

RUNNING HEAD: Relationships and Film

Unhealthy Views on Relationships: A Content Analysis of Top-Grossing and Bechdel Films

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April 19, 2011

### Abstract

This content analysis of film focuses on the themes of relationship style and relationship repair in two groups of film from the years 2000-2009. Top-grossing films from these years were compared with other films from the same years that passed the pop-culture Bechdel Test of female roles in film. The Bechdel Test states that a film must (a) have at least two female characters with names (b) who speak to each other (c) about something other than a man. The two lists of films were examined for themes of relationship style- based on Franiuk, Colten and Pomerantz's (2002) theory of soul-mate vs. work-it-out relationships. Soul-mate relationships were more common in the top-grossing film list than in the Bechdel film list. It was believed, and observed, that holding a soul-mate theory of relationships would lead to less observed relationship repair in the event of a conflict when compared to work-it-out relationships. This content analysis was conducted to examine how unhealthy or simplistic views of relationships are perpetuated in mainstream film.

## Unhealthy Views on Relationships: A Content Analysis of Top-Grossing and Bechdel Films

“At their most basic [Tony Scott, Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer’s] movies weren’t movies, they were pure product- stitched-together amalgams of amphetamine action beats, star casting, music videos, and a diamond-hard laminate of technological adrenaline all designed to distract you from their lack of internal coherence, narrative credibility, or recognizable human qualities.”  
(Harris, 2011)

Mark Harris, a noted film critic and author, made that point about the modern film industry: a defined lack of coherence, storylines, or human emotion in big-budget, top-grossing blockbuster films. He argues that the summer blockbuster is now a new species of film, as compared to the classic era films prior to the rise of the summer blockbuster in the 1980s. Rather than encouraging creativity and originality, Harris says, the movie studios have now focused on creating films that will sell in large quantities (Harris, 2011b). This has the potential for some rather serious consequences for the modern-day moviegoer.

The summer blockbuster is a category of film that offers excitement, action, and noise, but often –unfortunately- very little character development or relationships. The summer movie season is not the time for character-driven story-based films, but rather films marketed toward the younger end of the film-viewer spectrum- films based on comic books, children’s books, and animated films (Harris, 2011b). These films, as well as the big-budget, special effects action films, generally have high total domestic and foreign gross, which in turn encourages the film studios to produce more of these films. Often, these films are male-driven, meaning the main character as well as many of the supporting roles are male, because it is believed that “female-driven movies aren’t usually blockbusters, and studio heads don’t see them as repeatable”. This is to the detriment of the adult drama; a genre which produces arguably the more creative and realistic films (Harris, 2011b). Adult dramas, as well as some adult comedies and romances, are often more story-driven and closer to life, as well as more likely to be female-driven, meaning

the main character as well as many of the supporting roles are female. They rely less on computer generated images and more on dialogue and character development. However, these films are often difficult to market, which therefore leads to poorer theater performance and box office earnings.

Adult dramas not only differ from action blockbusters in their storylines, but also possibly in their audiences. Banerjee, Greene, Krcmar, Bagdasarov, and Ruginyte (2008) found that men, on average, preferred high-arousal films, meaning action and horror films, while women reported enjoyment of low-arousal films, meaning dramas and romances. The high-arousal films were characterized by the excitement of the viewer, while low-arousal films were characterized by the general relaxation of the viewer (Banerjee et al., 2008). This may indicate that men are less likely to watch adult dramas- which in comparison to action films are significantly less exciting. Women, however, enjoy lower-arousal films, but, according to Harris and others, are often less likely to view these films in theaters (Harris, 2011a). If a film cannot be “sold” within the first week of its release to theaters, meaning that it can generate significant box office earnings, studios often do not want to produce it (Harris, 2011b).

### *The Bechdel Test*

Perhaps as a result of movie studios’ reluctance to make female-driven movies on the basis that they do not perform as well as male-driven movies, it seems that there are fewer and fewer female characters in film at all. This has been noted by many people, dating back to the late 1980’s by Alison Bechdel in her popular comic “Dykes to Watch Out For”. In one particular comic (See Appendix A), titled “The Rule”, a character states that she will only go to a movie if it fulfills three rules: a) there must be two female characters with names who b) talk to each other

c) about something other than a man. This has turned into something of a pop-culture phenomenon, as well as a commentary on the modern film industry. Various forums discussing films that pass these three rules have been established on the Internet, and the story was also picked up by several entertainment magazines as well as other news outlets . Fulfilling these rules does not automatically make a film better or feminist-friendly, but rather more equal to women in casting choices. As Harris states, “If the Bechdel Test had suddenly landed in Hollywood with the force of law, it would have seriously jeopardized five of last year's 10 Best Picture nominees. If we'd rewritten the rule to apply to men, it would have seriously jeopardized...um...let's see...*Precious*” (Harris, 2010).

The overall message of the Bechdel Rule is that there are not enough women in today's films, and that when there are women in the film who talk to each other, too often their conversations revolve around men and relationships. It also implies that when women do appear in film, they do not merit a name or as much character development and interaction as men do in the same film. As Jennifer Kesler interpreted the Bechdel Test, it is a way to highlight the fact that females do not get important roles, because these roles go to males. “Female characters are traditionally peripheral to male ones. That's why we don't want to hear them chatting about anything other than the male characters: because in making them peripheral, the writer has assured the woman can't possibly contribute to the story *unless* they're telling us something about the men who drive the plot”. This point is crucial to the Bechdel Test, as well as the point that if men are allowed to be complex characters whose lives do not revolve around their relationships, women should be able to be as well.

