

Women in film 1986-2016: Has their representation improved or worsened?

By

Shauna Mc Crudden

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for MA in
Journalism & Media Communications (QQI)

Faculty of Journalism & Media Communications

Griffith College Dublin

August 2017

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA Journalism & Media Communications, is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other students.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

Abstract

Women in film have been consistently underrepresented over the years. The representation of women and minorities in media is incredibly important, as people need to see themselves reflected back in the stories they consume. Young girls should be able to see well-written, complicated characters that are able to stand on their own without a man or anyone else. It is possible for the lack of representation to negatively affect the attitude towards women in society.

This dissertation examines the 31 top-grossing films over a 30-year period, between 1986 and 2016. This is to analyse whether the representation of women in film has improved in the types of roles and increased in numbers, or worsened in the same respect. I conducted a quantitative and qualitative content analysis on the 31 films and looked at the characters and how they are shown in each of the films.

The analysis showed that there is a pattern of roles that women play which haven't really changed in 30 years. And it also showed that while the numbers of women have indeed increased over the years and the roles have slightly improved, there is still a lot of work to be done on the stereotypical and similar roles that women are often reduced to.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Chapter 1: Introduction	7
Chapter 2: Literature Review	
2.1 Overview	10
2.2 Objectives of Research.....	10
2.3 Representation in the Media	11
2.4 Women in Film	12
2.5 Research of Women in Film	14
2.6 The Male Gaze and the Bechdel Test	17
2.7 Theoretical Framework.....	19
2.8 How my research differs from previous research	20
Chapter 3: Methodology	
3.1 Overview	22
3.2 The research problem	22
3.3 Hypothesis of results.....	23
3.4 Quantitative content analysis	23
3.5 Qualitative content analysis	28
3.6 Selection of the films	30

3.7 Word Cloud	33
3.8 Identification of potential challenges and possible ethical implications	33
Chapter 4: Analysis	
4.1 Overview	34
4.2 Quantitative analysis findings	34
4.3 Qualitative analysis findings	43
4.4 Descriptive words	52
4.5 Conclusion	57
Chapter 5: Conclusion	58
Bibliography.....	66
Appendices	76

Acknowledgements

“Books! The best weapons in the world!” - The Doctor

You’re probably asking: Is this a quote from *Doctor Who* and who let this girl into a higher education institution? Well yes it is, and how dare you! It is amazingly relevant to my journey back into education. As is, “Always take a banana to a party. Bananas are good”. I can’t count the number of times that advice has saved me.

Going back to college was a big decision in my life so my first thank you must go to the Faculty of Journalism and Media Communications in Griffith College Dublin. You created an environment which put me at ease and made college actually enjoyable.

I want to say thank you to my wonderful supervisor, Brian Maye. Thank you for your help and patience and for pointing out all my grammar mistakes. Thank you for the birthday wishes and sorry for the annoying texts about arranging our first meeting, I’m just a very annoying person in general.

And, last but not least, a big thank you to my lovely family. Without your support, driving skills and endless supply of Coca-Cola, I would not have been able to do this!

Chapter 1: Introduction

“It was the dearth of female characters in the worlds of the stories — the fact that the fictitious villages and jungles and kingdoms and interplanetary civilizations were nearly bereft of female population — that hit me over the head” – Geena Davis, 2013.

The lack of female representation in media has become so accepted that when there is an all-female cast or even simply one more woman than a man in a film or TV show, it becomes the subject of debate and even anger.

Star Wars: Rogue One came out in 2016 and when it was revealed that it would have a female lead, only the second in the eight Star Wars films released over 40 years, there was a negative reaction from a number of male Star Wars fans complaining that there was another woman leading a film. “Another woman lead...come on Star Wars be original!” (Sampson, 2016) was one of the responses to the reveal. This is despite the fact that only 29% of protagonists and 37% of major characters in the top films in 2016 were women.

Another recent female-led controversy was 2016’s *Ghostbusters*. It became the most disliked movie trailer on YouTube (Sims, 2016) before anyone had even seen the film. The reveal that there would be four women in the rebooted version of the 1980’s comedy instead of four men caused an incredible amount of backlash and even death threats sent to the actresses. Actress Leslie Jones took time off Twitter due to the amount of abuse she received (Child, 2016). This was simply due to her involvement in a comedy film with an all-female cast.

A study conducted in 2017 detected how much screen time and speaking time men and women received in the top-grossing 100 films from the last three years. The study found that women appear for 36% of the total time characters are on screen and had less than 30% of speaking time. It also found that “Often when women are speaking, it’s actually the men that are shown on screen” (Reynolds, 2017).

This strangely accepted idea that women should have less of a presence than men is what drove me to complete research in this area. The ratio of male actors to female actors in films between 2007 and 2012 was 2.25: 1 (New York Film Academy, 2013). In my own study

I found that there was on average around 14 men to 5 women per film. This large gap between men and women led me to my research question:

Women in film 1986-2016: Has their representation improved or worsened?

Women's equality and representation is very close to my heart and is something I actively campaign for. The theories of Gerbner and Bandura helped me in creating the idea of what I needed to research as their theories of media influence indicated areas of concern for women's representation. An audience watches films with a small number of women always in the same types of roles and they are led to believe that women are like this. They are there to be the girlfriend, they are there to be sexy and they are there to be the support to the man. My own research tries to answer whether the representation of women in film has improved or worsened over 30 years but the question of why there is a lack of women in film also needs to be researched.

In the second chapter of this dissertation I have reviewed the literature and current research which has already been published. Some of this research is similar to my own, with studies of the numbers of women in media and the types of roles they have but, over a smaller timescale. This helped my own research in a significant way. Previous research lays out the foundation for future research and analysing this research creates critical ideas, theories and knowledge that can be used later on. My own research builds on the past, takes methodology ideas from previous researchers and creates a new study which goes farther back in time to see if there are any changes over a 30-year period as opposed to a handful of years.

The third chapter lays out my methodology and how I hope to achieve my research. I decided to conduct a quantitative and qualitative analysis on the 31 top-grossing films from every year between 1986 and 2016. This includes analysing the numbers of women and comparing them to men, analysing the types of roles women have and how they are represented on screen, and analysing patterns of roles.

The fourth chapter lays out the results of the research I conducted and answers the questions I set out for myself.

The fifth chapter lays out the conclusions I found in my analysis which answered the questions:

1. Have women's representation and roles in film changed over the time period of the study?
2. How well are women represented in film by the number of women shown?
3. Are the women overly sexualised throughout the films?
4. Is there a pattern of roles which recur throughout the different films?
5. How many minority women are represented in the films?
6. Is there a link between the way women are represented in film and people's attitudes towards women and women's roles in society?

The answers to these questions revealed that there is a severe lack of representation of women, of women of colour and LGBT and of varied roles for women to play. I found that there were around six types of roles that women play in films and most are written in a similar way. But, I also found that there has been a slight increase in numbers of women in film and numbers of female protagonists in the last few years. However, this could be improved upon as there were also roles which badly represented women in the last few years too.

The results and conclusion chapters try to answer the question of whether the representation of women in film has improved or worsened between 1986 and 2016 and it also sets out some recommendations which could be used to improve the portrayal of women in film.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: Overview

The focus of this literature review is to summarise the research which is particularly significant to show the representation of different categories of people by the media whether that be in film and television fiction or through the news media. There is a wide range of publications which delve into how different sectors in our society are represented by the media.

This chapter will discuss different areas of research. I will discuss the objectives of my own research and then examine the literature on which the research is based. The representation by the media, by film, television or news either print or onscreen, of women and other demographics such as people of colour and gay people in particular are discussed and I will analyse how all of this research helps my own chosen area of investigation: women in film. To conclude the literature review, I will document how my dissertation differs from previous studies.

2.2 Objectives of research

The objectives for the research are to examine the ways women are represented and stereotyped in film and to see if it has improved or gotten worse over a 30-year period. The criteria used to define the term “improved” are:

1. The number of women in film has increased
2. The number of female protagonists or major characters in film has increased
3. The women in the films have become less sexualised either by the male characters or by the overall representation in the film (lack of clothing, camera angles etc.)
4. The women in the films have become less dependent on the male characters either through the plot or through their own lives
5. The women in the films have a wider range of roles beyond that of common ‘traditional’ female roles

The criteria for ‘gotten worse/worsened’ are the opposite of the above.

One of the main ideas that attracted my attention to this research proposal was the somewhat unified way women are shown in contemporary Hollywood films. Despite making up half the population, women still make up a small percentage of roles in film in comparison to men. Only 22% of protagonists in 2015 were female and 34% were major characters (Lauzen, 2016). Lead female roles where the woman is the main protagonist are difficult to come by and when they are shown, they are usually alone in the representation of their gender with men making up most of the supporting cast around them with only 33% of all speaking characters in 2015 both major and minor being female (Lauzen, 2016).

Some of the ways women are shown are as passive and lacking in agency. A character with agency makes choices which affect the plot or other characters within the plot but a lot of women in film have their choices made for them or they're simply dragged around in the plot by other characters. Another common way women are shown is that they're overly sexualised. A woman in a film will be far more likely to take her clothes off in a random scene or wear revealing clothing throughout the film or be made into a sexual object and an object of desire by male characters. The male gaze is a film theory about how women are shown, first mentioned by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey (1975). The film world is shown through a masculine point of view and the world is viewed through a heterosexual man's eyes. Examples of this are introductions of a woman with the camera panning the length of her body to show how the male character is seeing her. This sexualises her and makes it clear that she is there to be the love interest for the male character.

The objective is to show how women are represented and how they can be stereotyped by being cast in certain roles and how those roles are shown. This is to try to show how this can affect the audience watching the film and watching these representations as they can influence how people see men and women and their roles in society. There are a few theorists such as Albert Bandura (2001) and George Gerbner (1976) with their theories of Social Cognitive Theory and Cultivation Theory, respectively, who describe the influence the media can have on an audience. These describe how people can base their vision of the world on what they see on screen and how people can imitate what they see on screen by modelling themselves on it.

2.3: Representation in the media

Every person deserves representation in the media; however, women have been lacking in this for years. Whether it is in journalism, television, film, or behind the scenes as writers, producers and directors, women have been at a disadvantage. Other minority individuals such as people of colour, those within the LGBT community or the disabled are represented even less. The representation question in film has been especially prevalent in recent years with it being talked about in mainstream media. The Academy Awards ceremony in 2015 was referred to as “the whitest Oscars since 1998” (Heusinkveld, 2015) for having mostly white films with white actors and directors nominated for awards. Unless you are a white, straight man, it is difficult finding media which represents you. Representation in media provides a reflection of who a person is. It provides a voice for those with less power and is a tool to influence people’s perceptions of others. Film in particular is a very powerful tool to influence how people see the world and can influence younger viewers in how they see the world and themselves. A little girl who sees only images of women in skimpy clothes may think the most important thing for a woman is how sexy she can be. If a little boy sees only images of overly masculine, violent men, then they may think that’s how they should act. It also works the opposite way across the gender divide. It provides a “normal” idea of how people look, behave and how they live their lives. “These images of women have contributed in no small way to a patriarchal hegemony in which the real class and gender relations of women in society have been replaced by myths” (O’Connor, 1984, p. 79). Film can reach a global audience unlike some other forms of media and therefore can have a more far-reaching influence. It’s the reason why companies want to advertise their products in movies; it’s the reason why a movie has sponsors. One product placement can lead to huge increases in sales because film has such an influence on people. It’s a visual world and the reality of people’s lives can occasionally be replaced by myths of reality.

2.4: Women in film

The study of women in film and how they are represented can be referred to as feminist film theory. This started from second wave feminism in the 1960s. A book such as *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* published in 1974 by feminist film critic Molly Haskell, was one of the first studies of women in film and how a woman’s

image is shown. She compares and contrasts how women are shown in film with how they are in real life. In the book Haskell says that women are puppets of a male-dominated motion-picture industry and are used to create images of female inferiority, serving as scapegoats for men's problems and as vessels for the projection of male fantasy. She says that women are made into stereotypes such as "the love goddesses, mothers, martyrs, spinsters, broads, virgins, vamps, prudes, adventuresses, she-devils, and sex kittens" (Haskell, 2016, p. 8), because according to her, men need to assert their independence and superiority over women. She analyses older films from the 1930s and 1940s and researches their images over the years and suggests that positive images of women in film had actually become far fewer at the time she wrote in the 1970s and women had become more and more demeaned in film as the decades had gone on. Haskell analyses the amount of screen time women received in different films and the common ways in which they are shown. Mainstream movies, today and at the time Haskell wrote her book, have been dominated by men making films for other men with action movies, superhero movies and even children's films offering very few leading roles for women. Haskell discusses the "woman's film", where a woman is at the centre of the film and the film is about the woman's emotional story, as a term of critical opprobrium as a film focusing on men's relationships is never referred to as a "man's film". But, films focusing on women's relationships are deemed to be so insignificant and different from what is deemed regular that they are given separate terms. She separates the themes for a "woman's film" into four categories:

1. Sacrifice: A woman must sacrifice herself for her children; her children for their own welfare; marriage for her lover; her lover for marriage or for his own welfare; her career for love; love for her career. These films can either end happily or tragically.
2. Affliction: Woman has an affliction, an illness or disease, which she keeps secret. She either dies in the arms of her doctor-turned-lover or is cured by her doctor-turned-lover.
3. Choice: The woman is pursued by two suitors. The man is usually cold and closed off and a lifelong bachelor and is cured by the woman.
4. Competition: The woman competes with the other woman whose husband, fiancé or lover she loves.

The treatment of women in film and their representation is her primary concern as it is in my own research and she notes how women's representation in film has deteriorated. What Haskell wants is not women taking over all roles in films or even having huge plotlines solely about themselves; she wants women in film to be shown to have an interior life which is more than the role and theme she is generally given.

2.5: Research of women in film

There have been several studies done trying to research the representation of women in film and of the effect of the media on people. These studies have used a content analysis and thematic analysis as the main way of researching the topic such as the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media that are dedicated to researching the representation of women in film and television, both in front of and behind the camera. Particular years and specific genres such as G-rated films between 1990 and 2005 have been analysed to research women in media by using quantitative and qualitative analyses. Examples of these particular years and genres from the research are: "A total of 21 of the 100 top films of 2014 featured a female lead or roughly equal co lead" (Smith et al, 2015) and "fewer than one out of three (28%) of the speaking characters (both real and animated) are female" (Smith 2008).

