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The role of women in film: Supporting the men -- An analysis of how culture influences the changing discourse on gender representations in film

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**The Role of Women in Film:
Supporting the Men**

**An Analysis of How Culture
Influences the Changing Discourse on
Gender Representations in Film**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Honors Studies in Journalism

By

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J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	4
2. Theoretical Framework.....	5
3. Literature Review.....	7
3.1. Women in Film.....	8
3.2. Racial Minorities in Film.....	10
3.3. The Great Mancession/Hecession.....	11
3.4. Objectification.....	12
4. Methodology.....	16
4.1. Table 1.....	17
4.2. Table 2.....	18
5. Results.....	18
5.1. Table 3.....	22
6. Discussion.....	23
7. Conclusion.....	26
8. References.....	28
9. Footnotes.....	32

Introduction

Women are underrepresented in film. Racial minorities are underrepresented in film. White men are vastly overrepresented in film. How do these facts affect audiences that are so demographically different from what is portrayed onscreen? This study serves to examine how character representations in film relate to the demographics of the audience viewing them, and how these portrayals have changed over a 20-year span. Considering the depictions of women in the context of social gender movements of the last two decades will provide a deeper understanding of the attitudes toward female characters, as well as factors that shape the themes and representations that appear in the most popular films.

The purpose of this study was originally to examine the relationship between the sexual objectification of women in film and race. It began as a content analysis that would measure the amount of provocative skin shown by major and minor female characters in the top grossing domestic films across a 20-year span, and compare the results to determine if the objectification varied between races in its amount and context. A study of this nature would be significant because, while there is abundant literature illustrating sexual objectification of women in film in general, there is a lack of research showing how objectification varies when comparing women by race. In beginning the research, however, it was determined that the number of films in the chosen sample that featured female minorities in significant roles was too low to permit a statistical comparison. Instead, this study will discuss the implications of recognizing there are too few minority women in popular films to compare to Caucasian women.

This study will supplement existing literature by adding a time period to the conversation of female representation in modern film. By expanding the study beyond one film and genre, the findings will provide historical and cultural context for what makes certain films popular and how women and racial minorities fit into those popular molds. Then, by examining the messages that these depictions are sending to the audience, the study will examine the significance of the prevalent themes on current attitudes toward women and how they may shape the future of gender representations and equality.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory and Cultivation Theory lay the foundation for understanding audience interpretations of how gender and race are represented in film. The Social Cognitive Theory suggests that people develop expectations for real-world situations from observational learning while consuming media (Hall et al., 2012). In their 2009 study analyzing the representation of relationships in top grossing romantic comedies, authors Johnson and Holmes found evidence to support the ideas of Social Cognitive Theory when they determined that people “look to relationships presented in film to learn what to expect from real-life relationships” (p. 353). Through observation, retention, then reenactment, people perpetuate the rewards and punishments that result from behaviors learned through the media (Eyal, Raz, & Levi, 2014). Bussey and Bandura (1999) point out that:

Gender development is a fundamental issue because some of the most important aspects of people’s lives, such as the talents they cultivate, the conceptions they hold of themselves and

others, the sociostructural opportunities and constraints they encounter, and the social life and occupational paths they pursue are heavily prescribed by societal gender-typing. (p. 676)

Rather than providing realistic representations in the media, men and women both tend to be depicted in a hyper-traditional manner, which maintains stereotypes of personality traits, capabilities, and aspirations (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Additionally, Social Cognitive Theory is not confined to one period of life like previous research. Bussey and Bandura argue that the perception of gender role and development is continually influenced by social factors throughout life for both sexes (1999).

Cultivation Theory also reveals that representations in the media affect audience's perceptions of reality, but more passively. The theory proposes that continuous exposure to specific cultural messages will influence how the audience identifies with that message in the long-term (Eyal et al., 2014). Previous research suggested overall interaction with general media would influence audience perceptions; however, Johnson and Holmes found that genre-specific exposure is much more likely to change beliefs and expectations (2009). Movie theaters in the United States had three times higher attendance than all theme parks and professional sports events combined in 2013 (MPAA). So it is reasonable to assert that vast numbers of movie-goers *are* receiving those specific cultural messages, and the perpetuations of these themes regarding gender roles, which are depicted across genres in the top grossing films, are reaching a huge audience.

The Bechdel Test for film is not based in theory, but is a litmus test for examining how well-rounded and complete are the representations of women in media. Created in 1985 by cartoonist Alison Bechdel, the test asks only three questions:

- 1) Are there at least two women in the film who have names?
- 2) Do those women talk to each other?
- 3) Do they talk to each other about something other than a man?

