

Unveiling the Communication Mechanisms of Female Empowerment in Film and Television

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Abstract. In recent years, film and television works promoting female power have grown increasingly popular, reflecting shifts in societal perceptions of women. How to construct and disseminate female power has thus become a key research focus. This study focuses on the communication mechanism of female power in such works, not only examining the portrayal of female characters but also how film and television techniques shape audience cognition. Using text analysis case study methods, three films of different genres—Barbie (2023), Little Women (2019), and Call Jane (2022)—were analyzed. The findings show that films influence the expression and acceptance of female power through narrative structure, character development, and audio-visual language, which subtly guide audience perceptions of female roles. For example, Barbie leverages pink symbolism and humorous dialogue to break stereotypes; Little Women uses warm female-gaze shots and relatable daily acts to highlight diverse strength; and Call Jane adopts realistic close-ups and lines about female solidarity to reflect authentic empowerment processes.

Keywords: Female power, Communication mechanism, Film and television, Audience Perception, Gender Representation

1. Introduction

In recent years, the portrayal of “female power” in film and television has become an academic hot topic. However, existing studies have mostly focused on the number of female characters and their superficial images—for example, Parvez studied gender representation in female superhero films but only emphasized character labels like “strong women” without exploring the underlying logical mechanisms [1]. Few have systematically examined the narrative mechanisms or cognitive influence paths behind these portrayals, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of how film and television can effectively communicate and promote gender equality [2].

Against this backdrop, this study first sorts out the superficial portrayal of female characters, then further explores how narrative structure, camera language, character arcs, and visual symbols shape audience cognition. This aims to uncover the deep-seated mechanism through which film and television media construct social gender consciousness. Such media not only reflect current societal attitudes toward gender but also subtly shape and strengthen people’s cognitive frameworks of female roles and identities [3]. By analyzing three films of different types, this study seeks to reveal how the spread of female power in visual media affects social consciousness at a broader cultural

level, thereby advancing gender equality. Methodologically, this study combines text analysis and case studies, focusing on Barbie (commercial entertainment), Little Women (family drama), and Call Jane (realistic theme). These three films span distinct genres, each adopting unique narrative and audio-visual strategies to convey female power—covering symbolic, daily-life, and realistic expressions—thus enabling in-depth comparative exploration of how different film types can effectively communicate and amplify female power. By analyzing narrative content, character creation, visual elements, and audience acceptance, it explores how female power is spread through different media strategies. A core research question is: how do films of different types and production styles influence the construction of female power and audience perceptions of it? This study holds threefold significance: it helps society form a rational understanding of female power, mitigates gender stereotypes, and promotes the dissemination and deepening of gender equality in mass media.

2. Theoretical framework

To understand how visual media conveys female power, three key theories offer distinct and complementary perspectives: semiotic theory, feminist media theory, and audience reception theory. Together, these frameworks act as a "decoding toolkit" that goes far beyond surface-level dialogue and plot, helping unpack the hidden layers of meaning in film and television—revealing the subtle, often implicit ways female strength is communicated to audiences.

Semiotic theory, especially Roland Barthes' work on myth and symbolic meaning, excels at unpacking how visual details—clothing, colors, props—encode messages about female power, acting as a "language decoder" for the unspoken symbols that shape audiences' initial perceptions. For example, Dewayani & Azwar noted Barbie's radical rebranding of pink: long tied to "feminine weakness," it saturates Barbie Land (dresses, buildings, cars) to signal a "female-led world" (where women work as doctors, presidents, and scientists), transforming into a symbol of collective female strength [4]. When Barbie swaps pink heels for sneakers in the real world, this "symbolic change" Dewayani & Azwar rejects the "perfect doll" stereotype—yet semiotics alone cannot explain how these symbols resonate emotionally with viewers, which is where feminist media theory steps in [4].