To relate the Bechdel Test to the rise of the summer blockbuster, it is often difficult to find a summer film- one not targeted at teen girls, that is- that passes these three rules. The films that do

pass the rules often do not gross as much in the theaters, nor are they released in the summer. Many films that do not fall into the summer blockbuster genres are reserved for smaller fall or winter releases, and then do not gross as highly as the summer films. For instance, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* and *The Holiday* were both released to theaters in 2006. *Pirates* was obviously a summer blockbuster- released in July- while *The Holiday* was a December release. *The Holiday* passes the Bechdel Test while *Pirates* does not. *The Holiday* grossed just over \$205 million in theaters while *Pirates* grossed over \$1.06 billion . This, as well as other examples of films released in the same years, seems to support the idea that the films that gross highly in theaters do not pass the Bechdel Test.

### *The Impact of Film on Audiences*

Looking only at theater gross, blockbusters are viewed by more people than adult dramas. The messages in these blockbuster films are systematically different from the messages in the adult dramas in many ways. It is important to examine the messages that are perpetuated in blockbuster films because they may have a drastic impact on those who view them. According to the theory of Social Learning developed by Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961), film can be used as a method for people to learn through modeling. Modeling is a method of observing others in order to form new ideas of how behaviors should be performed. Therefore, using Social Learning Theory, people who view blockbusters and other films model their behavior after behaviors they have seen from characters in films.

Other research on the impact of films on the behavior of humans has been conducted, particularly looking at how films can change the beliefs and thoughts of the audience. Dine Young (2000) found that viewing films can lead “to a change in the viewer’s thoughts, attitudes,

or beliefs.” He also found that films can “give an ideal for which to strive” and can be internalized to the point that they become “equipment for living”. The effects of violence in the media have been widely examined by psychologists, educators, even the United States Government. The effects of violence in the media on the behavior of children and young adults is especially important, because many studies have found that youths who view violence in films- and other media- have been observed to have more aggressive behaviors, thoughts, and emotions than those children who do not view violent films. Building off of this belief that violence in media can affect the behavior of children and young adults, we believe that images of relationships in film can also affect the behavior of those who view them. In fact, Shapiro and Kroeger (1991) found a significant positive correlation between popular romantic media viewing and dysfunctional or unrealistic views on relationships. There was an observed trend that married women were less satisfied with their current intimate relationships if they viewed more romantic popular media. This may be due to the women’s ability internalize the images of romantic relationships.

### *Relationship Style and Repair*

The images of romantic relationships are influenced by how relationship style and repair are shown in film. Relationship style refers to the method of the relationship: whether the couple is a good match or a bad match, a pairing of love or convenience, love at first sight or growing attraction, etc. Relationship repair is best defined by how the couple overcomes problems in the relationship including arguments, jealousies, betrayals, etc. The treatment of women in top-grossing films is affected by the films’ treatment of relationship style and repair. Johnson (2007) found that films display unrealistic images of relationships in general. Using popular wedding

films, a genre that focuses solely on the image of the relationship, Johnson found that wedding films propagate several myths about healthy relationships, including “Your perfect partner is cosmically predestined, so nothing/nobody can ultimately separate you”, “Bickering and fighting a lot mean that a man and a woman really love each other passionately”, and “All you really need is love, so it doesn’t matter if you and your lover have very different values” . These ideas follow a theory of human relationships posited by Franiuk, Colten, and Pomerantz (2002), who theorize that in romantic relationships, people fall into two styles: soul-mate or work-it-out . People who follow soul-mate theory are more likely to believe that there is only one person in the world that they are meant to be with and with whom they can have a satisfying relationship. On the other hand, work-it-out followers believe that there are many people with whom one can have a successful relationship, and that building a successful relationship relies on the work one puts into it. Their research found holding a soul-mate theory of relationships was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction and relationship length. This suggests that people who hold a soul-mate theory- and therefore would agree with the three myths mentioned by Johnson- are less likely to report being satisfied in their relationship, and their relationships are often shorter than people who hold a work-it-out theory.

The style of relationship often influences how conflicts will be resolved in that relationship. Johnson found that bickering and fighting was common in romantic relationships on film, but that this was never displayed as a negative relationship trait, rather a characteristic of a pairing that may be cosmically predetermined (Johnson, 2007). If this is also displayed in actual human romantic relationships, this could lead to a lack of relationship repair when conflicts occur. For example, a person with a soul-mate theory may be less likely to work on repairing rifts in the relationship because they feel the relationship is either destined or doomed. In fact, they are more

likely to report perceived agreement with their partner when they believe they are with “The One” . This does not indicate that the conflicts are actually solved, but rather that a soul-mate theorist will report agreeing with their partner because they are destined to be together. Marriage and Family counseling research has indicated that in order to successfully repair a relationship after a rift has occurred there must be communication and the desire to repair the relationship. A narrative of the conflict must also be present in order to overcome the problem, meaning that both partners must discuss exactly what occurred as well as the emotions associated with it. This indicates that the work-it-out theory is preferable because it emphasizes overcoming problems and working through conflicts. However, work-it-out theory is not as favored in films about relationships as the soul-mate theory is, even if it is the healthier option. Therefore, relationships are displayed as being destined or doomed, and often the partners in these relationships are displayed in exaggerated ways.

### *This Study*

How do these three aspects- relationship style, relationship repair, and women- interact in popular film? This study aims to answer those questions. If in fact blockbuster films are providing an overly simplistic or skewed view of relationships and women, and the audience is internalizing these views, then they may be more likely to be manifested in actual relationships. This study aims at discovering trends in how these skewed views of relationships and women are displayed in these blockbuster films. Because the Bechdel Test criticizes the portrayal of women in film, this was used to help identify exactly how top-grossing films may be biased in their portrayals. The Bechdel Test highlights the aspects of real life that blockbuster films lack or distort- the purpose of women and their conversations.

