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Kayla Marie Krahn

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Reel Women: Gender Stereotypes in Film

by

Kayla Krahn

Thesis

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Thesis Committee:

Tsai-Shan Shen, Ph.D, Chair

Dennis Patrick, Ph.D.

Michael Tew, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Horror films portray female characters as sexual, helpless victims. When horror films attempt to portray female characters as the hero, this sends a message to audiences that women can be strong and independent. An experiment was conducted to test an audience's perceptions gender stereotypes of women in the horror film, *Scream*. Results indicate that stereotypes present in the horror film effected the participants' perception of women as competent heroes. Female participants were also more likely to perceive women as more competent than male participants.

Then, from a qualitative standpoint, five individuals were interviewed about their perceptions of characters in their favorite films. These interviews helped give insight into why audiences continue to enjoy films even though mainstream films tend to overly exaggerate female stereotypes in most genres of film.

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According to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA, 2014), “more than two-thirds of the U.S./Canada population (68%) - or 227.8 million people – went to the movies at least once in 2013.” Audiences choose from hundreds of movies released each year, in hopes of being entertained.

With this many people going to the movies, it is important to look at the content of these films and how the portrayal of men and women affects the way the audience thinks about gender stereotypes and gender roles. Gender has been a way to divide the population into separate groups, making gender a way in which people define themselves (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). As social behaviors and cultural beliefs begin to shape gender into stereotypical categories, this is when research in these areas becomes important.

There are several reasons why the idea of gender stereotypes in film are still relevant for study in communication. Oliver (1998) states, “The fact that sex plays such a robust and recurrent role in viewers’ responses to media entertainment makes it a variable worthy of further exploration” (p. 47). According to Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008), “media consumption has a measurable influence on people’s perceptions of the real world” (p. 131). New research in the areas of gender stereotypes and film will always need to be updated in order to remain current as new films are released each year and as men and women continue to shape the way gender stereotypes influence daily life.

In trying to cover such a large area of gender stereotypes, I will break this investigation down into specific areas in film where examples of gender stereotypes are heavily prevalent, yet need more research. First, I will give a general background of gender stereotypes. Second, I will look at horror films influence gender stereotypes of

women and how that affects audiences. Third, I will look at how audiences' ideas about gender and pre-existing stereotypes affect how they watch films.

Background

Gender stereotyping has not always been a heavily discussed topic in the field of communication. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, thrust the subject further into the minds of those in the media by raising awareness on how women are depicted (Carrera, 2012; Mills et al., 2012). According to Hoffman and Hurst (1990), little is known about the origins of stereotypes and what factors lead to their content. "The content origin issue has been a much more difficult problem to conceptualize" (Hoffman & Hurst, 1990, p. 197). This idea that sex and gender are more complex than has been previously predicted is a huge part of ideas behind gender and gender stereotypes.

According to Eagly (1987), "gender-stereotype studies have shown that the majority of the beliefs that people hold about the differences between men and women can be summarized in terms of two dimensions, the *communal* and the *agentic*" (p. 16). Communal qualities are described by selflessness, concern for others, and a desire to be at one with others and agentic qualities are described by self-assertion, self-expansion, and the urge to master. Women are more likely to be categorized as communal and men are more likely to be categorized as agentic (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Hoffman & Hurst, 1990).

In the research by Eagly and Steffen (1984), their goal was to discover why women are more communal and men more agentic by looking at gender stereotypes in the workplace. They found that subjects perceived the described average men and

women stereotypically. Eagly and Steffan (1984) determined, “the content of gender stereotypes arises from perceivers’ observations of people’s activities and these activities are determined primarily by social roles, gender stereotypes arise when women and men are observed typically to carry out different social roles” (p. 749). The way people view each other in social settings, further enhances gender stereotypes when different actions and characteristics are observed.

What Are Gender Role Stereotypes?

