
Audience Reception Analysis Toward Women's Representation in *Damsel*

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ABSTRACT

Upon its release, *Damsel's* movie became the spotlight since its director, Juan Carlos, claimed it represented contemporary feminism. Using the encoding-decoding model of communication by Stuart Hall, this study aims to analyze the representation of women's heroes and how the audiences respond to them. The data collection techniques include interviews, newspaper articles, and observations from the movie itself. From the decoded messages obtained, the findings show that the hegemonic dominant audience agreed that there was a concept of feminism explained through the heroine; however, the negotiated audience found it unrealistic due to the overpowering female characterization, and the oppositional audience found that the movie depicted women's suffering due to the patriarchal system rather than women's empowerment. Furthermore, the majority of audience responses indicate agreement where they acknowledge the feminist values in the film. Therefore, this movie stands out among many hero-centric films by highlighting a fresh portrayal of women in media, challenging the conventional depiction of women as weak and needing rescue by men for happiness or salvation. It also questions how well they align with real-world realities.

Keywords: *audience analysis; Damsel; female action hero; feminism; women representation*

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INTRODUCTION

The film has long been a medium to represent the condition of gender inequality as well as a portrayal of women's ability to become heroes. One categorization in literature alongside novels, poetry, and play, films can raise a wide variety of themes and issues. A film can be a vibrant place to explore stereotypes about women that can often position women as central characters who represent the challenge of issues regarding weak women (Reyvonputra et al., 2023). From another perspective, the debate about feminism in popular movie culture has the potential to be recognized and criticized. In other words, the emerging phenomenon of popular culture can produce the kind of critical movement that helps efforts to establish feminism as a genre that has a direct social and cultural impact (Cattien, 2019).

Under modern patriarchal conditions, media, including film, has a significant role in shaping and influencing perceptions of traditional

gender. Women in films have often been seen from the perspective of feminism interpreted by men, which then evolved into men's perceptions of women's views. The representation of women in films is important because films not only reflect social reality but can also influence society's views and values (Reyvonputra et al., 2023). However, women and their problems are often used in films only as a tool to make the story more exciting or dramatic, with a focus on developing male characters as heroes or dominant protagonists. Male actors are often central to the film's narrative, acting as heroes who protect women from various threats or dangers (Akçora As et al., 2019). As a classic example, most of the early Disney Princess films, such as *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), feature a prince or male character as an essential figure in the princesses' lives. In these narratives, princesses are often portrayed as passive, submissive figures who often

require rescue or help from a male hero to achieve their happiness or salvation (Karmakar et al., 2023). These movies reinforce traditional gender roles where women are expected to be objects awaiting rescue or protection from men, and where the focus of the story is often the search for true love and living happily ever after. Nonetheless, changes in the representation of women in films have also been seen over time with the emergence of more inclusive and progressive narratives. There is an attempt to showcase a shift to more diverse and inclusive representations of women in the media, which better reflect the complexity and diversity of women's experiences in real life.

Along with that, the development of films about gender inequality has been widely released. Women are no longer seen as objects but as fundamental subjects. For example, in several films by Disney, the portrayal of different princesses varies considerably. Most of the females in early Disney animation were portrayed as falling in love with a prince

or being inseparable from their family bonds, such as Snow White and Cinderella (Liu et al., 2021). In later developments, the diversity of Disney princesses contributes to the challenge of gender stereotypes. Disney princesses have evolved to become more than just characters focused on their physical appearance and romantic relationships (England et al., 2011; Singer, 2023). Some of them: Princess Jasmine is depicted as a headstrong and assertive princess who desires freedom and the ability to make her own choices. She actively challenges the idea of being a passive love interest and seeks to break free from the confines of palace life (Dodd, 2019). Furthermore, the character of Elsa from *Frozen* (2013) breaks away from the conventional princess narrative by focusing on self-discovery, empowerment, and personal growth. Her transformation from a fearful, isolated individual to a confident, independent queen resonates with audiences. It emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and inner strength, which is centered

around accepting and embracing her unique powers rather than solely relying on a romantic relationship (Hine et al., 2018).

