

Gender inequality in English-speaking film industry

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i
mađarskog jezika i književnosti

Karla Zorko

**Rodna nejednakost u filmskoj industriji engleskoga govornog
područja**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Goran Milić

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Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

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Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and
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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Goran Milić, PhD Assistant Professor

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ABSTRACT

My Bachelor's Thesis investigates the position of women in today's film industry. What has been discovered is that many directors constantly put women in the same scenes and situations, as if those are the only ones they are able to do. My goal here is to use the Bechdel test (it is explained in Section 2) on a few movies that I have chosen, and see whether they pass the Bechdel test or not. I will also use the research done by Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media to determine whether there is a bright future for women in film industry.

KEY WORDS: movie/film, gender, inequality, men, women, sexism, change, roles, the Bechdel test, male, female

1. Introduction

According to the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, films made from 2006-2009 featured 2.42 male speaking characters for every 1 female speaking character. Even more worrying is that this number has stayed almost the same for the past twenty years. In this Bachelor's Thesis, after an analysis of the key statistics behind gender inequality, I will study the stereotypical plot-line found in most conventional Hollywood films. I will also show that a majority of films fail to adequately involve women. This trend of gender inequality in Hollywood presents lasting negative sides of the film industry and it also impresses a stamp of gender bias on our society. This is why American cartoonist Alison Bechdel created the Bechdel test, which is a method for evaluating the portrayal of women in popular fiction. The test was created after Bechdel created a comic strip "*Dykes to Watch Out For*", in which it was first used. Many famous Hollywood movies did not pass the test. There is also a large difference between male and female roles in movies. There are way more actors than actresses in the film industry. It has been said that it is the way it is because of the larger male market, which is not actually true. Women are more frequent moviegoers than men. Women are quite often portrayed in sexy, tight and revealing attire, unlike men. They are also more likely to be physically attractive than men. When it comes to behind-the-scenes jobs, the majority of directors, writers and producers are men. On the other hand, gender equality is definitely possible to achieve, but the problem is that many directors do not see this as a problem that has to be solved. The sexualization of women and their minimized importance creates a lasting impact on our views of women in society today. People are strongly influenced by the media, especially the films. There are many examples of sexism in popular Hollywood movies such as *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Legally Blonde* (2001) and *Jurassic World* (2015). In Section 2 the Bechdel test is presented, followed by a discussion of female and male roles in Section 3. In Section 4 the question whether gender equality is possible is answered, after that comes Section 5 where examples of sexism in movies are presented and lastly, in Section 6 the future of women in film industry is discussed.

2. The Bechdel test



Picture 1: Alison Bechdel's comic strip "The Rule" (from *Dykes to Watch Out For*)

Picture 1 shows Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* published in 1985, in which the rules for the Bechdel test first appeared. The comic strip shows two women who discuss seeing a film and one woman explains that she only goes to the cinema if it satisfies her three requirements; it has to have at least two named women in it, who talk to each other about something besides a man. The Bechdel test is one of the best ways to evaluate the difference between the importance placed on gender and to indicate the active presence of women in film. It requires three specific criteria in order to pass the test: the movie must have at least two named women in it, who talk to each other about something besides a man. Shockingly, the data shows that just over half of the movies fully satisfy these requirements, and only about ten percent of movies do not pass any of these tests. For example, movies such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Ratatouille* (2007) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007) all fail to meet any of these standards and they all fail to even introduce two women into the plot. There are many worldwide famous movies that fail the Bechdel test, such as *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (2001, 2002,

