

Final Project DAT 102 – Chelsea

Question:

Is the portion of women in lead roles significantly higher in popular films during the Great Recession than in the Great Depression?

Introduction:

Women have seen increased representation in congress and on corporate boards, though their numbers in both categories are still well below 50% (1, 2). Women's pay wage gap has slowly declined since the women's rights movement of the 60s and 70s (3). Popular culture, one would assume, mirrors the trends of the wider social culture. Women should be more visible in media, including Hollywood films, than they used to be.

I chose to study women's representation in film in two time periods which have similar historical significance. The Great Recession was the worst economic downturn in American History since the Great Depression. I chose the first five years after the start of each economic downturn to study, 1930-1934 and 2008-2012. I chose to record the top 5, top 3 and top 1 billed cast in each of the top 50 domestic box office earners in the years chosen. I did this because there can be a significant difference in how visible and how many lines the cast has from top leading acting credit compared to the next four, which may be smaller supporting roles. If we find that women have a large percentage of top 5 or top 3 roles, but few top 1 roles, they may still be relegated to mostly supporting characters.

Women represented few officials in national leadership in the 1930s, their wages were low, and social mores made it difficult to leave the home to find work (4). Women film stars, however were popular. A list of actors whose films earned the most money for that year showed women with 3 of the top 5 spots and 8 of the top 10 (5). By comparison, women made up 0 out of the top 5 and 1 out of the top 10 movie stars in 2010 (6).

Hypothesis:

Based on my preliminary research, I predict that women in leading roles in film in the Great Recession did not significantly increase compared to the Great Depression.

Results:

The data suggests that there have been significantly fewer leading roles occupied by women in the Great Recession than the Great Depression. My hypothesis was correct that the number of leading roles

for women has not increased, but I did not predict that the numbers would decrease. The most stark contrast between the years is in the number top 1 billed acting credits for women. In 1930-1934, women averaged 44% of the leading roles in the top 50 films. In 2008-2012, this percentage fell to 23%. Other concerning figures for the Great Recession include the number of times there were no women in leading roles. In 65 out of 250 top earning films, women were left out of the top 3 billing, and in 20 out of the 250 films they were not even in the top 5 billing. By comparison, women were left out of the top 3 billing for 20 films and left out of the top 5 billing in 5 films for the Great Depression.

Discussion:

There are many possible factors in the discrepancies between the eras which demand further study. Looking at top billing on IMDB.com is not necessary indicative of how large the role was. Determining number of lines or minutes on screen are other possible ways of determining representation. It is possible that women made up a greater percentage of filmgoers and preferred movie stars of the same gender in the 1930s then they did in the 2000s. It is also possible that the years selected for each era are anomalous compared to other years in the same decade or recent decades. Studying trends for gender representation in top films for every year since the film industry began would help to paint a better picture. It clear from the data, however, that women were far behind parity with men in representation in leading roles, in the 1930s and in the modern era.

Sources for Introduction:

1. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/02/womens-corporate-board-change-gender-equality-business/>
2. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2018/11/20/461273/womens-leadership-gap-2/>
3. <https://nwlc.org/blog/wage-gap-over-time/>
4. <https://canvas.santarosa.edu/courses/24761/pages/women-in-the-1930s-and-1940s>
5. <https://archive.org/stream/motionpictureher108unse#page/n531/mode/2up>
6. <https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-star-records/domestic/yearly-acting/highest-grossing-2010-stars>

Sources for data collection:

Imdb.com, Wikipedia.org, <https://www.ultimatemovierankings.com/>

Academic journal:

The below study by Northwestern University looked at women's roles in the U.S. movie industry from 1911 and 2010 and found that representation amongst women in all categories of film workers declined in the "studio system" era of the 1920s to the 1940s and in many categories has not yet reached pre-1920s levels.

Amaral, Luís A. Nunes; Moreira, João A. G.; Dunand, Murielle L.; Tejedor Navarro, Heliodoro; Lee, Hyojun Ada. Long-term patterns of gender imbalance in an industry without ability of level of interest differences. PLOS ONE. 4/1/2020, Vol. 15 Issue 4, p1-17. 17p. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0229662.

Sharing for future:

Gathering the data was very time consuming. I primarily used imdb.com for the cast list. However, there were times when the billing order was obviously different than what would be considered starring order. In these cases, I had to use other sources. I used the movie posters and what order the actors were listed on them whenever I could, because I assumed the poster most accurately reflected what the studios considered the stars of the films.

Representation on screen is also only one part of the problem. A future student may be interested in comparing starring roles in popular films with proportion of women writer, directors and producers.