The films that fail the test fail more often due to lack of female characters, not always because of stereotyping females as being male-dependent (“Feminist Frequency,” 2009). Though the test seems simple to pass, only 17 of the 50 top grossing films of 2013 met those three criteria (Sharma & Sender, 2014).

As the Bechdel Test is only a litmus test for character representations and meant to bring attention to a lack of complex characters, since its popularization authors have been adapting the test to measure other underrepresented character groups such as ethnic minorities and characters of varying sexual orientations. Author Alaya Johnson of the blog, *The Angry Black Woman*, wrote a post constructing a Bechdel Test for people of color in popular fiction. The test asked the same questions, but regarding people of color:

- 1) Does the work have at least two people of color in it?
- 2) Who talk to each other?
- 3) About something other than a white person (2009)?

While Johnson was primarily considering television fiction, she and commenters still had trouble discerning very many examples of science-fiction/fantasy shows that pass the test. Considering the original Bechdel Test, as well as its variations in future research, and indeed in future production decisions regarding the media, will further expose the discrepancy in well-rounded minority characters and hopefully work toward its retribution.

Women in Film

In 2013, women comprised less than a third of speaking parts in the top grossing domestic films, and only 15% of protagonists (Lauzen, 2015).¹ But due to the success of several high profile female-led films in recent years, “there is a growing disconnect...between what we might perceive as being the current status of women in film and their actual status,” said Dr. Martha Lauzen, the executive director of the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University (Lang, 2015, n.p.). The truth is, even in the latest films, female characters are two times more likely than males to be identified only by a life-related role rather than a work-related role, they are consistently younger than their male counterparts, and they are rarely portrayed as formal leaders (Lauzen, 2015). The recent popularity of strong female heroines such as Katniss Everdeen in the *Hunger Games* series and Tris in the *Divergent* series may lend to the impression that women are often being represented equally and fairly in films. David Gautlett said in his 2002 book *Media, Gender and Identity* that “the traditional views of a woman as a housewife or low status worker has been kick-boxed out of the picture by the feisty, successful ‘girl power’ icons” (p. 247). However, research is still revealing that women are overwhelmingly valued in film based on their identification as a mother, wife, or lover (Lang, 2015). Women are portrayed as dependent on other characters, over-emotional, and confined to low-status jobs when compared to enterprising and ambitious male characters (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Even films aimed at a female audience often disappoint in depictions of independent women that real audience members can relate to. Commercial films and counter-cinema² alike habitually see the female characters centered in “themes of self-sacrifice, defined...in

relationship to children or to men, and have encouraged [the female audience] to identify either with female figures on screen who were powerless or victimized, or...with active *male* heroes” (Montgomery, 1984, p. 39).

While women may be depicted as “feisty, successful girl-power icons” more often in recent years than in decades past, one reason gender stereotypes and traditional views of women regarding familial and career roles continue to permeate the media could be due to the influence of post-feminism (Gautlett, 2002; Hill, 2010). The history of the feminist movement saw the first wave in the in the late 1800s through the ‘20s, the second wave in the ‘60s and ‘70s, and the third wave of feminism, as well as post-feminism, emerging in the mid-1980s (Coleman, 2009). Post-feminism has several definitions based on the group identifying with, or defining it, but most definitions see it in some way or another as a response to the end of feminism, or as anti-feminist ideology (Coleman, 2009). Catherine Orr indicates the defining feature of the movement saying, “Post-feminism assumes that the women’s movement took care of oppressive institutions, and that now it is up to individual women to make personal choices that simply reinforce those fundamental societal changes” (1997, p. 34).

In the face of making these personal choices, women in film are “caught between competing demands to be strong and independent while retaining their femininity” (Ferris & Young, 2006, p. 9). The third wave of feminism and post-feminism both identify with characteristics of the second wave, such as critiquing beauty and power structures, while also rejecting agendas of the previous wave by acknowledging and making sense of the potential in those structures (Coleman, 2009). Anita Harris suggested that the differing ideals between the third wave and post-feminism, as well as their development from the

second wave, have influenced representations of modern feminists in a “competing discourse about... ‘power feminists’ fighting ‘victim feminists’ (2001, n.p.). This idea supplements research asserting that in a postfeminist third wave, emphasis is on individualism, where the concern is more about the power of one’s own body than on social change. As Elizabeth Wurtzel pointed out, “These days putting out one’s pretty power...one’s sexual energy for popular consumption no longer makes you a bimbo. It makes you smart” (Wurtzel, cited in Coleman, 2009, p.8). This is the crossroads at which women in film find themselves. One side of modern feminists contends that owning and celebrating one’s sexuality by being in control of the context of a situation gives women power. The other side, maintaining more values from the previous wave of feminism, argues that power will never be reached until women are equally depicted on film in age standards, in positions of leadership, and by distinction of extra-familial aspirations, among other inequalities.