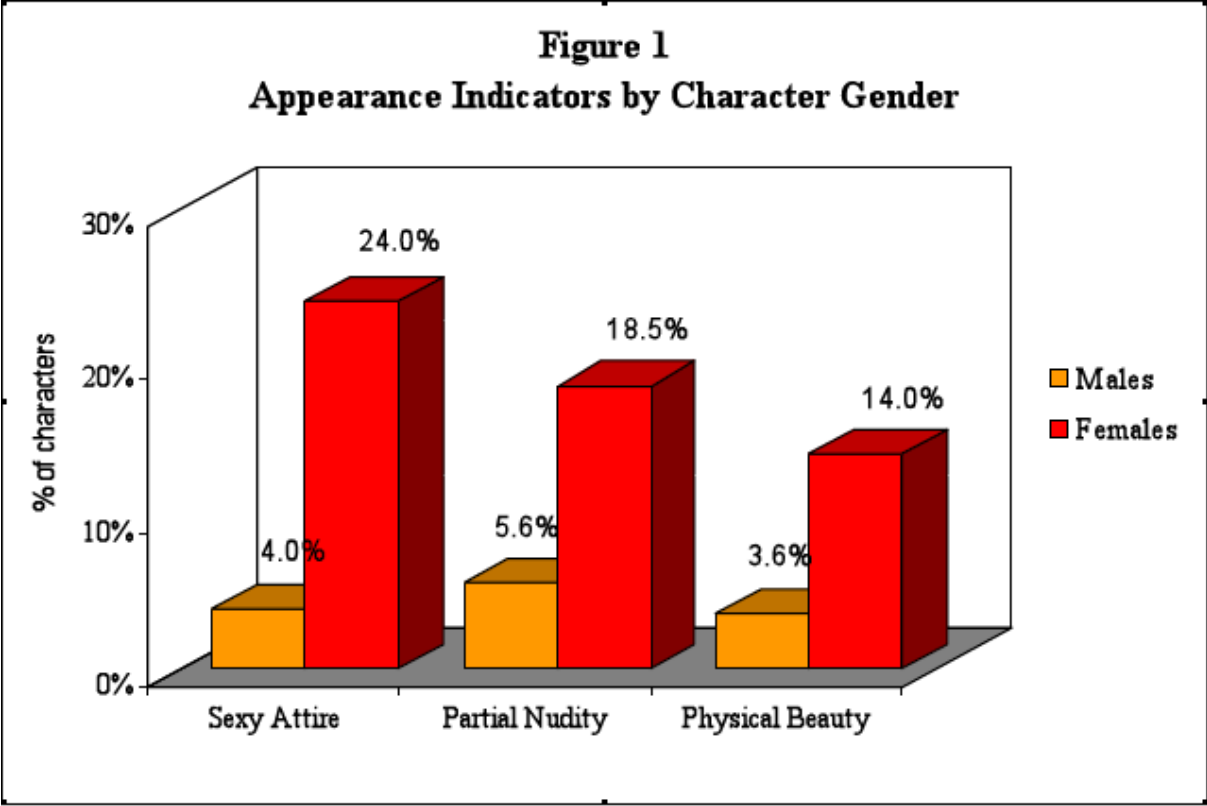
2003), *Avatar* (2009), *The Avengers* (2013), *Whiplash* (2014), *La La Land* (2016) and many more. This proves that some of the most popular and recognized movies go completely overlooked when it comes to gender inequality. It is quite saddening how many movies actually do not pass the test because it is not even a sign of whether it is a feminist movie or whether it is a good movie, but rather just that there is a female presence in the movie.

3. Female and male roles

Another statistics suggests that these numbers will not be changing anytime soon. The Geena Institute finds a large difference between male speaking and female speaking roles in movies. In fact, it is proven that 29.2% of speaking characters across all movies were women. Additionally, the percentage of female speaking characters has changed only 2.4% in the past twenty years, and is almost perfectly consistent across all movie ratings. Despite this huge gap, little work would be needed to solve this issue. Perhaps the most concerning of all these findings is that 50% of film creators, both male and female, reported that accomplishing gender equality in a movie would be 'achievable without much difficulty'. (Smith 15)

These statistics show a strong correlation between employment trends and gender dominance in movies. "Only three percent of leadership positions in the mainstream media (telecommunications, entertainment, publishing and advertising) belong to women." (Stroud 24) This find by Paramount Pictures creates a strong suggestion for the effect of unfairly placed importance on men in the film industry. In a market dominated by men, women are not only socially punished in film participation, but also in their ability to create a film. The Geena Institute's findings echo this argument. After asking content creators why they think that women play such a minimal role, six spontaneous reasons emerged. The most common reason stated was due to 'positive male market forces', suggesting that the economic market succeeds more when men are shown on film. The second most frequently mentioned reason was "the male dominated nature of the business." This ties in directly with Paramount's findings that nearly all film creators are men. The lesser cited reasons all dealt with men being of more importance in movies. Surprisingly, and contrary to the logical conclusion that the film market is more impacted by men, "in 2010, females were responsible for purchasing 50% of all movie tickets. Women are also more frequent moviegoers than males in the 18-24 year old demographic (4.2 million vs. 3.3 million)." (Smith) This completely contradicts any ground for