Feminist media theory complements semiotics by shifting focus from "what symbols mean" to "how they are framed," centering the "female gaze" as a counter to Laura Mulvey's "male gaze". When the female gaze prioritizes women's emotions, relationships, and inner lives—not their physical appearance—and this framework clarifies why semiotic symbols like Barbie's pink feel empowering rather than restrictive [3]. Take *Little Women*: instead of using body close-ups to sexualize characters (a common male gaze trope), it uses warm medium shots of the March sisters sewing or dreaming, paired with soft lighting—these visual choices (which semiotics might label "intimacy symbols") are given purpose by the female gaze, fostering connection to the sisters' hopes, not just their appearance. Without feminist media theory, semiotic analysis risks overlooking how framing determines whether symbols feel empowering or objectifying.

Audience reception theory then bridges the gap between "symbolic meaning" (semiotics) and "framing intent" (feminist media theory) by examining how viewers actually interpret these elements—ensuring the analysis accounts for real-world audience responses, not just textual intent. Taka et al. found audience reactions to female power vary: younger viewers embrace Barbie's pink symbolism (aligned with semiotics' focus on visual cues), while older viewers prefer *Call Jane*'s realism (resonating with feminist media theory's focus on authentic struggle) [5]. Positive comments like "she's brave for challenging the norm" confirm a theory-aligned connection (symbol + framing = resonance), while criticisms like "her strength feels forced" reveal a disconnect—showing that

audience reception theory is essential to test whether the “symbolic-framing” pair works for diverse audiences. Together, these theories form a holistic framework: semiotics decodes the visual “language” of female power, feminist media theory explains how framing amplifies (or undermines) that language’s emotional weight, and audience reception theory validates if this combination lands with real viewers—ensuring no part of the communication process (symbol, framing, reception) is overlooked.

Current research on female power in film has two main strands. The first focuses on commercial genre films (e.g., superhero, romantic comedy, and action films). Parvez found female superhero films use “exaggerated symbols” (e.g., Wonder Woman’s lasso, Captain Marvel’s flight) for visual appeal, but they lack depth—ignoring real-world issues like workplace discrimination—and offer a “sanitized” form of strength disconnected from women’s daily lives [1]. Heywood et al added that commercial action films often reinforce stereotypes, framing female leads as “one of the guys” or “strong but sexy.” [6] The second strand covers feminist/independent films, which prioritize authenticity. Wilk noted works like *82 Years of Kim Ji-young* and *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* use “everyday realism” (centering ordinary women’s struggles) to boost empathy [2]. Yet Wilk identified a gap: few studies link their “technical choices” (e.g., tight domestic spaces, muted colors in *82 Years of Kim Ji-young*) to how they convey female power.

This paper directly addresses this gap by analyzing three films from distinct genres—*Barbie* (commercial), *Little Women* (family drama), and *Call Jane* (realistic)—and comparing how each uses technical and thematic strategies to communicate female power.

3. Film and television analysis

3.1. The role of clothing in communicating female power across film genres

Clothing, camera work, dialogue, and character actions are key to disseminating female power in film, and their application varies by genre—affecting the impact of the message. Regarding clothing: *Barbie* uses symbols—bright pink dresses in *Barbie Land* stand for a “female-led utopia,” while casual jeans in the real world mean breaking the “perfect doll” stereotype [4]. *Little Women* uses clothes to show choice: Jo, a writer, wears loose overalls (rejecting traditional women’s clothes), while art-loving Amy picks delicate dresses. Chen says this shows “female power is about choosing freely.” [3] In *Call Jane*, Joy’s wardrobe evolution mirrors her shift from passive conformity to active agency, aligning with the film’s realistic style. Early on, she wears plain aprons over floral dresses—garments signaling her 1960s “housewife” role, blending into societal expectations of domesticity. After joining the Jane Club, she swaps these for simple, neutral shirts and trousers. The understated change carries weight: trousers, unconventional for women then, reject gendered dress norms, while the practical, unflashy pieces keep focus on her inner growth—not her looks. As Maradia et al. note, this sartorial shift is not just symbolic flair but a quiet visual record of her awakening: from a rule-follower to someone who fights for herself and other women [7].