Great strides have been made in media portrayals of women over the years; however, women still tend to be stereotyped in gender-specific ways or simply appear far less frequently than their percentage of the population would suggest they should be represented. "When they are portrayed in film, women can be stereotyped into characters that are treated 'as adornment, enticement, or with inclination to romance as the main or exclusive personality trait or motivator'" (Smith, 2008). An analysis done on the top 100 films in 2015 revealed that a film is more likely to tell an audience what a man's occupation is and show him working than a woman, whose job is rarely shown or commented on. A woman's marital status will be known to an audience more than a man's and a woman is more likely to have goals related to her personal life than a man, whereas a man is more likely to have goals related to work or even crime (Lauzen, 2016a). This study focuses on 2015 films on the 2,500 characters appearing in the top 100 domestic (US) grossing films

and compares a number of the findings to previous research in past years going back to 2002. Her research also heavily focuses on the number of women behind the scenes. "In 2015, women comprised 19% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 domestic grossing films" (Lauzen, 2016b). She finds that the more women there are behind the scenes, the more women are represented on screen with at least a 10% increase in female protagonists and female-speaking characters.

Dr Stacy Smith's research study (2015) for the USC Annenberg's Media, Diversity & Social Change Initiative on 700 films from 2007 to 2014 (excluding 2011) examined films every year over a seven-year stretch of time trying to note differences between years. This study revealed 30.2% of the 30,835 speaking characters over the seven years were female, had a gender ratio of 2.3 to 1 and only 11% of the 700 films had a gender-balanced cast with women making up at least half of the speaking roles, and over the 7 years only 21% of women were over 40 years old. Her research showed that domestic roles are still gendered with female characters more likely to be shown as caregivers and more likely to be shown in a romantic relationship. "The rule seems to be that a woman may be strong and successful if and only if she also exemplifies traditional stereotypes of femininity, subservience, passivity, beauty, and an identity linked to one or more men" (Wood, 1994, p. 7).

The representation of women in film has been changing over the years as shown in Martha Lauzen's study (Lauzen, 2017) of the top 100 films of 2016. In her study she found that 2016 films had an improvement in female protagonists from the previous year and was a historical high for the industry, with 29% of protagonists and 37% of major characters in film being women. However, she found that there was a decrease from the previous year in all female speaking characters, down to 32%. She also accounts for gender stereotypes and her findings show that they remain prominent, with women still being most likely to have their marital status be known to the audience with men more likely to have their jobs be an important part of their motivation and goal within the film. Her studies have had a major influence on my own aspiring study with gender stereotypes still being in most films but her findings go back only a few years, with the oldest year of study being 2002. While her findings reveal a historical high, this "high" is still very low and no percentage is anywhere

near equal. However, this shows that things within film are changing over the years and it's important to know how much it has gotten better or worse.

“The narrative structure of traditional cinema establishes the male character as active and powerful: he is the agent around whom the dramatic action unfolds and the look gets organized. The female character is passive and powerless: she is the object of desire for the male character(s). In this respect, cinema has perfected a visual machinery suitable for male desire” (Smelik, 1999, p. 491). Smith et al (2015) used a content analysis to research films in 2014 and it revealed that women were far more likely to be shown as sexy and described as such and far more likely to be naked than a man. “Examining patterns of sexualization by age in 2014 revealed that female teens (13-20 year olds) were just as likely to be sexualized as young adult females (21-39 year olds). Middle-aged females (40-64 year olds) were less likely than these two groups to be sexualized.” This is seen in different forms of research done over the years as women in all forms of media are objectified and sexualised far more than men.

A content analysis done on James Bond films (Neuendorf, 2007) showed that 91% of all major female characters engaged in sexual activity of some type with the women averaging at under 30 and all slim and incredibly attractive. “Among major female characters...fully 88% engaged in some type of sexual activity with Bond (73% of major female characters experienced mild sexual contact with Bond, while 79% engaged in strong sexual contact). In total, 66% of all female characters engaged in no sexual activity with any character (Bond or other). However, 91% of major female characters engaged in some type of sexual activity” (Neuendorf, 2007, p. 753). Of course this is in Bond films which are widely known to have “Bond Girls” who are created specifically to be sexually objectified and to be love interests to the male main character but this shows a larger problem as these films are not on the fringe; they are large blockbuster movies which millions of people will see and could influence large sections of society. This content analysis researches the effects of the media images of women in a specific series of films where the female characters have been criticised as being stereotyped. It deals with the sexualisation of the female characters which is part of my research questions and the researchers used a quantitative analysis which has influenced me with my own research as the code words used to conduct the

analysis are important to note because they can be used in my own analysis. This publication researches the films to assess how the female characters have been portrayed over time which adds to my own research as it is also over a period of time.

2.6: The male gaze and the Bechdel Test

Laura Mulvey (1975) posited a theory of the “male gaze” with film being used by male creators (who are to this day the majority film makers) as a form of projection of their own male fantasies. Hers is a seminal study which is still referenced and highlighted today in similar analyses. Mulvey uses psychoanalysis in her study and focuses on the sexualisation of female characters. How the male characters in the film see the female character and how the audience is introduced to the female character join together to sexually objectify the female character. Women are shown as sex objects and created to be so, and yet they are also vilified for being interested in sex. “In essence, women on screen are expected to be ‘good girls’, despite the fact that, simultaneously, they are purposefully conceived of and positioned as sex objects” (Manatu, 2002, p. 61). As Haskell (2016) says, women tend to be placed in the film as a projection of a male fantasy which means the Madonna-Whore Complex (TVTropes, a), where men lust after sexually provocative women but do not consider them to be wife material as they are morally bankrupt (only “good girls” are wife material as they are pure), can be seen in full force in many films. Mulvey determined that the audience will identify with the main male character and follow his “gaze” for which the female character performs. “She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 809). As it was written in the mid-seventies, the book uses older films as examples such as Marilyn Monroe's first appearance in *The River of No Return*, Lauren Bacall in *To Have or Have Not*, and uses Marlene Dietrich's legs and Greta Garbo's face as examples. While she takes specific examples of films with no obvious unifying pattern in themes and many changes have occurred in society and films since, her study is still influential today as her theory can still be seen in studies of cinema.

The Bechdel Test, also known as the Bechdel Rule or the Bechdel-Wallace Test, first appeared in a comic called *Dykes To Watch Out For* created by American cartoonist, Alison

Bechdel (Ulaby, 2008a). In the comic, two women talk about going to see a film but one of the women says she has particular requirements about the movies she watches. The three rules she has for films are:

1. The film has to have at least two named women in it
2. The women must talk to each other
3. The topic of discussion must be something besides a man.

This test has brought about an interesting discussion about the representation of women in fiction. It not only discusses the lack of women within the fiction as the first rule dictates that there must be more than one woman, but it also discusses the stories and characterisation that those women have. The idea is that even if there are a number of women present within the story, if they are clichés who talk only about what the male characters are doing, then they are not worthwhile characters to have as representation. “The cartoon still resonates because it articulates something often missing in popular culture: not the number of women we see on screen, but the depths of their stories and the range of their concerns” (Ulaby, 2008b).

The point of the test is not to be the absolute rule for female representation in fiction. For instance, the movie *Gravity* fails this test but only because the only female character happens to be the only character, male or female, for most of the movie. The rule is supposed to be a base test for female representation to show how many films and television shows actually fail such a simple test just to have two women talk to each other about anything other than a man, which should be an incredibly simple test to pass. “If a female character calls her sister on the phone and has a totally tangential conversation about spaghetti, the movie passes the test” (McKinney, 2015). A study of the 100 highest grossing movies of 2015 showed that 45% failed the Bechdel Test (McKinney, 2015) and the same study done in 2016 showed an increase in films passing the test with 66% of films passing (McKinney, 2016). A study was conducted on films between 1970 and 2013, to research if the Bechdel Test had been passed. Around half of the films passed the test “In a larger sample of 1,794 movies released from 1970 to 2013, we found that only half had at least one scene in which women talked to each other about something other than a man”

(Hickey, 2014). When trying to figure out why this is, Hickey asked Hollywood insiders whose reasons include: the lack of female directors and producers; the assumption that audiences prefer male-focused stories; and the idea that women in films don't work internationally. "This assumption is up for debate; we found that films that pass the Bechdel Test tend to do better dollar for dollar than those that don't - even internationally" (Hickey, 2014).

2.7: Theoretical framework

There are many areas of research to be taken such as representation of minorities and especially minority women, women's progress and complications in real society, the idea of rape culture and how it can be generated by the media and the reasons behind the lack of representation of women in the media and its skewed depictions of them. Research has been conducted on how the media can affect a person's perception of reality. The purpose of a content analysis is to study what that content is and its effect on the audience. Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (2001) (Bussey et al, 1999) explains how the media can affect human attitude and behaviours. It encompasses observational learning, imitation and modelling. The audiences' perceived social reality is influenced by vicarious experience, and their images of reality increasingly depend on the media. Observing behaviour can influence people and their own behaviour so they imitate what they have seen by witnessing the positive and negative reinforcements they have seen in film or television.

Previous research using this theory has been conducted and has been done through the eyes of gender. Kimberly R. Johnson and Bjarne M. Holmes (2009) did a content analysis of romantic comedies and their effects on women in particular. Taking a sample of 40 romantic comedy films, Johnson and Holmes analysed how romantic comedy films affected women's views of relationships in their own lives. They found that those who view a high number of romantic comedies ultimately believe that their significant other should "intuitively understand their needs". They also recognised that the relationships within the films are incredibly idealistic but anything negative that occurred in the relationships would not have any long-term impact and there would not be consequences. Johnson and Holmes suggest that women are led to believe that men's behaviours and overly romantic inclinations within

the film such as risking their lives to tell a woman they love her are normal and should be reflected in a real man's actions. They found a direct correlation between the messages in romantic comedy films and how women view romantic relationships in reality due to Social Cognitive Theory. "Romantic Comedies do have the potential to affect the expectations, beliefs and overall relationship experiences for both women and female adolescents" (Green, 2013, p. 403).

There is also George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1976) which suggests that people are socialised into placing people into particular roles and acting out behaviours because of what they have seen on screen. Their vision of reality is shaped by the media. It also creates a reality for viewers which they believe accurately represent real life despite it being a false representation. People from different backgrounds can have a common view of the world due to exposure to similar media. This means that the representation of female characters can play a role in how people view gender and gender roles. These theories are incredibly relevant to today's world where home video, DVDs and online streaming services make film and television easier to watch than ever and allows for repeated viewing which in turn allows for repeated exposure.

There has been much research done on the effects of Cultivation Theory such as Dixon and Linz (2000). They conducted a content analysis on a sample of local television news programmes in Los Angeles and Orange counties to assess the representation of blacks, Latinos and whites as law breakers and law defenders. They found that minorities were portrayed far more negatively in the media and by applying the Cultivation Theory, the researchers found that white viewers came to link lawbreaking and violent behaviour with minorities through being exposed to this on television on a consistent basis. "If the perpetrators of crime on television news are largely people of color and guardians of law usually white, then viewers of news programs may come to the conclusion that people of color are evildoers who must be subdued" (Dixon et al, 2000, p. 132).

2.8: How my research differs from previous research

I will research films released between the years 1986 and 2016 making 31 films. The choice of studying films over a 30-year period is to study whether the representation of women has changed over a significant period of time.

The other research in the area contained in this literature review and beyond takes a genre of films such as Disney films, romantic films, Bond films etc., a series of films such as sequels or they take films over a short period of time such as two years, seven years, 10 years etc. No other research in this area discusses a wide variety of top grossing films over a lengthened period of time to note how the films themselves have changed, as I am doing over a 30-year time period. This will lead to a better understanding of how film representation of women has changed, if it has changed at all, over a long period of time.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1: Overview

In order to investigate how the stereotypical representation of women in film has changed over the years and how that could influence people's ideas of the roles of men and women in society, I will undertake a qualitative and a quantitative content analysis of the worldwide top grossing films from 1986 to 2016 which consists of 31 films. This is continuing the method of study used in most of the literature I have read and it seems to be an appropriate method for this research. Firstly, I will detail what a quantitative content analysis and a qualitative content analysis actually are, how they are conducted and discuss how they can be used in research. In doing so I will name the films used to conduct the research and lay out how the study itself is to be conducted.

3.2: The research problem

The research problem is the question and title of this study: Women in film 1986-2016: Has their representation improved or worsened? The content analysis will be based on this question.

The research questions are:

- Have women's representation and roles in film changed over the time period of the study?
- How well are women represented in film by the number of women shown?
- Are the women overly sexualised throughout the films?

Secondary questions:

- Is there a pattern of roles which recur throughout the different films?
- How many minority women are represented in the films?
- Is there a link between the way women are represented in film and people's attitudes towards women and women's roles in society?

As previously stated in the review of literature, the criteria used to define improved or worsened are:

1. The number of women in film has increased
2. The number of female protagonists or major characters in film has increased
3. The women in the films have become less sexualised either by the male characters or by the overall representation in film (lack of clothing, camera angles etc.)
4. The women in the films have become less dependent on the male characters either through the plot or through their own lives
5. The women in the films have a wider range of roles beyond that of common “traditional” female roles

The criteria for “gotten worse / worsened” are the opposite of the above.

3.3: Hypothesis of results

My hypothesis of what I believe will occur in the results is that women’s representation in films has increased over the years. It will be shown to have improved in the types of roles women play and the number of lead characters but, it will show that there is still a significant shortcoming in the representation of women.

3.4: Quantitative content analysis

A quantitative content analysis is the “research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). Berelson notes that a content analysis is valuable in tracking trends and changes over a long period of time. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a content analysis is the “analysis of the manifest and latent content of a body of communicated material (such as a book or film) through a classification, tabulation, and evaluation of its key symbols and themes in order to ascertain its meaning and probable effect”. A content analysis can be used to research trends and patterns in a text which can be anything from a newspaper article to a film to a piece of music. It generates a measurable analysis of the content by

counting the number of items in a text. It has been used in communications research to analyse media content in a deeper way in order to interpret it and understand the meaning of the content.

An early example of a content analysis can be traced back to the 17th century with theologians analysing church texts and a well-documented analysis took place in the 18th century in Sweden with scholars analysing symbols in the *Songs of Zion*, a collection of 90 hymns which had unknown authors (Krippendorff, 2012). By the 20th century, journalism had taken what came to be known as a quantitative content analysis and made it part of its research due to newspapers becoming mass produced. This approach to newspaper analysis broadened out to include radio, television and film.

