

Overlapping and Complicating: Analysis of the Effects of Experiments on Shaping Relationships between Female Characters in films on Feminist Attempts

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Abstract. Films involve a great number of stereotyped implications currently. For years, research on film studies and gender studies has been primarily focused on the transition of thread screenwriters, film directors, and editors could use for the creation of more real and inspiring female characters. However, few studies have focused on a fundamental structure of films, the relationships between characters. In 2020, scientists at the Ben Gurion University and Nottingham University Business School found a method to reveal links between characters appearing in the Star Wars Movies Series when they set out to find the closing gender gap in the Series. Although the 2020 study relied on network and machine learning algorithms in the largest part of the instigation, the methods it utilized are of pioneering endeavor because the social network between characters in the films was considered and weighted. To eliminate and seek out more positive effects films could have on feminist attempts, experiments on relationships between female characters are analyzed in this paper on a more literary level and accepts psychoanalytic and behavioral psychology. The methods utilized focus on implementing case studies on experimental attempts on creating overlapping and complicated relationships between female characters. This paper will also emphasize the inspiring 2020 study.

Keywords: Overlapping and complicating; relationships; film; feminist.

1. Introduction

Film characters are connected by their relationships with each other; thus, their identities set up in the network of relationships are of import, the same as people's identities in real life. However, problems are being raised by scholars that the identities in various kinds of relationships the characters have in films have gender stereotypes. One of these theories, which was raised by Irigaray, suggests that relationships happened mainly in a pattern of "homosexuality", in which men have multifarious bonds with men, but bonds established between women are highly repressed. As many argue that women's identities in films are generalized, the author observes that this could be related to the mono-angle, monotonous illustration of relationships between women. Because certain mimicking behaviors are universally found in humans, this could have a further impact on gender stereotypes applied in everyday life. However, more convoluted, multi-angled relationships observed in films, which are summarized as "overlapping identities" in this paper, are hypothesized to have an impact on gender stereotyping. Previous research focus on the limited roles played by female characters in films and the reinforced effect these roles could have on gender stereotyping.

This research focuses on the complexity created by overlapping or blurring the bonds films establish between female character-centered relationships. In the first part of section 2, the impact of the entertainment world on social life which could be implied in films by deductive reasoning will be explored; the next part of section 2 will focus on the fundamental relationships between female characters and how the relationships could be misrepresented. In section 3, a simulation model done by a previous study is explained both on the mechanism it is based on and on the results it yields. A case study originated from this study is also presented in section 3.

2. The basic fundamental of relationships between women established in films

2.1 The impact of films on reality

Highly specific relationship patterns between female characters are fundamentally the same as those of specific and deliberately shaped natures of female characters. Calculated agendas, (strong economics being the ultimate goal) and a lack of female producers and directors are the main reason why ordinary female characters and ordinary feminine relationships cannot be presented in a wide range of films. Furthermore, the lack of ordinary female characters and ordinary feminine relationships have similar effects [1].

Clumsy handling of “social justice” issues promotes the trend of monotonous character creations; in contrast, they altogether endanger the fundamental goal of the movement. Following the third wave of the feminist movement (born in the 60s and 70s), female characters appear as new forms on the screen, along with their interrelated circles.

The desires spectators emerged for characters in films create “shipping wars”, or various “Fandom”, resulting in the realized, popularized discussion of fictional affinity [2]. This involves character development and a sense of identification, which could be influential in the shaping of real-life characters in followers.

The second battleground supplied by powerful network connections increasingly shapes our enjoyment of media and greatly affects our consumption behaviors.

Ideology-driven productions of the paradigms of relationships within the female gender are correlated with pop cultures within certain regions, which seek to shape the values of societies. This type of production is more impressive and provides more polarized messages which may appear innocuous and thus hard to identify.

“Entertainment” and “imitation” are keywords linked and correlated among recent scientific studies. According to studies, what one watches and what one feels in conjunction would, in high possibility, be applied to the person's future behaviors, and the connection between action and emotion still exists. These imitations include expressions and, most fundamentally, languages in films. The chain effect that happens after is the emotional expectations, which bring the illusion to the audience about the real-life relationships they feel “obliged” to establish.