Using films that pass the Bechdel Test as a comparison, top-grossing films from the years 2000-2009 were examined to answer four questions. How are female characters displayed, and do they follow set formulas? What is the main purpose of the female character (i.e. sex object vs. mother-figure)? When there are relationship rifts, are there also relationship reconciliations, and are these reconciliations shown? Ultimately, do these films follow the work-it-out theory or the soul-mate theory?

### Methods

Thirty films were analyzed by both researchers. The films were split into two groups, the “Top-grossing list” and the “Bechdel list”. All films were released between 2000-2009 in the American market. To maximize the number of independent observations, all sequels were removed from each list. In the top-grossing list, only the highest grossing film of a franchise was examined, and in the Bechdel list only the first of each franchise was examined. For a list of each film analyzed and its respective total gross earnings, see Appendix B and C.

The top-grossing films were chosen from the list of the 50 top-grossing films for the decade of 2000-2009 . As stated before, all sequels were removed from the list and were replaced by the next-highest grossing film. Films targeted mainly toward children or films that had children as the main characters (i.e., the *Harry Potter* franchise, the *Chronicles of Narnia* franchise) were excluded, as the researchers wanted to focus primarily on adult relationships and interactions. There were some films that were considered for analysis that had teenagers as the main characters or were targeted toward teenagers (i.e. *Mean Girls*, *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*), however, in these films, the teenagers were all over the age of 16, and therefore were considered “adult”. The relationships in these films were also more adult in nature than

relationships between children, so they were considered for analysis. These relationships were considered more adult in nature due in large part of the sexual inclination and emotional intensity of the relationship.

The “Bechdel list” was chosen using a pop culture “test” developed from a comic drawn by Alison Bechdel . This “test” is used to identify films which feature women prominently. These films are not necessary “‘good’ or feminist friendly”, but they do pass the three rules in the Bechdel comic (The Bechdel Test, 2010). The three rules of a Bechdel film are that the film must

- 1) Have at least two female characters with names who 2) talk to each other 3) about something other than a man. These conversations between female characters can occur only once in the film (i.e., most conversations between female A and female B are about their male partners, but they have one conversation about female A’s occupation).

The “Bechdel list” group of films was chosen using a forum-style website (The Bechdel Test), in which forum members outline how each film passes the three rules. The researchers chose the films from this forum using specific criteria: the film must be targeted toward adults, it must pass all three rules completely, it must have had a wide theater release in the United States, and it must have been released in the years 2000-2009. Top-grossing films were avoided with the exception of *Mamma Mia!*, which was #39 on the 50 top-grossing films list . The two lists were kept separate from each other, that is to say that the top-grossing list was chosen based on how much it grossed, regardless of if it passed the Bechdel Test, and the Bechdel list was chosen based on passing the Test, regardless of total gross. However, there were no films on the top-grossing list that passed the Bechdel Test.

All 30 films were viewed by both researchers at the same time. Each researcher took independent notes, focusing only on adult female characters with names. Only significant female characters were analyzed. The working definition for “significant female characters” included

both lead and supporting characters in the film. A lead female character is the female character that is featured most in the film (i.e., the heroine, the romantic female lead, etc). A supporting female character was deemed significant only if she fulfilled one of two requirements: a) she has conversations with the lead female and also has significant conversations with at least one other named character, OR b) the role of the supporting female is important to the plot of the film

The researchers developed a coding manual based on all of the categories observed during the films. After a trial film (*He's Just Not That Into You*) was viewed, the researchers refined the coding manual based on themes that were of interest, mainly the relationship style and relationship repair in each film. The genre of film, the age, race, importance of role, marital status, occupation, purpose of the character (i.e., sexual figure or relationship figure), and personality traits were noted for each significant female character, as outlined in the Character Review Sheet. For each significant female character, the interactions and relationships with other significant characters were also examined. These relationships were outlined in the Overall Character Interaction Sheet. See Appendices D, E, and F for detail of the Character Review Sheet, The Overall Character Interaction Sheet and the coding manual.

The relationships between characters were noted, and any changes or developments in the relationship were also noted. In order to examine relationship repair between characters, any changes and conflicts as well as resolutions were documented. The frequencies for each category of the Character Review Sheet and the Overall Character Interaction Sheet were tabulated and themes were drawn from these frequencies.

## Discussion of Results

This study focused on recognizing themes that recurred in films, rather than measuring the content of these films. Because of this, we decided to use qualitative analysis rather than quantitative to give us the ability to go into more detail with the themes we observed. Qualitative analysis also gave us the ability to go into the films we observed without too many restrictions so that we could find new themes that we had previously not considered.

There were some results that were not too surprising. Because of the nature of the films that passed the Bechdel Test- those films that had at least two named female characters who talked to each other about something other than a man- we expected to have more female characters in the Bechdel films as well as more interactions between characters. As stated in the methods of this study, we only examined the interactions between named females with other named characters. We did find that there were more main named females in the Bechdel films ( $N=22$ ) than in the top-grossing films ( $N=20$ ). There was one film, *War of the Worlds*, that had no adult female character. There were also more than double the amount of interactions in the Bechdel films ( $N=61$ ) than in the top-grossing group ( $N=30$ ). In the top-grossing interactions, only one interaction was female-female, while in the Bechdel films there were 26 female-female relationships.