It is undeniable that for a long time, women have been portrayed as objects or commodities in films, with their bodies being used to sell products or convey themes. This objectification of women has contributed to a broader cultural attitude that sees women as mere objects rather than as individuals with their agency and humanity (Yang et al., 2020). Consequently, the idea of a strong female character has evolved into a new chapter due to the lack of women perceived as strong in mainstream media and a lack of awareness of the strong women who already existed on the margins (Knight, 2024). Along with the development of the movie industry, movies like *The Hunger Games* (2012), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Black Panther* (2018) have introduced diverse female characters and challenged traditional gender norms. Many films challenge this objectification of women and present them as complex and

multidimensional individuals (Liu et al., 2021). These films often feature strong female protagonists who are not defined solely by their physical appearance or sexual attractiveness. Instead, they are portrayed as having their own agency, motivations, and desires.

Netflix has become a significant trend among young people due to its convenience and vast content library, catering to diverse tastes with a wide range of genres and themes, making it easy for viewers to find something that interests them. In February 2024, Netflix released a fairytale-themed movie. Not far from the original story, this movie portrays the character of a strong female princess who fights alone to save herself against a fire-spewing dragon. Upon this release, this movie became spotlight since it was claimed by the filmmaker as a new kind of princess movie and was raised as a form that breaks the stereotype of women heroes (Meredith, 2024). According to (Debruge, 2024), specialist movie critics from *Variety*, this film was classified as

one of the revisionist fairytale films whose main character, Elodie, is shown to be the hero's actions for a less gender-rigid period.

Juan Carlos, the director of the movie, has branded this film as a representation of contemporary feminism. As discussed in his interviews (Cinemablend, 2024), the film is not intended to be compared with others but to showcase what women need to do when facing the world. However, in reality, some film critics have pointed out that the storyline fails to capture the essence of feminism fully. Based on reviews from (Chowdury, 2024), it is known that the feminist point of view seems forced, probably due to the characterization of Elodie, who is depicted as being able to solve problems independently without any assistance, which makes the film seem "self-centered" in its approach to problem-solving. Moreover, according to a review from (Naahar, 2024), one of 'Rotten Tomatoes-approved' critics, mentioned that the film does not relate closely to feminism, as all women need to handle things on their own

by nature, so it is inherently expected that both men and women resolve issues based on individual capabilities.

For that reason, this article will explore various audience perceptions toward the film *Damsel*, which are related to modern feminism. Consequently, there is a possibility that not all audiences may view this movie as the filmmakers expected. As one of the top critics from the audience on The Rotten Tomatoes platform, Wilkinson (2024) from The New York Times, said in general, *Damsel* is proof that filmmakers still have not realized that a "strong female lead" is not enough to make a good movie. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the representation of the heroine in the Netflix film *Damsel* and how the audience perceives this representation using the Encoding-decoding communication model by Stuart Hall. Representation is translated as content delivered by the media to be interpreted into the message's meaning, especially in the context of gender representation and

feminism (Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study examines audience responses to fairy tale movies with female heroes that air on Netflix. Data sources were drawn from interviews with several participants to get the audience's views regarding the understanding of the theme of feminism that the filmmakers have claimed. The interviews gathered audience opinions and perspectives on Elodie as the heroine. Additional data was drawn from movie reviews on the internet and responses on social media. Analysis was conducted based on Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding theory. This research uses qualitative methods to investigate the representation of gender, especially women, in films, with a systematic approach that focuses on understanding real-life phenomena in a natural context (Creswell, 2009).

DISCUSSION

The findings were sourced from online observations of several movie reviews,

transcribing interviews with the director, and interviews. In this film, directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, the characterization of Elodie as a brave and independent woman is essential in creating a narrative that combats established gender stereotypes (Meredith, 2024). Through the story of Elodie struggling to achieve freedom and courage, the director not only creates an exciting adventure story but also invites the audience to see the role of women in a more complex way. The director aims to highlight the gender inequality that often occurs in traditional stories. By positioning Elodie as the main character who faces not only physical challenges, such as defeating a dragon, but also the inner battle of finding her identity and purpose in life, Fresnadillo changes the prevalent paradigm associated with the role of women in fantasy stories. This not only strengthens Elodie's character as a woman who is not dependent on male help but also expands our view of the possible roles of women within existing social

and structural contexts (Meredith, 2024).

