THE PERFECT AGE FOR AN OSCAR PRIZE: GENDER AND AGE DIFFERENCES AMONG WINNERS

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ABSTRACT

This article approaches ageing and gender in the context of the Oscar prizes. The goal of my research is to determine the average age of winners according to their gender. I also set out to find out if young actresses get recognition for their physical appearance, as opposed to male actors, for whom prestige is more important. The analysis is structured into two sections: the first one focusing on the actors and actresses who won the Oscar prize for Best Actor in a Leading Role and the second on the actors and actresses who won the Oscar prize for Best Actor/Actress in a Supporting Role. Since there are different prizes awarded for actors, respectively, actresses, no gender differences can be found – and this has led me to research the age differences between the gender categories. Gender, linked to age, is a rich cultural resource that generates a whole set of expectations, as soon as a person is defined as a woman or a man of a certain age. In the context of the Oscars as most prominent awards in the industry, it is relevant to find out what is the most likely age at which actors, respectively, actresses, are given recognition – and if this age can be correlated to gender-specific attributes.

Keywords: ageing; gender; representation; film; Oscar awards.

INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that studying gender is almost inexhaustible, considering the complexity it involves. Gender means by far more than the distinction between women and men. Gender means representation, expectations, values, norms and much more. In this article, we shall view gender as a differentiating tool in a close relation to age. Femininity and masculinity have many and varied representations in movies. Of course, the models of femininity and masculinity differ from one film to another, but we will analyze them in general, focusing only on the age-related representations.

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Commonsensically, we often associate femininity with beauty and youth, while the portrayal of masculinity tends to be associated with an older age. That's why my initial assumptions were that the moment of glory brought by the earning of an Oscar happens at different ages, depending on the gender of the recipient.

If one should name something as a benchmark in the film industry, it would be the Oscars. Coveted and eagerly awaited every year, the Oscars have enjoyed a special popularity for decades. They are the end target for many young or old actors, regardless of their gender, ethnicity or race. (McIntyre & Chen Cheng, 2019) The first Academy Awards (Oscar prize) presentation took place on May 16, 1929, at a private dinner at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, gathering an audience of about 270 people. The Oscar for Best Supporting Actor was introduced later, in 1937.

I am basing my research on the following assumption: the older actors have more chances to win an Oscar because they are more famous than the younger ones, whereas the younger actresses are more prone to succeed in this career earlier in life, and their success is more connected to their beauty than to other attributes.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The theoretical framework of this article focuses on several central elements. These are: gender, aging and their intersectional representation in Oscar-winning movies. I set out to find out the average age at which men, respectively women have won their Oscar for Best Actor / Actress. The studies presented below approached the issue from the same perspective, that of gender. From my point of view, gender is a rich cultural resource, through which we identify and define ourselves as individuals. Many times, we find that people do or don't do certain things based on gender-associated expectations. In this case, I'm exploring the connection between the success of movies, the success of actors and actresses and their age. In this article, gender is a differentiating tool, in a close relation to age.

Laura Mulvey's theory about male gaze serves as starting point for this paper. She asserted that the majority of well-known films are made in such a way as to attract a certain type of look, the male scopophilia ("pleasure in looking", Freud, 1953), objectifying women into mere objects to be looked at). Mulvey's concept of "male gaze" can be described as a heterosexual, manly look (in fact, it is also referred to as a "masculine look"). For a male spectator, visual material that caters to male voyeurism tends to sexualize women. (Mulvey, 1989) This is why I wanted to find out what the average age is for women to win an Oscar to further connect this data with the age of beauty. Furthermore, the disparity between this and the average age of men at the moment of winning an Oscar as best Actor / supporting Actor is important in order to be able to establish a correlation.

Continuing the discussion on gender, we should introduce the concept of gender exposures, which, according to Erving Goffman (1979) are predetermined displays of gender; we, humans, reveal our gender through clothes, communication,

and behavior. “Gender Advertisements”, the research he published, looked at how gender is communicated in the United States through print media. Goffman looked at over 500 images from newspapers and magazines and discovered that men are depicted in greater sizes than women and are typically in a dominant position on a symbolic level. He also discovered that depictions of women who are completely reliant on men are the most common during the era he studied. In their classic research “Doing Gender”, West and Zimmerman (1987) expanded the Goffman’s observations. The theory of symbolic interaction, which focuses on the day-to-day interactions of the micro-level that generate and question gender as we know it, has impacted the popular and modern approach to gender sociology. Gender instability and fluidity are highlighted in this approach, which recognizes that gender is essentially changing because it is formed by humans via their interaction.