After the film we used as our trial, we realized that one interesting difference between top-grossing films and the Bechdel films was their treatment of relationship conflict and repair. We noticed that in our experiences with other films there was a trend to avoid showing how exactly a relationship was repaired. We decided to compare how conflicts were treated in both groups of films.

We found that in the 15 top-grossing films there were a total of 10 unstable relationships, all of which were romantic relationships. As it turned out, there were only heterosexual romantic

relationships, but we also observed unstable platonic relationships, although unstable platonic relationships were only observed in the Bechdel list films. “Unstable” in this context means that the relationship experienced drastic changes and fluctuations during the course of the film. An example of an unstable relationship was the romance between the characters of Jane and Kevin in *27 Dresses*. They begin as acquaintances- they meet at a wedding, after which he mocks her while she is openly hostile. They begin a flirting relationship, which develops into a sexual relationship. The main conflict is caused by a newspaper article he wrote about her, and after he apologizes, they reunite and later marry. In the Bechdel films there were 26 unstable relationships, 17 of which were romantic relationships. The difference in ratio of romantic to platonic unstable relationships in the two groups is most likely due to the large difference in the number of relationships in each group of films.

Only examining the romantic relationships, we decided if the relationship was repaired or not. To be called “reconciled”, a relationship must be an unstable relationship that returns to its previous high point. For example, the relationship between Bella and Edward in *The Twilight Saga: New Moon* is reconciled because some time after they break up, they reunite and return to their previous romantic relationship. This film was part of the top-grossing list, and it was one of 5 relationships that reconciled. The Bechdel list had 19 total relationship reconciliations, but 2 of these relationships were platonic.

The most interesting difference between these relationship reconciliations was the difference in how the reconciliations were shown in the films. We decided that “shown” reconciliations needed to have communication and desire to repair the relationship, as discussed in Johnson, Makinen and Milliken (2001). Therefore, a “shown” reconciliation, for example, the reunion between Carrie and Big in *Sex and the City*, in which Big writes love letters to Carrie, which

leads to him admitting his faults in their relationship and Carrie admits to hers as well, ultimately leading to their marriage. An “unshown” relationship reconciliation was displayed in the relationship between Kate and Jackson in *2012*. The pair, who is divorced from each other in the film, reunites romantically after Jackson lives through a supposed suicide mission. They bicker and fight throughout the film, giving the impression that they hate each other, but after this one heroic act, the relationship is miraculously repaired and all of their problems evaporate. Using theories from marriage and family counseling, the “shown” relationship reconciliations are healthier for couples and lead to more satisfying and longer lasting relationships. In the top-grossing films, of the 5 relationships that were reconciled, none of those reconciliations were shown. In the Bechdel films, however, 15 of the 17 romantic relationships that were reconciled were shown.

All of this, the relationship stability and reconciliation, culminates to the relationship styles exhibited in the films. We used Franiuk, Colten and Pomerantz’s (2002) theory of soul-mate and work-it-out relationship styles to assess which category the relationships we observed fell into. We assessed only the successful relationships in the films. These relationships could be unstable, but they must reconcile. In the top-grossing films there were 12 soul-mate couples. There were two work-it-out couples, the couples of Ray and Mary in *Hancock* and Rachel and Harvey in *The Dark Knight*, but it was interesting to note that both of these couples were overshadowed in the film by the woman’s supposed soul-mate, Hancock and Bruce, respectively. In both of these films the main conflict in the relationship between the work-it-out pair was caused by the relationship with the soul-mate. However, it is also interesting to note that both women rejected the soul-mate relationship in favor of the work-it-out pairing. In the Bechdel films there were 12 work-it-out pairs and only 4 soul-mates. There was no overlap in reconciled relationships in the

Bechdel list. There are overlaps in relationships, or rather there are multiple relationships for the female character, but ultimately the female chooses only one to reconcile with in the film. For instance, in *The Devil Wears Prada*, the character of Andrea has relationships with both Nate and Christian, and both relationships are unstable, but she ultimately only reconciles with Nate.

Using Franiuk, Colten and Pomerantz's (2002) findings that soul-mate relationships are negatively correlated with relationship length and relationship satisfaction, we believe that soul-mate relationships are the less healthy type of relationship for several reasons. At the heart of the theory, soul-mate relationships are destined or doomed from the beginning, which does not allow for growth and change as the relationship progresses. Correlation, of course, does not imply causation, but using this "destined or doomed" mentality, it explains why soul-mate relationships are shorter and less satisfying than work-it-out relationships. If a person believes their relationship may be doomed from the beginning, they will not work to overcome rifts that may occur.

Soul-mate vs. work-it-out theory grew from the theory of destiny belief vs. growth belief in relationships. This theory is similar to the soul-mate vs. work-it-out theory, but this theory is applied before the relationship begins. From first impressions, a destiny-belief holder can decide if a relationship will be worth pursuing. In contrast, a growth-belief holder recognizes that relationships will change over the course of time, and that obstacles in a relationship can help it grow and progress. In film, destiny belief is expressed as "love at first sight". And, while love at first sight may work out in the movies, it often does not translate into real life. An example of destiny belief is the relationship of Vesper and James in *Casino Royale*, while growth belief is shown in the relationship of Novalee and Forney in *Where the Heart Is*. It is established that Vesper and James know relatively little about each other at the beginning of their relationship,

but after a very brief hatred of each other, they leap into a relationship regardless. Novalee and Forney, however, let their relationship develop despite the problems they encounter.