2.2 Types of simple stereotyped relationships established between women in films

2.1.1 Kindred relationships

Past filming of kindred relationships connecting female characters is limited and patterned. Lack of forms in relationships female lineage or connubial coalesces may be affected by the compacted domesticated environment.

For example, the analysis of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relation model in family ethics dramas specifically summarized three kinds of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relation models (by the time the study was conducted) increasingly popular family ethics drama in China [3]. The three are, namely, the “mighty mother and weak daughter relation model, conflict and fusion relation model, and harmonious relation model.” The study also reveals that the construction of the relationship models results from the need for propaganda regarding patriarchal supported women’s consciousness. Negative induced emotions outweigh positive ones, meaning more hostile relationships are established in the type of entertainment. And Levi-Strauss Claude suggested in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that emotional connections in marriage originate from ancient times when patriarchal tribes trade women as gifts [4]. It could be safely inferred that any strong emotions in matrimony relationships (now as legal forms) could present latent emotions between men.

However, research revealed that, in real life, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relation displays varied patterns according to the educational backgrounds of both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. In regard, to the simplified patterns created by TV entertainment are fictitious and misleading. Furthermore, the analysis of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations on screen might be applied

to further investigations into female kindred relationships such as sisterhood or mother-daughter relationships.

2.1.2 Contractual relationships

Contractual relationships in this paper include friendships defined as positive emotional interpersonal bonds and adversarial relationships defined as mutually hostile-dependent relationships. The point is that both friendship and adversary between female television figures follow a conformed pattern, conveying dull information: certain conscientiousness and emphasized viciousness. The late 20th century has seen a period of craze for violence against slum women. “She was seen as both a figure of pathos and a threat, a virtuous victim and vicious virago.” The need for women to be “viragoes” reflects the need for them to be “victims”, both of which are essentially associated with voyeurism [5]. The modern type of adversaries between female characters are believed to be repressed fights, and the aim of adversary creation transforms from voyeurism to pathological feminism propaganda.

Critics demonstrate the excessive adversary in the plot of *Ms. America* (2020), for example. Although it conveys strong cooperative force and opens the voice source of various streams for female figures of all ages and classes, the TV series was criticized for misrepresenting facts [6]. The over-portrayal of the anti-ERA movement led by Phyllis Schlafly represents historical wrongs by creating a pseudomorphic portrayal of the power of women. And it blames women for a historical debacle for humans.

2.1.3 Romantic relationships

Stereotypes about gendered movie preferences in romantic and melodramatic films include pair bonding and feelings of love, especially in same-sex relationships. Which, admittedly, however, have some extent of biological accounts [7].

Meanwhile, a seemingly paradoxical stereotype of homosexual relationships coexists, including the assumption of overestimating the effect of physical attractiveness on homosexual couples [8]. Certain stereotypes have won a place in the film.

3. Results

3.1 The establishment of the simulation model

In 2020, Dima Kagan, Thomas Chesney, and Michael Fire at the Ben Gurion University utilized named entity recognition (NER) in the analysis of interactions among movie characters [9]. They first connected their NER database with the IMDB character list database and then matched nodes (characters) if the time characters shown talking to each other is within a 5-second threshold. By extracting the characters’ names and creating links between nodes, they established over 15,000 movie social networks.

By using NER as the tool, they tried to detect the gender gap between major roles played in films and the difference in the roles’ interactions. Consequentially, they researched characters in the series of Star Wars movies between 1977 and 2018.

The research yielded results including three sections. First, the number of female characters is growing. Second, leading women's role is increasing. Third, only half of the movies in the Star Wars franchise passed the Bechdel Test [1].