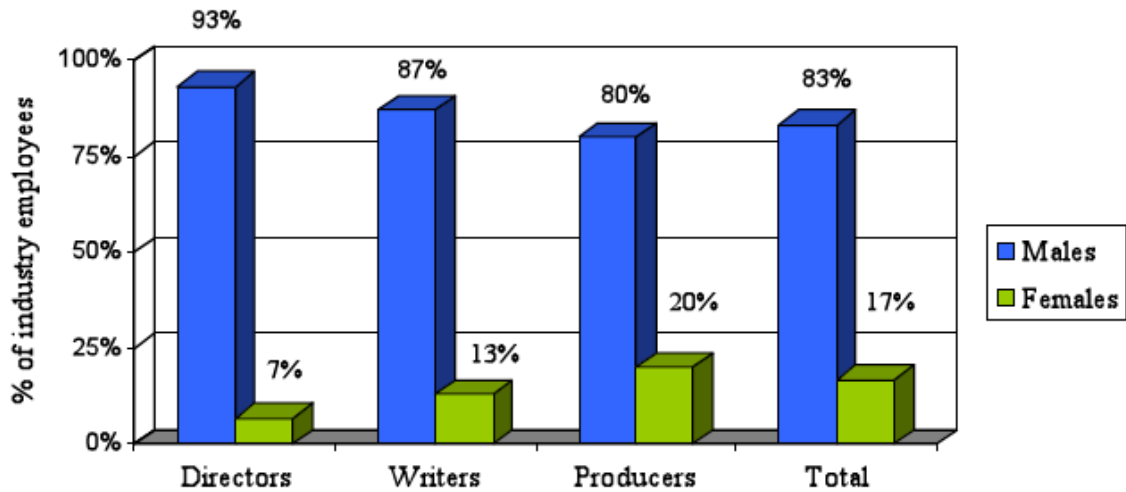
the argument that men are predominantly displayed in films because men predominantly participate in watching films.



Picture 2: Appearance Indicators by Character Gender

Picture 2 shows us that a higher percentage of females than males (24% females and 4% males) are shown in sexy, tight or revealing attire. Women are more likely than men to be physically attractive (14% females and 3.6% males) and portrayed with some exposed skin between the mid chest and upper thigh regions (18.5% females and 5.6% males). Though not depicted, waist size is also related to gender with a higher percentage of women shown with a small waist (22.9% females and 4.5% males). The percentage of characters with a large chest (15.3% males and 12.6% females) or an unrealistic body ideal (2.9% males and 7.5% females) varies significantly with gender.

Figure 2
Occupational Title by Biological Sex



Picture 3: Occupational Title by Biological Sex

Picture 3 shows that more women are shown on the screen when one or more females are involved directing or writing films. In fact, a 10.4% difference is observed for on screen women when one or more women are involved in the writing process. A significant but trivial (less than 5%) association is observed for producer gender and character gender. In comparison to the percentage of women on screen in films with only male producers (26.3%), the percentage of women on screen when one or more women produce films is 29.9%. All in all this suggests that there are definitely more women in films that have been directed or written by women.

4. Is gender equality possible?

The most important question is: Is gender equality possible? The Geena Institute finds this answer to be a “qualified yes”. They asked content creators to rate and discuss how important it is to achieve gender balance on-screen, 98.5% indicated that it would be anywhere from ‘a little bit important’ to ‘extremely important.’” Yet roughly a third of content creators for films immediately answered in another questions that they would not even notice if a film were to be corrected for gender imbalance. Gender imbalance is a clear problem on camera; it hurts the gender gap in the workforce; content creators know this and they choose to do nothing about it, despite half finding this not difficult to achieve.

The majority of content creators firmly believe in the dominance of the male market when it comes to producing films, and a majority of film creators (regardless of gender), believed that many more men than women watched films. A male favored market creates a strong trend for the desire of men in the film industry.