The differences between Novalee and Vesper's relationships may be related to their primary purpose in the films. Vesper is a classic example of a sex object, whose sole function in the film is to be attractive and sexual. Novalee, on the other hand, is the main character of her film, and her primary purpose is her family, in fact the entire film revolves around the changes in Novalee's life with her young daughter. Novalee is a mix of the stereotypical "career woman" and "housewife". We divided the primary purpose of the female character into five categories: sex object, family, relationship, occupation, and "other" purpose. The character may fulfill additional purposes in the film, but only the primary purpose was assessed. A sex object character, like Vesper, exists only to be attractive and has very few other qualities. Family characters, like Novalee, exist because of their roles in their families, which may be mother, daughter, sister, niece, etc. Relationship characters are defined by their romantic or platonic relationships with other characters. These characters may be The Wife, The Girlfriend, or The Best Friend. Characters in the occupation category were defined through their profession, such as being a writer, an art specialist, a nurse, etc. Any characters that did not fit into the previous categories were sorted into the "other" purpose category. For a break-down of the frequencies of each category in the two groups, see Table 1.

Primary Purpose	Top Grossing	Bechdel list
Sex Object	4	0
Family	8	5
Relationship	4	6
"Other" Purpose	0	2
Occupation	4	9

*Table 1.* Primary purpose of female characters

The most intriguing finding in the purposes of the female characters is that the only sex object characters were in the top-grossing films. To repeat, this is only the primary purpose of the character. There were at least six characters in the Bechdel films whose secondary or tertiary purposes were to be sex objects, but they all had more important roles to play in the films. It was intriguing for us that there were more occupation characters in the Bechdel films because of the genre of most of these films. Many of these films were romantic comedies, which would lead one to believe that the women in these films would be defined by their relationships. However, we found that there were a large number of single female characters in the Bechdel films.

Relationship status was of course very important to our investigation of themes in these films. We found that most of the films had relationships that developed as the plot progressed, but that there were also some films that began with established relationships. We only examined the relationship status at the outset of the film, therefore theoretically, a character could begin single but by the end of the film be widowed. We divided the relationship status into eight categories: single, dating, engaged, married, separated, divorced, widowed, and not stated. The only interesting trends that we observed were in the single and not stated categories. Levy (1990) found that in Oscar winning films from 1920-1990 the relationship status of a female character was usually stated within the first two minutes of the character's introduction. We believed that in the Bechdel list of films there would be at least some characters whose relationship status was never mentioned, because these films do feature women as the main characters. However, the opposite occurred. There were six characters whose relationship status was not mentioned, and all of these characters were in the top-grossing films. We believe that these characters' relationships were not mentioned because this detail about the character was not important for the plot or character development. For example, in *Casino Royale*, the character of M is shown

in one scene to be sleeping in bed with a man, but it is never mentioned who this man is or why he is in her bed. It is never mentioned because it is simply not important for the character or the plot. However, the characters who are single often mention that they are single very quickly after their introduction. We found 18 characters in total that were single, 6 of which were in the top-grossing films. These characters, especially in the Bechdel films, are often single because the film is the story of how they came into a relationship. In fact, there are only two characters, Eowyn in *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* and Dylan in *Charlie's Angels*, who begin single and are still single at the end of the film. The occupation of these characters may also influence their relationship status.

Looking at only the single and not stated characters, most of the single females have a job outside of the home. Of the single characters, there are three characters that have no occupation, and two of these characters are too young to be married or have a career. Levy found similar results, stating that career women were typically single and that "it is impossible for women to combine successful careers with satisfying family or personal life". The images of what occupations women hold in film, as well as the images of how career women are treated, are important to recognize, because they can affect how young women and girls view their future vocations. In films directed at teenage girls, it has been found that substantive skills, such as hard work to develop a talent, are unusual, and more often than not the main character is given her dream through the hard work of others, often her father. By extension, the images of characters that have a career but no relationship are negative to the viewers, especially young women who want to have families.

## Conclusion

Based off of Social Learning Theory, it can be assumed that the large numbers of people who view top-grossing films are being influenced by the images of soul-mate relationships in these films. Because of the nature of soul-mate relationships, this leads to less growth in intimate romantic relationships and may possibly also lead to shorter and less satisfying relationships. In contrast, the people who view the Bechdel films may be more inclined to follow work-it-out relationships, which according to marriage and family counselors, is the more healthy and beneficial relationship view to hold. Work-it-out relationships acknowledge that fights may occur in relationships, but that communication and desire to repair the relationship helps the couple overcome problems and grow past them.

This study was limited by a few factors that were not able to be examined. It was noticed after the fact that there were some female characters that only existed to act as exposition for the story. These characters, for example Sofie in *The Da Vinci Code*, had very few conversations that did not involve the main character explaining something to them. It would be interesting to examine these types of characters in other films to explore possible gender-related biases or trends. However, since this trend was only noticed after the films had all been viewed, it would have been difficult to go back and examine possible exposition characters that were not initially recognized. This may also be related to the fact that there were only two researchers who viewed all thirty films and coded them. Perhaps if there had been more researchers to code these films, some different themes would have been more apparent.

Perhaps the biggest limitation, and the one that would be most interesting to explore in another study, was the fact that this study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative research worked best for what we wanted to accomplish, the discovery of themes of relationships in film, but this method did not give us any idea of how actual people internalize these themes. We can only

assume- using past research as our guide- that the images that we observed could lead to unhealthy or unrealistic views of relationships, but it would be intriguing to conduct an experiment measuring the actual viewership of these films as well as people's actual views on relationship style and repair. It would also be interesting to compare the films that people view the most (for example, a girl who had viewed Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* more than one hundred times) with the messages that they have internalized from films, and how these films have impacted their view of relationships.