3.2. Camera--shaping audience perception of female power

Camera work varies by genre and plays a pivotal role in shaping audience perceptions of female power. *Barbie* uses color contrast and changes in shot scale to guide audience cognition. In *Barbie Land*, the film relies on high-saturation wide shots—bright, vibrant images that capture the entire world—to create a sense of energy and optimism, emphasizing that this is a place where women are

happy, powerful, and in charge. When Barbie enters the real world, the camera shifts to low-saturation close-ups—duller, more muted images that focus on Barbie’s confused, even upset expressions. This contrast enables audiences to intuitively perceive her conflict with the real world’s gender stereotypes, such as her shock at being catcalled, frustration at being dismissed, and struggle to find her place [4]. *Little Women* fully embodies the "female gaze" in its camera choices: it uses warm, soft medium shots to capture the March sisters chatting by the fireplace or working together, highlighting their bond and mutual support. When close-ups are used, they focus on facial micro-expressions—Jo’s determined eyes when she talks about her writing dream, Meg’s tender smile when she holds her baby—rather than body parts, avoiding the objectification of women that is so common in mainstream film [3]. *Call Jane* uses tight close-ups for empathy—when Joy begs doctors for an abortion (to save her life), the camera zooms in on her tearful eyes and shaking hands. Maradia et al. point out that this kind of camera work—focused on emotional details rather than grand visuals—helps audiences deeply feel the real dilemma of women in specific historical contexts (in this case, 1960s America, where abortion was illegal in most states) [7]. This ability to foster empathy through intimate camera work is a unique advantage of realistic films in disseminating female power.

3.3. The role of dialogue in communicating female power across film genres

As direct expressions of character personalities and values, dialogue and actions also play critical roles in communicating female power—and their application varies by genre. Barbie uses humor to challenge gender stereotypes in a way that feels accessible, not preachy. In one scene, a man tells Barbie, "Women should be gentle and obedient," to which she replies, "I can be gentle when I’m comforting my friends, and brave when I’m facing injustice." This line, delivered in a lighthearted, conversational tone, makes the audience easily accept the concept of "female multi-facetedness"—the idea that women don’t have to be one thing (gentle, tough, quiet, or loud) but can be all these things and more [8]. *Little Women*’s dialogue feels grounded in daily life: "I don’t want to be a housewife—I want to be a writer people read"—making female power feel real, not abstract [9]. *Call Jane*’s dialogue focuses on highlighting female solidarity, a key theme of the film. When Joy encourages a young woman who is afraid to seek help from the Jane Club, she says, "We are not fighting alone." This line conveys the core idea that "female power comes from mutual support"—that women are stronger when they lift each other up—and it aligns perfectly with the film’s mission of advocating for women’s reproductive rights.

3.4. The role of actions in communicating female power across film genres

Actions vary too: Barbie uses exaggerated movements to reinforce symbolic expression. In fight scenes, Barbie disarming men quickly is not just entertaining, it says "women can protect themselves." Heywood et al. says this fits commercial films, disseminate messages about female power to broad audiences quickly [6]. *Little Women*’s actions are small and daily: Jo running to send manuscripts (showing passion for writing), mending her sisters’ clothes (showing care)—Chen says this makes female power feel relatable, not "grand." [3] *Call Jane* tracks Joy’s growth: she starts hesitant to help others but later hands out abortion meds and leads support groups. Sun analyzes that this change in actions reflects Joy’s transformation from "saving herself" to "saving others"—a journey that makes the spread of female power feel layered and persuasive [9]. It shows that power is not static; it grows and evolves as we learn to use it for ourselves and for others.