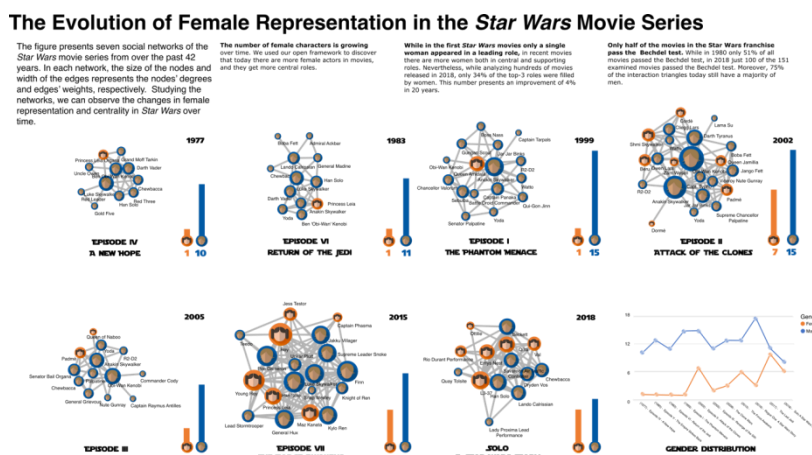


Fig. 1 The Evolution of Female Representation in the Star Wars Movie Series
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A pattern associated with connections between female characters is shown in the graph. The number of matching lines between nodes representing female characters is increasing. From the trend, female characters may decline their dependence on male characters in interactions. Instead, female characters have more direct connections through conversations.

3.2 Case Studies

3.2.1 Persona (1966 | Ingmar Bergman)

The enigmatic relationship established between Elizabeth and Alma is one of the most discussed and classic ones in film history. It pioneers the discussion of relationships between women through Avant-garde film apparatus. Specifically, the filming of faces. In short, the obscure pictures review obscure emotions, thus leading to more elaborate and diversified expressions of relationships between female characters.

The most well-known sequence, in which Alma accuses Elizabeth of the latter’s relationship with her child, includes the third and the most prominent cinematic apparatus even the actors and the director had never expected [10]. The sequence repeats twice entirely, the first-time showing Elizabeth listening, and the second time showing Alma speaking. Then at the closing of the sequence, their faces are cut up in half and stitched to one another. Indeed, Bergman’s women’s faces are not dull partly for their various kinds of presentation: covered faces, overlapping faces, and, in this case, half-half faces.

The intention of the sequence, though explained by many critics, could be concluded by one explanation: it shows the link between two identities. It evokes endless questions when the two hostile faces overlap, symbolizing Alma and Elizabeth’s some kind of fusing and emotional connection. At some point, Alma and Elizabeth lost their identities, or they give out their freedom of choice in identities by letting us choose who to look at as the monologue continues. But the cooperation of faces shows a sharing of identities, but the shared feature is hard to tell. While the problem arises about whether the care-taking identity Elizabeth has as a mother and the one Alma has as a nurse link with each other, another question arises: while Alma loves her job (although it could not be assured), Elizabeth seems to hate her child.

The analysis of the ending-scene sequence shows the result that the relationship identified between characters could be complicated and rich in connotations. The film blurs the boundaries between various kinds of relationships represented by traditionally categorized emotions, such as ambiguous affection representing love, hostility and indifference representing override, and mutual resentment representing rivalry within patriarchal construction. In her novel I Love Dick, Chirs Kraus declares that “being paradoxical, inexplicable, flip, self-destructive but above all else public is the most revolutionist thing in the world.” The empathy and reflection among the audience resulting from this ambiguous establishment are emphasized.

3.2.2 *Todo sobre mi madre* (All about my mother) (1999) | Pedro Almodóvar

Like in *Pain and Glory* (2019), Almodóvar successfully created flawed relationships between mothers and children: abrasive but tender. More importantly, sexual tensions are created between female figures: Manuela and Agrado (Antonia San Juan Fernández), Manuela and Lola (Toni Cantó). By causing “abnormality” in relationships and female-centered relationships such as motherhood, the film blurs the definition divisions of bearing and adopting, cis and trans.

Some interpretations explain Almodóvar’s attempt to create the plot with the absence of Esteban’s father, and then that of Esteban as choices of Manuela. Though Manuela seems impotent in avoiding any of her roles in her life, she could decide the relationships she has with people around her by mental processing [11]. Firstly, the relationship between Mother Manuela and her son Esteban itself rejects the presence of a father in the family, but this cannot be entirely interpreted by the Oedipal effect. Secondly, the moment the scene begins when Esteban writes in his notebook about his mother, Manuela, Manuela’s memory starts to create her bond with her son with the rejection of a father.

Although Manuela mourns her son’s death, she is somehow satisfied with the new relationships she establishes with strangers (Huma, Rosa, Agrado, and Nina), and the pain brought by her loss of her son does not create tension between those relationships. Manuela’s painful situation, which spreads throughout the film, is generated partly by her impotence to reconstruct her net of relationships. She struggles to get out of her relationship with Esteban, who, hard to deny that she loves. However, realizing that she could only be Esteban’s mother but not Rosa’s, she breaks down. And she even keeps her friendly relationship with Huma, who has a close bond with Esteban’s death, first as a personal assistant, and then as a close friend.

3.2.3 *Orange is the New Black* (Television Series) (2013-2019)

The analysis focuses more on the coupling in the TV series *Orange is the New Black*, but the overlapping relationships serve a latent import. Friendships (when turmoils require collaborations), adversaries (when the shortage of commodities and daily supplies emerges), the relationship between the principal and the subordinate (for factional struggles or collisions), and romantic relationships (vague or clear) are fused into each other.

Another statement suggests inmates in the Litchfield community serve most of the daily roles a real society has, which means that female characters are covering the qualities of intelligence and bravery. For example, when the turmoil starts, the rules and principles that run Litchfield are set up by various roles inmates play guards (Gloria Mendoza and her friends), doctors (Nicky Nichols and her friends), and even law draftsmen (Tasha Jefferson and her friends), etc. Although critics claim that *Orange is The New Black* violates normal rules inside a real-life prison and thus it inevitably created improper relationships in the series, progress in shaping social interactions between female characters is shown. The relationships between superior and subordinate are established in an environment with high regard for “kitchen, bathroom, and personal hygiene” [12], but there is separation from traditional family roles. In the series, the relationships between female inmates are set up within the discussion of daily matters, and as mentioned in earlier sentences, these relationships involve professional settings that are rare in previous daytime TV shows. Daytime TV series involve only 19% of the female characters identified as professional, compared to the scenario of male characters which was reported as 58% [13].

The presentation of women’s struggle in life in a world ruled by patriarchal principles and the space it creates without over-casting of men, though essentially controversial, is experimental for TV series. The effect of overlapping types of relationships on its success of it could have been underestimated.

The involvement of casts associated with minority groups and that of female casts are the results of more convoluted screen relationships between women. The need for tailored plot design for female characters and emotional projections requires the need for a more diverse camera crew. Improvement in future measures may include hiring more female directors, screenwriters, cameramen, and actors.

4. Conclusion

Except for bringing more female major roles, both Hollywood movies and feminist-tagged films are creating a more convoluted and obscure network of female characters. The data in the first part of section 3 reveals that in the Star Wars series, some weight has been shifted to the construction of the relationship web of female film characters and the analysis of three asynchronous representative feminist tagged films (TV series) shows the same trend.

Furthermore, these forms of interaction networks produce more diverse characters, emerge more sophisticated emotions, and generate more chimerical lines. As the result suggests, the variation in new attempts in experiments on relationships between female characters in films could consider overlapping the connections. This overlap means creating intricate relationships between women either by diversifying types of relationships or complicating the connotation behind relationships. For example, as the case studies in the second part of section 2 suggest, relationships that are experimental and are hard to define through mere reference to emotions or conventional language system was established between female characters in *All About My Mother* (1999) and relationships that are not precise if described as only one or two types are established in *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019).

This study also concludes that as an entertaining and promoting measure, films may have a bigger chance of encouraging relationships with more possibilities as the analysis based on communication psychology explored at the beginning of section 2.

5. Footnotes

[1] “To pass the test the film has to pass three criteria: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, (2) who talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man.” (See Kagan, Chesney and Fire, 2020).

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