Feminist Representation and Audience Reception of *Damsel*

In an interview with Millie Bobby Brown, the lead actress, she expressed that the representation in this film not only embodies feminism but also serves as a lesson for children, regardless of gender, to reshape their outlook on various aspects of patriarchy and feminism (Cinemablend, 2024). Her point is that since everyone is equal, everyone has the right to be brave and make decisions according to their instincts. Regardless of gender, both men and women have equal rights in decision-making and the right to voice their opinions.

From the interview results with audiences, there are at least three positions related to the audience's expectations from the movie. These three positions refer to Stuart Hall's concept: a Dominant Hegemonic Position, a Negotiated Position, and an

Oppositional Position (Hall, 1980).

Audiences in the Dominant Hegemonic Position tend to agree that the film is an excellent example of how women can be portrayed in films without being reduced to stereotypes or tropes. "We're not just seeing 'strong women' or 'feminist icons' - we're seeing real people with complex motivations and personalities. And that's something I think is really important for representation" (Interview with TM, April 21, 2024). One of the dominant hegemonic audiences with the initial TM said that *Damsel* portrays the suffering of women due to patriarchal practices around them. Characters like Elodie, the stepmother, and other victimized women are emphasized to represent feminism, as feminism is a form of support among women. Specifically, the dominant hegemonic type of audience stated that *Damsel* is a film that highlights gender issues and women's rights fulfillment. The character Elodie emerges as a representative of women advocating for gender

equality and justice for fellow women. She refuses to remain silent and chooses to voice her opinions, even if it means challenging existing authorities. The ceremony that requires women to become "substitutes for past wrongs" illustrates the unfair treatment of women in the society depicted in the film. Through the character of Elodie, the film attempts to highlight the importance of giving voice to women who are often marginalized or silenced within patriarchal power structures. Although initially afraid, she never gives up on reclaiming her freedom by leaving the cave inhabited by a dragon seeking revenge against the noble family. It can be interpreted that the cave containing the dragon is a metaphor for how we overcome challenges and learn from those experiences. The key to facing these challenges is courage and steadfastness. This reflects how women should advocate for equal rights in society. Instead of being victims, women should be protagonists, as fundamentally, the rights between men and women should be equal.

The hegemonic dominant audience generally said that they love seeing girls act as important figures. Starting from the heroine, the antagonist dragon, the stepmother, the queen, and the victims are all girls. The audience expressed their feelings regarding the emotional struggles of Elodie with words such as "girl power", "women fighters", and "leader". This clarifies the message from the filmmakers that encourages the focus on women's empowerment. The agreement from these audiences was considered dominant as they generally accepted the dominant idea of female heroes without being associated with the concept of feminism. This could be influenced by the background knowledge gained by the audience, who, after being questioned, had never formally learned about feminism. This opinion is undoubtedly influenced by the aspect of audience knowledge that only accepts the big idea of a work without criticizing or seeing the feminist perspective of the story in this film. They generally

take the dominant idea that was built by the media. According to existing literature, as the dominant ideology influences how femininity and masculinity should behave, the press continues to guide women on the standard of behavior (McQuail, 2010).

The hegemonic dominant audiences explain further on the characterization of women that this movie is much greater than just challenging traditional gender norms; instead, it can be said to be a representation of women who have complex characters. The depiction of complex characters in this film illustrates how the characters in *Damsel* demonstrate resilience, not just the portrayal of strong women. It can be interpreted that the film addresses equality, where every individual is considered equal, emphasizing that all humans are equal and no one should be "sacrificed" in life, and everyone progresses together. The representation of Princess Elodie demonstrates intelligence and bravery, as well as her ability to

overcome the patriarchal system within the kingdom. This is unusual and goes against the grain of traditional princesses who often rely on princes to help them. This change is supported by many studies of characters in Disney movies released from the 2000s to 2010s, which display more equal partnerships with princes in rescue missions, and storylines have evolved to include outcomes beyond traditional romantic endings (Barber et al., 2015; Daulay et al., 2022; Hine et al., 2018; Palupi, 2019).