Our daily actions are defined by gender. What we do or don’t do contributes to gender construction. According to Simon Biggs (2004), adult aging brings back to attention the issue of gender and identity, possibly constructing a compelling story of age, but without laying too much stress on the complexity of these issues. It raises the question of how history and experience are valued in today’s world. It also questions the way we live and deal with the complexity of our identities and the way these identities can be manipulated by others. The intricacy of age and gender also reminds us that various truths about ourselves may coexist at different levels within the psyche. The complexity of age and gender’s interferences shows that, despite the various beliefs about ourselves, we may still juggle with varying degrees of visibility. This idea of the hidden and the surface allows to consider different spaces which allow to grow and develop.

As my hopothesis is related to gender and age of the Oscar winners, the following section of literature review tries to explore this subject. Thus, one of the researches is that of Lauzen and Dozien (2005), who approaches the representations of gender and age in the most popular movies. Most of the Oscar winners are American actors. Immediately after, statistically speaking, are actors from Great Britain. Linking the representations identified in films with the population of the United States, this study revealed that the film portrayal of women, respectively men in the US population is unbalanced, despite the steady increase in the number of male characters. Their study shows that men in their 40s and even older were more likely to hold leadership roles and earn occupational power than their female counterparts. Major male characters outnumbered female characters by a wide range. The majority of male characters were in their late 30s and 40s, while the majority of female characters were in their 20s and early 30s. More specifically, the study searched for a relationship between the leadership status and the person’s ability to achieve goals. Most characters in top-grossing movies played leadership roles as they got older, but the number of these roles decreased after they turned 60. The conclusions of the study conducted by Lauzen and Dozier (2005) were similar to the initial assumptions of my study. Men and women are represented differently depending on their gender and age (and awarded

differently, accordingly). Although there were not significant differences in leadership abilities for female characters', these abilities were significantly more prevalent in the roles played by men in their 40s and 50s. Similarly, in their 60s and 70s, male characters were more likely to have powerful occupational roles than female characters. Occupational power increased for female characters as a linear function of age. However, it was significantly stronger for male characters when they were in their late 30s, 40s, or 50s.

The history of the Academy Awards is engrained with a certain privilege that actors enjoy more (Beckwith & Hester, 2018), compared to actresses, and this is, the possibility of having a more sustainable career in the film industry. (Child, 2015) Over time, several critics have pointed out that actresses are excluded from the film industry when they reach middle age (Ghazi Askar, 2013). This privilege of the actors is gender-related, and in approaching it, we will use the concept of hegemonic masculinity and its relationship with both other forms of masculinity, and with femininity. It is a way of describing the privilege that men have over women (Connell, 1996). Hegemonic masculinity is the ideology that guarantees the dominant social position of the man and the subordinate position of the woman in society. According to this concept, masculine traits are superior to feminine traits and, consequently, are more desirable. Hegemonic masculinity has been defined, in fact, as "a configuration of gender-related practices that includes the accepted answer today to the question of patriarchal legitimacy, an answer that guarantees (or is believed to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." (Connell, 2005)

Further, I will discuss aging, and especially aging related to gender, all in the context of their representation in media. As Lazz argues (1998), the sociology of age is not so rigorously documented or taught in most schools and is less commonly studied than the sociology of aging. This is largely due to the overlapping of the two fields of study. Some overlaying assumptions referring to age as an objective fact, age as an individual attribute and age as a social problem obscure the various facets of age studied by sociologists. His paper developed a framework for age recognition as both a process and an effect of social interactions. Aging changes our look and our body, but also our behavior and social policies. According to Dawn Leah Magoffin (2007), older people are rarely represented in media in comparison with their real number in the real world. The statistics on the percentage of the old persons in America and the percentage of established media, such as television, vary due to the age definitions advanced by researchers. Studies have definitely stated that the old are under-represented in media. Seniors have traditionally been underrepresented in several types of media, including advertising, television or films. Older men and women often appear in advertisements for advanced age-related products such as medicines.

Also, in the film industry, older women were particularly portrayed as ugly and mean, just like in Disney movies. Comparing to men, they were more prone to be portrayed as eccentric, foolish, asexual, or lacking common sense. Another

representation featured them as being male-dependent in television commercials (Magoffin, 2007). Therefore, older women were less likely to be represented as working outside their home, despite the fact that 63 % of the US women, between the age of 55 and 59, and 44 % of women aged 60–64 continued to work outside their home (Smith, 2002).