Racial Minorities in Film

The characters onscreen are out of touch with the gender demographics of the audience as well as the ethnographic make up of moviegoers. Frequent moviegoers (those who attend a movie once a month or more) account for only 11 percent of the population, but drive the movie industry with 50 percent of ticket sales (MPAA, 2014). The Theatrical Market Statistics Report, released annually by the Motion Picture Association of America, revealed that relative to the size of the population, Hispanics are more likely than any other ethnic group to go to the movies, and comprise 32 percent of frequent moviegoers (2014). This would make Latinos, portraying only 4.9 percent of speaking

characters in 2013, the most grossly underrepresented ethnicity in film related to its proportion of the audience (Smith et al., 2014). Representations of African American characters are marginally better, with 14.2 percent of speaking parts in 2013, and are actually an overrepresentation of African Americans, who make up only 12 percent of the population (Smith et al., 2014; MPAA 2014). However, Smith et al. examined *all* speaking parts, no matter how small, so this figure does not accurately represent African American or Hispanic characters in significant roles. In fact, the authors of the Race/Ethnicity study mention that “many have claimed 2013 to be a renaissance year for Black actors in film” due to the critical success and audience reception of several films with larger African American casts (2014, p. 4). However, similar to Dr. Lauzen’s statement on the actual representation of women in film, Smith et al. found there had been “no meaningful change observed in the frequency of any racial/ethnic group on screen in popular films” in the last five years, and these high-profile cases are likely affecting the audience’s perception of racial representations (2014, p. 4).

The Great Mancession / Hecession

While movie screens have always been overtly dominated by white males, there is a possible cultural explanation for the surge in popularity of hyper-masculine superhero and action films in the last decade: The Great Mancession. Coined in 2008 during the nation’s financial crisis, the term emerged as a response to the disproportionate job loss in male-dominated fields over female-dominated ones. News and media outlets pushed the term and shared graph after graph of the closing employment gap between men and women (closing because of men’s job losses, not women’s gains). The idea was that the

factors that plagued men (higher unemployment than women, shorter life expectancy, lower education levels than women, etc.) led to a “crisis in masculinity” that was then translated in some parts of popular culture, particularly film and television (Albrecht, 2015). Hollywood films tend to operate within a (relatively fixed) spectrum of gender representations based on what is going on culturally at the time. Thus, waves of hyper-masculine, aggressive films have come before in the early ‘80s in a “post-Vietnam malaise,” and again after 9/11 (Albrecht, 2015). The man-cession of the late 2000s and most recent resurgence of macho masculinity in films happened to coincide with changing film technology and the popularity of the superhero movie. Redfern noted in 2012 that:

Decisions of producers are affected by recent box office history, [so they] will...simultaneously diversify their product in order to establish a unique identity in the market place, whilst also following a production cycle so as to avoid missing out on the current popularity of a particular genre. (p.2)

Enter *X-Men*, *Spiderman*, *Batman*, *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, the *Fast and the Furious* franchise, *Taken*, *James Bond*...the list goes on. All are “angry or embattled white male protagonists,” here to abate the so-called crisis of masculinity among America’s men (Christian, 2009, n.p.).

Objectification

Objectification Theory provides the theoretical framework for a majority of the research that has been conducted on the sexualization of women in the last decade

(Frederickson & Roberts, 1997). Frederickson and Roberts' research reveals that being female may create a shared social experience in that women are constantly exposed to the objectification of the female body and often internalize the observer's gaze, which affects their mental health (1997). Using Objectification Theory as a guide, Aubrey and Frisby (2012) examined body exposure and dress³ of female artists in their music videos to determine how self-objectification of artists varied between race and genre in a content analysis of the top 10 "Hot 100" Billboard songs. The average number of body parts shown by each artist was not significantly different between races (Aubrey & Frisby, 2012), but when these results are considered alongside research of advertising (*APA Task Force*, 2010) and television (Glascock & Ruggiero, 2004), these studies reveal: women are significantly more sexually objectified than men in the media; Caucasian women or women with lighter skin tones tend to be less sexualized than African American women and hold more power in the workplace; and revealing clothing, or lack of clothing, is the most common form of sexual objectification of women. There is little available concrete research comparing how women of different races are sexualized in film, however, authors Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper did touch on the issue in their 2014 study, "Race/Ethnicity in 600 Popular Films." The authors only looked at films from 2013 and defined sexualization as percent of women in sexualized clothing (tight or revealing attire) and percent of women with some exposed skin (between the mid-chest and upper thigh region) (2014). The study found that Hispanic females were the most likely to wear sexual clothing and to portray nudity, with Caucasian females being the second most likely (Smith et al., 2014). Further research should be conducted in this area to determine

how the sexualization of women of different races has changed over time, and how these portrayals influence the views of the audience.