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Appendix A



*The Rule* (Bechdel, 2005)

## Appendix B

Top grossing	Total foreign and domestic gross (IMDB.com, Inc)
Avatar	\$2,782,359,986
Lord of the Rings: Return of the King	\$1,119,110,941
Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest	\$1,066,179,725
The Dark Knight	\$1,001,921,825
Spider-man 3	\$890,871,626
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen	\$836, 297,228
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	\$786,636,033
The Da Vinci Code	\$758,239,851
2012	\$769,679, 473
The Twilight Saga: New Moon	\$709,827, 462
Hancock	\$624,386,746
Casino Royale	\$594,239,066
War of the Worlds	\$591,745, 540
I Am Legend	\$585,349,010
Iron Man	\$585, 174, 222

## Appendix C

Bechdel list	Total foreign and domestic gross (IMDB.com, Inc.)
Mamma Mia!	\$609,841,637
Sex and the City	\$415,253,641
The Devil Wears Prada	\$326, 551,094
What Lies Beneath	\$291,420,351
Charlie's Angels	\$264,105,545
Erin Brockovich	\$256,271,286
Miss Congeniality	\$212, 742,720
The Holiday	\$205,135,324
27 Dresses	\$160,259,319
Mean Girls	\$129,042,871
Finding Neverland	\$116,766,556

Confessions of a Shopaholic	\$108,333,222
Resident Evil	\$102,441,078
Under the Tuscan Sun	\$58,878,723
Where the Heart Is	\$40,863,718

## Appendix D

Character Review Sheet  
 Research on female conversations in film  
 Kit Riddle and Natasha Guffey  
 Based on the model provided by Dr. Skip Dine Young

## Character Review Section

- A. Name of Reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_
- B. Name of Film: \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Genre of Film (circle one):    **Drama**              **Comedy**              **Action** **Romantic** **Comedy**  
**Other**
- Comments:
- D. Film list (Circle one): **Bechdel list**              **Top-Grossing list**
- E. Name of Character: \_\_\_\_\_
- F. Importance of role (circle one):              **Lead**              **Supporting**
- G. Age of character (circle one): **under 20**      **20-30**      **30-40**      **40-50**      **over 50**
- H. Race of character (circle one):      **Cauc.**      **Afr.-Am.**      **Hispanic**      **Asian**  
**Other**
- I. Professional affiliation of character (circle one):      **No occupation stated** **No occupation stated**  
**occupation**      **Traditional Female Role**      **Housewife/Mother**  
**Corporate**      **Other**
- Comments:
- J. Primary purpose of character (circle one):      **Occupation**      **Family**  
**Sex object**      **Relationship**      **Other**
- Comments:
- K. Relationship status of character (circle all that apply):      **Single**      **Dating**  
**Engaged**      **Married**      **Separated**      **Divorced**  
**Widowed**      **Not stated**
- L. Main personality traits (circle one of each pair):      **Introverted/ Extraverted**  
**Warm/ Cold**      **Conscientious/ Irresponsible**      **Emotionally stable/**  
**Emotionally unstable**      **Intellectual/ Non-intellectual**  
**Mature/ immature**

## Appendix E

## Overall character interaction

For character \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_

A. Name of secondary character in conversation: \_\_\_\_\_

B. Gender of secondary character:      Female      Male

C. Most common conversation intent of main character(circle no more than 2):

<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Bickering</b>	<b>Hostile Argument</b>	<b>Flirting</b>
<b>Comforting</b>	<b>Confiding</b>	<b>Whining</b>	<b>Relationships</b>

D. Most common conversation behavior of main character (circle no more than 2):    **Sexual**

<b>Intimate</b>	<b>Power</b>	<b>Helping</b>	<b>Neutral</b>
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E. Most common clothing choice of main character:    **Seductive**    **Non-seductive**

F. Most common body posture of main character:                  **Open**                  **Closed**

G. How often do main character and secondary character agree and disagree in conversation intent?

a. Agree: \_\_\_\_\_

b. Disagree: \_\_\_\_\_

H. How often do main character and secondary character agree and disagree in conversation behavior?

a. Agree: \_\_\_\_\_

b. Disagree: \_\_\_\_\_

I. How often do main character and secondary character agree and disagree on clothing choice?

a. Agree: \_\_\_\_\_

b. Disagree: \_\_\_\_\_

J. How often do main character and secondary character agree and disagree on body posture?

a. Agree: \_\_\_\_\_

b. Disagree: \_\_\_\_\_

K. Was there a shift in the relationship between main and secondary character?    **Yes**    **No**

Cause of shift:

L. Was the relationship stable between the main and secondary character?    **Yes**    **No**

Describe changes in relationship:

M. Do the main and secondary characters reconcile (return to previous relationship)?    **Yes**

**No**

Describe cause of reconciliation:

N. Was there a shift in the clothing choice of main character?    **Yes**    **No**

a. Direction of shift:    **Seductive to non-seductive**    **Non-seductive to seductive**

- O. Was there a shift in body posture of main character?      Yes      No  
 a. Direction of shift:      **Open to closed**      **Closed to open**

## Appendix F

### Instructions for Completing Character Review Sheet Research on Women's Conversations in Top-Grossing Film Natasha Guffey and Kit Riddle Based on the model provided by Dr. Skip Dine Young

Definition of "conversation": A conversation is any verbal interaction between two characters that consists of at least four lines- at least two lines per character. Interactions between more than two characters should be considered "discussions" and are categorized differently. For the purposes of this study, discussions will be disregarded. Therefore, only conversations between two characters will be examined. The requirement that at least two lines per character is necessary to distinguish actual conversations from passing remarks. For example, a five minute conversation between Becky and Jenny about Jenny's husband is distinguished from Becky commenting that Carol's hair looks nice and is also distinguished from the conversation at an AA meeting.

