

Female Empowerment in Romantic Relationships within Teen Eighties Films

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Despite their popularity with teen female audiences, the majority of female characters were subordinated to their male romantic counterparts.

Abstract

Millions of American teens flocked to movie theaters in order to watch John Cusack hold a boom box above his head. And that was just one film. In their formative years, a whole generation of American teen girls learned from the romantic relationships portrayed in these movies. For this reason, it is important to examine the main characters' behavior and attributes to deconstruct whether and how they may perpetuate sexist stereotypes.

This study explored the degree of female empowerment within the main romantic relationships in the ten highest grossing teen movies of the 1980s. Using the Bechdel Test, the Bem Sex Role Inventory Test, and a new empowerment point system developed for this study, the researchers examined twelve female characters across the ten movies. While the results of the Bem Sex Role Inventory varied by character, all movies except one passed the Bechdel Test. Seven of the twelve female characters scored negatively on the empowerment scale, one scored zero points, and four scored positively.

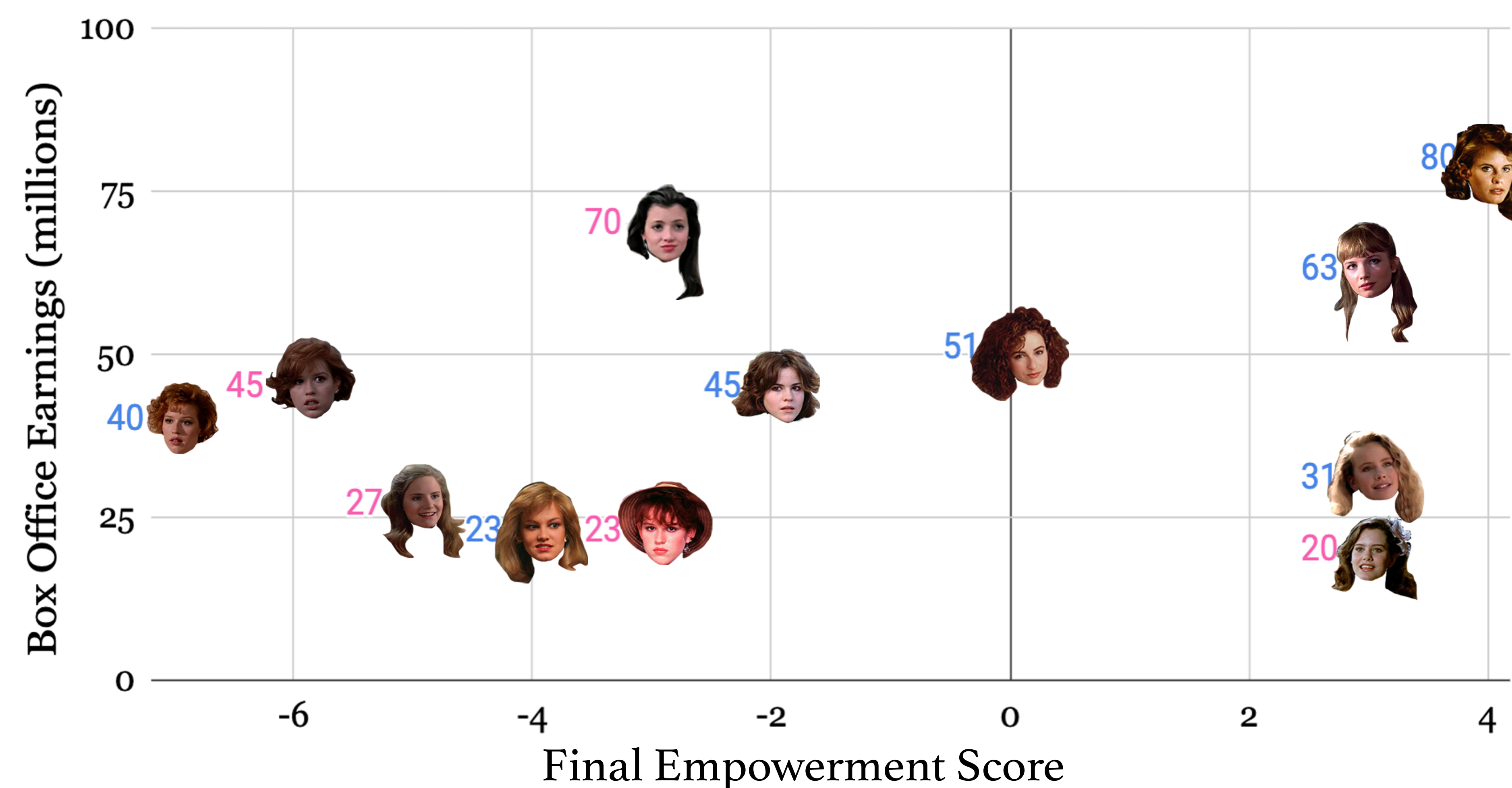
Methods

Each movie was evaluated by each test and watched an average of three times through.

- **Bechdel Test:** assesses each movie for the most basic level of female representation and empowerment; it requires that two named female characters share a conversation focused on a topic other than men.
- **Modified Bem Sex Role Inventory Test (BSRIT):** analyzes a character's behavior and personality using relevance of typically gendered adjectives to determine a position on the masculinity/femininity spectrum; each character is awarded points for each adjective, on a scale from 1-7, producing a final masculinity, femininity, and androgyny score.
- **Empowerment Point System:** awards points to characters within film scenes based upon moments in which the female character asserted dominance over her partner, when she was subordinated, and when the two were equal; each character received a positive score, a negative score, and an equal score; the point system based on scholarly literature regarding characteristics of celluloid female empowerment.

Results

Box Office Gross Compared to Final Score



- The combined scores of the positive empowerment and the negative empowerment systems are graphed along the horizontal axis above. Characters finishing with a **masculine** score on the BSRIT are represented with **blue** numbers, and the **feminine** characters with **pink**.
- The **majority** of characters scored **negatively** in their final combined empowerment scores, with a notably low score from Andie in *Pretty in Pink*.
- The **majority** of characters scored as **masculine**. No correlation existed between the masculinity/femininity scores and the characters' empowerment scores. Only one character scored as both empowered and highly feminine (Diane in *Say Anything*).
- Of the **top three highest grossing movies**, two scored positively, indicating that female empowerment does not necessarily financially disadvantage a film.
- All of the characters in **John Hughes** movies scored **negatively**.
- **None** of the characters scoring positively were the movie's **main character**.
- *Risky Business* was the only movie to fail the **Bechdel Test**.

Discussion



When asked to describe their experience with eighties teen movies, most people will reference John Hughes. Having created five of the films studied, he is impossible to ignore. Yet all of his female characters scored negatively, despite their main character status. Meanwhile, *Risky Business*, a movie that most feminists disdain, scored second highest on the empowerment scale, despite not passing the simple Bechdel Test.

A possible explanation for this discrepancy is the limit in scope of this study. This research focused only on the main romantic relationship. For example, while Andie in *Pretty in Pink* had total control over her friend Duckie, her romantic relationship with the popular Blane disempowered her. And though Joel paid Lana for sexual services in *Risky Business*, she exploited him financially and manipulated him for her own needs.

Focusing on just the main relationship may appear to be a limitation of the study but determining that creators like Hughes subordinated female characters without backlash from audiences is critical. Only once this sexist filmmaking is acknowledged can it be rectified.

References

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