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) defined sexual objectification as the amount of skin (provocative body parts) visible and measured the amount of skin along a dimension from least amount of skin to most amount of skin. Guided by Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) framework, and based on the past research of Aubrey and Frisby (2012), Hall, West, and McIntyre (2012), the APA Task Force (2010), and Hatton and Trautner (2011), the present study began with the intention to measure the amount of visible provocative skin on a sliding interval scale coded from 1-5.⁴ Because one actress may have the same body part exposed more than once in a film, the number of times each provocative body part is shown was measured on an interval scale, and also coded from 1-5⁵ (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; 2012). The context in which nudity is presented in film is important in determining the level of objectification that is occurring. Sometimes in film, sexual objectification can be misinterpreted as healthy sexuality (*APA Task Force*, 2010). So the context of the situation – whether the intention of the character showing the skin is sexual or nonsexual – is also noted for the study. Although there are many factors that affect the sexualization of a situation and how it is perceived by the audience, in order to keep the study concise and specific, only the visibility of the provocative skin, the intention with which it is shown, and how many times it is shown will be analyzed. Further research in this area should consider the visibility of skin in the context of the objectifying gaze, the character's intention or position of power in the scene, and other variables that may affect the context, such as drug use or violence.

As the original study focused on the sexualization of women based on race, the original hypotheses guided the methodology of the study and led to the research and findings that will be discussed later. They are presented here in that context.

H1: Caucasian women in film will be sexually objectified to a greater degree – they will have a greater amount of skin showing and more frequently – than African American, Hispanic, or Asian women.

H2: Leading characters will be more sexually objectified – having a greater amount of skin showing and more frequently – than supporting or minor characters.⁶

H3: Women will be sexually objectified to a greater degree, and more frequently, in later films than in earlier films.

Using Social Cognitive Theory as a guide for considering how different audience members may perceive women based on factors beyond visible skin, additional research questions were established to interpret any patterns that may emerge as the study progressed regarding the depiction of female characters when also considering movie genre and the actor's age.

RQ1: What level of sexual objectification of women's bodies (ranked on 1-5 interval scale) occurs most frequently in top grossing movies?

RQ2: In films where all the women belong to one race, which characters are sexually objectified to the greatest degree and the most frequently?

RQ3: Which film genre sexually objectifies women the most? The least?

RQ4: Do films of all ratings (R, PG-13, PG, G, NR) vary in their level of objectification between races?

RQ5: Which age range of actresses is sexually objectified the most in the top grossing films? Is this consistent across races?

Methodology

The sample used for the original content analysis of the sexual objectification (amount of visible skin) of leading and supporting female characters of the four major ethnicities comprises the three domestic top grossing, live-action movies from 2013, 2008, 2003, 1998, and 1993 (Aubrey & Frisby, 2012; Hall et al, 2012; Fowdur, Kadiyali, & Prince, 2012; Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011; Redfern, 2012). Top grossing movies were chosen as an indicator of audience preference and to avoid bias toward, or limiting the study to, any specific genre (Redfern, 2012). The movies were determined by their box office ranking with 1 being the highest-grossing live-action film of that year, and 2 and 3 being the 2nd and 3rd highest-grossing live-action films of that year, respectively (Redfern 2012). The chosen films are presented in Table 1. The five-year intervals over a 20-year span were chosen to show the change, if any, of depictions of women over time, while keeping the study concise in its examination of 15 films versus the 63 top grossing films from all the years between 1993 and 2013. I did not feel surveying all the top films from the two decades would provide a statistical difference in the data or the results due to the genres and casts of the films.⁷ Animated movies were not considered for the study because, while animated characters are often sexualized, the purpose of the study was to examine the amount of visible skin of real women, so only live-action movies were used

(APA Task Force, 2010). The 15 sampled films were obtained from Netflix and home movies.