The study of gender role stereotypes has been a prevalent area of study in the fields of psychology, sociology, and communication. Gender-role stereotypes are characteristics of gender in traditional representations that draw differences between typical “feminine” behaviors from typical “masculine” behaviors in society (Baker, 2007; Coyne et. al, 2014; Mayes & Valentine, 1979). Gender stereotypes can come in the form of characteristics such as: women are emotional, women are caring, men are strong, and men are the heads of the household. Gender stereotypes can also be in the form of occupational roles such as: women being nurses, secretaries, or daycare workers and men being firefighters, farmers, or pilots (Wilbourne & Kee, 2010). Some research has questioned whether gender stereotypes still exist in today’s society, yet others (Embry et. al, 2008; Mills et al., 2012) remain convinced gender stereotypes still exist, to some extent, in everyday life. If gender stereotypes are still noticeable in everyday life, it leads to the question of how these stereotypes come about.

According to Diekmann and Eagly (2000), “Gender stereotypes are thus emergents from role-bound activities, and the characteristics favored by these roles become stereotypic of each sex and facilitate its typical activities” (p. 1172). The everyday

activities of men and women in their social roles, lead to their individual social role categorizations of gender stereotypes. One influencing factor in defining and redefining gender and gender role stereotypes among individuals is the influence from media. Since cultural interpretations are a defining factor in the way society wants a woman to behave as opposed to how a man should behave versus how men and women think they should behave, it is important to discover how film has influenced these ideas.

As the trend of gender stereotyping in films continues, there is a need for more research in the area of these stereotypes in film. The few studies that exist are full of “what if’s” and calls for further study, specifically with children and young adults. Smith acknowledges this need in stating, “We must investigate how exposure to an imbalanced gender landscape affects boys’ schema for the female gender and vice versa (Smith, 2010, p. 784). Yet the adult moviegoer is not well represented in study on how these ideas affect them.

Women in Horror Films

According to Smith (2010), “It could be argued that during the last 15 years heightened awareness about gender equality has emerged in the entertainment industry” (p. 777). Horror films have always had an interesting way of portraying women. They tend to be the one genre where a woman can be the “hero” in the story, but also the glorified sex symbol and victim. The term “Scream Queen” came from the depiction of women as victims, who scream for help. Jamie Lee Curtis’ character in the *Halloween* movies is the prime example of a woman continually victimized and screaming for help while a “madman” is trying to murder her (Keisner, 2008; Walsh, 2010). Slasher films, a subgenre of horror cinema, have become synonymous with victimizing women using

lgraphic violence. (Linz & Donnerstein, 1994; Walsh, 2010). While there are some films that have broken the mold and attempted to show a woman as a strong character, she is still ultimately, a victim.

An example of this type of character is Neve Campbell's character, Sydney Prescott, from the *Scream* franchise. Sydney is characterized as smart, cunning girl with a troubled past, yet she is ever enduring. When the people in her life become victims of a ruthless serial killer, she becomes the perfect target: young, innocent, and attractive. Sydney proves to be stronger than the killer envisioned and in their final showdown, Sydney defeats the tag team of killers by electrocuting one with a television and shooting the other, several times (Weinstein & Craven, 1997).

This idea of a female making it to the end of the film is called "the Final Girl" character. The Final Girl comes from an idea by Clover, meaning she is the last to survive out of her fellow victims (usually her closest friends and even family) and will ultimately kill her attacker. How does this female make it to the end? By being a virginal, pure symbol of a stereotypical "good" girl. This communicates the audience that, if you have sex; you will be savagely murdered by the killer (Lizardi, 2010; Welch, 2010). According to a study by Cowan and O'Brien (2009), "Quantitative content analysis research has shown that "female non-survivors were frequently engaged in sexual behavior immediately preceding the slashing." This fact is made very clear in horror films. *Scream* mockingly made fun of it in the final standoff. One of the killers, Stu, says "That's right and now you're no longer a virgin. You gotta die – those are the rules" (Weinstein & Craven, 1997). Since Sydney had sex with her boyfriend, Billy (who is the other killer), she has to die in order to follow the "rules." These rules do not

hold male characters to the same standard. It is typically only the female character that is shown on screen having sex and then getting murdered.