Only the conversations of major named female characters will be examined. These characters must have a name that is stated within the first 5 minutes that they are on screen. In the event that the character is a major character but does not have a name (i.e., in "Kill Bill", The Bride is not given a name until much later in the film) the character will be referred to by the listing in the credits. Therefore, in most films we will only examine the main female character and the main supporting female character(s). Supporting female characters will only be analyzed if they (a) converse with the main female character and have other significant conversations OR (b) play a large enough role in the plot to be deemed significant. A "significant" supporting character, for example, is displayed in "Titanic" in the character of Molly Brown. While Molly does not

significantly converse with Rose, the main female, she does play a larger role in the overall plot, especially with the character of Jack, and therefore is significant. Only the conversations with other major characters will be examined. Conversations between the main female character / supporting female character and both male and female characters will be examined.

A Character Review Sheet should be completed for each significant female character, as described above. In the event that there are no significant female characters in a film, a review sheet should be filled out with only the title of the film, genre, and film list, and a note should be made that there are no significant female characters.

### **Character review section**

- A. Name of Reviewer:** Include your first and last name
- B. Name of Movie:** Use official title of film
- C. Genre of Film:** Choose one of the four options that best applies to the film being reviewed. If a film fits into two categories, or into a category not provided, choose the option which best fits the film.
- D. Film list:** Choose option for which film the examined film is chosen from. The Bechdel list comes from the list of films which pass the Bechdel test; the Top-grossing list includes 15 films from the top-grossing films of 2000-2009.
- E. Name of Character:** Include character's full name if provided. If no name is provided, the billing of the character in the film credits should be used.
- F. Importance of Role:** Choose "Lead" or "Supporting". A character may be considered a "Lead" if she has the longest screen time of any other female character. A "Lead" female character does not have to be a lead character in the film. "Supporting" characters must

fall into one of two categories: (a) she must converse with the lead female character and have other significant conversations with main named characters, OR (b) she must be significant to the overall plot and/or character development.

**G. Age of Character:** Four categories are given. Estimate the best fit for each character. In the event that the character ages throughout the film, choose the age in which the majority of significant interactions occur.

**H. Race of Character:** In most cases the appropriate classification will be evident through appearance or through other context cues. In the event of multiracial or non-human characters, choose “other” and describe in the comment section

**I. Professional Affiliation of Character:** The main occupation of the character, chosen from six categories. This is the social role most applicable to the character, for instance a character who is a nurse, but who spends the majority of the film being a mother and housewife would be categorized as only a mother and housewife. Secondary occupations should be mentioned in the comment section. The title of the formal occupation should also be mentioned; i.e., a therapist would be classified as “corporate” but in the comments, the reviewer would mention that she is a therapist. “Traditional female role” means any role that is usually associated with females occupying it, i.e. nurses, teachers, prostitutes/dancers, etc. that is a profession outside of the home. “No occupation stated” should apply to a character in which it is assumed that they have an occupation outside of the home, but that it plays no significant role in the plot of the film. Characters that do not fall into any of these categories or who do not have an occupation, assumed or otherwise should be placed in the “other” category. Any character given an “other” distinction should be explained in the comment section.

J. **Primary purpose of character:** Choose the option which best fits the character for the majority of the film. This should be the answer to “why” this character is in the film. It should be the identity of the character. If a character is defined by her occupation, “Occupation” should be chosen. If a character is defined by her family (i.e., being a wife, mother, sister, or daughter) “Family” should be chosen. “Sex object” should be given to any character who is blatantly sexualized (i.e. Halle Berry in “Catwoman” in which her costuming was designed to be seductive). “Relationship” should be given to any character that is defined by her romantic relationship, excluding marriage (i.e., the Girlfriend, the Fiancée). “Other” is given to any character that does not fit into the other categories. In the comment section, describe the primary purpose of the character using terms from the film, as well as any changes in purpose (i.e., a character begins as a sex object but becomes family-oriented at the end).

K. **Relationship status of character:** Choose any status that applies, as stated at the beginning of the film or the beginning of the character’s introduction. “Single” is someone not in any type of romantic relationship; “Dating” is someone in a relationship, but who is not engaged or married; “Engaged” should be blatantly stated (i.e., refer to partner as “Fiancé”, engagement ring on finger); “Married” is someone who is married and not separated; “Separated” is married, but not living together (estranged); “Divorced” should not be married; “Widowed” is formerly married, but spouse is deceased while still married; “Not stated” is a character who has no relationship status mentioned in the film at any point. A character may be multiple categories, such as a widow who is remarried—this character should be categorized as “Widowed” and “Married”.

L. **Main personality traits:** One option should be chosen from each pair.

- a. **Introverted/ Extraverted:** An introverted character is shy, reserved, quiet, while an extraverted character is outgoing, friendly, personable
- b. **Warm/ Cold:** The overall mood of the character when interacting with others. Warm characters are compassionate, involved, open, while cold characters are distant, withdrawn, and stoic
- c. **Conscientious/ Irresponsible:** This describes the character's outlook on life. Conscientious characters are aware, careful, and thorough, while irresponsible characters are flippant, messy, and foolish
- d. **Emotionally stable/ Emotionally unstable:** Emotional state of the character for the majority of time. Emotionally stable are reasonable, thoughtful, and constant, while emotionally unstable are irrational, tempestuous, and volatile.
- e. **Intellectual/ Non-intellectual:** Overall apparent intelligence level. Intellectuals are interested in learning, bettering themselves, appear intelligent. Non-intellectuals are disinterested in learning and appear to be unconcerned with intelligence.
- f. **Mature/ Immature:** Level of behavior of character. Mature are adult, appropriate in responses, tactful, and fully developed in personality. Immature are adolescent in behavior, sometimes childish in mannerisms or method of speaking; they appear to be thoughtless in their actions and behavior.