Table 1 Top Grossing Films

Movie Title	
<i>Jurassic Park (1993)</i>	<i>The Matrix Reloaded (2003)</i>
<i>Mrs. Doubtfire (1993)</i>	<i>The Dark Knight (2008)</i>
<i>The Fugitive (1993)</i>	<i>Iron Man (2008)</i>
<i>Saving Private Ryan (1998)</i>	<i>Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the</i>
<i>Armageddon (1998)</i>	<i>Crystal Skull (2008)</i>
<i>There's Something about Mary (1998)</i>	<i>The Hunger Games: Catching Fire (2013)</i>
<i>Lord of the Rings: The Return of the</i>	<i>Iron Man 3 (2013)</i>
<i>King (2003)</i>	<i>Man of Steel (2013)</i>
<i>Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the</i>	
<i>Black Pearl (2003)</i>	

After all data was collected, it was to be analyzed in the following way: the number of times (coded 1-5) each type of provocative skin (coded 1-5) is visible, and in what context, would be calculated for leading and supporting characters separately, and for each race (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; 2012; Hall et al, 2012; APA Task Force, 2010; Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Eyal et al., 2014; Fowdur et al, 2012; Humes et al, 2011). Then three nonparametric Crosstabs would be used to interpret the results: the statistical significance of the differences between the ordinal variable amount of visible skin and the variable of race; the statistical significance of the differences between the ordinal variable amount of visible skin and leading versus supporting characters; and the statistical significance of the differences between the ordinal variable amount of visible

skin and each selected year from the 20-year span to determine how the amount of sexualization has changed over time. The findings of this study would add to the existing research of Objectification Theory by revealing how the sexual objectification of women in film varies between races, between races in different genres, and how these differences have changed over a 20-year span. The chart, which would measure each female character of significance in each film, is illustrated in Table 2 with rankings for Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013).

Table 2					
Measure of Objectification in <i>The Hunger Games: Catching Fire</i> (2013)					
Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) – Protagonist					
		Visible Skin		Implied Skin	
(Character Intent/Context)		Nonsexual	Sexual	Nonsexual	Sexual
1	Tight clothes/no visible skin				
2	Small-medium cleavage / bare upper thigh				
3	Heavy cleavage / partial abdomen				
4	Partial breast / full abdomen / partial buttock				
5	Full breast / full buttock				

Results

Table 3, (page 22) breaks down the data of the 15 films examined in the study. The table includes how many women were featured in significant roles, the studio that released the film, the rating, the genre, and the gender makeup of key behind the scenes

roles. The data revealed there were 41 female characters central to the plotlines; only two were protagonists. Two Hispanic women and three African American women were portrayed as minor characters, along with one African American supporting character. Women also represented only 14 percent of crucial production roles: 10 producers and three writers. Action/adventure movies are overwhelmingly represented in the sample, with the only diversity being among the older films.

Although the number of minority women represented in these films was too low to permit a statistical comparison of the amount of sexual objectification, the original hypotheses and the significance behind them can still be considered. The data supported H1, which stated that “Caucasian women in film will be sexually objectified to a greater degree – they will have a greater amount of skin showing and more frequently – than minority women.” This hypothesis was supported primarily due to the lack of minority women in the sample. This contradicts the findings of Smith et al., so further testing of a larger sample would need to be conducted to determine an accurate representation of the sexual objectification across races. The data did not support H2: “Leading characters will be more sexually objectified – having a greater amount of skin showing and more frequently – than supporting or minor characters.” The sample only revealed two leading female characters from the chosen years, and those two characters (Katniss Everdeen, played by Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games* and Dr. Ellie Sattler, played by Laura Dern in *Jurassic Park*) were two of the least sexualized women in the study. The supporting and minor characters were sexually objectified more often, and to a greater degree than the leading characters, but the significant observation is that in every film in the sample that involved sexual objectification, the “bit” and background characters were

the most significantly objectified. Bit characters may or may not have lines or interact with main characters, but they are not central to the story and if they were removed, the plot would not be affected. The majority of these examples took place in the context of the bit character participating in a sex scene with a leading or supporting male character, or interacting with a male character with whom she had had previous sexual relations. Women in the background were most frequently objectified in scenes involving a large group of people – namely: strip clubs, pools, and large dance scenes. The objectification was made explicit through the gaze of one or more significant male characters in the scene. The research did support H3: “Women will be sexually objectified to a greater degree, and more frequently, in later films than in earlier films,” but not to a significant extent. As previously cited by the *APA Task Force*, revealing clothing or lack of clothing is the most common form of sexual objectification of women, and the depiction of women in later films wearing more revealing clothing, more often than women in earlier films, is the only significant difference (2010). This could also simply be due to fashion trends of the times, as it was noted in the research that women in films from 1993 and 1998 were typically depicted in bulky or loose clothing, with high necklines and long hemlines (when compared to trendy clothing for women today).