According to Hansen (1998), the steps for a content analysis involve:

1. The definition of the research problem

The research problem is finding out if the representation of women has changed or remained the same over a 30-year period in film. Women being underrepresented in the media has been the subject of great debate over the years whether it be in television, news broadcasting, and film or beyond. I have chosen film to investigate how women are shown in the media and if it has improved or worsened.

2. The selection of media and sample

The media I have specifically chosen for the study is film. The question of female representation in the media can be researched in various types of media such as television, newspapers, books etc. but I have chosen film to research as film has a global reach, which I feel means the representation of women in film is more important than in a medium with a smaller reach.

The nature of the research problem means I have to choose films over a section of time and I have selected the worldwide top-grossing films from 1986 to 2016 as the media, and the titles selected are listed below in Table 1. Choosing top-grossing films made the selection of the films an obvious choice as they were listed out by different websites. This sampling has

to have a “reasonably representative” (Hansen, 1998) sample which means a sample of the chosen media which isn’t skewed by the researcher’s own bias looking to prove the point they are setting out to research. I feel I have a reasonably representative sample as I have only chosen the films on their box-office results and not on my own personal bias in order to prove a point.

3. Defining analytical categories

The identifier categories used for the films are:

- Year of release – the year is important to note but the month and day is less important
- Runtime of film – the length of the film
- Genre – The genre of the film is important to note as different genres can have very different representations of women. A blockbuster aimed towards men can have very different representations of women than an animated film aimed towards young girls.

In order to identify a female character in the films, every female character will only be counted as a character if they are named and if they speak (in this instance it doesn’t matter what they speak about). If a female character is only referenced by another character as their wife / sister / mother etc., but is not shown or if she is shown but does not speak, then she is not classified as a character. If a woman appears in the background of a scene or has a few lines but is not named, then she is not classified as a character. If a female character is a baby / toddler / child not old enough to speak, then she is not classified as a character. This identification will also be used for male characters.

4. Constructing a coding schedule

“Coding is the term content analysts use when this process is carried out according to observer-independent rules” (Krippendorff, 2012, p. 127). With the coding section of the content analysis, I took inspiration from the content analysis done on James Bond films (Neuendorf, 2007) and from Lauzen’s study for the Center for the Study of Women in

Television and Film (2016a, 2016b, 2017). Their coding criteria greatly influenced my own as I took the elements of their work I felt added value to my own research, and it helped to conduct the analysis.

Each female character in every film was assessed in the same way. I noted the following in my analysis:

- The number of male and female major and minor characters in the film was counted. A major character is one who is named, is part of the main plot and is featured in around half of the film. A major character can be the protagonist and their supporting players. Minor characters are any and all characters shown on screen, named and speak words. The minor character can be a character that appears for less than one minute of screen time, but as long as they have the other criteria of having a name and speaking, they are classified as a character.
- Protagonist – I will make a note if a film features a male or female character as the protagonist. The protagonist is the leading character, the hero and the one whom the plot revolves around. If there are two protagonists of equal importance in the film, both will be included.
- Age – Both male and female characters will have their age, or general age, noted down as the difference in ages between men and women in film is of interest.
- Race – the race of the female characters will be noted as non-white women are seen to be even less represented than white women.
- Job – The work the major female character is involved in will be noted. If the female character is a homemaker, this will be classified as her job.
- Relationship status – If the major female character is married, has a boyfriend / girlfriend, or is single will be noted. The amount of times their relationship status is brought up will be also be written down.
- Mother – If the major female character has children or not will be noted down. If their motherhood is a major part of their identity is also of interest.

- Sexuality – The sexuality of the major female character will be noted as LGBT women are represented less than straight women.
- Sexual activity - If the major female character engages in mild or heavy sexual activity. Mild activity can be kissing or sexual flirtation.

5. Piloting the coding schedule and checking reliability

According to many experts on how to conduct a content analysis, a pilot study should be done before the full analysis to check if everything is in order and whether there should be more added to the study. Preferably, a second person, objective to the study, should do the analysis and check back with the main researcher. I obtained the services of a second analyst, a student in a separate college not involved in the media, who along with myself, analysed the first two films, *Top Gun* and *Fatal Attraction* between the 3rd and 4th June. After reflecting on the success and failures of this study, it was decided that two extra assessments should be used for the study to answer more questions. They are:

- Hero or villain – Whether the major female character was a good guy or a bad guy.
- Violence – If the major female character engaged in violence or was treated with violence.

These help with getting a more accurate reading for the research I'm conducting. Assessing violence against a woman in a film is important as this is something which can influence an audience, especially if it is excessive violence. The female character being a hero or a villain is also interesting to note, especially if the female character is portrayed as overly sexual in the rest of the film.

6. Data-preparation and analysis

The results were entered into a spread sheet to organise the numbers by hand, and graphs were created of the results. The results and conclusions of this are in the analysis and findings, and conclusions section.

3.5: Qualitative content analysis

I also conducted a qualitative content analysis alongside the quantitative content analysis to help conduct the study.

A qualitative content analysis focuses on symbolic elements of the film such as the aspects of the performances by the actors, the use of colour and the use of locations. It focuses on the technical elements such as the use of the camera and how it lingers on particular things, the use of sound effects and how shots are framed. It focuses on non-verbal communication such as clothes and appearance, gestures and body movements.

A semiotic analysis is the analysis of signs and symbols of images. A film is a series of images together and they have many messages in those images. This means a visual semiotic analysis can be used to research the messages. Signs in the film can include language, clothes, props and other elements of a film. An analysis asks what we associate with certain images shown and asks “the question of representation (what do images represent and how?) and the question of the ‘hidden meanings’ of images (what ideas and values do the people, places and things represented in images stand for?)” (Leeuwen et al, 2001, p. 92). By analysing the messages in images, we can understand the ideologies being expressed in the film which pass through subconsciously to the viewers.

There are layers to a visual semiotic analysis; the first layer is the denotation of the text which answers the who or what is being depicted in the image. It is the reality of the image, if there is a girl in an image, the denotative meaning is that there is a girl in the image. If there are immigrant women in the image, the denotative meaning is that they are immigrant women because we recognise what they are wearing or what they might look like. Recognition can sometimes be up to the person looking at the image and may not be recognised by someone else. She can be categorised into a particular social type or a religion by wearing a headscarf or a crucifix. The second layer of analysis is the connotative layer which is the ideas and concepts that the person in the image represents. “It can come about either through the cultural associations which cling to the represented people, places and things, or through specific connotators, specific aspects of the way in which they are represented, for example specific photographic techniques” (Leeuwen et al, 2001). How they are posed, how they are photographed and filmed with lighting and close-up shots

versus wide angles etc., signify many things about what the message of the image is supposed to be.

The narrative is also a major part of analysing film. The dialogue, the sounds, images, and actions of the characters are a part of the narrative. Narrative is “able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances” (McQuillan, 2000, p. 109).

This all creates a textual analysis. “When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). Interpretations of a text are considered likely and what the creators either meant to express or unconsciously meant to express. However, some interpretations of a text can be subjective depending on the background of the researcher and their research objective.

According to Rose (2007), in order to interpret an image, there are three modalities which contribute to the critical understanding of images:

- 1) Take images seriously – To look very carefully at the images and everything involved in those images.
- 2) Think about the social conditions and effects of visual objects – A critical understanding of images needs to address the cultural and social significance of the objects within the images.
- 3) Consider your own way of looking at images – Ways of looking at images are culturally, socially and historically specific and there is a need to reflect on how an individual looks at an image.

Areas of Analysis

I will take the major female character in all films and conduct a qualitative analysis on her. No minor character will be included in the study. If the protagonist is female, she will be the chosen character for the study. If there are no main female characters in a film, the one with the most screen time and prominence to the story will be chosen, and if there are multiple

major female characters, the most prominent character with the most screen time will again be chosen for the study.

I specifically focused on the following aspects of film but the overall character will be analysed:

- Focus – Is the female character in the film for the plot, for their own character advancement, as a love interest or are they there to forward someone else’s story such as a male character’s story? What is the focus of her story?
- Camera angles – How is the female character filmed and what angles are used to show her? Does the camera introduce her by slowly going up her body to show how sexy she is?
- Physical appearance and gestures – If the female character is particularly attractive and what her body language says.
- Clothing – How the female character is dressed shows what type of character she’s supposed to be – does she wear provocative clothing or is she covered up etc.?
- Framing – How the female character is framed within the story. Whether she acts as a damsel, a victim, and whether romance and/or motherhood/marriage/family plays a significant role in her story.
- Active or passive – Do the female characters make decisions which affect the plot?
- Music – What kind of music is played when she appears?

This would test the conclusions which emerged from the various studies in the literature and the quantitative analysis as to how women are represented.

3.6: Selection of the films

Worldwide top-grossing films indicate audience preference. If they made a lot of money, it's easy to assume that they were particularly popular with audiences and you can assume that

a wide range of people have seen the film and therefore the amount of influence the films have is higher than any other. I also did not want to limit the study to one specific genre, so top-grossing was chosen to make the selection based on audience preference instead of picking and choosing a genre as stereotypes can be more prevalent in different genres, which means animated films will be included in the selection process along with live-action films.

Movies are determined by their worldwide gross as #1 at the box office seen on *Box Office Mojo*, *Variety*, *Deadline* and *Box Office*. *Box Office Mojo* was my main point of reference and despite only being created in 1999, the box-office records on the website date back to 1989. *Box Office*, a website recording the box-office results of films from 1937, helped to indicate the films from 1986 to 1988. *Variety* and *Deadline* were used as a secondary reference to confirm the correct films with the highest box office were used from the correct years.

The sampled films were obtained either through online sources such as Netflix and Amazon Prime or were personally owned films on DVD or Blu-ray.

The films included in the study are listed below in chronological order with the year of release beside them:

Table 1:

1. <i>Top Gun</i> (1986)
2. <i>Fatal Attraction</i> (1987)
3. <i>Rain Man</i> (1988)
4. <i>Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade</i> (1989)
5. <i>Ghost</i> (1990)
6. <i>Terminator 2: Judgement Day</i> (1991)
7. <i>Aladdin</i> (1992)
8. <i>Jurassic Park</i> (1993)
9. <i>The Lion King</i> (1994)
10. <i>Toy Story</i> (1995)
11. <i>Independence Day</i> (1996)

12. <i>Titanic</i> (1997)
13. <i>Armageddon</i> (1998)
14. <i>Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace</i> (1999)
15. <i>Mission Impossible II</i> (2000)
16. <i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone</i> (written on the website as <i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone</i>) (2001)
17. <i>The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers</i> (2002)
18. <i>The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</i> (2003)
19. <i>Shrek 2</i> (2004)
20. <i>Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire</i> (2005)
21. <i>Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest</i> (2006)
22. <i>Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End</i> (2007)
23. <i>The Dark Knight</i> (2008)
24. <i>Avatar</i> (2009)
25. <i>Toy Story 3</i> (2010)
26. <i>Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2</i> (2011)
27. <i>Marvel’s The Avengers</i> (2012)
28. <i>Frozen</i> (2013)
29. <i>Transformers: Age of Extinction</i> (2014)
30. <i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i> (2015)
31. <i>Captain America: Civil War</i> (2016)

Films excluded

The idea of excluding animated films from the study was thought of, as live-action films were seen to be more of an indicator of female representation but as the study progressed, I decided not to exclude any films. I don’t wish to specify the genre of film which is why top-grossing was chosen and animation is an influential genre especially for children and therefore, the number of female characters in those films and what those female characters

are doing would be some of the first introductions to film and women in film that children have. In that way, they couldn't be excluded.

3.7: Word Cloud

To analyse the ways in which women are represented in the films, I noted down every descriptive word about the major female characters from a film every five years: 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016. I then created a word cloud from these descriptive words. The descriptions can be from another character, from a narration, or from the character describing herself. I recorded the words during my content analysis and inputted them into wordclouds.com, a website where you can create your own word cloud. This showed the most commonly used descriptive words about those characters to represent the entire selection.

3.8: Identification of potential challenges and possible ethical implications

A potential challenge would be that doing the content analysis is quite time-consuming, which is difficult to do in a busy life with other work commitments. It requires focus and dedication.

Another challenge is the sample size. It does not include all films from every year and therefore cannot completely show if representations and stereotypes have totally changed or stayed the same as there are thousands more films released during the time period. The films are also not the only media an audience is exposed to. It is difficult to apply the link between how an audience views gender roles from only this sample as an individual is exposed to multiple types of media influence on any given day.

There are no possible ethical implications in this study as I am dealing with films and fictional characters.

Chapter 4: Analysis

4.1: Overview

I will start off by discussing the quantitative findings of the films and then the qualitative findings of the films to answer the research questions I set myself.

The findings of the quantitative analyses are important to find the numbers of characters in each film and other quantitative results but the qualitative analyses adds the findings of the overall character of the women in these films. Looking at the numbers of female characters can lead to many conclusions based solely on those results but occasionally, the quality of the female character can add a different dimension.

I will also add the word cloud descriptions of the selected female characters after their discussion.

4.2: Quantitative analysis findings

In order to be counted, a male or female character has to be named, has to be shown on screen and has to speak at least one word of dialogue.

By analysing the 31 films, 580 speaking named characters were counted overall with 143 of those characters being female. This means women made up 24.66% of all speaking named characters in the 31 top-grossing films over a 30-year period. This is a similar percentage as percentages found in other areas such as TV news programmes. For example, there was a similar representation in Kira Cochrane's analysis of the BBC *Today* programme (2011). She found that women's representations never usually reached much more than a third and according to her, if it were any higher, then the female presence was considered to be too dominant. Over the 31 films, there were actually less than a third of women in speaking roles.

Protagonists

In this study, a protagonist is defined as the character from whose perspective the story is told. The protagonist is the leading character, the hero and the character the plot revolves

around. *Frozen*, *Titanic* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* were the only films which had verifiable female protagonists, making up approximately 9.68% of films. Male protagonists make up 90.32% of all protagonists in the 31 films over 30 years. Interestingly, these female protagonists are all of similar ages: 18 and 20/21 and they are all attractive, heroic white women. There is a 16-year gap between the first female protagonist in 1997 and the second in 2013.

Genres

The numbers of women in film changed in different genres. Over the 31 films, there were eight different genres with the fantasy and science fiction genres having the highest amount of top-grossing films.