The evolution of these depictions reflects broader societal changes and the influence of feminism, which requires modern women to be aware of and fulfill their self-worth (Gao, 2024). As a result, there is a change in the character of the princess, who initially appears helpless and in need of protection, often does housework and is likely to marry, and, if overweight, ugly, unpleasant, and unmarried, becomes a complete princess character with a romantic narrative that is deeper. In 2009, Disney released an animated

film featuring an African-American princess, marking a shift in the concept of happy endings. The princess in this film is portrayed more realistically; to achieve a happy ending, she cannot merely rely on the presence of a prince but must work hard to attain it herself. In connection with the concept of feminism, the portrayal of women in movies continues to evolve, reflecting the ongoing influence of feminist and postfeminist ideologies. According to (Liu et al., 2021), the transformation of female images in Disney films was expanded following the American feminist movement, and the portrayal of princesses reflects societal changes in the development of women's status and their sense of self.

The second category, the Negotiated Position, perceives that this film powerfully demonstrates feminist values regarding women as heroines in the movie but further examines reality to real-world reality as an inverse comparison. The negotiated audiences appreciate how the representation of the film

provides inspiration and new guidance for young women in understanding feminist concepts; however, they still hold the actual reality that the character of Elodie is too exaggerated and does not match reality in the real world. "It is good to see how females can be dominant characters other than Elodie, the queen also, her stepmother, and all the victims; however, I think it is overpowered that they try to make it all females, as I know it's a fairy tale, but a little bit nonsense to relate" (Interview with SK, April 2024).

In the interview, SK acknowledged that the film embraced feminist ideals by featuring dominant female characters such as Elodie, the queen, her stepmother, and various victims. She appreciated seeing women in strong, central roles but found the portrayal somewhat unrealistic. The negotiated audiences argued that the film overemphasized female strength and presented a one-sided perspective. They believed that this focus on female dominance distorted reality and was not entirely believable. SK pointed out

that while it is a fairy tale, the film's depiction of the queen's dominance in the kingdom, which also had a king, was exaggerated. She felt that the queen's character was portrayed as too arrogant and overpowering, overshadowing the king's role and consequently creating an imbalanced plot and making the story less relatable and somewhat nonsensical. Although the intention was to elevate the value of women's abilities as heroines and rulers, the execution seemed to skew too far in favor of female dominance. The negotiated audiences' critique highlights the tension between the film's feminist message and its narrative execution. While the film aims to showcase women's heroism and leadership, the audience felt it did so at the expense of a more balanced and realistic portrayal. Their perspective suggests that the film's attempt to correct traditional gender biases by elevating female characters resulted in an overcompensation that felt artificial. This analysis aligns with broader

discussions in media studies about the representation of women. According to (Koushik et al., 2018), women's heroism often goes unnoticed or underappreciated due to societal bias and lack of recognition. By overemphasizing female strength, the film may have unintentionally created a narrative that, while empowering, feels disconnected from the complex realities of gender dynamics. SK's feedback underscores the importance of balanced representation that acknowledges women's strengths and struggles in a way that feels authentic and relatable.

An in-depth analysis of the audience's response to the movie revealed that while most of the negotiated audience accepted the feminist ideology promoted by the film, they struggled to relate to it. Elodie's journey from survival to actively facing and overcoming threats symbolizes her growth and the breaking of traditional gender roles. Her attempts to escape and avoid danger initially reflect her response to her environment.