Five of the 15 films in the study pass the Bechdel Test for women in movies, but only one film passes the People of Color Bechdel Test. However, most female characters in the selected films are more complex than *only* being identified by their relation to men or children. The two leading female characters, as well as the supporting characters Lois in *Man of Steel*, Rachel in *The Dark Knight*, Elizabeth in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and Niobe in *The Matrix*, are defined by their purpose or occupation while they also happen

to have a present love interest in the film. Minor female characters appeared to be represented the most often with no relation to men: Effie, Joanna, Prim, and Wirus in *The Hunger Games*, Maya* and Brandt in *Iron Man 3*, Faora in *Man of Steel*, Detective Ramirez in *The Dark Knight*, Irina** in *Indiana Jones*, Anamaria in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, The Oracle and Councilor Dillard in *The Matrix*, Co-Pilot Jennifer Watts in *Armageddon*, Mrs. Sellner in *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and Dr. Eastman and Poole in *The Fugitive*. In fact, most of the minor characters listed were identified by positions of leadership or high intelligence, or did their own fighting in action sequences. It is worth noting that two characters, Pepper Potts in *Iron Man 3* and Eowyn in *Lord of the Rings*, were technically defined by their relationship to their employer/boyfriend or father and potential husband, respectively, but both women participated in major action sequences, not by accident, and were also responsible for saving major male characters in the process. (Liv Tyler's character in *Lord of the Rings* could also be mentioned if looking at her character from previous films, but in the third film of the series, which is the only one in the sample, she is solely defined by her relationship with Viggo Mortensen's character.)

Another prevalent theme was the lack of diversity in the top grossing films. As previously mentioned, only six of the 41 significant female roles in the sample were women of color and of those, five were minor characters and only marginally significant, at best. It is also interesting to note that of the 16 significant roles played by men of color (15 African American and 1 Asian), there were four supporting characters (the rest were minor characters).

Table 3

Data from top grossing films 1993-2013

Year	Film	Rank	Protagonist	Female characters / race	Studio	Rating	Genre	Production
2013	The Hunger Games: Catching Fire	1	Female – white	One supporting female character, four minor female characters of significance – all white	Lionsgate	PG-13	Action / Adventure	Male director, two male writers, female producer
	Iron Man 3	2	Male – white	Two supporting female characters, one minor female character – all white	Buena Vista	PG-13	Action / Adventure	Male director, two male writers, six male and one female producers
	Man of Steel	5	Male – white	Two supporting female characters, two minor female characters – all white	Warner Bros.	PG-13	Action / Adventure	Male director, two male writers, three male and two female producers
2008	The Dark Knight	1	Male – white	One supporting female character – white, one minor female character – Hispanic	Warner Bros.	PG-13	Action / Adventure	Male director, three male writers, two male and one female producers
	Iron Man	2	Male – white	One supporting female character – white	Paramount	PG-13	Action / Adventure	Male director, two male writers, seven male producers
	Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	3	Male – white	Two supporting female characters – white	Paramount	PG-13	Action / Adventure	Male director, three male writers, two male producers
2003	The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	1	Male main characters – white	Two minor female characters – white	New Line Cinema	PG-13	Adventure / Fantasy	Male director, female writer, one male and one female producers
	Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl	3	Male – white	One supporting female character – white, one minor female character – Hispanic	Buena Vista	PG-13	Action / Adventure	Male director, two male writers, male producer
	The Matrix Reloaded	4	Male – white	Two supporting female characters – one white, one black, four minor female characters – two white, two black	Warner Bros.	R	Sci-Fi / Action	Two male directors, two male writers, one male producer
1998	Saving Private Ryan	1	Male – white	No significant female characters	DreamWorks	R	Action / Adventure	Male director, male writer, three male and one female producer
	Armageddon	2	Male – white	One supporting female character, one minor female character – both white	Buena Vista	PG-13	Sci-Fi / Action	Male director, three male writers, three male and one female producers
	There's Something about Mary	3	Male – white	One supporting female character, one minor female character – both white	Fox	R	Romantic Comedy	Two male directors, four male writers, two male producers
1993	Jurassic Park	1	Male and female co-protagonists – white	One minor female character – white	Universal	PG-13	Sci-Fi / Adventure / Horror	Male director, male writer, one male and one female producers
	Mrs. Doubtfire	2	Male – white	One supporting female character, two minor female characters – all white	Fox	PG-13	Comedy	Male director, two female writers, two male and one female producers
	The Fugitive	3	Male – white	Two supporting female characters – white, one minor female character – black	Warner Bros.	PG-13	Action / Adventure	Male director, writer, and producer