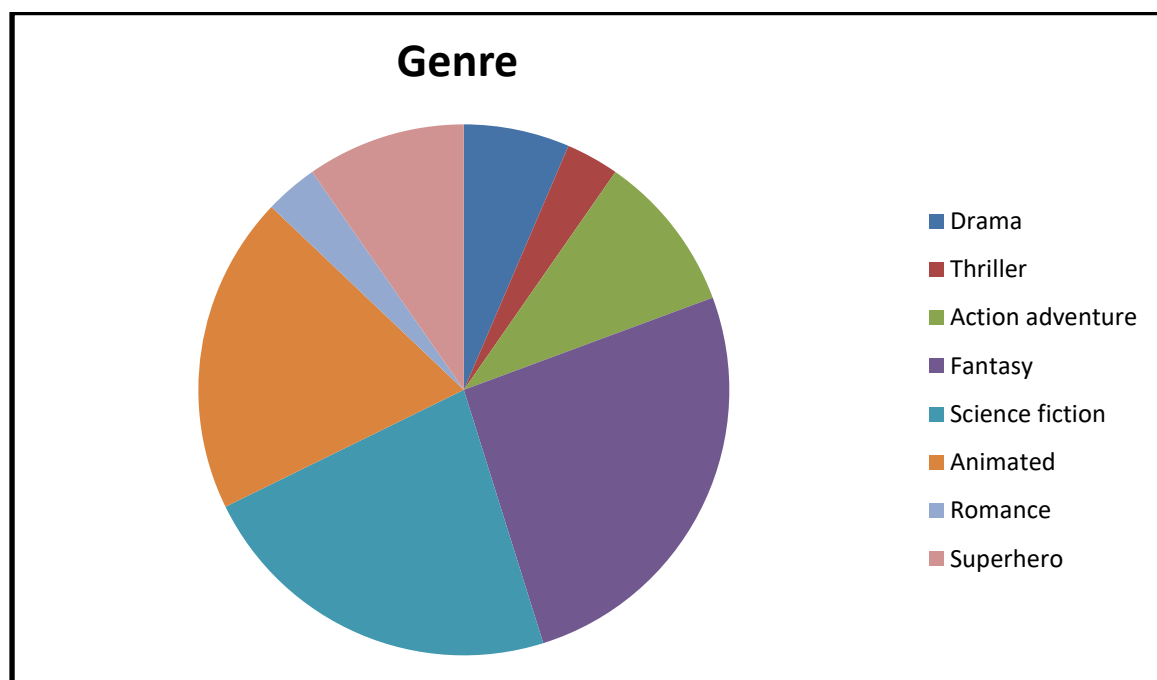


Chart 1: Types of genre

The fantasy and science fiction genres, along with the animated genre contributed the most female characters to the overall study.

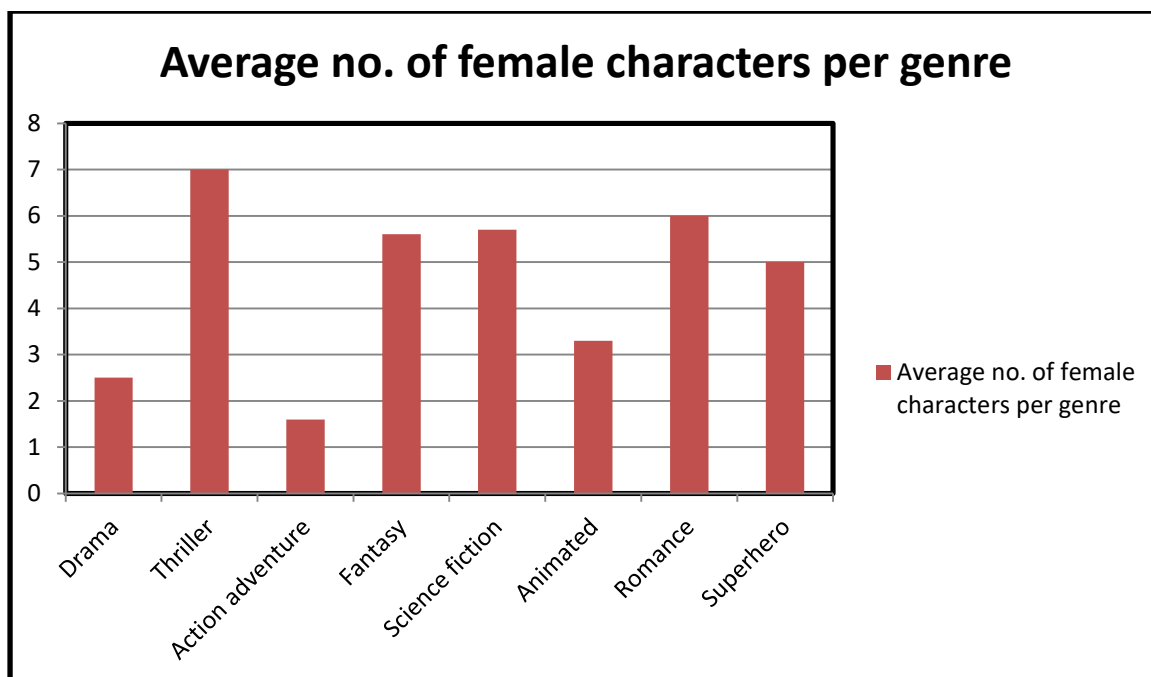


Chart 2: Average number of female characters per genre

The thriller genre had a large percentage of female characters at 54%. Fantasy had the second largest percentage of women in film with *Ghost* at 50%, however, another fantasy film, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, had the lowest percentage of female characters at 8%. The action adventure genre with *Mission Impossible II*, had the second lowest percentage of female characters at 11%. These percentages are as a comparison to the overall number of characters in the film. The lowest actual number of female characters were in *Aladdin* and *Mission Impossible II* with one female character each, meaning the animated and action adventure genre both had the lowest number of female characters.

Directors

There is only one female director in the study, Jennifer Lee, who directed *Frozen*. However, she co-directed the film with a male director, Chris Buck. *Frozen* is known for having one of the only female protagonists in the films who is also the heroine of the film and the story is about the connection between two women, which could be due to having a female director.

Bechdel Test

There are 16 films which do not pass the Bechdel Test where two named, female characters speak to each other about something other than a man meaning 51.61%. 15 films do pass

the test although some passes are quite dubious as some conversations are a three-line greeting, but technically they pass the test set out.

Numbers per film

The question is whether the numbers of women in film actually improved as the years went by or got worse. Improved in this study means an increase in the numbers of female characters and worse means a reduction of female characters. The only way to see if the numbers of female characters have improved or worsened is by comparing them to the numbers of male characters in the films alongside them.

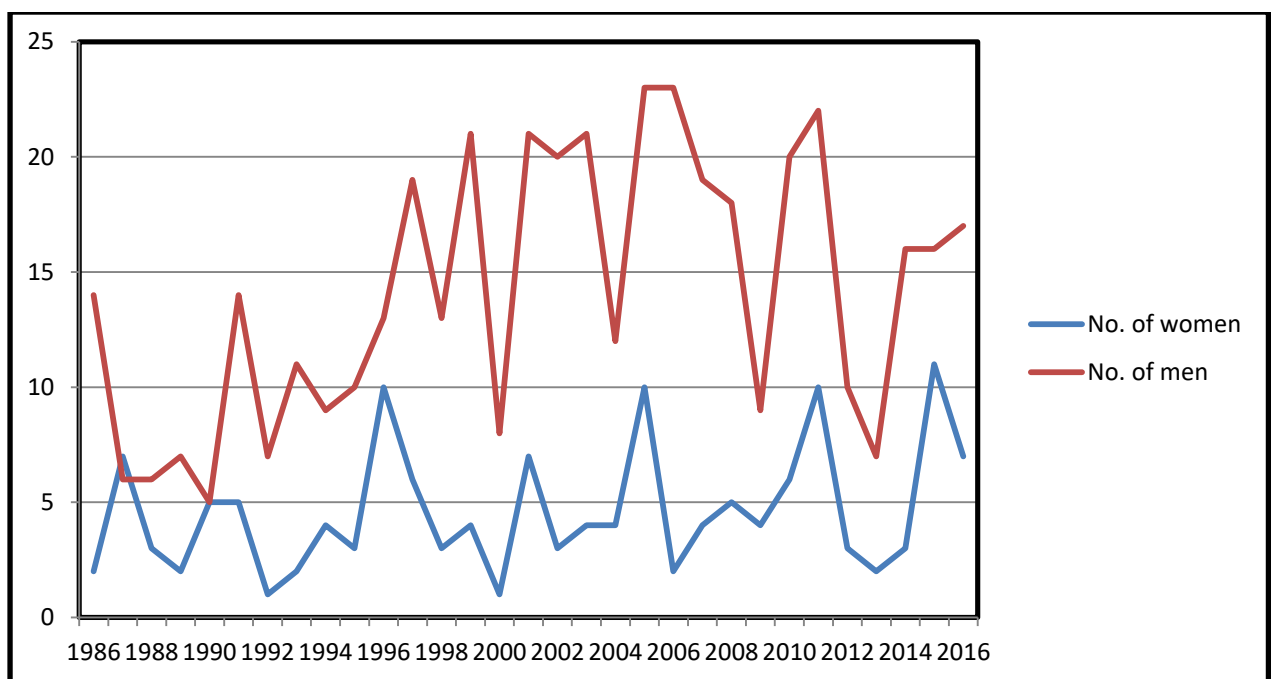


Chart 3: Number of female characters compared to male characters

According to this analysis, the numbers of female characters to male characters actually worsened as the years went by. The numbers of female characters remain consistently lower than male characters throughout the years. *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* in 2006 had the widest gap between male and female characters with a 21 character gap with the next in line being 1999's *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* which has a 17 character gap between male and female characters. Both of these films take place in the mid-point of the analysis. Between 1999 and 2010, there were very large gaps between male and female characters. The only time the difference between male and female

characters is skewed towards female characters is in 1987's *Fatal Attraction* with seven female characters to six male characters. The only time there was an equal amount of both male and female characters in a film, was in 1990's *Ghost* with five characters each. However, the highest number of female characters coded in the entire analysis, is in 2015 with 11 speaking, named female characters counted in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. This means the numbers of female characters technically did improve in more recent years but, not compared to the number of male characters in the same film.

On average, there are 4.6 female characters per film and an average of 13.7 male characters per film.

This includes all the named, speaking characters in every film and even includes some characters that were on screen for less than five minutes and had one line of dialogue. There is a large difference in the numbers of minor characters compared to major characters.

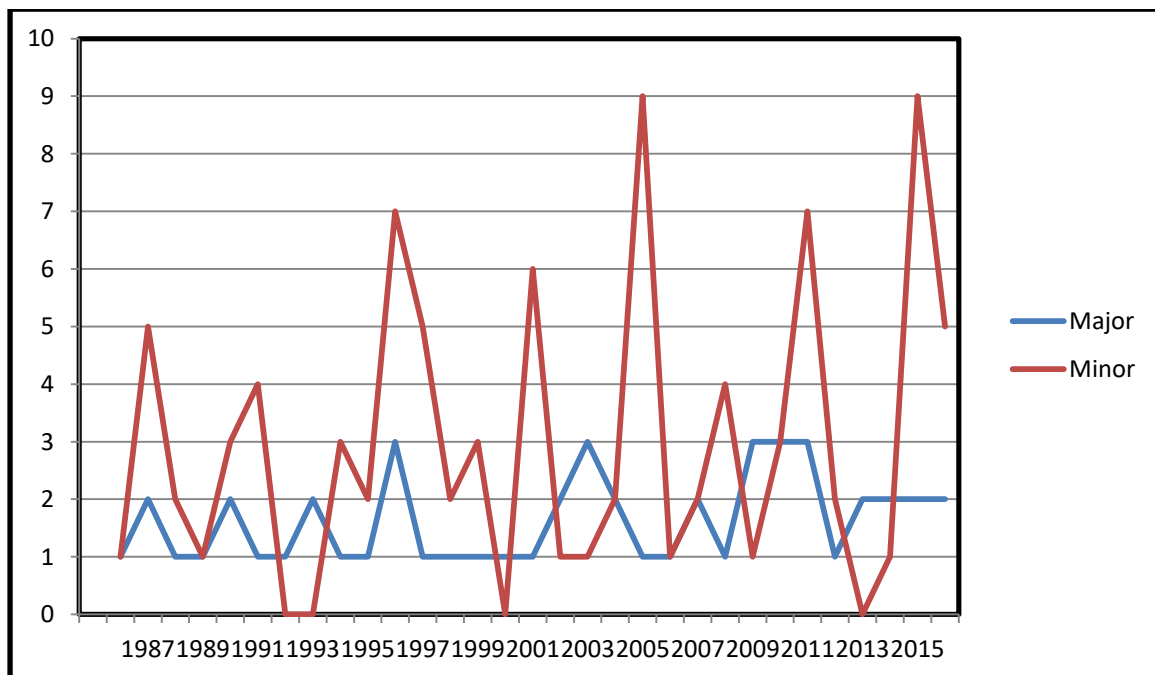


Chart 4: Major female characters compared to minor female characters

The chart above shows the difference in the numbers of minor female characters compared to major female characters. Minor characters in this study are defined as: characters that speak and are named but are not overly important to the story. Examples of minor

characters include Parvati and Padma Patil in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, whose roles are to be dates for the major characters, Harry and Ron, for one dance and then are promptly forgotten for the rest of the film and have no impact on the story.

On average, there are far more minor female characters in film than major female characters. There are two films coded which have only one female character: *Aladdin* and *Mission Impossible II*. Interestingly, these are the only two films where a non-white female character is the major female character of the film.

Overall, there were 50 major female characters coded during the analysis and 93 minor female characters. Major female characters made up 34.97% of all female characters coded and just 8.62% of all characters. Between 2009 and 2011, there were three major female characters per film with a slight reduction in the years after to an average of two per film.

Race

One of the research questions set for this study is to see how many minority women are represented in the films. The diversity issue in film has always been debated in Hollywood as there is a severe lack of different races and sexualities, even though this is of great importance to representing the overall audience.