However, she later decides to confront significant challenges, such as facing the dragon, which underscores her empowerment and the feminist themes in the story. This progression aligns with Naahar's (2024) review of Elodie's character, noting that she begins by merely trying to survive and avoid danger. It is only after a pivotal change in her position relative to her sister that she decides to confront the dragon, eventually playing a crucial role in ending the kingdom's evil. This character highlights the film's intention to portray female empowerment, yet the audience's varied ability to relate to it illustrates the complexities of aligning on-screen representation with viewers' lived experiences. By navigating these intricate dynamics, the film prompts discussions about the portrayal of women and the ongoing challenges in achieving genuine gender equality.

From the analysis conducted, it is relevant that this negotiated group consists of the oldest interviewed audiences, who

offer a deeper perspective on the issues. Further investigation reveals that these audiences view the phenomenon with more nuance, particularly concerning women's independence and freedom of choice. They believe that the characterization of Elodie as a heroine does not fully embody true freedom, as she remains entangled in a dynamic requiring her to conform to the desires of the men around her. This perception underscores that, despite the film's intention to portray women as strong and independent, the enduring realities of patriarchal social complexities influence how these characters are understood and received by diverse audiences. Films play a crucial role in challenging existing norms and prompting society to reassess how they view and treat women in daily life. By highlighting the gap between intended representation and actual reception, feminist-themed films encourage deeper contemplation about the progress still needed in achieving genuine gender equality (Hine et al., 2018).

The third category, the Oppositional Position, is the last way the audience decodes the media message, which tends to disagree with how the filmmakers conveyed the feminist message. In the Oppositional Position category, the audience expressed disagreement with how the director conveyed several elements of feminist roles in the film, "I think this movie is more inclined to the suffering of women due to the patriarchal social system rather than women empowerment. You see ... all the girl characters suffer" (Interview with AM, April 2024)

One of the primary sources of conflict in the story is when Elodie's father decides to marry her to an unknown prince without her consent. This reflects a social reality where decisions made by men are often considered final and unquestionable, while women were expected to accept them without protest. A striking difference is how men can freely make decisions while women merely follow. It was supported by the review (Naahar, 2024), which mentioned the main female character as ignorant for not

questioning her father's decision to marry her. The father hid his motivation to undergo a ritual of tactical moves to gain a higher status in society. In the beginning, Elodie, as a daughter and woman, initially resisted and protested but did not question why her father did not seek her consent first. However, through various subtle persuasions, her father convinces Elodie to consider the plight of their kingdom, threatened by poverty and hunger, leading her to accept his decision. This means that in the storyline, Elodie is given equal standing by her father to voice her opinion, implying that women are only allowed to express opinions but not to make decisions, as men's ultimate decision-making power remains. It also highlights the dynamics of selfishness that usually occur where men's interests frequently take precedence, as with Elodie, who falls victim to the ambitions of the prince's family.

This approach indirectly illustrates a critique of the patriarchy that still exists in society, where women are often confined to the role of

being submissive or victims of a more dominant power structure. It reflects the ongoing debate on how gender equality should be applied in everyday life, not only as a concept but in concrete actions (Singer, 2023). It can be interpreted as a strong idea regarding human capacity that, above all, the idea that every individual is free to choose anything they desire or choose from various options and decide what suits them best is lacking. In humanist theory, a person is seen as either active or passive. Thus, one acts freely or is forced to do something they did not choose to do (Wolf, 1992). All these opinions were considered patriarchal because they depict male selfishness in achieving their desires, highlighting the inherent selfishness of men, as seen when Elodie becomes a victim of the prince's royal family.

All these opinions reflect doubts about the film's ability to portray complex issues such as gender equality in a way that is acceptable and relevant in an authentic context. After further investigation, it turns out that the audiences

in this position had studied the concept of feminism formally in college and could see the implied meaning in the movie and relate it to the social reality they were familiar with. They acknowledged that the film could not possibly represent every aspect of real life in detail. Still, they appreciated how the film challenged patriarchal structures by portraying women as active and independent actors in their struggles. Thus, this research shows how formal education can influence how one interprets and accepts the messages conveyed by the media, including movies. Despite the agreement of some audiences towards the film's presentation, formal educational students can enable viewers to see beyond the story being told and delve into deeper meanings and implications related to complex social issues such as feminism and the role of women in society.