It is also interesting to note that very rarely is a woman depicted as the killer in a horror film. There have been women as co-killers (*Scream 2*) or have some type of outside influence such as being a vampire, ghost, alien, werewolf or curse (*Let the Right One In*, *The Ring*, *Species*, *Ginger Snaps*, *Jennifer's Body*). Rarely is a woman depicted as a cold-blooded serial killer without an outside influence. Only Mrs. Voorhees (*Friday the 13th*) is a stand-alone female serial killer, though she is often overshadowed as a killer because all of the *Friday the 13th* films after the first featured her son, Jason, as the killer. Why is there such a small representation of women as murderers? Why can't men be the helpless victims, cowering in fear at the feet of a powerful, evil woman?

The portrayal of female characters in horror films will most likely never change. Horror films are all about shock-value and cheap thrills. Perhaps women will soon get equal representation as both the victim and the murderer. While not much can be learned about society through horror film (hopefully no one will have to live through an ordeal similar to that of a horror film), as a popular entertainment genre, it should represent both genders equally. What would be more terrifying than a female serial killer stalking her prey?

What are the lasting effects of all of this gender stereotyped media that is being consumed by audiences on a daily basis? There has yet to be a substantial amount of research made into just how the audience is perceiving these portrayals, especially when it comes to younger audiences. According to Smith (2010), "Exposure to such distorted "reel" world images may be having detrimental effects on youth's gender-role

socialization” (p. 774). According to Bigler (1992), “At the level of group analysis, children generally remember gender-stereotypic information better than counterstereotypic information although occasionally the reverse is observed” and “at the level of individual differences, children with relatively more stereotyped attitudes usually show significantly better memory for stereotypic than counterstereotypic information” (p. 352). Smith would agree with Bigler, “Children who watch skewed portrayals of males and females while they are developing cognitively may organize their view on gender into schemas driven by these stereotypes” (Smith, 2010, p. 783).

The effects of gender stereotypes on adults tend to be less severe than those on children as adults have most likely already developed their ideas on gender. “Zillma et al. (1986) determined that male and female enjoyment of horror films is a function of moviegoers’ level of attraction to companions of the opposite gender” (Nolan, 2000, p. 40). Since men and women both enjoy watching films for entertainment, they are often unaware of the underlying concepts of gender stereotypes that are being continually refreshed in their minds. According to Bleakley (2012),

“Repeated exposure to gender imbalance, sexual depictions of women, and violent depictions of men may affect gender-related attitudes and beliefs of young men and women as well as their normative beliefs about the extent to which their peers are engaging in sexual activity and violent behavior.” (p. 73)

The study Bleakley conducted concluded that 31% of the characters in top grossing films between 1950 and 2000 were female. The study by Lauzen concluded that films overrepresented young female characters between the ages of 20 and 30. When the viewing audience sees their age group not represented, the message is sent. While males are represented through all ages and in a larger amount of top grossing films, females are

drastically cast. These studies point to a trend in film that women need to be young or they will not be represented (Bleakley, 2012; Lauzen, 2010). The number of women as the main character or as the hero of the film was also significantly lower than their male counterparts. Men are more likely to be depicted as the hero character in most genres of film. This leaves questions about women in hero roles.

Study One:

H1: Individuals who watch the clip depicting women in a stereotypical role are less likely to view women as a hero than those who do not.

H2: Women perceive female characters as being more competent than men perceive female characters.

H3: Women are less likely to be influenced by the stereotypical clip of the female character and men are more likely to be influenced by the clip.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Two hundred and thirty-eight undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a mid-size Midwestern university were recruited in this study. The average age of participants was 19.49 ($SD = 4.57$), range from 18 to 62. Reflecting the composition of the university, 142 (59.7%) were females and 96 (40.3%) were males; 52.5% were Caucasian, 31.1% were African-American, 4.6% were Asian, 3.8% were Hispanic, and 8% were others. Of the 124 (52.1%) participants who were assigned to watch scenario A, 78 (62.9%) were females and 46 (37.1%) were males. Of the 114 (47.9%) participants who were assigned to watch scenario B, 64 (56.1%) were females and 50 (43.9%) were males. Depending on the course instructors' decision, participants

might receive extra credit for their participation. All participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without negative consequences, regardless of whether extra credit was given. They also were assured of anonymity.