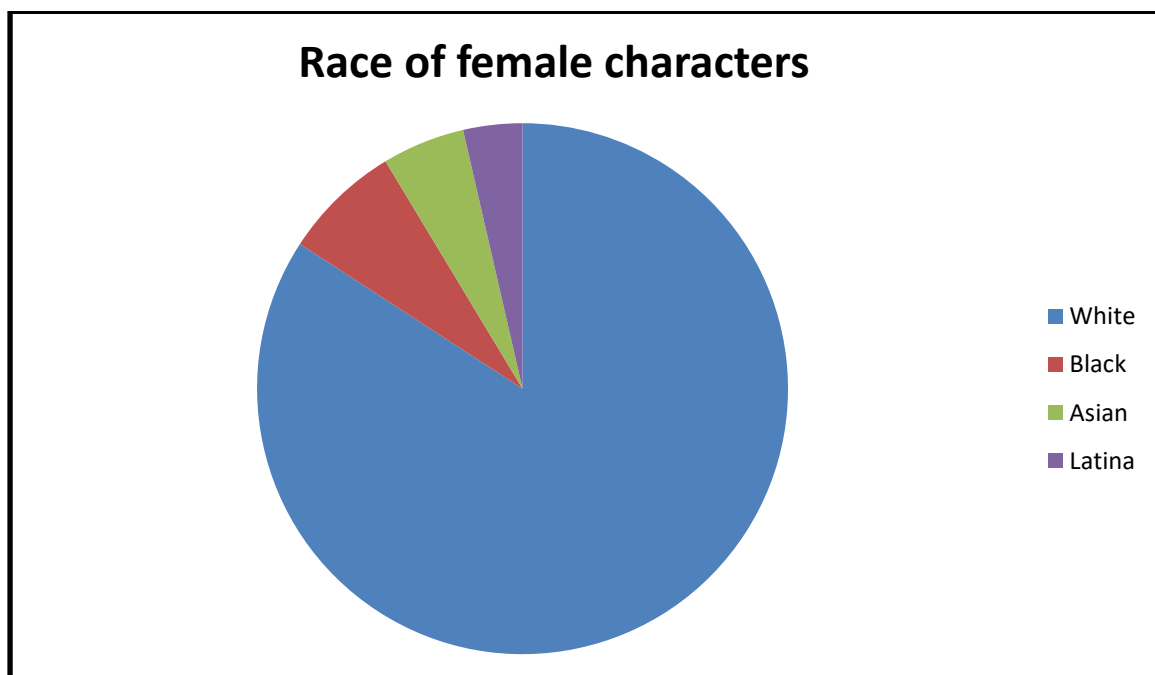


Chart 5: Races of major female characters

(The above chart does not count *The Lion King* characters as they are all animals).

In this study, it was found that white characters dominated the screen. 139 female characters were counted in this study with only 22 of those making up non-white characters. This leaves 117 female characters coded as white. This means 15.83% of all female characters over the 30 years, were non-white. Non-white here means black, Asian or Latina characters. Middle-eastern characters from *Aladdin* are coded as Asian in this study.

84.17% of the 139 female characters involved in this study were coded as white. 7.19% of the female characters were coded as black. 5.04% were coded as Asian. And, 3.60% were coded as Latina.

There are four major black female characters, one major Asian female character and no major Latina female characters. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* has the most non-white female characters with three minor Asian female characters and one minor black female character. The film has six white female characters.

There are 17 films which have zero non-white female characters at all which is over half the films studied.

The numbers of non-white female characters have arguably increased over the years of the study with slightly more minor characters, however, there are still two films in the last five years which had zero non-white female characters. The most recent film which had a non-white major female character was 2007's *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* creating a nine-year gap between that and the last film recorded in 2016.

Sexuality and relationships

In the 31 films between 1986 and 2016, there are no LGBT female characters coded. Every single one of the 143 female characters were classed as straight and five had an unknown sexuality which was not brought up.

For these female characters, instances of sexual activity were high.

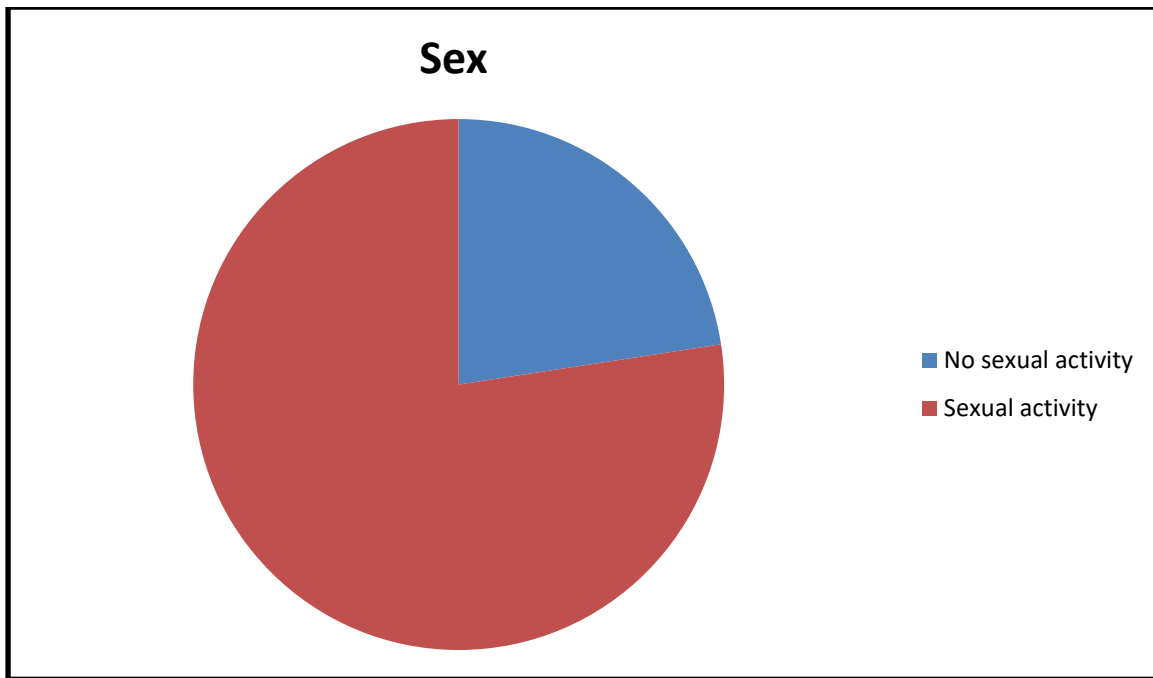


Chart 6: Amount of sexual activity in all films

24 out of the 31 films had mild and / or heavy instances of sexual activity. 24 of the major female characters in those 24 films had instances of mild sexual activity, meaning flirting or kissing, and nine of those 24 also had instances of heavy sexual activity, meaning sexual intercourse or heavy sexual content. This means that 77.42% of all the major female characters had some form of sexual activity recorded, and 29.03% of the major female characters had scenes where they were involved in heavy sexual activity. This suggests that female characters continue to be highly sexualised throughout the films.

Only six films had no recorded instances where the major female character was involved in sexual activity. These films are: *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Captain America: Civil War*.

The major female character's relationship status was also recorded. 25 of the major female characters had their romantic relationship as a prominent part of their story. This is 80.65% of all the major female characters.

Strikingly, only six of the 31 major female characters had children in their films making 19.35% of the female characters. This is even less when the context is taken into

consideration. In *Fatal Attraction*, Alex says she is pregnant and refers to her baby several times and is therefore classed as having a child. In *The Lion King*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, the female characters have their children at the end or in the future, signifying a happy ending. They do not have children during the course of the story. *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* is the only film in which the major female character has a child which is prominent in her story where she is referred to as a mother on more than one occasion.

Age

The majority of the major female characters were coded as in their twenties with teenage girls having the second most prominence. Only 28 of the films could be counted for age as the others, such as *Toy Story*, has toys as major characters and do not have ages. 21.43% of the major female characters were coded as teenagers. 57.14% of the major characters were in their 20s. 14.29% were in their 30s. 3.57% were coded as pre-teens under 13 years old and the same percentage was in their 40s. The latter two had just one character each. On average, the major female characters were approximately 20 to 25 years old.

For the male ages, the major male character's age was coded. 3.57% of the male characters was a pre-teen and the same percentage was in their 60s. This meant there was one character each. 14.29% were teenagers. 25% were in their 20s and 30s and 28.57% were in their 40s. On average, the major male characters were approximately 35 to 45 years old.

This means that on average, there is at least a 10 to 20-year age gap between the male and female characters with male characters continuing to be older which has not changed over the course of the study.

Hero / villain and violence

93.55% of all the major female characters were coded as heroes. 6.45% were coded as villains, both of whom started out pretending to be heroes.

On the violence scale, 54.84% of all the major female characters faced violence in their films. This goes from someone shooting at the character to someone slapping her. Four of

the major female characters ended up dead in their films meaning 12.90% of the major female characters faced death.

4.3: Qualitative analysis findings

The qualitative analysis was used to find the types of characters and types of roles that the major female characters had in the 31 films analysed. Whether they were stereotypical, whether they were progressive and well-rounded and whether the roles for female characters have improved over the years.

While researching the films, I classed the female characters into six types of roles over the time period of the study which all the major female characters fit into:

- 1) The love interest – her story was predominately about being the love interest to a man.
- 2) The damsel in distress – she is in the film to be rescued by the male characters.
- 3) The sexy villain – she’s the bad guy of the film who uses her sexuality to her own advantage.
- 4) The heroine – she saves the day or has a large part of the conclusion to the story.
- 5) The mother – her role is solely about being a mother to her children.
- 6) The side character – she doesn’t have much of a role and contributes nothing to the story.

The love interest

There are 10 female characters that fit into the role of love interest recorded in this study. They are Charlie Blackwood from *Top Gun* (1986), Susanna from *Rain Man* (1988), Molly Jensen from *Ghost* (1990), Princess Jasmine from *Aladdin* (1992), Nala from *The Lion King* (1994), Bo Peep from *Toy Story* (1995), Grace Stamper from *Armageddon* (1998), Nyah Nordoff-Hall from *Mission Impossible II* (2000), Princess Fiona from *Shrek 2* (2004) and Rachel Dawes from *The Dark Knight* (2008). These are scattered throughout the study years. The most passive of the characters were in the 1980s and early 1990s, with the female

character getting slightly more characterisation and focus from 2000 onwards. In this way, these roles have improved and the fact that the last love interest role was recorded in 2008 shows female characters have moved away from this role at least for a few years.

Most of these roles are written in quite a similar way creating a pattern. The female character is in the film for the sole purpose of being the love of the main, male character. They have no other role, barely think of anything else and it seems like their whole world is based around their boyfriend / husband. The majority have romantic songs and music playing over their scenes with the men, clearly showing what their roles are intended to be. The love interest has no plot outside of their respective male loves and end up being very passive throughout the film.

Charlie from *Top Gun* is smart and has a job in a male-dominated profession but, she has no plot outside of Maverick, the male protagonist. Every single conversation she has is about him or to him and even when she talks about her own promotion, it is framed around how it would affect him. This is similar to *Rain Man's* Susanna, who is Charlie's girlfriend. She is considered to be such an unimportant character outside of her relationship with Charlie, that she is not even given a last name. Grace from *Armageddon* doesn't have much of a character outside of her boyfriend and her father, and she exists to be a part of their ongoing feud. She is there to be the one to stay behind while her boyfriend and father risk their lives to save the world. *Mission Impossible II's* Nyah is the only black leading female character in any film analysed. It first appears she's wanted on the mission because of her own skills as a thief but, it's revealed that she's wanted because she had a prior relationship with the villain and therefore would be able to find him and sleep with him for information. This is framed as a terrible thing for her boyfriend, Ethan instead of being a terrible thing for her. Fiona from *Shrek 2* is in the film solely to be Shrek's wife and causes him to go an adventure to be worthy of her love. Rachel is the love interest in *The Dark Knight* for two separate men. Rachel is the only love interest to die to forward the stories of the men in her life. She is used as a unifying theme to show how similar Bruce and Harvey are as opposite sides of the same coin. Rachel's death comes about because of what the male characters were doing and had nothing to do with who she was or anything she did.

Rachel's death marks another similarity in how the female love interests are written. They are passive, have very little do in the plot and some completely disappear for a large section of the film without affecting anything.

Susanna disappears for around 40 minutes of the runtime and then randomly reappears again without affecting anything. Nala disappears for a large chunk of the runtime just like Susanna, while the male character has adventures. She then finds him and tries to convince him to return home to be King but she doesn't manage to convince him, it is the ghost of his father who ends up doing it so she ends up having no real purpose.

Bo Peep tries to rally the other toys around to help Woody but, it doesn't actually achieve anything and she is very passive throughout the film and disappears for most of it. Nyah at first seems like an active character but she's forced into a passive role. She has no part to play in the conclusion and like Nala and Susanna, she doesn't speak any words and she barely appears for at least 40 minutes of the film.

Another similarity between the love interests in the films is the instances of sexual activity and their physical appearance. The love interest role is highly sexualised.

Fiona's appearance is the most important part of her story as her parents are shocked she looks the way she does and the characters all try many different things to change her appearance back to beautiful against her will. Molly is referred to as beautiful several times, she is small with short hair and is picked up several times by her boyfriend showing her to be like a vulnerable, child who needs protecting. She has a famous movie sex scene with the song, 'Unchained Melody' playing over the scene. Susanna also has a sex scene in her film. Her biggest scene is with the autistic Ray when she stops the elevator, slows dances with him and gives him a kiss. The camera moves close to her and shows her as a beautiful, sexual woman that can even get through to a highly autistic man.

Grace is introduced naked in her boyfriend's bed as her father pulls down the covers she was using to hide her face, implying she and her boyfriend had sex the previous night. She is also shown in a sexual position later on when her boyfriend runs animal cookies down her bare midriff and into her pants. Charlie is placed in sexual positions throughout her film, eats seductively, lies down on beds and couches while talking and she has a sex scene.

Nyah has a sex scene and an implied forced sex scene with the villain. The camera focuses on Nyah's face many times as the wind blows her hair back making her look beautiful and enticing. She wears very revealing clothing and she is introduced in slow motion as a sexual being with Spanish, passionate music playing over the scene.

Nala, Bo Peep, Princess Fiona and Princess Jasmine don't have the same explicit content as they are in animated films marketed towards children. However, they do have implied instances of sexual activity. Jasmine uses her sexuality to manipulate the villain. She wears blue throughout the film until she needs to be sexual and then she wears red. Even though she yells at the men in her life for treating her like a prize to be won, it's ironic that her character really is there to be the object to be won by multiple men.