Discussion

Examining the top grossing films over a 20-year span revealed that women are seeing greater representation in roles valued for their intelligence, their strength, and their independence more frequently in later films than in earlier films, but that they are still not as well-rounded, or as important, as the men. As previously noted, these representations could be due in part to the influence of post-feminism, which would claim that the female characters in these stereotypical roles *chose* to be where they are. Post-feminist theory would say that Laura Dern's character in *Jurassic Park* (who is a brilliant scientist who does not rely on her husband) and Liv Tyler's character in *Armageddon* (who has a career because of her father's business, and is more focused on her romance with Ben Affleck's character than her own career or potential) are both equally feminist because they chose their own paths. Neither is more right or wrong than the other because neither was forced into her situation by an oppressive patriarchal system (mainly because that oppressive system no longer exists because the women's movement wiped it out, according to post-fem theory). Third-wave feminist theory, however, would say this is not correct because Laura Dern's situation is not the norm. Liv Tyler's character spends most of the film wrapped in Ben Affleck's arms, or crying over his absence, so the fact that she has a career and is an intelligent woman who stands up for herself against her father is all secondary to her character, and is therefore an emblematic representation of how women continue to be portrayed in film. So, while the argument can be made that women are being portrayed as more balanced and complex characters in later films, for those women who do appear on screen, gender stereotypes regarding personality characteristics as well as familial and career roles are still the norm in the most popular films. Another

interesting finding in examining the top grossing films from a 20-year span was the degree to which female characters are still vastly underrepresented, with the number of female protagonists falling four percentage points from 2002 to 2014 (Lauzen, 2015).

According to the *MPAA*, women have consistently accounted for the larger share of moviegoers than males every year since 2009 (2014). Yet, movie studios are, and have been, producing movies aimed at the 18-25 year old, white male audience, traditionally perceived as the largest movie-going demographic (Epstein, 2011). Redfern accurately noticed in 2012 that “action/adventure and fantasy films have come to dominate the US box office [over the past 20 years] at the expense of character- and narrative-driven films that used to be more popular” (p.10). This could be due in part to the fact that these action films are hyper-masculine and bring in the intended audience.⁸ In fact, the Nielsen Company reported in 2013 that 61 percent of *all* moviegoers over the age of 12 said action/adventure movies are what they prefer to see in theaters, not *just* white males. But part of the rise in popularity of these genres is due to changing production technology. The new special-effects based film technologies lend themselves to action/adventure and animated films, where exciting battle sequences or computer-generated imagery can create something never-before seen on screen (Redfern, 2012). Something else that lends itself to action films is cross-platform merchandising. According to an article released by Nielsen in 2013, the relationship between movies and video games is the strongest it has ever been. Producing films that can inspire video game adaptations has been seen to increase audience awareness about a film, and also creates the opportunity for cross-platform merchandising. It would be difficult to form a successful video game based on a

romantic comedy or a drama, but action and fantasy films are practically (and literally) made for it.

Despite the majority of the U.S. movie-going audience reportedly preferring action films, the fact is that the demographics of the audience are not being represented on screen. For example, with 77 percent of African American moviegoers reporting action/adventure as their favorite genre in 2012, they are 26 percent more likely than any other group to see this genre in theaters (Nielsen, 2013). Yet, African American characters (mostly men) saw barely more than a quarter of representation in action/adventure films in 2013 (Smith et al., 2014). Social Cognitive Theory tells us that the continued representation of women and minority characters in only supporting roles, or roles which are vessels to further the white male protagonist's story, sends the message to audiences that minorities and women are less important. Bussey and Bandura remind us that "basic messages conveyed [by the media] shape public images of reality" (1999, p. 696). And this study showed that these basic messages of underrepresentation, of the lack of capability from women and minorities, have been ingrained in the most widely-consumed films of the past two decades. The UK Film Council found that "these practices have serious implications for cultural role models, whereby the film tells the audience men are more important...and, whereas women [and minorities] are culturally devalued" (2007, p.71).

The information presented in this study matters, especially in the context of Social Cognitive Theory and Cultivation Theory, because these theories demonstrate that people, particularly young people, develop ideas of how they should behave, perceive themselves, and treat others through their interpretations of the media and film. For

example, Gerding and Signorielli examined television shows targeted at a “tween” audience and found that by labeling the shows as “action/adventure” or “teen scene,” they are automatically gendered to the audience and based on Social Cognitive Theory, perpetuate stereotypes of how boys and girls should interact (2014). So the media has the power to perpetuate negative views, but it can also influence positive change. After the release of the film *Billy Elliot*, there was an “increase in boys applying to ballet schools – suggesting that film can encourage different perspectives of masculinity and femininity and has the power to influence real-life decisions” (Bhavnani, 2007, p.123-124).