Impact of Sociocultural Background on Interpretation

From the result of further analysis, audiences can be classified based on several

aspects, such as age and educational background. This selection of diverse audiences is intended to provide different points of view on the feminist themes presented in the film and observe how the generalization of these messages can be fulfilled or not fulfilled by various social groups. Each individual in this study brings different educational backgrounds, diverse genders, and diverse knowledge, which naturally influences how they assess and interpret film messages. These social categories cause variations in individuals' views of certain social situations, even though they may share the same environment. This theory emphasizes that a person's life experiences, knowledge, and communicative behavior are primarily shaped by the social group to which they belong and their identity (Huirem et al., 2020).

Audience members who have an educational background in the humanities, especially those who have received formal teaching on feminism, are expected to have the

ability to conduct in-depth criticism of cultural products such as films. In this research, they are likely to analyze the film from a critical perspective, identifying and assessing gender representations as well as conformity to the feminist theories they have learned. They have a theoretical framework that allows them to compare the representations in the movie with the existing social reality, resulting in a more complex and informative critique. On the other hand, the interview results show that age also affects how audiences capture messages from cultural products. Despite having no formal education in feminism or other humanities fields, mature audiences have the ability not to take media messages at face value. Adult audiences tend to compare the messages conveyed by the media and the reality in their social environment. Their life experiences and social interactions help them to understand and criticize cultural products more thoughtfully and contextually. These findings are consistent with other

research (Zhang, 2019) that highlights the importance of considering sociocultural factors in understanding how individuals generate and interpret meaning from media messages. Social identity and context play an important role in the negotiation of meaning, especially in complex contexts such as feminist messages in the media. By understanding this variability in viewpoints, we can better understand how different audiences receive and process these messages.

In understanding the ideas of feminism on the basis of female heroes in this film, it can be seen that the majority of the audience belongs to the hegemonic dominant position. Four out of eight audience members agree and accept the concept of feminism that is explained throughout this movie. Apart from the audience grouping, all audiences agreed that Elodie's character provides a fresh portrayal of women in media, challenging the conventional depiction of women as weak and needing rescue by men for happiness or salvation. The concept of 'Damsels in Distress', which

has long been entrenched in popular culture, depicts women as weak and in need of rescue by men. However, Elodie's character challenges this stereotype by becoming her own hero, without needing help or rescue from men to achieve happiness or salvation. This approach is in line with the principles of feminism, which emphasizes the equality of women and men in social, economic, and political life (Cattien, 2019). The influence of this film in changing the perception of the word 'damsel' to a more positive one and encouraging a broader understanding of women's abilities and strength in a modern context is significant. Films like "Damsel" are not only entertaining but also have the potential to be agents of social change with narrative shifts that have long been embedded in our culture (Wilkinson, 2024).

The concept of feminism, according to (Rokhmansyah, 2016), advocates that the transformation of the patriarchal system can be achieved by changing the attitudes of individuals,

especially women, in their relationships with men. This view emphasizes the importance of women being independent economically, socially, and politically and not depending on the help or protection of men to achieve the promised life. In the context of Elodie's character in the film, although oppositional audiences criticized Elodie's representation as too strong and interpreted it as a representation, she still receives help from her father when she is in critical condition. This indicates that, in reality, women can be independent but can also accept and appreciate help from men or other people when needed.

Feminism emphasizes the principle that every individual has the fundamental right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, regardless of gender. This view opposes the patriarchal system, which limits women in various aspects of life by changing individual attitudes, especially women's attitudes towards men, as a step to change the existing social structure (Rokhmansyah,

2016). This contrasts the biological view, which often uses biological differences to classify gender roles and abilities. Feminism also encourages more comprehensive women's access to education and employment opportunities as the key to eliminating discrimination and social disparities between men and women. The essence of this movement is to achieve substantial equality in various areas of life, from political and economic to cultural and social. The film "Damsel" presents a strong image that women can be equal, even more potent than men. The positive impact of this approach was written by (Seitz, 2024) in The Wrap magazine, in which he mentioned that *Damsel* successfully became one of the most popular films on Netflix, one of the ten most popular films of all time on Netflix's list. This action film debuted as the No. 8 most-watched British film on the streamer, with 137.2 million views in its first 87 days on Netflix. He further explained that the film's successful debut shows a strong demand for stories featuring strong,

independent female heroes. Overall, "Damsel" is an entertaining action film and a work of art that played an essential role in changing views and expanding the understanding of women in popular culture.