The damsel in distress

Tessa Yeager from *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) is the only damsel recorded which is interesting as the only damsel recorded is in the 21st century, in 2014. This is good for female representation as it is the only one however, it is worrying that such a character is seen in the last three years of the study. The damsel is also highly sexualised with different men commenting on her short shorts and how they are distracting throughout the film, including her father.

She is saved by male characters, her boyfriend and her father, throughout the entire film. She even has to be saved from crossing over wires to get off the ship she was just rescued from by her father and boyfriend, even though they cross easily. She is infantilised and shown as a child who needs to be protected and told how to do things despite also being in a sexual adult relationship with her boyfriend. The camera pans to her sleeping like a child and then pans back to her father and boyfriend talking about protecting her. She tends to wear white clothing and has a bright light shining behind her in some scenes suggesting she is angelic and pure.

The sexy villain

There are two female villains recorded in the films: Alex Forrest from *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and Dr Elsa Schneider from *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989). Both of these female characters get killed for being evil, are used to teach the audience a lesson and both are highly sexualised. However, both are written as complicated characters which is interesting as there are no female villains in later years.

Alex has multiple sex scenes in *Fatal Attraction*, her hair is wild and carefree and she wears tops down over one shoulder showing her carefree, sexual attitude. Elsa in *Indiana Jones* has a sex scene with Indiana and it is then revealed that she also slept with his father. She uses her sexuality to manipulate the men around her and get what she wants.

Both are shown as morality tales. Elsa's downfall is her greed for the Holy Grail and her desire to do anything possible to get it including teaming up with Nazis. She dies because of this greed as she over-extends herself to grab the Grail and Indiana learns a lesson from her greed-fuelled death. In *Fatal Attraction*, it is framed as a morality tale where the good mother and Dan's wife Beth, kills the crazy, sexually driven vixen woman, Alex, who went against her morals and slept with a married man. Alex is not great representation as she inhabits the stereotype that women don't actually want casual sex and will even try to trap a man with a pregnancy.

Elsa wears loose fitting white blouses and Alex wears all white clothing throughout most of her film. Elsa's white clothing is to contrast with who she really is and Alex's white clothing is a hint to *Madame Butterfly* and its white bridal dress theme, as the opera, about a woman who kills herself because her lover left her, is a major theme of the film.

The heroine

The heroine of the film is the female character who saves the day; or, has a large part of the conclusion to the story; or, goes on some form of hero's journey throughout the film. They are active, make decisions and do something which contributes to the conclusion. There are 11 recorded heroines in the films. These are: Dr Ellie Satler from *Jurassic Park* (1993), Rose Dewitt-Bukater from *Titanic* (1997), Padme Amidala from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999), Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2001), Elizabeth

Swann from *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006), Elizabeth Swann from *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* (2007), Neytiri from *Avatar* (2009), Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2* (2011), Natasha Romanoff from *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012), Princess Anna from *Frozen* (2013) and Rey from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015). While there are 11 films, some are sequels with the same character so in actuality there are nine female heroines which is unfortunately lower than the number of love interests. These are scattered around the years, however, there are more heroines from the 21st century and two female protagonist heroines in the last five years of the study. This can definitely be counted as female character's roles improving over the years of the study.

The heroine doesn't just have to be a woman of action. She can also be a woman who uses her mind to save the day. If there is no saving the day to be done, she can also be a woman who has a mind of her own, has her own thoughts and feelings, develops over the course of the film and she has a large part in the conclusion of her story.

The heroines recorded in this study don't have a lot of similarities other than being women and helping in the conclusion. However, in seven of the films, the heroine has a love interest which is a big part of her story and there are only three heroines who are the protagonists of their films and the others are all supporting characters to male protagonists.

Being supportive to male characters is a primary aspect of most of the heroines. Some of the heroines give up their heroine life to lead a traditional life as a wife and mother by the end. Dr Ellie Satler is introduced by showing her back while she puts a scarf around Alan's neck showing her relationship with him as the primary part of why she's there. She is not the protagonist and she doesn't have much of a character arc other than wanting children with her boyfriend, the actual protagonist. However, when the dinosaurs attack, she goes out to turn the power back on, equips herself with a gun and doesn't accept it when Hammond implies that it should be a man doing it. She has a part in the conclusion and helps save other characters. Padme Amidala is supporting to the male Jedi and young Anakin but she has no love interest. She is a queen who changes into large costumes in every scene she's in but wears lighter layers when pretending to be a servant, showing the weight of her responsibilities and the showy side of politics. She stands up for her people,

tries to take down the evil Trade Federation, rallies her allies, brokers peace with a race so that they may help her and she devises plans to retake her planet of Naboo. However, it is the male characters that get the awards at the end.

Rose Dewitt-Bukater from *Titanic* will be classified here as the heroine. She is the only truly sexualised heroine on the list as she has a major sex scene in her film. While her entire story is her love life with Jack, the major male character, she is the protagonist and therefore Jack is her love interest instead of the other way around. Jack does save her but she also saves him. Jack dies while Rose survives and interestingly, it is the man who dies to spur on the woman to live a better life which is rare in cinema as the trope of a woman being “stuffed into the fridge” (TVTropes, d), meaning killed, to further a male character’s story and angst, is very prevalent. This is seen with Rachel Dawes in *The Dark Knight*. Rachel’s death takes place nearly 10 years after Jack which means that trope at least did not get erased.

Hermione in both her films can be seen as the heroine. She is the clever, logical friend and she is incredibly important when the trio of friends try to get through the traps to protect the Philosopher’s Stone from being stolen, as her knowledge saves them. However, she is also supporting to a male character that then gets to have the big hero moment. Her love story with Ron is a big focus of her story in *Deathly Hallows* and they are dressed in similar colours showing they are in a relationship. She, Harry and Ron stand in a triangle when speaking to each other or, she and Ron stand side-by-side with Harry in front, showing they are equal in importance as supporting characters to Harry. Hermione ends the film married with children as an adult woman showing that she has embraced a traditional role after having adventures as a teenager. This also happens with Elizabeth Swann. Her focus in both films is on reuniting with her fiancé, Will and rescuing him. She fights a horde of zombies by herself, saves the pirate crew, is voted to be the Pirate King and she rallies the other pirates together to fight to save the day. However, it is still a man who really saves the day, with her help, and she ends the film having quit being Pirate King and waits for her husband Will to come back to her every 10 years and she has a son with him.

Neytiri in *Avatar* (2009) has a story that revolves around a man, Jake. She saves Jake from dying a number of times in a reversal of the damsel in distress trope but, we don’t learn much about her life or her thoughts and feelings as we do about Jake.

Natasha brings the Avengers team together. She is the only woman fighting on the team and she manages to help save the day by stopping the alien beam but she is supporting to male characters that also help save the day. She uses her beauty and the fact that she's a woman to trick others into thinking she is vulnerable but, it is her brains that is her biggest asset. She wears a skin-tight costume to fight as Black Widow but other male characters also wear skin-tight costumes. She is supporting but she is important.

There are heroines who manage to save the day by themselves and are not supporting to male characters. Princess Anna of Arendelle from *Frozen* is the heroine of her film but she is not supporting to any male character. Despite being desperate to fall in love with a man, which turns the traditional Disney romance on its head when the man reveals he was just using her, she saves herself with her act of love for her sister which breaks her own curse. She is the most active in the plot and she moves things forward with her decisions and no male character really contributes to saving the day. This is similar to Rey from *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the only female character to experience a traditional hero's journey in any of the films. She is called to action, goes on a journey, meets a mystical figure who gives her advice, has an older mentor, is trapped and all seems lost until she fights the bad guy and wins. She manages to save herself before Finn and Han can save her and she then saves and avenges both of them by fighting the villain. She wears white and light coloured clothing throughout the film signifying that she is good in contrast to the male villain's full black outfit as he is bad. Rey has no last name but that is intentional for the story rather than based on her importance as a character. Both Anna and Rey are the most progressive of the heroines as they lead their films and are the undisputed heroines. The most important arc for these characters are their own journeys of self-discovery and in Anna's case, her relationship with her sister. These show that representation is slowly improving as they are both within the last four years of the study.

The mother

Interestingly, there is only one role which is classified as being the 'mother' role and that is Sarah Connor from *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991). Sarah is framed as a single mother who will do anything to protect her son. She is introduced doing pull-ups on her over-turned bed with long sweaty hair telling the audience she is not to be messed with. But, her only

relevance to the plot and the terminators themselves is her role as John's mother and she has no identity and barely any thoughts outside of this. She is introduced by John referencing her as his mother before we even get to see her. She can be considered a female icon, but, it is true to say that her character has no character outside of being a mother to her son which, thankfully, has not been repeated as a character arc in the rest of the films.

The side character

There are a few characters who, despite being the major female character in their film, don't do an awful lot in the overall plot. They are not love interests, villains, heroines, mothers or even damsels. They tend to have plots on the side which aren't particularly relevant to anything else happening in the film. They don't impact much and would rarely be included when summarising the film. There are six side characters recorded in the study: Constance Spano from *Independence Day* (1996), Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2005), Eowyn from both *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003), Jessie from *Toy Story 3* (2010) and Natasha Romanoff from *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). The fact that the most recent female character in the study is considered a side character is worrying as it shows that this type of female character still persists.

The side characters tend to be passive and don't have much to do. Constance and Jessie don't have much to do and are side-lined throughout most of their films. This is similar to Eowyn as she has very little to do and has little screen time despite actually having the most screen time of any female character in the two *Lord of the Rings* films. She falls in love with Aragorn but he doesn't want her. She becomes more active in *Return of the King*, and dresses as a man in a helmet and rides off with the other soldiers to fight. She has a big hero moment in defeating a villain but she disappears after this scene which does not affect much in the plot, and she's then shown without speaking at the end.

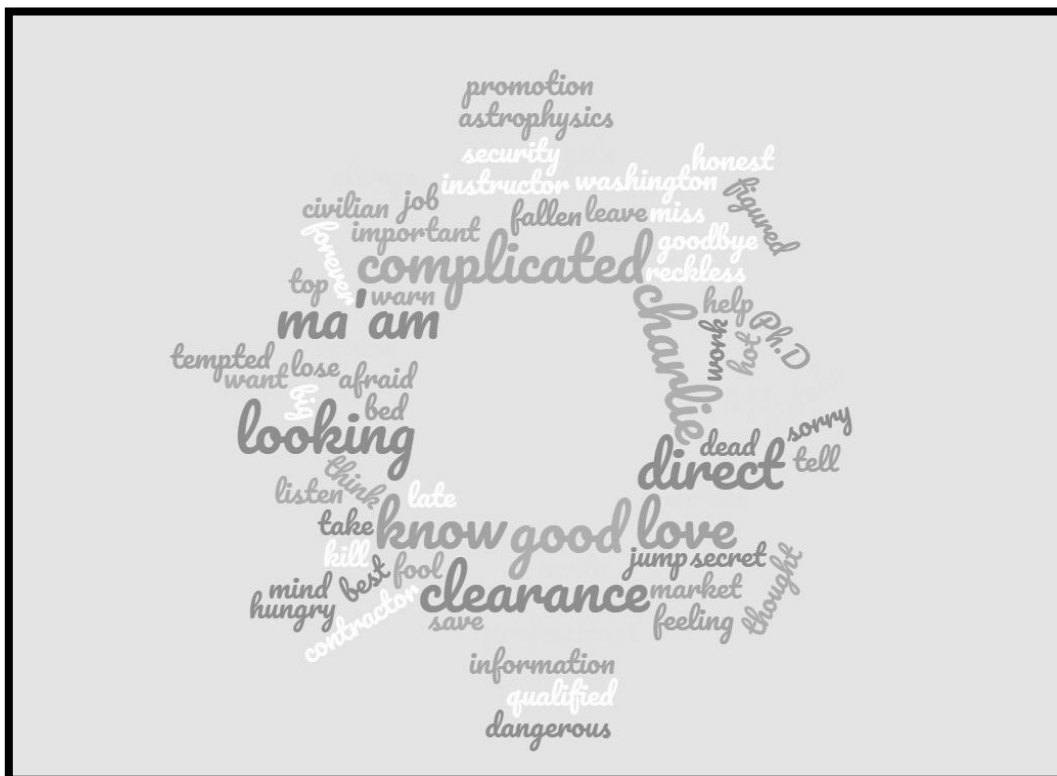
She is the second of two female characters in three films to dress as a man to become more 'powerful' along with Elizabeth Swann.

Both Hermione and Natasha are considered side characters in contrast to their other films in this study as they have very little impact on the plot and have nothing to do with the conclusion of the stories. Hermione is relegated to worrying about her love life in *Goblet of Fire* and Natasha's focus in *Civil War* is on the argument between two men and she becomes a go-between.

The side character is the worst type of character to have as representation as they don't even have recognisable roles and are mostly in the film to react to events around them.

4.4: Descriptive words

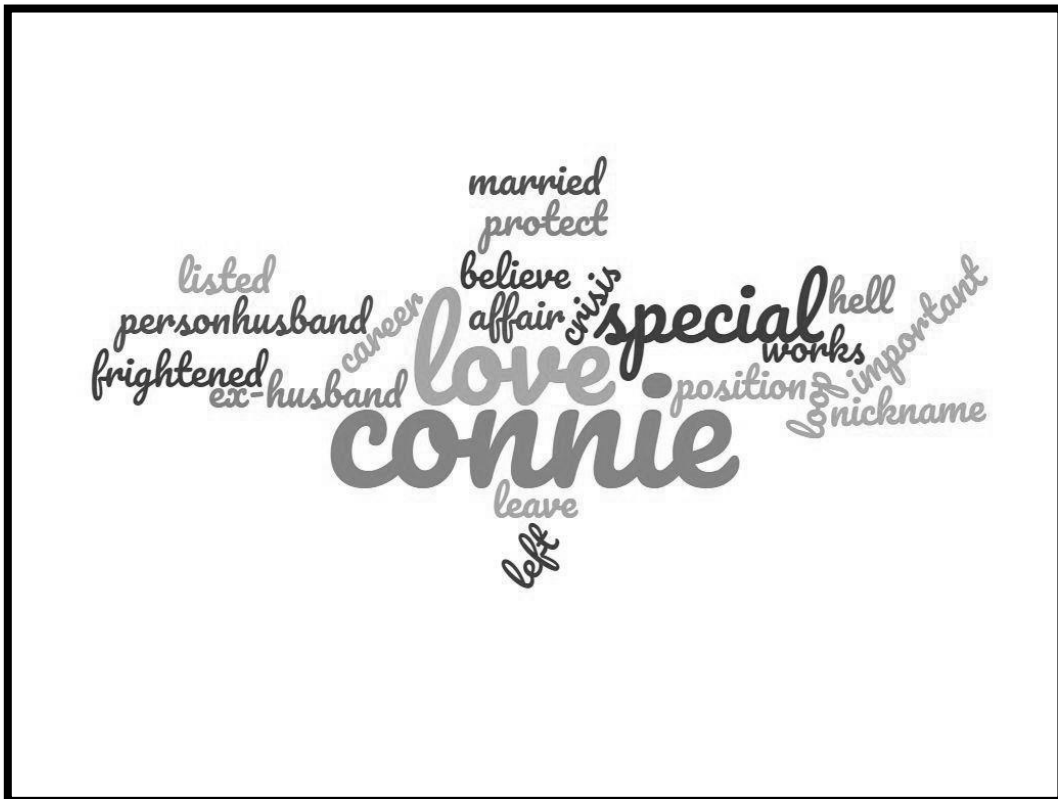
For this study, I took the 1986 film and then took a film every five years after, and wrote down the descriptive words of the major female character. This is to show how these female characters are described in their films which may give a sense of the characters and how they have changed through the years.