Even for those women who do make it into the film production industry, even more problems arise due to gender discrimination:

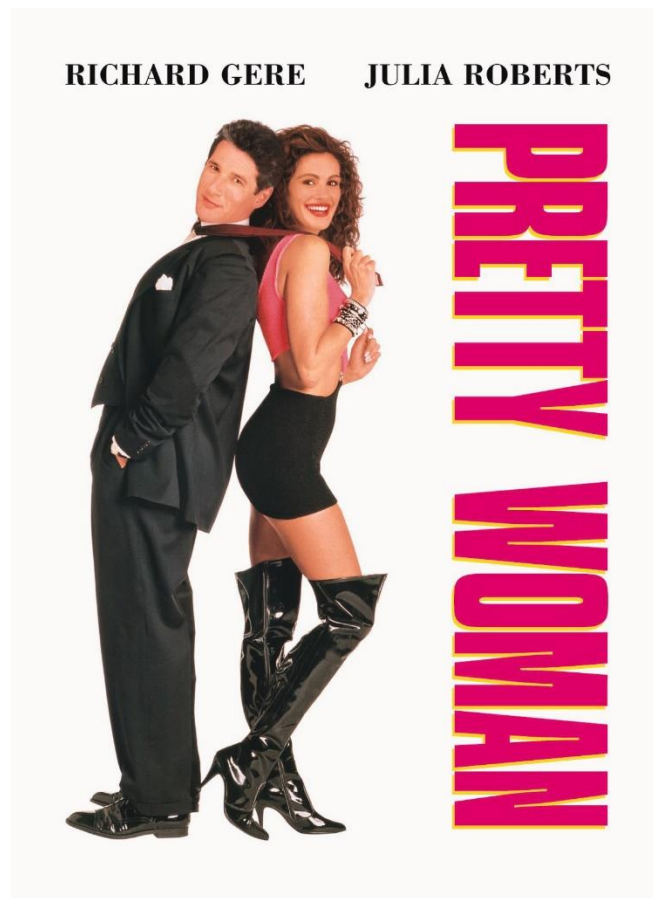
The typical woman writer is likely to break into the industry writing material that is either currently fashionable or viewed by producers as appropriate for a woman writer, and she is paid at a rate comparable to that for a new male writer (Guild minimums under the collective bargaining agreement place a floor on compensation of novice writers). But as her career progresses, the woman writer's opportunities are limited to a narrow range of genres, whereas her male counterpart faces no such limitations. Even if she achieves a modest degree of success as a screen-writer, her long-term marketability is vulnerable to the inevitable cycles in the popularity of specific genres in the way that a male writer's is not. (Bielby 12)

Here we can see an established limitation for a film creator's creative freedom, entirely based on gender.

5. Sexism

The sexualization of women and their minimized importance creates a lasting impact on our views of women in society today. As Denise Bielby writes, “Mass culture industries are sites where symbolic representations of gender are literally produced, and they provide new challenges to the way we understand gender inequality in organizations”. We can clearly see the link here between society and film. When women are treated differently than men on film, it reinforces that same comparison within our own society. People are strongly influenced by the media, especially the films. A cinema is supposed to be a place where we can relax our minds and travel to a new reality. In reality, films strengthen the sexist mindset and create whole new waves of sexist notions that men are superior to women. Why do female characters in family films often serve as eye candy? Content creators of films intentionally place a much stronger emphasis on more men involved in more important and often more moral actions, and by doing so they also reinforce the view and judgment of women and their purpose in society. Until these problems in the film industry are fixed, we cannot expect the social stigma of women to change.

5.1 Examples of sexism in popular movies



Picture 4: Pretty Woman (1990)

Picture 4 shows *Pretty Woman*, a 1990 American romantic comedy film, starring Julia Roberts and Richard Gere, which can be said to have a typical “Disney” plot because it describes the life of Vivian Ward, an alluring young woman who worked as a prostitute until she met Edward Lewis, a handsome rich businessman, who turned her into a classy and elegant lady. After that they lived happily ever after. Vivian is undoubtedly the heroine of the movie, however, she needed a man to save her from the life on the streets of Los Angeles. This portrays women as weak and dependent on men for survival. Surprisingly, this movie managed to pass the Bechdel test. There are a few scenes in which two women talk to each other, e.g. the scene when Vivian goes shopping on Rodeo Drive and talks to two unnamed saleswomen who refuse to help her find an elegant dress. The second scene is when Vivian talks to her friend Kit about moving to San Francisco and finishing high school. Nobody mentions any man in this scene, which is the only scene that got this movie to pass the test.

