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Does the Bechdel Test Bring in the Big Bucks?

What do *Cocaine Bear* (2023) and *Hocus Pocus 2* (2022) have in common? They both pass the Bechdel test. The Bechdel test requires a movie to have three components in order for it to pass: “(1) at least two [named] women (2) who talk to each other (3) about something besides a man.” It is based on author and artist Alison Bechdel’s comic strip in direct response to the oversaturation of shallow portrayals of women in media culture, particularly in films. Examples of these shallow or underdeveloped roles include, but are not limited to, love interests, damsels, villains, or an obstacle the male protagonist has to overcome in order to move the story forward. According to Walt Hickey, the author of “The Dollar-And-Cents Case Against Hollywood’s Exclusion of Women” (the accompanying methodology of the Bechdel test dataset), “[p]lots need to advance after all.” (This begs the question: why do men have to be the one driving the plot, and why does the author himself see the merit in this claim?) The accepted assumption is that when women *are* in the driver’s seat and the movie passes the Bechdel Test, the movie does worse at the box office. Therefore, movie producers’ “justify” continuing to present the same subservient and stereotypical portrayals of women with the supposed monetary consequences. In other words, the common belief is that strong stories about women make less money. This leads directly into the research inquiry for Alex Flowers, the processor of the dataset. To investigate this, Flowers combines data from bechdeltest.com (lists 10233 movies and whether or not they pass the Bechdel test) with the-numbers.com (tracks the quantitative data associated with movies, such as grosses, opening date, and more) to test the validity of this claim. The overarching question asks: is there a correlation between the Bechdel test and success in the box office at all?

In 2014, Flowers crafted a dataset analyzing 1615 films between the years of 1990 and 2013. These specific years were chosen because there was less of an exponential difference in culture (as what might have been from 1913 to 2013, for instance) in terms of what we find empowering in society today. And even though today “[m]ore movies are passing the Bechdel test than before”, “the level has flatlined at about half over the last 20 years.”According the analysis section of the dataset, Flowers processed the data by calculating the “summary statistic and basic regression analysis to determine” “whether movies which pass the Bechdel test do better or worse at the box office.” Due to the span of years in which the movies were released, Flowers’ operations accounted for the inflation rate over time. The box office information included “grosses, budget and return investment.” The pass/fail rate was not always a defined category, which led to the development of a “dubious” descriptor; dubious describes any pass or “ok” that seems questionable in the way in which it allowed the film to pass. However, the ultimate results of the analysis conclude that there was no correlation between passing the Bechdel test and box office performance: “[W]e found evidence that films that feature meaningful interactions between women may in fact have a better return on investment, overall, than films that don’t” (Hickey). Not only do the results disprove the theory, but they offer a relationship that fully contradicts the original hypothesis. This surprising result demonstrates the overall importance of doing research projects such as this in heavily subjective fields, such as entertainment. The results illustrate that there is no negative correlation between the passing the Bechdel test and doing poorly at the box office. Therefore, future producers can use this information to their advantage to justify the potential success of stories that center women with power and agency. Despite the benefits of these results, there are some biases that we must account for within this particular dataset.

For example, Hickey points out that the Bechdel test is flawed in doing an extensive job of screening a movie for potential empowering representations of women. He says, “[t]he Bechdel test isn’t measuring whether a film is a model of gender equality. It doesn’t certify that a movie is “good” when it comes to integrating women. And passing it doesn’t mean that female characters are well written, play crucial roles in the plot or display meaningful depth of character.” This is important when it comes to engaging with the information from the datasets in a critical way. The concise requirements of the Bechdel test does not always leave room for nuance. For example, two women talking about triggering or hate crime related information would, technically, pass the Bechdel test. It does not take into account if that might be the *only* representation of women in the movie (or if it is the only instance in the movie where such language is used). What message does this send? In this example, would having women engage in this dialogue “soften the blow” of the triggering information? This sparks another question: what role does race play in the Bechdel test as well and how well these movies may or may have not done at the box office? Moreover, the bechdeltest.com is crowdsourced data, and all of the film grades come from community members’ votes and comments. However, the fanbase and the people who would be monitoring this site are probably feminist leaning, so that means the majority of the films uploaded would probably be more likely to pass the test because those are the movies that the fanbase are watching. Hickey notes that the passing of the test is 56% to 53% from the bechdeltest.com compared to this specific dataset.

It is also important to interrogate the original source in which the box office information came from. In the-numbers.com, the number of movie theaters in which the film was released is a part of the original data. However, this factor is removed when putting it in conversation with the films that pass or fail the Bechdel test. Not all new movies are always released to all the theaters in the nation. For example, some really small towns might only have one theater that gets the movie release months after the film first opens. Moreover, does the date of release of a movie have a direct impact on the gross? If a movie opens during a holiday weekend, are more people likely to see it, so it is more likely to do well at the box office? Another aspect to consider in terms of the numbers at the box office is how can we think about film grosses in conversation with the new popularization of streaming services? Nowadays, it is common to wait for films to be released digitally rather than actually going to the physical movie theater. How representative is a movie’s gross of its success today compared to 2013? I do acknowledge that this particular data set is from 2013 (when I was still patiently waiting to have Netflix DVDs delivered in the mail), but these are important questions to consider if this dataset were to continue or be expanded with more recent movies.

*This paper represents my own work in accordance to the University regulations.*

*/s/ Layla Williams*

Works Cited

Flowers, Andrew. analyze-bechdel.R, fivethirtyeight/data, <https://github.com/fivethirtyeight/data/blob/master/bechdel/analyze-bechdel.R>

Hickey, Walt, “The Dollar-And-Cents Case Against Hollywood’s Exclusion of Women,” FiveThirtyEight, 1 April 2014, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-dollar-and-cents-case-against-hollywoods-exclusion-of-women/>

Original Dataset:

<https://github.com/fivethirtyeight/data/blob/master/bechdel/movies.csv>