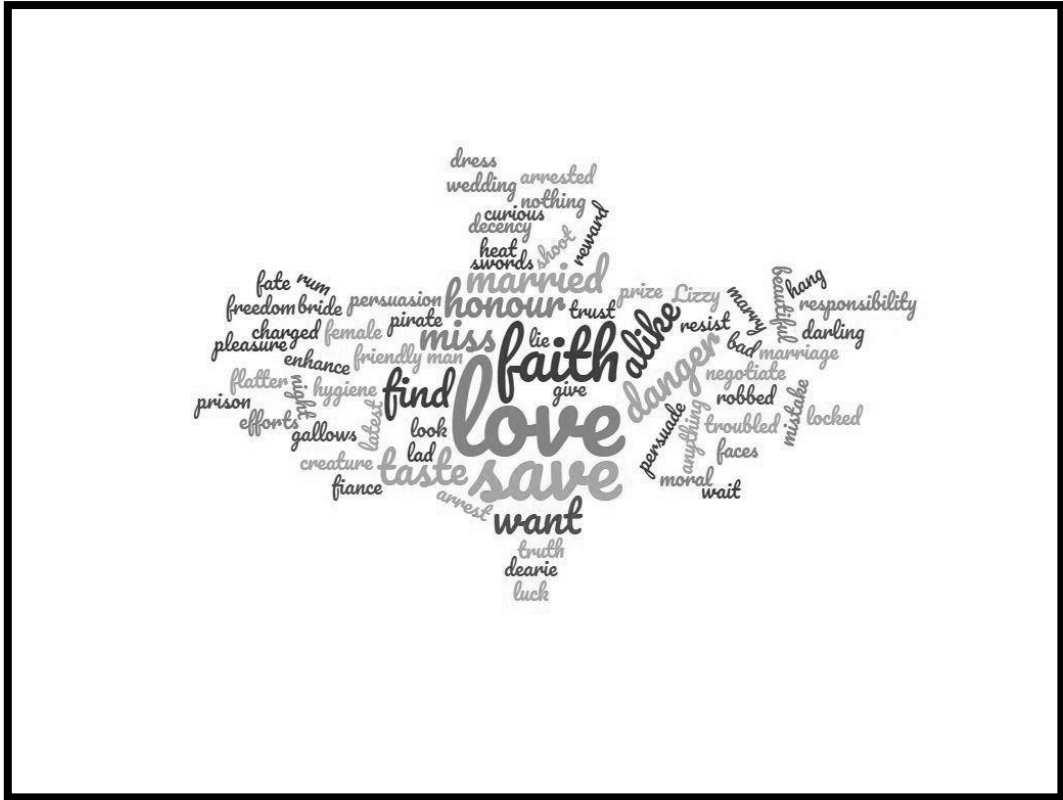


Graph 1: Word cloud of descriptive words of Charlie Blackwood in *Top Gun* (1986)



Graph 2: Word cloud of descriptive words of Sarah Connor in Terminator 2: Judgement Day (1991)





Graph 5: Word cloud of descriptive words of Elizabeth Swann in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006)



4.5: Conclusion

There are only a few different types of roles for female characters. The lack of female characters in the films is compounded by some of the stereotypical roles and the roles which do nothing for the character.

Female characters are still vastly underrepresented and they have very similar roles over the years, but these roles have improved slightly to include a more well-rounded character. The love interests are written in a similar fashion as sexual and passive, and technically there are more unique female characters counted as love interests than any other role but, there is an eight-year gap between the last recorded love interest and the last film so this shows that that role is slightly reducing. The love interests, the sexy villains, the damsel and at least one of the heroines are highly sexualised throughout the films proving that it doesn't really matter what role the female character has, they will still be sexualised. There are 11 films with heroines but most of these are supporting to a male character and their love life is a major part of their story with a couple of the characters deciding to quit their heroine roles to become traditional wives and mothers but, this changes slightly as the years progress so there is an improvement. The fact that the majority of side characters were in the 2000s including the last female character coded, and the only damsel was coded in 2014 sets representation back. But, since there has been two female protagonists in the last five years, both of whom were classed as the heroine of the film who had dreams and thoughts expressed on screen, it can be said that female representation is slightly improving but at a very slow pace and only every once in a while.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The question of women's representation in film has been a hot topic in recent years. The lack of representation of women and other minority groups in the media has been a part of the feeling of inequality in society in general. If these groups, which make up more than half of the population, are not represented in national media, then it is a form of erasure. Little girls grow up without role models and believing they have less impact on society than a man does.

This led me to my main research question and the title of this study:

Women in film 1986-2016: Has their representation improved or worsened?

This became my title and led me to the six research questions I hoped to answer in my study:

1. Have women's representation and roles in film changed over the time period of the study?
2. How well are women represented in film by the number of women shown?
3. Are the women overly sexualised throughout the films?
4. Is there a pattern of roles which recur throughout the different films?
5. How many minority women are represented in the films?
6. Is there a link between the way women are represented in film and people's attitudes towards women and women's roles in society?

To answer these questions I conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis on 31 films between 1986 and 2016. In order to have an unbiased approach to the films, I chose the top-grossing film from every year over the 30-year period, in order to study how, and if, women's representation in film has changed.

A quantitative content analysis has been used in communications research to analyse media content to interpret and understand the meaning of the content. A content analysis can lead to many surprising answers and is the best way to research my questions. I also conducted a qualitative content analysis by studying the characters in the films themselves.

I looked at their appearance, their stories, their music and how they were framed within the narrative itself. This led to a fuller picture of the films and the characters as a quantitative study can only answer a few questions and may leave a hole in the research. Studying the characters created a textual analysis. "When we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" (McKee, 2003, p. 1). An interpretation of a text can be subjective depending on the person studying the text. For example, someone watching *Top Gun* (1986) may look at the character of Charlie Blackwood and find her to be an example of an intelligent, working woman who chooses to ask out a guy she likes and therefore, is good representation. However, if you look more carefully at the character, what she says and how she's posed, it appears that she has no character outside of her boyfriend and all she does throughout the film is talk about him and to him. This is a love interest role and one that does not have much of a character arc for the woman.

How well are women represented in film by the number of women shown?

Women are not very well represented in film based on this study. There is a significant lack of female characters compared to male characters and most of the roles women have are as support to men or as their love interests who are highly sexualised and most barely have an arc of their own and rarely get to express their inner thoughts. My findings from this investigation into the representation of women in film revealed that there are 580 speaking named characters counted overall in the 31 films with 143 of those characters being female. That means women made up 24.66% of all speaking named characters which is not even a third of all speaking characters.

Over half of the films fail the Bechdel Test where two named speaking female characters have to talk to each other about something other than a man. On average, there is a 10 to 20-year age gap between men and women in the films with women predominately being in their 20s while men tend to be in their late 30s. Out of the 31 protagonists in the 31 films, there are just three female protagonists with a 16-year gap between the first female protagonist and the second. There are eight genres of film coded in the study with the fantasy and science fiction films taking the majority and having on average more female characters than other genres despite also having the smallest percentage of female

characters compared to male characters in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*. Two of the films only had one female character each which were *Aladdin* and *Mission Impossible II*. There were only two films which had an equal or majority number of female characters: *Ghost* and *Fatal Attraction*, both released within the first five years of the study. There were large gaps between the numbers of male and female characters in almost all of the films with *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* having the largest gap with a 21 character gap and the next is *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* with a 17 character gap between male and female characters. On average, there are 4.6 female characters per film and an average of 13.7 male characters per film.

Out of the 143 female characters counted in the study, only 50 of those were classed as major characters with 93 being counted as minor. The majority of the major female characters were classed as heroes with love interests a close second. Only two were counted as villains but over half of the major female characters faced some kind of violence with 12.90% ending up dead.

Have women's representation and roles in film changed over the time period of the study?

Women's representation and roles remained mostly consistent throughout the years. When female characters increased in number, so too did male characters widening the gap between them even more. Women were mostly love interests from the 1980s through the 1990s and by the time the 2000s hit, there were more heroines but there were also more side characters and a damsel in distress. However, the representation did improve slightly over the time period of the study.

While there are only three female protagonists in the 31 films, two of those appear in the last four years of the study. Six out of seven of the last films in the study all passed the Bechdel Test and 2015's *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* had the highest number of female characters in one film in the entire 31 years with 11 named, speaking female characters. The numbers of women in film did noticeably increase over the years from the start of the study. The roles of female characters slightly improved. The love interest roles are scattered throughout the study years. The most passive of the characters were in the 1980s and early 1990s, with the female love interest getting slightly more characterisation and focus from 2000 onwards. The major female character has not been given the love interest role since

2008's *The Dark Knight* which means there has been eight years between the last love interest and the last film in the study.

There was only female character categorised as the mother whose entire identity is based on being a mother to their child and nothing else which was in 1991. The sexy villain never reappeared after 1989's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* which marks an improvement in representation as the stereotype of an evil woman who uses her sexuality to manipulate men didn't continue, however, the villains were written as more fully realised characters than some others on the list. The damsel in distress role was only counted in 2014's *Transformers: Age of Extinction* and considering her role is to be there to be saved by all the men in her life and she offers nothing to the plot or to helping move anything along, this means there was a slight worsening in female representation. This is also shown with the number of major female side characters there are with the majority taking place in the 2000s. The side character contributes nothing and is in the film to simply exist or react to the plot. The last film in the study, *Captain America: Civil War*, had its major female character, Natasha Romanoff, be a side character who disappears from the plot and doesn't affect the outcome. This also adds to a worsening of female representation.

The heroine role makes up the majority of the women categorised and the majority of those appeared in the 2000s, which means there was a stark improvement in the types of characters women play. While most of these roles have the women play supporting character or girlfriend to the major, male character, the women are able to contribute to the plot and the conclusion and most of them have some form of characterisation which makes them easy to root for. The fact that there are two protagonist heroines in the last four years of the study, both of whom carried the plot and saved the day without needing much help from the male characters shows a vast improvement in the characters of women shown. There has been a slight improvement but very slight and is only now beginning.

Are the women overly sexualised throughout the films?

The female characters are overly sexualised throughout the films. 24 out of the 31 films had mild and / or heavy instances of sexual activity. 24 of the major female characters in those 24 films had instances of mild sexual activity, meaning flirting or kissing, and nine of those 24 also had instances of heavy sexual activity, meaning sexual intercourse or heavy sexual

content. This means that 77.42% of all the major female characters had some form of sexual activity recorded, and 29.03% had scenes where they were involved in heavy sexual activity. 80.65% had their relationship with a man as a large part of their story.

Five out of 10 of the love interest characters had a sex scene or implied sex scene in their films, with the others experiencing some form of sexual content. The damsel is sexualised, even by her father mentioning her shorts, both of the sexy villains have multiple sex scenes and are highly sexualised and two of the heroines have sex scenes in their films with most of the others having prominent, romantic relationships with men.

This shows that women continue to be sexualised throughout the years and even films marketed towards a family audience have sexualised or implied sexualised women in them.

Is there a pattern of roles which recur throughout the different films?

While I was doing my analysis on the films, I noticed a pattern of roles which the female characters tended to play. I have classed them as the love interest, the damsel in distress, the sexy villain, the heroine, the mother and the side character. Every character in the 31 films fit into these categories and even within the roles themselves, they are written in a similar way. Even with the different class of roles, most of them are supporting to the male characters and have prominent, sexual relationships with men. The love interest women are written as characters with no story outside their boyfriends, rather like the damsel. They are passive, sexualised and occasionally disappear from their films for a long period of time. The female villains are highly sexualised and are morality tales. The mother has no identity outside of being a mother and the heroines, while better and more well-rounded characters, are supporting to men and most have prominent relationships with men in their stories too. The pattern seems to be that women are, most of the time, support to men and not much else.

How many minority women are represented in the films?

For minority women, this includes women of colour and LGBT women. In these 31 films, there is a significant and obvious lack of either. 139 female characters were counted in this study with only 22 of those making up non-white characters. This leaves 117 female characters coded as white. This means 15.83% of all female characters over the 30 years,

were non-white. Over half of the films studied don't have any non-white female characters, two of which are in the last five years.

In speaking about LGBT female characters, there is even less to discuss. There are no characters coded as non-straight. There are five female characters with unknown sexualities which are never stated or shown, two of whom are young girls.

Is there a link between the way women are represented in film and people's attitudes towards women and women's roles in society?

This is entirely subjective however, I believe there is a connection between the way women are represented in film and people's attitudes towards women and women's roles in society. Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (2001) (Bussey et al, 1999) explains how the media can affect human attitude and behaviours through observational learning and imitation. The audiences' images of reality increasingly depend on the media. Observing behaviour can influence people and their own behaviour so they imitate what they have seen by witnessing the positive and negative reinforcements they have seen in film or television. There is also George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1976) which suggests that people are socialised into placing people into particular roles and acting out behaviours because of what they have seen on-screen. Their vision of reality is shaped by the media. It also creates a reality for viewers which they believe accurately represents real life despite it being a false representation.