KIT We look so dopey. San Francisco's not that great, you know. It's bad climate. It's foggy. It's unpredictable.

VIVIAN I'll wear a sweater.

KIT What are you gonna do there ?

VIVIAN Get a job. Finish high school. I got things I can do. I used to make pretty good grades in high school.

KIT Yeah, I could see that about you. I could see that.

VIVIAN Sure you won't come with me ?

KIT And leave all this ? Not in a million.

VIVIAN Come here.

Kit stands up, puts the Teddy Bear down, and walks toward her. Vivian takes some money out of her pocket. She puts the money in the breast pocket of Kit's denim jacket.

KIT Whoa. Whoa. What is this ?

VIVIAN It's part of the Edward Lewis scholarship fund. We think you got a lot of potential, Kit De Luca.

KIT You do ? You think I got potential ?

VIVIAN Oh, yeah. Don't let anybody tell you different, okay ?

KIT Okay. (J.F. Lawton, *Pretty Woman*)



Picture 5: Legally Blonde (2001)

Picture 5 shows the 2001 American comedy film, *Legally Blonde*, starring Reese Witherspoon. The main character of the movie, Elle Woods is crushed when her boyfriend Warner breaks up with her over a romantic dinner rather than proposing to her, as she was expecting. He says he needs a more serious woman in order to fulfill his political aspirations, which include attending Harvard Law School. Then, Elle decides she wants to get her boyfriend back, and in order to do so, she needs to enroll in Harvard Law School too. She was not considering higher education before that happened. She is portrayed as a shallow ‘dumb blonde’ throughout the movie. The movie managed to pass all three criteria of the Bechdel test. It has many named women, Elle, Paulette, Chutney, Vivian, Serena, Brooke, Professor Stromwell etc. There are also scenes in which those women talk to each other about various things, e.g. when Elle visits the main murder suspect Brooke in jail, the two talk about how on the day of the murder of her husband, Brooke was actually getting a liposuction.

BROOKE I have made my fortune on my ability to teach women how to perfect their bodies with the Brooke's Butt Buster workout.

ELLE I know! You helped me go from a six to a four!

BROOKE On the day of Heyworth's murder, I was –

(continuing)

-- getting liposuction (Kristen Smith, *Legally Blonde*)

Later in the movie, Elle shows everyone that she is actually quite brilliant in the courtroom and she also solves the murder mystery. However, the whole reason she was at Harvard in the first place was because of a man, which makes this quite dubious when it comes to determining whether it is a sexist movie or not.



Picture 6: Jurassic World (2015)

Picture 6 shows Jurassic World, a 2015 American science fiction adventure film, starring Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard. The scene where the park's manager Claire, played by Howard is shown as a resourceful woman who lures T-Rex using a flare to save the day. However, she is still wearing the same high heels like at the beginning of the movie. The reason why this is sexist is because we can clearly see that it is impossible to run on the grass all the time wearing those shoes. Also, the camera zooms in on Claire's feet as if the director deliberately tried to make use of the dumbness of women in such circumstances. Jurassic World passed the Bechdel test. There is a scene when Claire talks to her sister Karen about their family and mother.

CLAIRE Hey, Karen!

KAREN Hi, Claire. How's it going?

CLAIRE Yeah, everything's great. The boys are having fun. Everyone's... Yeah, everyone's good.

KAREN Really? Because I just hung up with Zach, and he said that you weren't even with them.

CLAIRE Yeah, look. Today turned out to be a really bad day for me. They're in great hands. They're with my assistant. She's British, so they invented nannies. Wait, are you crying?

KAREN This was supposed to be a family weekend, Claire. You haven't seen the boys in forever. And I know how Zach will treat Gray if they're by themselves. And he can just be so mean.

CLAIRE Okay, I'm sorry. Tomorrow, I'm gonna spend the entire day with them. I'm going to take off work, and I will not leave their side. I promise.

