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Article Evaluation

Agarwal, A., Zheng, J., Kamath, S., Balasubramanian, S., & Dey, S. A. (2015). Key female characters in film have more to talk about besides men: Automating the bechdel test. In *Proceedings of the 2015 Conference of the North American Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics: Human Language Technologies* (pp. 830-840).

<https://www.aclweb.org/anthology/N15-1084.pdf>

In order to get a sense of the importance, accuracy, and data surrounding the Bechdel test, I read “Key Female Characters in Film Have More to Talk About Besides Men: Automating the Bechdel Test.” The article is very informative and presents research about gender in media through the lense of a benchmark for feminism with which the audience is already likely familiar -- the Bechdel test. While I appreciate the research topic and reliability of the researchers, I critique the article in the way that it presents its findings in a way that is inaccessible to the average reader, it doesn’t present a clearly stated hypothesis to the reader, and researchers don’t acknowledge the flaws in their lens for research.

“Key Female Characters in Film Have More to Talk About Besides Men: Automating the Bechdel Test” was composed by 5 different researchers, 4 of whom are college professors here in the states. The researchers conducted this literary analysis with the goal of studying the key differences in language use and the importance of women’s roles in film, particularly comparing films that pass the Bechdel test and those that do not. Hypothesizing that in moves that fail the test, women play a less-central and less-important role, the researchers analyzed a total of 457 movies and used about 20% of these for testing purposes. In order to determine which moves passed or failed the test, different tests were conducted to determine each movies success and/or

failure for each criteria of the test: (1) there must be at least 2 named female characters in the film (2) female characters must talk to each other (3) conversation must be about a subject other than men. To determine the gender of characters in each movie, researchers used the third person pronouns associated with each character in the films. Conversations between female characters were successfully labeled by the CONSECUTIVE approach allowing researchers to link characters that conversed between scene boundaries. Determining conversation content was accomplished by training a topic model to catch words associated with men and vectors were drawn from there. Researchers went the extra mile of determining the importance of each female character by analyzing her degree centrality, closeness centrality, and betweenness centrality. Finally, researchers concluded that movies that failed the Bechdel test tended to have less centrally connected and therefore less important women characters, proving that there is a significant correlation between the importance of roles of women in movies and the Bechdel test.

The key point that this article centers around is the importance of women's roles in film, which is a very important and relevant topic of discussion. After all, women's prevalence and emphasized importance can not be discussed or improved upon if no one is willing to conduct research and share their findings on this important issue. For this reason, I applaud the researchers for taking on this interesting and relevant topic. However, I admit that I had trouble finding a clearly stated hypothesis for their research. In the discussion section, the researchers state their findings clearly in a way that most readers would understand, but due to the lack of a clearly defined hypothesis in the beginning of the article, I found myself wondering what, exactly, the researchers were searching for in their study. For this reason, my first critique of "Key Female Characters in Film Have More to Talk About Besides Men: Automating the

Bechdel Test” is the lack of a clear hypothesis, leaving readers confused until deeper into the article.

Another aspect of this article that is done well is the incorporation of the researchers’ universities and departments at the beginning of the article. A lot of explanation given to the reader about the research conducted is in the form of mathematical equations and work that the reader might have a hard time understanding. Because the researchers include their positions, it allows the reader to know that the information they are receiving is accurate and reputable, even if they could not understand every step of the mathematical process. That being said, I feel that the authors could have done more to ensure that the average reader would be able to understand most if not all of the process if possible. Being a strong reader and a college student, I should be able to process the research I am reading about. However, even after several read-throughs, I had a hard time putting together exactly what the researchers were doing in their research. For this reason, my second critique of the article is that it could have been made more accessible to the average reader outside of the top academic community because this research is important for all audiences.

My third and final critique of this article is the lens used to conduct the research. According to the article, the main goal of this study was to analyze the importance of women’s role in film. The researchers did this by comparing movies that passed the Bechdel test and movies that failed. What the researchers fail to acknowledge is that the Bechdel test is not necessarily the best way to analyze prevalence of women in film. The Bechdel test, while widely used and commonly known as a benchmark for feminism in film, has several flaws. For example, the test does not take into account if the women in the film are portrayed stereotypically. Additionally, a film can meet the bare minimum criteria and pass the test with only one singular

line of dialogue between two women. For these reasons, my third critique of my article is that it fails to acknowledge the shortcomings of the framework they use for their research.

“Key Female Characters in Film Have More to Talk About Besides Men: Automating the Bechdel Test” analyzes the importance of women’s characters in film using the framework of the Bechdel test. The researchers take on an important and relevant topic, but phrase their research in a way that is not very accessible to the general public. Overall, this article is very insightful and interesting because it explains how the importance of a female character is determined by the characters surrounding her and her connectivity to them, which will ultimately help determine if a film will pass the Bechdel test or not. Because it uses the widely-known Bechdel test to present relevant and important information, this article is informative and interesting to those interested in gender in media.