Both of these theories accurately depict how I believe the media influences an audience's view on reality. Due to the films being the worldwide top-grossing films of every year for 30 years, there is a statistical likelihood that a general cinema-goer has watched these films. They will see a significant lack of female representation with less than a third of all speaking characters being female and an average of 4.6 female characters per film compared to 13.7 male characters per film. The Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media found that women tend to make up just 17% of crowds in films which reinforces how people can perceive how many women are even in a room. "If there's 17 percent women, the men in the group think it's 50-50. And if there's 33 percent women, the men perceive that as there being more women in the room than men" (Doyle, 2014). Seeing the lack of female roles on-screen can lead to this being the normal perception of the numbers and importance of women in

reality. The roles the female characters have are mostly supporting to men and are love interests who don't matter much other than being there for their man, which can reinforce this notion in society as can the idea that women are innately sexual beings as a significant portion of the female characters are highly sexualised.

My hypothesis of what I believed would appear in the results was that women's representation in films has increased over the years and improved in the types of roles women play and the number of lead characters but, that it would show that there is still a significant shortcoming in the representation of women. I believe my hypothesis was somewhat correct as there was an increase and slight improvement in women's roles and representation but there is still a hugely significant shortcoming.

More research on this topic needs to be done in the future but preferably on a larger scale. I feel further research in this area should be undertaken as the only way to change the lack of representation is to show the results. There also needs to be research into why there is a lack of representation of women in film and the media at large. Seeing such a lack of women in film and their similar roles could push those who create the films to add more women and write them as more complicated characters with deeper emotions and personalities. More research could include box office results, amount of dialogue per character and deeper research into gender behind the scenes. A study on a larger scale over a period of time could create recommendations which can change the results in the future.

Recommendations can include programmes to encourage more female writers and directors as there is a very small number working on large films in Hollywood. According to Lauzen (2016b), "In 2015, women comprised 19% of all directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and cinematographers working on the top 250 domestic grossing films." Lauzen found that the more women there are behind the scenes as directors, producers and writers, the more women are represented on screen with at least a 10% increase in female protagonists and female-speaking characters in films with a female presence behind the camera. In my study there was only one female director who co-directed with a male director and her film, *Frozen*, was one of the three films which had a female protagonist. That protagonist was also coded as the heroine of the film where no male character played a part in saving the day.

Another recommendation could be gender-blind casting. This is casting the best person for the role regardless of their gender. This means that a woman could audition for a male role, which are the majority of roles, and a man could audition for a female role. Another way for gender-blind casting to work is to cast half women and half men in the roles regardless of gender set out in the script which means the female roles cannot be specifically written for women and may leave out any stereotypes or patterns. Simple ideas could go a long way in improving the representation of women in film.

Bibliography

Bandura, A. 2001, Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication, *MediaPsychology*, 3, 265–299. [Online] Available at http://cogweb.ucla.edu/crp/Media/Bandura_01.pdf (Accessed 28 December 2016).

Behm-Morawitz, E and Mastro, D. Mean Girls? The Influence of Gender Portrayals in Teen Movies on Emerging Adults' Gender-Based Attitudes and Beliefs, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No. 1 Spring 2008.

Berelson, B. 1952, Content Analysis in Communication Research, *Foundations of Communication Research*, American Book-Stratford Press Inc., New York, (Online) Available at: http://pubman.mpdl.mpg.de/pubman/item/escidoc:2281462/component/escidoc:2283003/Berelson_1952_content_analysis.pdf (Accessed 7 June 2017).

Bunche Center. 2016, *2016 Hollywood Diversity Report*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2-25-16.pdf> (Accessed 12 May 2017).

Bussey, K and Bandura, A. Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation, *Psychological Review*, 1999, Vol. 106, No. 4, 676-713.

Child, B. 2016, Twitter Attacks on Ghostbusters' Leslie Jones a symptom of fan entitlement, *The Guardian*, [Online] Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2016/jul/19/twitter-attacks-on-ghostbusters-leslie-jones> (Accessed 1 July 2017).

Cochrane, K. 2011. Why is British public life dominated by men?, *The Guardian*, Sunday, 4 December.

Davis, G. 2013, Geena Davis' Two Easy Steps To Make Hollywood Less Sexist (Guest Column), *Hollywood Reporter*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/geena-davis-two-easy-steps-664573> (Accessed 20 July 2017).

DCU, 2016, *DCU Professor publishes major study on Irish journalists*, [Online] Available at: <http://dcu.ie/news/2016/july/s0716r.shtml> (Accessed 17 May 2017).

Dixon, T. and Linz, D. 2000, Overrepresentation and underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as lawbreakers on television news, *Journal of Communication*, 50, 131-154.

Doyle, S. 2014, The Feminized Society Myth, *In These Times*, [Online] Available at: http://inthesetimes.com/article/16157/our_feminized_society (Accessed 20 July 2017).

Gauntlett, D. 2005, *Media, Gender and Identity*, Routledge: London and New York.

Gerbner, G. and Gross, L, 1976, Living with television: The violence profile, *Journal of Communication*, 26.

GLAAD, 2017, *2017 GLAAD Studio Responsibility Index: Overview of Findings*, [Online] Available at: <https://www.glaad.org/sri/2017/overview> (Accessed 19 May 2017).

Green, C. 2013, *The Effects of Romantic Comedies on Women and Female Adolescents*, *Proceedings of The National Conference On Undergraduate Research (NCUR) 2013*, University of Wisconsin La Crosse, Wisconsin, April 11 – 13. [Online] Available at: <http://www.ncurproceedings.org/ojs/index.php/NCUR2013/article/viewFile/658/340> (Accessed 14 May 2017).

Hansen, A. 1998, *Mass Communication Research Methods*, NYU Press, New York.

Harris, R. 2004, *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.

Haskell, M. 2016, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

Heusinkveld, O. 2015, Why does media representation matter?, *Wakemag*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.wakemag.org/sections/voices/why-does-media-representation-matter> (Accessed 22 February 2017).

Hickey, W. 2014, The Dollar-And-Cents Case Against Hollywood's Exclusion of Women, *FiveThirtyEight*, [Online] Available at: <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-dollar-and-cents-case-against-hollywoods-exclusion-of-women/> (Accessed 16 May 2017).

Hogan, H. 2016. Autostraddle's Ultimate Infographic Guide to Dead Lesbian Characters on TV, *Autostraddle*, Available at: <http://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-ultimate-infographic-guide-to-dead-lesbian-tv-characters-332920/> (Accessed 19 May 2017).

IPU, 2017, *Women in national parliaments*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (Accessed 18 May 2017).

Johnson, K and Holmes, B. 2009, Contradictory Messages: A Content Analysis of Hollywood-Produced Romantic Comedy Feature Films, *Communication Quarterly*, Volume 57, Issue 3. [Online] Available at: <http://www.cinematherapy.com/pressclippings/Johnson-Holmes.pdf> (Accessed 12 May 2017).

Krippendorff, K. 2012, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, SAGE, California.

Lauzen, M. 2016a, *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2015*, Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film. [Online.] Available at http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2015_Its_a_Mans_Celluloid_World_Report.pdf (Accessed 28 December 2016).

Lauzen, M. 2016b, *The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 100, 250, and 500 Films of 2015*, Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, [Online.] Available at: http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/files/2015_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf (Accessed 29 December 2016).

Lauzen, M. 2017, *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2016*, Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film. [Online.] Available at: <http://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/2016-Its-a-Mans-Celluloid-World-Report.pdf> (Accessed 22 December 2017).

Leeuwen, T and Jewitt, C. 2001, *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*, Sage, London.

MacGuill, D. 2016, We now have more female TDs than ever before – but do we really have gender quotas to thank?, *The Journal*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.thejournal.ie/women-in-32nd-dail-election-2016-2630150-Mar2016/> (Accessed 18 May 2017).

Manatu, N. 2002, *African American Women and Sexuality in the Cinema*, McFarland Publishing, North Carolina.

Media Smarts, *Queer Representation in Film and Television*, Canada's Centre for Digital and Media Literacy, [Online] Available at: <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media->

[literacy/media-issues/diversity-media/queer-representation/queer-representation-film-television](#) (Accessed 19 May 2017).

Merriam-Webster Dictionary. (Online) Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/content%20analysis> (Accessed 7 June 2017).

McCray, T. 2011, Examining the Roles of African-American Academy Award Winning Actresses Between the Years of 2000-2010, *The Penn State McNair Journal*, Volume 18, Pennsylvania, [Online] Available at: http://forms.gradsch.psu.edu/diversity/mcnair/mcnair_jrnl2011/files/PSU_McNair_Vol18.pdf (Accessed 12 May 2017).

McKee, A. 2003, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. Sage, London.

McKinney, K. 2015, Almost half of 2015's top movies failed the Bechdel test, *Fusion*, [Online] Available at: <http://fusion.kinja.com/almost-half-of-2015s-top-movies-failed-the-bechdel-test-1793853784> (Accessed 15 May 2017).

McKinney, K. 2016, A third of 2016's top movies fail the Bechdel test, *Fusion*, [Online] Available at: <http://fusion.kinja.com/a-third-of-2016s-top-movies-fail-the-bechdel-test-1793857928> (Accessed 15 May 2017).

McQuillan, M., 2000, *The Narrative Reader*, Routledge, London.

Morgan M. 1986, *Living with Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process*, Hillsdale, Available at: <http://web.asc.upenn.edu/gerbner/Asset.aspx?assetID=1591> (Accessed 28 December 2016).

Mulvey, L. 1975. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, *Screen*, Oxford Journals, 16 (3): 6–18. [Online] Available at <https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey,%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf> (Accessed 28 December 2016).

Neuendorf, K, Gore, T, Janstova, P and Snyder-Suhy, S. 2007, "Bond Girls," Shaken and Stirred: A Content Analysis of James Bond Films, *Conference Papers, National Communication Association*, Chicago, Illinois.

New York Film Academy, 2013, *Gender Inequality in Film*, [Online] Available at: <https://www.nyfa.edu/film-school-blog/gender-inequality-in-film/> (Accessed 2 July 2017).

New York Film Academy, 2014, *Looking at Black Inequality in Film: An Infographic*, [Online] Available at: <https://www.nyfa.edu/nyfa-news/black-inequality-in-film-infographic.php#.WRs7pGgrK02> (Accessed 9 May 2017).

O'Connor, B. 1984, Aspects of Representation of Women in Irish Film, *The Crane Bag*. Vol. 8, No. 2, Media and Popular Culture, 79-83

O'Connor, O. 2016, Opinion: A woman's place is in the Oireachtas, *The Irish Times*, [Online] Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/opinion-a-woman-s-place-is-in-the-oireachtas-1.2564637> (Accessed 18 May 2017).

Reynolds, M. 2017, Machine learning reveals lack of female screen time in top films, *New Scientist*, [Online] Available at: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2123926-machine-learning-reveals-lack-of-female-screen-time-in-top-films/> (Accessed 2 July 2017).

Rose, G., 2007, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, SAGE, London.

Sampson, M. 2016, The Main Character in 'Rogue One' is a Woman and some 'Star Wars' bros are freaking out, *Screen Crush*, [Online] Available at: <http://screencrush.com/rogue-one-female-lead-angry-fans/> (Accessed 1 July 2017).

Sims, D. 2016, The Ongoing Outcry Against the Ghostbusters Remake, *The Atlantic*, [Online] Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/05/the-sexist-outcry-against-the-ghostbusters-remake-gets-louder/483270/> (Accessed 2 July 2017).

Smelik, A. 1999, "Feminist Film Theory", in Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink (eds), *The Cinema Book*, London, British Film Institute, 353-365.

Smith, S. 2008, Gender Stereotypes: An Analysis of Popular Films and TV, *The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media*. [Online] Available at https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/GDIGM_Gender_Stereotypes.pdf (Accessed 28 December 2016).

Smith, S., Kennard, C and Granados, A. 2009, "Sexy Socialization", in Shriver, Maria (ed). *The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Changes Everything*, Simon and Schuster, New York.

Smith, S., Choueiti, M and Pieper, K. 2015, Inequality in 700 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race, & LGBT Status from 2007 to 2014, *Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative*. [Online] Available at: <http://annenbergl.usc.edu/pages/~ /media/MDSCI/Inequality%20in%20700%20Popular%20Films%208215%20Final%20for%20Posting.ashx> (Accessed 29 December 2016).

Stam, R., Burgoyne, R., and Flitterman-Lewis, S., 1992, *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics: structuralism, post-structuralism, and beyond*, Routledge, London.

Stemler, S., 2001, An Overview of Content Analysis, *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, Volume 7, Number 17, June, [Online] Available at: <http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=17> (Accessed 9 June 2017).

TVTropes (a), *Madonna-Whore Complex*, [Online] Available at: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MadonnaWhoreComplex> (Accessed 14 May 2017).

TVTropes, (b), *The Hays Code*, [Online] Available at: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/UsefulNotes/TheHaysCode?from=Main.HaysCode> (Accessed 17 May 2017).

TVTropes, (c), *Bury Your Gays*, [Online] Available at: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays> (Accessed 19 May 2017).

TVTropes, (d), *Stuffed into the Fridge*, [Online] Available at: <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/StuffedIntoTheFridge> (Accessed 19 July 2017).

Ulaby, N. 2008a, The 'Bechdel Rule,' Defining Pop-Culture Character, *National Public Radio* [Online] Available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94202522> (Accessed 15 May 2017).

Ulaby, N. 2008b, The 'Bechdel Rule,' Defining Pop-Culture Character Transcript, *National Public Radio* [Online] Available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=94202522> (Accessed 15 May 2017).

Wood, J. 1994, Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender, *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*. Chapter 9, 231-244. Wadsworth Publishing, Boston.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

Film Analysis Coding Form

Name of Film _____

Year of Film's Release _____

Genre _____

Runtime _____

Creative Control Female Male

Director _____ _____

Box office gross _____

Time Period _____

Female Male

Number of Major Characters _____ _____

Number of Minor Characters _____ _____

Female Male

Protagonist _____ _____

Female Male

Age _____ _____

Female characters:

Race _____

Occupation _____

Relationship status

A Married

B Single

C In relationship

D Divorced

E Unknown

Children _____

Sexuality _____

Mild Heavy

Instances of sexual activity _____

Hero Villain

Morality _____

Acted violently Treated with violence

Violence _____

Death _____

Appendix 2:

Major Female Character Analysis Coding Form

1. Name of Film _____

3. Character Name _____

7. Race _____

8. Age _____

9. Occupation _____

Focus:

Camera angles:

Physical appearance and gestures:

Clothing:

Framing:

A Damsel in distress

B Victim

C Mother

D Love interest

Active/passive:

Music: