This writing sample is an excerpt from a research paper I wrote for my

Anthropology class 'Mass Media and Culture.' I researched female stereotypes in

films and conducted my own analysis of three Oscar-nominated films and the top

three grossing films from 2012.

Women in Film:

Stereotypes of Female Characters in 2012

On November 6, four Swedish cinemas announced plans to grade movies

with the Bechdel test (Swedish cinemas, 2013). People are taking notice and

working to rectify the problems of the misrepresentation and the lack of

representation of women in films. Women are not fully represented as diverse and

complex characters in modern films; most female characters are only portrayed as

gendered stereotypes. Common stereotypes are the helpless victim, the sex object,

and the action heroine. If women are continuously depicted in films as these same

stereotypes, people can leave films with skewed perceptions of women. I analyzed

The Impossible, *Silver Linings Playbook, Zero Dark Thirty, The Dark Knight Rises, The*

Hunger Games, and *Marvel's The Avengers*. The films were analyzed for their general

portrayal of women and men and women's interactions.

The Bechdel test comes from Allison Bechdel's 1985 comic strip *The Rule*

from the book *Dykes to Watch Out For* (*Bechdel test*, 2013). In the comic strip, one

woman tells her friend that she has a rule about movies she watches: two named

female characters must talk to each other about something other than a man

(Bechdel, 1985). The comic strip then ends with the first woman commenting that

the last movie she saw was *Alien*, implying that it has been six years since a film has

passed her test (Bechdel). Many films do not pass the Bechdel test, including huge

successes such as *The Lord of the Rings, Star Wars,* and *Pulp Fiction* (Swedish

cinemas, 2013). The comic strip and the Bechdel test have continuously shown that

women are still outnumbered in films. But the problem of women's representation

extends beyond just the number of female characters on the screen. The

characterization of these characters must be considered as well. And typically,

women are portrayed as simple stereotypes. Gilligan wrote that women in film exist

"in a world of binary oppositions in which [they are] defined according to the

'other.' She is the good girl or the bad girl, the virgin or the whore, the 'tart with a

heart' or the girl next door, the mistress or the dutiful wife" (1996, 18).

The most common female stereotypes (helpless victim, the sex object, and

the action heroine) continuously appear in films today. However, they are not

typically complete or accurate portrayals of real women. These representations of

women are one-sided, unlike the complex, multi-faceted women that exist in the real

world. I wanted to see how prevalent these stereotypes were in films from 2012.

After carefully creating and revising a content analysis and questionnaire, I viewed

and analyzed *The Impossible*, *Silver Linings Playbook, Zero Dark Thirty, The Dark

Knight Rises, The Hunger Games,* and *Marvel's The Avengers*.

With varying degrees of success, all six films represented diverse female

characters. The most complex female characters would be Tiffany from *Silver

Linings Playbook* and Katniss from *The Hunger Games*. Tiffany displays a wide range

of emotions as she deals with her grief and mental illness while befriending Pat in

the film. Her motives make sense and she does not rely on men. Likewise, Katniss

from *The Hunger Games* also has a faceted personality and emotional range. Her

motives and actions make sense in the situations she faces. She works together with

people and forms relationships to survive the Hunger Games.

Maya from *Zero Dark Thirty* and Natasha from *Marvel's The Avengers* are fully

competent in a 'man's world' and are portrayed as equal to or better than their male

colleagues. Selina and Talia from *The Dark Knight Rises*, though both secondary

characters, have motives and break from some gendered stereotypes. *The Impossible*

is the least successful because Maria becomes silenced and passive in the second

half of the film, though she is strong and active in the first half. Unfortunately, the

viewers do not learn anything more about her beyond this.

For the most part, the analyzed films portrayed women positively. There

were several complex, flawed women as main characters. Some of the female

characters broke or transformed gendered stereotypes. A continuous thread in all of

the films was the lack of women though. While the quality of the character is

important, quantity is just as important. Women are half the population of the

world, but apparently not half the population of the screen. This lack of

representation needs to change.

Stereotypes come from assigning certain abilities and qualities to one gender.

Assigning qualities and/or abilities based on gender limits people and society

(Hills). The ability "to access a range of emotions, skills and abilities which have

traditionally been defined as either 'masculine' or 'feminine'" dismantles

stereotypes and empowers women (Hills, 39). There needs to be an emphasis on

multiple diverse characters from all areas of life. Chimananda Ngozi Adichie easily defined the problem of female representation when she said, "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete." Films with few women will only portray stereotypes. Multiple films with multiple women will present better and more full representations of women.

Through tests like the Bechdel rule, people have started to realize that women need better representation. However, there is still a long way to go. In the films I researched, there were positive portrayals of complex female characters, but there was still a severe lack in both quantity and quality of women. Though *The Hunger Games* is about a woman, there are only five named women compared to ten named men. This was the best ratio of all the films I analyzed and shows that there is still so much need for improvement. With better and more representation will come more nuanced views about women, both on screen and off.

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