Students were shown, in groups, one of two film clips depicting a scene from the horror film, *Scream*. The first film clip, from the beginning of the film, will show a female character in distress. This will be the control. The second clip, from the end of the film, portrays the main character, Sydney as the heroine who kills her attackers and is assisted by another female character, Gale. It is a non-traditional scene from a horror film. Subjects will then be asked to complete the same questionnaire. The questionnaire will gather information on the gender stereotypes subjects observed in the scene. A five point Lycart scale will be used to collect the data.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that individuals who watch the clip depicting women in a stereotypical role are likely to view women as less competent than those who watch the clip depicting women in hero. H1 was supported. A *t*-test was performed to compare the difference between two conditions. Results showed that individuals' rating on women's perceived competence differed across two conditions, $t(234) = -4.74, p < .001$. Individuals exposed to the clip of women as non-hero ($M = 3.29, SD = .63$) perceived women as less competent than were those who exposed to the clip of women as hero ($M = 3.64, SD = .46$).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that females are likely to perceive women as more competent than are males. H2 was supported. A *t*-test was performed to compare the

difference between genders. Results showed that there were gender differences in pre-test, $t(236) = 8.42, p < .001$, and post-test, $t(234) = 2.92, p = .004$. Females ($M = 4.03, SD = .44$) rated women as more competent than did males ($M = 3.53, SD = .47$) in pre-test. Females ($M = 3.55, SD = .63$) rated women as more competent than did males ($M = 3.33, SD = .48$) in post-test.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that females are less likely to be influenced by the clip of non-hero scenario than are males. H3 was not supported. A within-subject t -test was performed to compare the difference between genders across scenarios. As the results indicated, females' rating on women's competence between pre-test ($M = 4.01, SD = .44$) and post-test ($M = 3.31, SD = .70$) under non-hero scenario was significantly different, $t(77) = 9.14, p < .001$. Males' rating on women's competence between pre-test ($M = 3.58, SD = .50$) and post-test ($M = 3.27, SD = .51$) under non-hero scenario was significantly different, $t(45) = 4.95, p < .001$. Females' rating on women's competence between pre-test ($M = 4.06, SD = .44$) and post-test ($M = 3.84, SD = .36$) under hero scenario was significantly different, $t(62) = 3.43, p = .001$. Yet, males' rating on women's competence between pre-test ($M = 3.48, SD = .46$) and post-test ($M = 3.38, SD = .45$) under hero scenario was not significantly different, $t(48) = 1.84, p = .07$.

Since this study shows that audiences can be influenced by the stereotypes they see in films, the results hold up among similar studies. These results give a larger view of how films influence an audience. It is also important to look at this influence qualitatively in order to fully comprehend a film's influence on an audience.

Study Two:

The purpose of the second study is to get a glimpse at how an average movie-goer thinks about, relates, and incorporates the ideas from films into their daily lives.

RQ1: What do audience members notice about female and male characters in the films they watch?

RQ2: How do audience members relate stereotypes to female and male characters in the films they watch?

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study was meant to further the previous study, where we looked at how the audience was influenced by horror films, and look at what an audience member notices about films in all genres that they watch. These personal interviews take an in depth look at the things an audience member takes away from the film days, weeks, or even years after they have viewed the film.

Six participants were obtained through an ad on social media (i.e. Facebook). The six participants included three men and three women. Their age range was 21 to 29 years old. All six participants characterized themselves as watching movies on a regular basis. The only requirement to be a participant was to have a basic knowledge of films and watch them on a regular basis (i.e. once a week). The participants were asked to consent to audio recording of an interview. The interviews took place at mid-western university library in a private room. Participants were not informed of the questions prior to the interview. Participants' identities will remain anonymous and will only be known as

Participant 1-6. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Participants were given code names to protect their identities.

Results and Discussion

Participants were asked about their favorite films, favorite female characters, and favorite male characters. The specific details of these films and characters that participants can easily recall give us a glimpse at what audiences notice. It is important to note, participants noticed female characters more thoroughly than male characters.

What makes a female character interesting to you?

When looking at female characters, participants spoke about strong, funny women who ‘kick ass.’ They spoke about memorable characteristics in their favorite characters.

Jennifer explained her preference to Emily Blunt’s character, Rita, in *Edge of Tomorrow*:

“I liked her because she was not this kind of helpless woman, she was this badass character teaching Tom Cruise how to pretty much survive and there was a hint of a romantic relationship but I really liked the fact that she didn’t give in and fall in love with him in the end, it just made her more badass.”

Jennifer favored this character because she wasn’t a traditional “helpless woman.” Rita taught her male counterpart to fight and survive in the alien warzone and she didn’t succumb to his charms, as many female characters would have. This idea of a ‘badass’ female in action films is starting to become a larger occurrence as audiences start to see that women, as well as men, can fight crime, wars, aliens, or even their closest friends.

Nick chose Beatrix Kiddo aka The Bride played by Uma Thurman from *Kill Bill Vol 1 & 2* as one of his favorite female character. Beatrix embodies similar characteristics to Rita:

“She is a total badass and she is just full of revenge and I think she could have been a woman, she could have been a man, she could have been anything. She’s driven by revenge and I think that is why I like her so much.”

Revenge is an effective plot strategy in many films. Though, it is interesting to see a female character driven by murderous revenge. This makes Beatrix a fascinating character because she embodies the ‘badass’ qualities the participants value in their favorite female characters.

Another quality the participants favored in female characters was intelligence. Female characters are portrayed as doctors, lawyers, law enforcement, or any other field that requires more than just looks. While women are shown in the same career choices in men, the character is often paired with a male counterpart to make her look smart, but not too smart. One of Lawren’s favorite female characters is Dr. Ellie Sattler, played by Laura Durn, from Jurassic Park:

“Dr. Sattler is a great character because she is one of the few mainstream women scientists who isn’t just like ‘oh I’m a sexy lady that they put glasses on and a lab coat’ you actually believe that she’s studied what she’s studied. She’s a paleobotanist, so she’s studied prehistoric plants and stuff so she knows all about them. She is knowledgeable about dinosaurs and stuff and she is put on an equal level with her male counterpart, Dr. Grant in the film so I think that’s pretty rare too because she’s not just there to be a love interest or make him look smarter. She’s equal to him and they have a pretty interesting relationship too.”

It is refreshing to see a female character have a different role in the film. For instance, Michael explained one of his favorite characters:

“That one movie about the woman who was a lawyer and sued the companies that were poisoning those families, Erin Brochovich, that was the woman. I like her because she was smart. She thought about the case differently than all of the actual lawyers and she helped all of those people. Plus she was sassy and didn’t let anyone push her around. It made for a really good movie.”

It is interesting to see a female character playing the role of someone who has more to offer the plot than just being a love interest. Romantic comedies have long been from the woman’s point of view. In recent films, women have been more than just the

beautiful woman who has no other goal in life than to find a man. Movies like *No Strings Attached*, *The Ugly Truth*, *Friends With Benefits*, *Love Actually*, *New Year's Eve*, and many more within the last ten years have featured women worrying about more than just finding the right guy. Amy finds the characters Katherine Heigl plays to be the most enjoyable to her:

“I like a lot of characters that Katherine Heigl plays like Abby from *The Ugly Truth* or Jane from *27 Dresses* or Jen from *Killers*. Her movies are typically romantic comedies but she always plays a really successful woman in addition to being beautiful and smart. I like her characters because I can relate to wanting to be smart and successful but not scare away guys. She shows that you can have both.”

It is interesting to see how participants seem to use the characters in the films they watch to think about their own lives and their ideas about what it means to be a woman.

What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be feminine?

Participants were asked what it meant to them to be a woman and what it meant to them to be feminine in order to evaluate if they thought differently about film characters as they did real people and whether or not they could distinguish between sex (male/female) or gender (masculine/feminine). When it came to defining what it means to be a woman, the male participants had jokingly negative stereotypical responses:

Nick: “They have to be in the kitchen at all times. Just kidding. I think women should be independent. She shouldn't have to rely on anyone. I feel like if she is a good cook, cooking qualities are awesome because I can't cook.”

Michael: “Periods, menstrual cycles, beauty, fashion, and also being a mother.