Generally, in movies, the main female characters are younger than men. (Katz, 2017) Previous research showed that although female characters are between 20 and 30 years old, men outnumber females of the age of 30 and older. (Gerbner *et al*., 1980) Gerbner concluded that "the character population is structured to provide relative abundance of younger women to older men". However, only a small gender difference (14.8 % men, 12.1 % women) was detected in the category of 50 and above. Davis (1990) argued that "television women apparently lose their usefulness after the age of 35, but they reappear in equal proportion to men aged 50 and over".

The value of characters from different gender and age groups is symbolically rendered through their absence or abundance on the screen and the quality of their portraits. Most media research on age focused on high-rating television. However, television and film studies have shown a consistent under-representation and distortion of older people, especially women (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005).

The representation and significance of gender in both movies and video games or any other kind of visual, narrative content were linked with what gender could generate and the way it was presented. Rughiniş and Toma (2015) argue that once a character is defined as male or female, a wide variety of stereotypes and scripts are available to players to make their own image of what they are expected to do. This cultural resource can also be used to deliver a meaningful and persuasive message about alignment with expectations. Like video games, movies can generate the same kind of expectations as soon as a female or male character enters the scene. The scripts associated with the situations of the characters can be intuited by the viewers, based on the characters' gender and age. Our daily lives demonstrate similar ways of reacting to gender, usually according to the stereotypes we encounter daily. Watching a movie, we expect older characters to be wiser, while younger characters to be more impulsive, or women to be gentler and more sensitive, and men to be stronger and more resilient.

A relevant study on the same topic was conducted by Bazzini *et al*. (1997). Here, the film industry was often referred to as both an instigator and perpetuator of gender-based stereotypes. This study analyzed the content of over five decades of popular movies. They hypothesized that the depiction of older women in movies would continue to be under-represented compared to men of the same age. Compared to men, women were underrepresented, in terms of characters (quantitatively). These findings support the observation that women who grew old are not considered fit to endorse or sell products. The study showed that one of the main factors that severely reduced the number of older female Academy Award-winning actresses was that few older women appeared in movies. This conclusion coincides with the suggestion made by Markson and Taylor that the the low number

of Oscar-winning older actresses is due to their lack of representation in movies. Older individuals are portrayed as less romantic, less friendly, and less competent. They are also less likely to have positive experiences after a movie's end.

In her study, Rebecca Feasey (2011) argues that the action film hero was typically a man who had already seen his fair share of action in life. However, physical strength and speed were not associated with the old age. She also concluded that although little work was dedicated to the subject of aging in film stardom, it tended to focus on the negative treatment that older actresses had received in Hollywood. An increasing number of studies highlight women being more likely to experience sexual disfunction than male characters in films. It is also suggested that the image of the aging female figure does not fit with the image of the female action star, who is supposedly the epitome of physical perfection (and youth).

If we look back at the film industry, actors have been more prominent and portrayed a larger number of roles than have actresses – an example that speed up during the 1960s without a corresponding increase in the number of available actors. That older actresses play fewer roles than older men is perhaps not surprising. (Markson, 2000) Between 1970 and 2000 a shortage of roles for women of all ages in American film has been noted. It is not that older actresses are not available. For instance, in 1989, the latest year for which Screen Actors Guild information is accessible, 11 % of actors and 9 percent of actresses were 60 years old or over. That the woman is disappearing, notwithstanding her age, most likely mirrors Hollywood's reaction against the women' movement. Besides, in American film, older actresses have generally been less noticeable than more youthful actresses. Reduced sympathy for advanced age in general, and to women that are older in particular, isn't unique to this industry. During the nineteenth century, an unmistakable unfriendliness toward advanced age emerged with the improvement of working-class American culture. Women were prime targets for products from health, cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries, emphasizing youth, health, and slimness, for ideals of female beauty required youthful, unwrinkled faces and lithe figures of adolescence or early adulthood. Older women, without the litheness of early adulthood, were at the twofold peril of ageism and sexism – a topic built up by contemporary purchaser culture. The women's movement also has to a great extent disregarded older women, mirroring the ambivalence that many founders felt towards advanced age overall and towards their own moms specifically (Markson, 2000).

Another important study in films and gender led to the formulation of the the Bechdel Test. This is a test that aims to assess how balanced or unbalanced a film is, gender-wise. In 1985, the American writer Alison Bechdel published in a series of comics a simple test to assess the representation of women in a film. To pass the test, a film has to have: ***1.*** have to have at least two [named] women characters in it; ***2.*** Who should talk to each other; ***3.*** About something else besides a man. (Bechdel, 1985) I found it interesting to know how many of the films in which the Oscar-winning actors starred would pass the Bechdel test.

