures than genuinely supporting Trudy's athletic development. The respondent viewed the unequal treatment as a product of stereotypes and gender bias that limited opportunities for female coaches and athletes to grow professionally. These observations align closely with research by Eagly & Karau (2002), which posits that attitudes toward female leaders and aspiring leaders are less favorable compared to those of males. Consequently, as both participants highlighted, women face greater challenges not only in attaining these leadership positions but also succeeding within them.

Transcendence, Immanence, and the Collective Becoming of the Female Athlete

De Beauvoir defines transcendence as the human capacity to move beyond given conditions through action, creation, and the pursuit of self-defined meaning. In contrast, immanence refers to a state of confinement characterized by passivity, repetition, and adherence to socially imposed roles. Within her feminist existentialist framework, de Beauvoir argues that women have historically been restricted to immanence and denied equal access to transcendence (Beauvoir, 2011). When examined across all five scenes, the participants' experiences collectively illustrate the social construction of the female athletic subject. Their narratives demonstrate how women are repeatedly positioned as the "Other" against which the male athletic norm is established and maintained. This process manifests through multiple interconnected structures, including patriarchal restrictions, gender discrimination, media objectification, institutional discrimination, and the dismissal of women's knowledge and competence. At the same time, the data also reveals an opposing movement: the continuous effort of female athletes to assert themselves as autonomous subjects despite the forms of immanence imposed upon them.

This resistance emerges through several distinct patterns. For some participants, it appears as performative poof, in which female athletes are compelled to demonstrate exceptional competence to gain opportunities that male athletes are often granted automatically. This dynamic is clearly reflected in the experiences of **Participants 1 and 5**. Discussing the relative's story within her experience, participant 1 said: "*It turned out that after she proved she could become a champion, she was eventually permitted to continue. Her mother also helped prove that even though she wore clothes like that (swimwear), it was not meaningless because she still had achievements and accomplishments."(Interview with P1, April 23, 2026*). The

concern surrounding swimwear in Participant 1's account reflects how the female body becomes socially monitored and interpreted not as an athletic instrument, but as a moralized object subject to cultural judgment. In this situation, athletic achievement functions as a form of justification that allows women temporary access to transcendence.

Participant 5 mirrored this sentiment through her own personal lived experiences of having to fight for personal validation, stating, "*So I wanted to prove it. I had trained hard, and I knew I could do it. I was just trying to prove it to myself, so I looked for ways to keep practicing. It was not about my physical appearanæ or wearing inappropriate clothing, not at all. When we really want something, we usually want to prove it to ourselves, not only to other people."(Interview with P5, May 13, 2026).* Her insistence that swimming "*was not about physical appearance*" demonstrates an attempt to reject the objectifying gaze that reduces female athletes to bodily display rather than athletic capability. In de Beauvoir's terms, Participant 5 attempts to reclaim herself as a subject who acts and chooses, rather than as an object defined by others. Nevertheless, the repeated need for self-justification also demonstrates how transcendence for women remains precarious and conditional within patriarchal structures. Rather than being freely recognized as autonomous subjects, female athletes must continuously resist reduction into immanence through discipline, performance, and self-validation. Young (1980) argues that women in patriarchal societies experience what she terms **"**ambiguous transcendence**,"** a condition in which the female body exists simultaneously as an acting subject and a socially regulated object. As a result, women's physical agency, including their participation in sports, is never exercised entirely freely but remains shaped by socialization processes that position women as objects to be observed and evaluated rather than autonomous subjects capable of self-determined action.

In other cases, participants demonstrate forms of epistemic independence, particularly **Participant 4's** experience of developing training strategies without sufficient institutional guidance or support. As participant 4 recalled: "*Actually, it was disturbing, but for me personally, because I focused on myself and had my own goals, it did not affect me too much. If I thought about it too much, like wondering, 'Why was that person invited while I wasn't?', it would only become a burden on my mind and eventually affect my own performanæ. So instead, I would subtly ask my friend, then, after they explained the training, I would take the program or the knowledge they shared and use it for my own training." (Interview with P4, May 11, 2026).* Participant 4's decision to independently seek training knowledge after being excluded from opportunities demonstrates agency and adaptability, both of which may be interpreted as forms of transcendence. Instead of remaining passive within institutional marginalization, she actively constructs alternative pathways for self-development. De Beauvoir argues that women are often forced to internalize limitation as an individual problem rather than recognize it as structural oppression (Beauvoir, 2011). Drawing on de Beauvoir's philosophy, Bremner (2022) argues that women often experience what de Beauvoir describes as the moral unintelligibility of oppression, whereby the barriers that limit their opportunities and well-being are not recognized as manifestations of systemic inequality. Instead, these obstacles are frequently interpreted as evidence of women's personal shortcomings, inadequacies, or moral failings, obscuring the structural conditions that produce them.