KAREN Well, a promise tomorrow is worth a lot less than trying today.

CLAIRE Ew! You're using Mom's lines now?

KAREN My God. I am using Mom's lines. I'm sorry, but you know, I have to tell you, they work. You'll see when you have kids.

CLAIRE Yeah, "if."

KAREN "When." It's worth it.

CLAIRE Bye, Mom.

6. Future of women in film industry

Fortunately for women, the future promises to be brighter. As the role of social media and the empowerment of women increases, the empowerment of women in society should also increase. The vice chair of the Nielsen group recently stated that:

Women across the globe are achieving higher levels of education, joining the workforce in greater numbers and contributing more to the household income...

Women are increasing their spending power, and with that they gain more control and influence over key household decisions. As a result the women of today and tomorrow are powerful consumers and understanding their habits and attitudes is critically important for marketers and advertisers. (Stroud 8)

Paramount Pictures report on women in films concludes that “The combination of Internet Technology, social media, and women in clout positions will drive change in the portrayal of women and girls in the film industry within the next twenty years.” If we take into account the fact that measuring gender divergence was of little to no importance until just over hundred years ago, the swift growth of female power holds promising for the future of film industries. It does not take much to notice the gender imbalance in films today and in the past. It only one smaller step to see how this impacts the industry that creates the actual films, and how contradictory they feel towards actually making a change in gender portrayal. However, there is a strong line of hope for gender equality in film. As societal values and the market desires continue to trend towards a baseline gender balance, we can expect the debate over gender equality to gradually end and the Bechdel test to fade out of importance over time. In fact, the Bechdel test has shown a gradual but positive growth in films over the past few years that pass the test.

7. Conclusion

Gender representation in media influences how people perceive gender issues since some specific gender roles uplift and strengthen the images of men. Men and women perform different roles and at times these roles do not hold true for all individuals. However, a majority of people live in accordance with these roles. Society assigns classes of social roles to both male and female individuals, in the same manner that society views the different sexes. These gender roles can be a hindrance to both men and women as they can limit the capabilities of what male and female can do. Gender roles can actually enslave individuals as they can force them to be what others want them to be. The film industry plays a big role in influencing people's daily lives because it influences the way people view the world in general. That is the main reason why we need to work on changing the film industry's stereotypical female roles and stopping the overall sexism in movies. The Bechdel test is good for evaluating whether there is or is not enough female presence in the movie, but it has many limitations. For instance, *Pretty Woman* passes the Bechdel test, yet it only has one conversation between two women which is not about a man in the whole movie. It is not always the case that if a certain movie passes the Bechdel test it is not sexist. That is why the test should be upgraded now to a newer, stricter version with more than the current three criteria. Fortunately, the future of women in film industry seems promising. There are more and more movies with women in main roles, which is a great sign of a brighter future. We can expect to see a trend toward more balanced films in the near future, as long as the prominence of women in businesses and social media continues to rise.