When joking was put aside, the male participants seemed to share similar ideas to the female participants.

Nick: "I feel like a lot of women I meet nowadays are just much more intelligent than me. I feel so dumb compared to some women and I feel like that's a good trait to have. Women can just handle so much more."

Michael: "Women have a nurturing quality that most men could never have. They are just so strong to deal with everything it takes to be a female today."

The female participants all had positive stereotypical comments about women.

Jen: "I just love women. They are powerful. I think they are strong and I think we are as close as you can get to whatever God that people believe in because we create life. I appreciate that in women."

Amy: "A women has similar qualities to a man. She is respectful, intelligent, and acts like a lady. That doesn't mean she's weak. A woman is mentally strong. She cares for others and thinks about herself last."

Lawren: "Women kick ass. You have to hold up to everyone's expectations of what you need to be. Like, whether you have to be a mom, and if you're not a mom then 'oh you probably need to be married and have kids soon' or whatever, whatever, whatever. But on top of that, you also have to go above and beyond in whatever work you do just for people to notice you. So that's what I think about, someone who is very hard working and probably emotional because we have feelings."

These three participants all felt that women are strong, intelligent, independent, 'bad-asses.' These observations fall in line with Study One where female participants were more likely to view women as competent in a hero role than male participants.

Participants were then asked what they think about when they think about what it means to be feminine. A few of the participants had a difficult time distinguishing between the previous question about being a woman and felt that woman and feminine went hand in hand:

Michael: "Well I think about the same sort of things. Nurturing and beauty and being girly. I think we all associate masculine with man and feminine with women."

Nick: "I think about all the stuff that women do. Shopping and tanning and wearing dresses. I know it sounds awful but it's being a feminine female."

When it comes to looking at what it means to be feminine, participants seemed to be in agreement about one thing. They all described being feminine as being “soft.”

Jen: “I think with femininity comes the ability to be intimate with others. I think there is more openness to be intimate even if you are being sexual with the other women that femininity is something you always have. I think it’s a softness, just overall softness, outer softness, not weakness, if that makes sense.”

Nick: “Being feminine is to be soft. Not weak but just that softness that women have that makes them so appealing.”

Lawren: “Well I think being feminine means being softer. You know, maternal. Whether that means with children or kind of like with nature like having more of a connection to your feelings or being empathetic.”

Amy: “Feminine to me mostly refers to physical appearance: well-dressed, like a lady. Wearing just the right amount of makeup without coming off as a whore. It’s just that softness. You can be feminine and also have masculine characteristics but to be feminine you need the right amount of softness.”

Michael: “I think soft. Like, you know, the opposite of masculine. I think not weak. Feminine wouldn’t be weak.”

It is interesting that while being feminine means being soft, each participant had an indescribable meaning. Soft did not mean weak. It is interesting that all of the participants used this particular way to describe characteristics of being feminine.

Looking at the interviews, it is apparent that there is a correlation between film and gender stereotypes. It is also apparent that audiences enjoy watching films even if they depict a female character in a negative stereotypical role. Lawren said it best in her response:

“A lot of characters are just an exaggerated characteristic. Like this person is a hopeless romantic so the only thing they do or think about is finding love. I think it all comes down to how you feel when you watch the movie. That’s how you think about things afterward.”

Films can affect people differently depending on all kinds of things. How one feels when they are watching the film may have an effect on what one takes from that film. If an

audience member is upset, their take away from a film may be completely different from a different audience member who is happy as they watch the film. This leads to the questions: Do films influence audiences, or does the audience influence the types of films that are made?

Conclusions and Future Study

Overall, horror films and other genres are making an attempt to move away from gender stereotypes. While they have a long way to go, they will still have a waiting audience ready to see what new ideas could be brought about in the entertainment industry if gender norms are done away with on a grand scale.

Until these changes have been made, further study in the area of gender stereotype effects on audience members need to be conducted. More in depth interviews about how participants react to stereotypes in films could really help flesh out different ideas on how stereotypes affect audiences. In learning that there is a correlation between gender stereotypes in film and perceptions of women in real life situations, it is important to expand our knowledge of these effects.

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