**Overall Character Interaction Sheet:** One Overall Character Interaction. At the top of each Overall Character Interaction Sheet, the primary character's name should be stated as well as the title of the film.

**A. Name of character in conversation:** This should be the full name (if possible) of the character the reviewed character is conversing with. In the event that the second character does not have a name, or does not have a name stated, the credit billing should be used.

**B. Gender of character in conversation:** Choose male or female. In the event of a character identifying with one gender but being biologically of the opposite sex, choose the gender the character identifies most with.

**C. Most common conversation intent of main characters:** Circle no more than two applicable themes for the average conversations as displayed by the main character in the conversation. Neutral conversations have no depth, are unrelated to the characters' personal lives. Business conversations would also fall into this category. Hostile argument and bickering are differentiated based on tone and feeling behind the argument. A hostile argument is angry, usually using raised voices, while bickering is annoyed, mild irritation, or teasing. Flirting conversations are conversations with sexual or flirtatious overtones. Comforting conversations exhibit normal comforting behavior. This includes conversations about mourning, illness, etc. Confiding conversations are intimate conversations in which one character confesses or confides in the other. Whining conversations are conversations in which one or both parties complain about life circumstances, other people, jobs, etc. Relationship conversations are conversations about romantic relationships only.

**D. Most common conversation behavior of main character:** Choose all applicable categories as displayed by the main character in the conversation. Sexual behavior includes flirting behavior, physical touching that moves beyond platonic touching. Also consider voice tone (i.e. lower vocal range than normal), and sensual eye contact. Intimate behavior is platonic or non-sexual behavior. Physical proximity, eye contact, and platonic touching (i.e., hugging, one arm across the other person's shoulder, etc). Any behavior in which there are no sexual overtones and both parties are comfortable should be considered intimate behavior. Behavior in which one or both parties have differing power should be categorized as "power" behavior. This includes behavior where one individual appears larger than the other (i.e., the female character draws herself in while the male character makes himself appear larger), tone (i.e. condescending tone) should be considered, as well as eye contact (i.e. one character avoids the other's eye contact). Power behavior may be aggressive or dominant by one character and submissive by the other character. "Helping" behavior can be described as helpful behavior as well as needing help. Characters who display helping behavior ask for help and offer help without provocation. "Neutral" should be chosen in the event that there is no overt behavior displayed, or for behavior that does not fall into the previous four categories. In the comment section, describe the behavior.

**E. Most common clothing of main character:** Choose "seductive" or "non-seductive".

**F. Most common body posture of main character:** Choose "Closed" or "Open"

**G. How often do main character and secondary character agree and disagree in conversation intent?** For each individual conversation analyzed in the conversation section, compare the answers for the main character and the secondary character (sections

A and E). If the answers are the same (i.e., main character's intent is flirting and secondary character's intent is also flirting) then they agree. If they are not the same (i.e., main character is comforting, secondary character is hostile) then they disagree. The total number of agreements and disagreements should be marked.

**H. How often do main character and secondary character agree and disagree in conversation behavior?** For each individual conversation analyzed in the conversation section, compare the answers for the main character and the secondary character (sections B and F). If the answers are the same (i.e., the main character's behavior is sexual and the secondary character's behavior is also sexual) then they agree. If they are not the same (i.e. the main character is helpful while the secondary character is sexual) then they disagree. The total number of agreements and disagreements should be marked.

**I. How often do main character and secondary character agree and disagree on clothing choice?** For each individual conversation analyzed in the conversation section, compare the answers for the main character and secondary character (sections C and G). If the answers are the same, then they agree. If they are not the same, then they disagree. The total number of agreements and disagreements should be marked.

**J. How often do main character and secondary character agree and disagree on body posture?** For each individual conversation analyzed in the conversation section, compare the answers for the main character and secondary character (sections D and H). If the answers are the same, then they agree. If they are not the same, then they disagree. The total number of agreements and disagreements should be marked.

**K. Was there a shift in the relationship between main and secondary character?** If the relationship changed dramatically (i.e. from hostile arguments to flirting), then note the

change. Explain the cause of the shift, including the exact point, if possible, of the shift in relationship.

**L. Was the relationship stable between the main and secondary character?** If the relationship experienced marked ups and downs throughout the course of the film (i.e., the characters fight throughout the film and make up repeatedly) the relationship is unstable. Describe any changes in the relationship if unstable. If the relationship experience a steady rise or fall, it is stable, but comment on the direction of change.

**M. Do the main and secondary characters reconcile (return to previous relationship)?** A reconciliation is a return to a previous high point in the relationship. Comment if the relationship reconciliation is shown or unshown, and comment on the method and cause of reconciliation.

**N. Was there a shift in the clothing choice of the main character?** Indicate if the clothing choice of the main character changed *when interacting with the secondary character only*. Indicate the direction of the shift, either from beginning as seductive and shifting to non-seductive or beginning as non-seductive and shifting to seductive.

**O. Was there a shift in the body posture of the main character?** Indicate if the body posture of the main character changed *when interacting with the secondary character only*. Indicate the direction of the shift, either from beginning as open posture and shifting to closed, or beginning as closed posture and shifting to open.