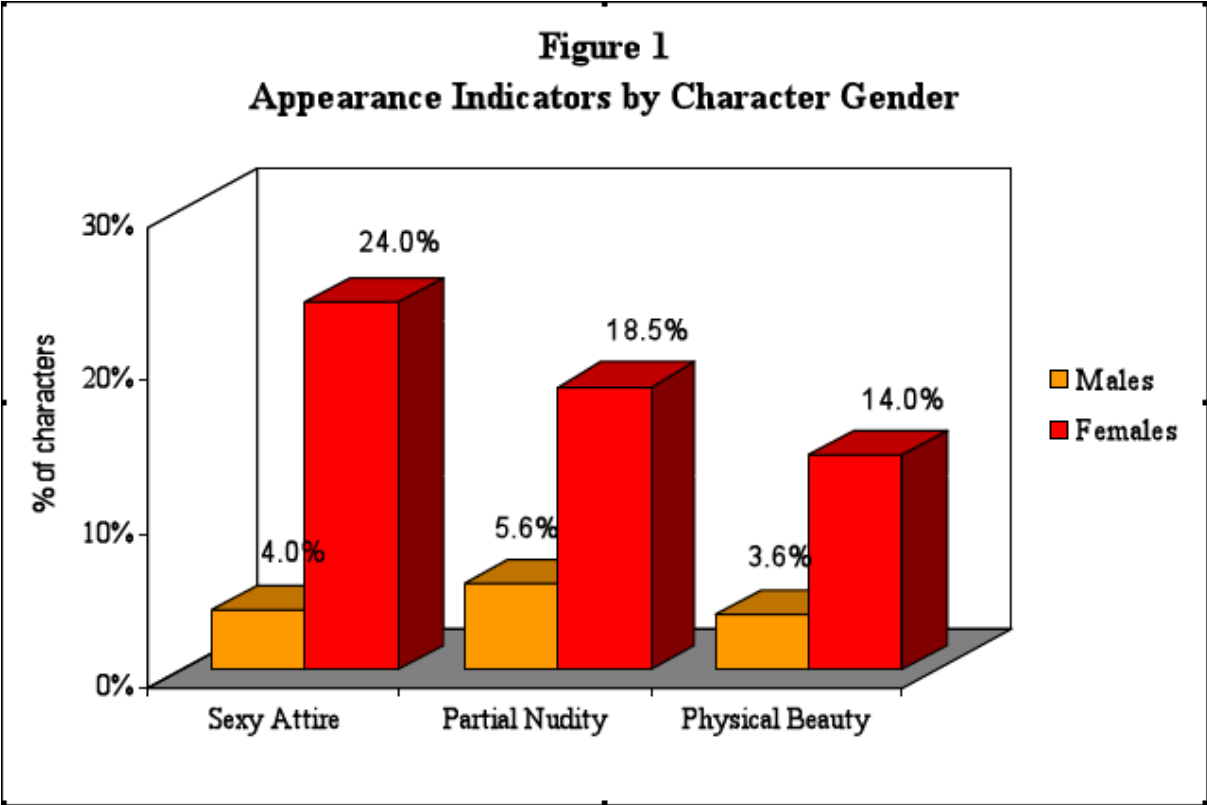
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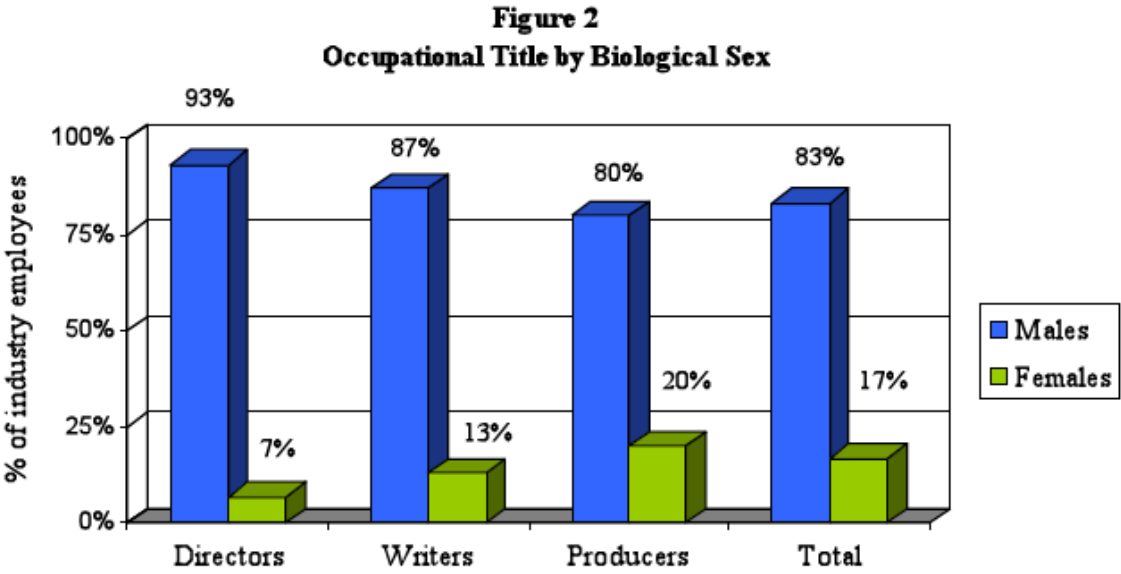
Appendices



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



Picture 5



Picture 6