This study was limited in its small sample size and so this research could be expanded by examining a larger sample, over a longer period of time, to determine how representations of women have changed over time. Other factors to consider could be exploring exact genres and their target audiences, rather than blanket top grossing films, to determine the specific messages regarding race and gender those particular audiences are receiving. There remains a lack of research explicitly documenting how women are sexually objectified based on their race in popular films, and so those portrayals and how they affect audience perceptions still deserve investigation.

Conclusion

Gender and racial stereotypes in film are not dead, but they are making progress. The demographics of the audience and their actual preferences should be considered more seriously in production decisions to influence more positive representations and to be more inclusive to the national audience, not just the white males. Calling for a lack of, or turn away from, action/adventure films because they promote hyper-masculinity is not the answer. The answer is pursuing depictions that more accurately represent the

audience as a whole. “The ideal approach to female representation, is female representation. The lack of overall notable female superheroes and supporting characters therein is the issue” (James, 2013, n.p.).

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Footnotes

¹ The study by Dr. Lauzen examines the representations of female characters in the top 100 grossing domestic films, live-action and animated, of 2013. The protagonists were defined as the characters from whose perspective the story is told, and speaking characters included all major and minor characters (Lauzen, 2015).

² “Counter-cinema” here describes cinema which does not follow the operations of dominant cinema, which includes, as defined by Sarah Montgomery in *Women’s Women’s Films*: cinema directed by women and/or made to be of interest to a female audience (1984).

³ Dress was defined as various levels of bodily exposure: noting whether the artist had a fully (e.g., abdomen not at all covered by clothing) or partially exposed area of skin (e.g., cleavage and breast tissue exposed but nipples covered). Fully and partially exposed buttock, chest/cleavage, and abdomen, as well as fully clothed body parts were coded for (Aubrey & Frisby, 2012).

⁴ 1 = form-fitting clothing, very tight on provocative body parts/no provocative skin visible; 2 = bare chest with small-medium cleavage OR bare upper thigh; 3 = bare chest with heavy cleavage OR partially exposed abdomen; 4 = partially exposed breast tissue but no nipple OR fully exposed abdomen OR partially exposed buttock; 5 = fully exposed breast including nipple OR fully exposed buttock (Aubrey & Frisby, 2012; Hall et al, 2012; *APA Task Force*, 2010; Hatton & Trautner, 2011).

⁵ The total number of times each provocative body part is displayed by each leading and supporting actress will be measured on a sliding interval scale, coded from 1-5.

1 = never; 2 = one to three times; 3 = four to six times; 4 = seven to nine times; and 5 = 10 or more times (Aubrey & Frisby, 2011; 2012).

⁶ Fowler et al. conducted a study to determine racial bias in newspaper movie reviews by studying patterns of reviewers based on the racial makeup of the casts. To determine lead actors vs supporting actors, the authors examined the top five actors listed for a film on the film's synopsis page through Yahoo! Movies because the website uses a "harmonized system to determine the five most significant roles" in the film (Fowler et al., 2012, p. 10). For the present study, the major roles listed on Yahoo! Movies were used to determine leading and significant supporting characters while Colin Welch's definition of minor character – a character who complements a leading character, reveals something about the plot or a leading character, or moves the plot forward – was used to determine minor characters who may not be significant enough to qualify as supporting characters, but who still influenced the plot of the film.

⁷ Of the 63 films, minus the 15 already included in the study, five feature a female protagonist (two of those films being from the *Twilight* series, thus featuring the same protagonist), and only 10 films are not classified as action/adventure or fantasy/sci-fi. Of *those* films of a different genre, only one features a female lead: Kate Winslet in *Titanic*. Nine of the 63 films include an actress of color in a role of consequence. Multiple films from the same franchise (superheroes, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*) comprise the majority of the 61 movies ("boxofficemojo.com").

⁸ E.g.: *Iron Man 3* and *Man of Steel* brought in overwhelmingly male audiences of 58 percent and 60 percent, respectively, in 2013 (MPAA, 2014).

* Maya's previous relationship with the male protagonist is mentioned, but because this factor could be removed and the plot remain the same, Maya is still defined by her brilliance and for her scientific creation.

** Maya and Irina are officially supporting characters, not minor.