Furthermore, resistance is also visible through protective mentorship, exemplified by **Participant 2's** efforts to equip female athletes with critical awareness in navigating objectifying media representations. Participant 2 explained their approach: *"So we only provide educational insight about what is acceptable and what is not, what is considered good and what is not. For example, if something is wrong, we should not be afraid to speak up against that unfairness or wrongdoing. That is my perspective on it. "(Interview with P2, May 05, 2026).* By educating younger athletes about objectification and encouraging them not to remain silent, Participant 2 moves beyond individual survival and contributes to the development of critical consciousness among female athletes. This reflects de Beauvoir's argument that liberation requires women to reject complicity with oppressive structures and actively challenge the social norms that sustain them (Beauvoir, 2011).

Within de Beauvoir's framework, these responses may all be understood as expressions of transcendence, namely, attempts to reject the limitations of the immanence socially assigned to women. Nevertheless, de Beauvoir also emphasizes an important distinction between individual transcendence and collective liberation. True resistance takes the form of collective institutional action, such as **Participant 3's** account of solidarity regarding gender-based calling orders and

unequal treatment during competitions. "*According to the existing rules, male swimming athletes were called first for competitions before female athletes, and often there were no seats left in the waiting area for the women. Eventually, the female athletes collectively spoke up to the committee, and after that, the issue no longer happened.*" *(Interview with P3, May 05, 2026*). Through collective action, the female athletes assert themselves not as isolated individuals seeking personal accommodation, but as a group demanding structural recognition and equal treatment. In de Beauvoir's framework, this movement toward solidarity is significant because genuine liberation cannot be achieved solely through individual transcendence within unequal systems, but requires transformation of the social conditions that continuously reproduce women's immanence.

This collective action confirms that the fact that individual women are able to succeed despite structural inequality does not indicate that gender inequality has disappeared (Manzi & Heilman, 2021). Rather, it demonstrates the extent to which female athletes must exert additional effort simply to secure recognition, legitimacy, and opportunity within institutions that continue to privilege masculine norms. This tendency to interpret isolated success stories as evidence of equality reflects what de Beauvoir conceptualizes as a form of bad faith. In this matter, De Beauvoir argues that there is an element of bad faith in claims that individual women's successes can be taken as evidence of broader gender equality. According to her, the achievements of a small number of privileged women neither compensate for nor justify the systemic subordination experienced collectively by women. Moreover, the rarity and limited nature of such successes further demonstrate the structural disadvantages within which women continue to operate (Beauvoir, 2011).

Accordingly, the research question concerning how participants relate the film's portrayal of gender-based struggles to their own lived experiences can be answered at a level deeper than simple identification or recognition. The participants' responses reveal a form of existential resonance, in which the film encourages reflection upon the broader social conditions shaping their experiences as female athletes. The film does not merely depict gender inequality as an external issue; it becomes a reflective medium through which participants recognize the structural forces that have influenced their personal trajectories, informed their strategies of resistance, and shaped their accommodation to norms they did not actively choose. In this sense, the film functions as a catalyst for critical consciousness, enabling participants to understand that the constraints they experience are not merely individual or accidental, but historically and structurally produced, and therefore capable of being challenged and transformed.

The findings demonstrate that audience interpretations are influenced by both the film's messages and viewers' personal experiences. However, the study is limited by its small number of participants and its focus on a single film, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could involve more diverse audiences, including male athletes and non-athletes, and examine different sports-related media texts to explore broader patterns of audience reception toward gender issues in sports.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to understanding how female athletes decode media representations of gender inequality in sports through Stuart Hall's reception theory. The findings demonstrate that audience interpretations are influenced by both the film's messages and viewers' personal experiences. This study concludes that female athletes interpret *Young Woman and the Sea* as a strong representation of gender inequality in sports, particularly through patriarchal restrictions, gender discrimination, media objectification, institutional discrimination, and stereotypes about women's competence and leadership. Ultimately, the film functions as a reflective medium that encourages critical awareness of the structural nature of gender inequality in sports. This study contributes to feminist media and sports studies by highlighting how audience reception can reveal the relationship between media representation, lived experience, and the ongoing struggle of female athletes for recognition and equality.

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