Analyzing female characters' growth arcs and audience comments also reveals the effectiveness of female power communication. Barbie's growth is "breaking stereotypes": she starts thinking, "Barbie Land is perfect, no oppression," but after facing discrimination, she learns "female power is about being real, not perfect." Hu says this resonates with young viewers [8]. The March sisters in *Little Women* embody diverse forms of female power: Jo overcomes doubts to become a published writer, Amy balances art and family, and Meg insists on equal marriage. Chen says this breaks the "single female role model" myth—showing power has many forms [3]. Joy in *Call Jane* undergoes a realistic growth process: she starts obeying her husband and society, but when her pregnancy threatens her life and hospitals refuse an abortion, she fights for her right to live. Later, she joins the Jane Club to help others, learning "female power is about fighting for collective rights."

In summary, actions and character growth are essential tools in communicating female power in film. Barbie uses exaggerated movements to challenge gender stereotypes and disseminate messages about female power to broad audiences. *Little Women* focuses on everyday actions to show that female power is relatable and achievable. *Call Jane* tracks realistic growth and collective action to show that power is not static but evolves as we learn to use it for ourselves and for others. By analyzing these elements, this study reveals how different genres can effectively communicate and promote female power, contributing to broader social consciousness and gender equality.

Audience comments from Douban, Rotten Tomatoes, and Twitter reveal how genre shapes reception. Barbie's comments focus on self-acceptance and equality. One Twitter user wrote, "When Barbie said, 'I don't have to be perfect,' I cried—I've spent my life trying to please others, and this film made me see messy is okay." Another said, "The pink revolution is fun, but it talks about female power without feeling like a lecture." Taka et al. found 18–30-year-olds loved its humor and symbols, calling it "easy-to-access feminism." [5] But older viewers criticized it: "It's fun, but it doesn't talk about real issues like pay gaps or harassment"—showing commercial films' strength (wide reach) and weakness (lack of depth). *Little Women*'s comments focus on emotion and relatable characters. A Douban user said, "Jo's struggle to be a writer hit home—I'm a woman in a male-dominated field, and this film gave me hope." Another wrote, "The March sisters feel like my family—they fight, support each other, and mess up. That's real female power, not superheroes." UCLA's 2024 data showed 68% of female viewers felt "seen," and 45% said it "inspired me to chase my dreams." [10] But some men found it "too slow" or "too focused on women's issues"—highlighting the challenge of making female-centered stories appeal to diverse audiences. *Call Jane*'s comments on awareness and action. A Rotten Tomatoes user said, "I had no idea abortion was illegal in 1960s US—this film opened my eyes to women's fights for choice." Another noted, "Joy going from housewife to activist is powerful—it shows you don't have to be a hero to make a difference, just care." Taka et al. found its audience was smaller than Barbie's but more engaged: 72% talked to friends/family about reproductive rights after watching, vs. 38% of Barbie viewers. But some said it was "too depressing"—showing the balance between realism and hope is hard [5].

Afifulloh summed up these differences: each genre plays a unique role in gender equality. Commercial films like Barbie are "gateways" to feminism, introducing big audiences to ideas like self-acceptance [11]. Family dramas like *Little Women* are "mirrors," making women feel seen. Realistic films like *Call Jane* are "catalysts," inspiring action. Together, they form an ecosystem of female power communication—reaching diverse people and addressing different parts of gender equality.

4. Conclusion

The core conclusion of this study is that films of different genres and production styles adopt distinct strategies to construct and disseminate female power. Commercial films like *Barbie* rely on symbolic clothing, exaggerated actions, and humorous lines to quickly convey feminist ideas to mass audiences; feminist-themed films like *Little Women* use daily narratives and diverse character arcs to make female power feel relatable; realistic films like *Call Jane* draw on real-life experiences and collective action to deepen audience understanding of gender issues. This study has limitations: the three films selected are all American, so their conclusions may not fully represent works from other cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the focus on films means television shows—an important part of visual media—are excluded. Future research can address these limitations in two ways: first, expand the sample to include films from East Asia, Africa, and other regions to explore how cultural contexts influence female power communication; second, integrate questionnaires and in-depth interviews with text analysis to collect first-hand audience data, improving the study's credibility.

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