The Evolution of Female Representation in Films

The film *Damsel* achieved significant achievements primarily because of its motif that shifted the conventional paradigm regarding the character of a royal princess. This concept emerged from the desire to explore female characters in a braver and independent context rather than just presenting them as figures waiting for rescue from men. Traditional depictions of royal princesses often place her in a passive role, dependent on men to protect or save her. According to (Pratiwi et al., 2022), this stereotype implies that women do not need to show courage or initiative in facing challenges because a male figure will act for them. *Damsel* promises this paradigm by presenting Elodie as an intelligent, brave, and active main

character taking control of her destiny. When Elodie is trapped in the cave, she does not wait for outside help but instead gets support and guidance from other survivors who have had similar experiences. This reflects solidarity between women, where women support and inspire each other to overcome difficulties. The role of Elodie's stepmother also shows the complex dynamics of female relationships in this story. When the stepmother realizes the incompatibility in the marriage arranged for Elodie, she not only pretends not to notice but acts based on her concern for Elodie. This highlights that female relationships in stories are not always about competition or betrayal but also about supporting each other in achieving common goals. In addition, *Damsel* depicts courage, intelligence, and the maturation process of female characters. This shows that fairy tales do not always have to end with the presence of a prince who "saves" the princess from difficulties. Instead, Elodie and the other female characters in this film find

happiness and justice through their own strength and intelligence (Karmakar et al., 2023).

In the context of audience perception of the movie, there are mixed expectations, especially regarding the representation of feminism. While the plot of the movie is well-packaged and effectively highlights feminist themes, certain aspects may disappoint the audience in terms of the narrative presented. One of the movie's main strengths is its depiction of the importance of women facing challenges and developing into stronger individuals. This is exemplified by the character of Elodie, who shows courage and independence in overcoming various obstacles throughout the story. Elodie's journey emphasizes the film's feminist message by featuring a female protagonist who does not rely on male support to succeed. Her character development from passive to active agent in her destiny resonates with audiences who value strong female leads. However, despite this positive portrayal, audiences may

feel that the film's narrative oversimplifies or distorts reality, especially in its depiction of gender dynamics. In short, while *Damsel* effectively conveys the theme of female empowerment through the character of Elodie, audience reactions may be mixed due to flaws in the film's representation of feminism. The movie successfully portrays female strength and independence but may also face criticism for its approach to gender issues.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the research only involved a small sample of respondents, which may not represent the broader audience in general. This limitation may affect the generalization of research results to the population. In addition, the research focuses only on one particular film, namely *Damsel*, so it cannot comprehensively represent all films that depict the theme of femininity in different ways. Therefore, to increase the validity and

generalizability of the findings, future research is recommended to conduct studies on a larger scale and include various films that raise the theme of femininity. This can provide deeper insight into how general audiences respond and interpret representations of women in the media and how messages about gender equality are conveyed and received by the broader community through film.

CONCLUSION

Based on this research's findings, audiences and film reviewers generally consider this film to contain the idea of feminism explicitly and implicitly. Still, there are some contradictory aspects about the approval of representation shown in this film. From the decoded messages, the findings show that the hegemonic dominant audience agreed that there was a concept of feminism explained through the heroine; however, the negotiated audience found it unrealistic due to the overpowering female characterization, and the oppositional audience found

that the movie depicted women's suffering due to the patriarchal system rather than women's empowerment. Despite the disagreement, the majority of the audience's responses indicated an agreement where they acknowledge the feminist values in the film so that, accordingly, this film stands out among many hero-centric films by highlighting a fresh portrayal of women in media, challenging the conventional depiction of women as weak and needing rescue by men for happiness or salvation.

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