METHODOLOGY

In this research I used the method of content analysis, in a quantitative approach. The analysis was done on a body of information collected from the Internet Movies Data base, IMDb (imdb.com). I have selected data and made up a database which contains the names of the actors and actresses who have won the Oscar prize year after year, and their age at the award-winning moment. I have divided the analysis into two sections: winners of best actor / best actress in a leading role and best actor / actress in a supporting role.

For each winner, I calculated the age at which he won the Oscar and then found out the average age. In each of these two sections of the analysis and the database, I also identified whether or not the film passed the Bechdel Test. The database was created in the IBM SPSS Statistics (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software, with the help of which I performed the entire analysis, using the descriptive statistical tools available. Data were synthesized using frequency tables, but also using the main measures of central tendency, such as mean, median, and mode. At the same time, I took into account the minimum and maximum values for each data set.[1]

RESULTS

Best Actor in a Leading Role – The statistics (*Table 1*) show that the average age for the category Best Actor in a Leading Role is 44.72 (averaged to 45 years old). The small difference between the mean and the median demonstrates that there are no extreme values. In other words, no actor was too young or too old to win an Oscar. The minimum age is 30 and the maximum age is 77. The age which is most frequently met is 39 (the mode). If I refer to this data, it seems that the perfect age at which a man can win an Oscar is around 45.

Table 1

Statistics for Best Actor in a Leading Role

Mean	45
Median	43
Mode	39
Minimum	30
Maximum	77

[1] For more data on this research, you can email the author at *alexandra.mosor@drd.unibuc.ro*.

Figure 1 presents the highest frequency of age of winning an Oscar, which is around 40 and the lowest frequency, which is situated between 70 and 80 years old. The number of cases (N) is 93. The frequency of age supports the idea that most actors were 39 years old when they received the prize (8 actors). The histogram below shows that the age distribution is symmetrical.

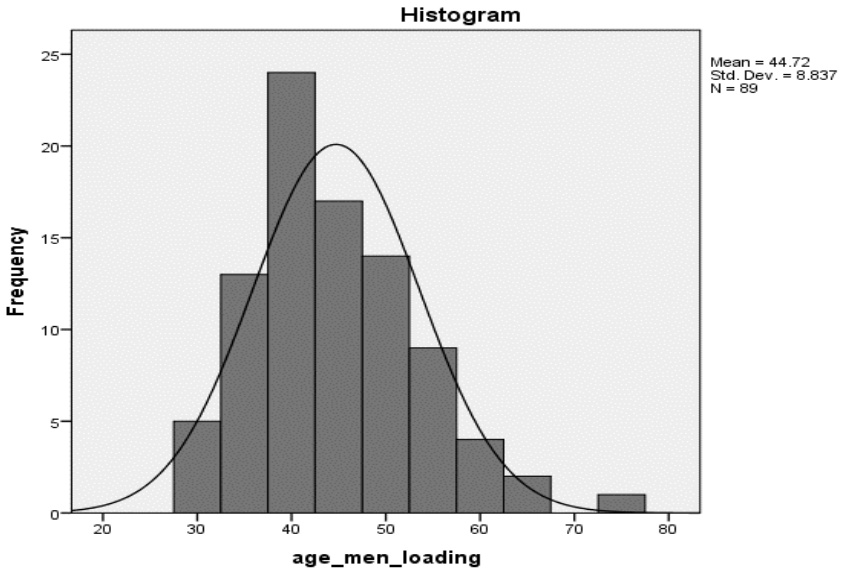

Figure 1 – Histogram for Best Actor in a Leading Role.

Best Actor in a Supporting Role – The statistics (*Table 2*) show that the average age for the category Best Actor in a Supporting Role is 50.84 (51 years old). In this case, the difference between the mean (50.84) and the median (47.00) increases, which results in more extreme values. The minimum age is 21 and the maximum age is 83. The mode is 47, equal with the median. If we look at this data, it seems that the perfect age at which a man can win an Oscar for a supporting role is higher than for a leading role, and this is around 51.

Table 2

Statistics for Best Actor in a Supporting Role

Mean	**51**
Median	**47**
Mode	**47**
Minimum	**21**
Maximum	**83**

Figure 2 presents the highest frequency, which is around the age of 50 and the lowest frequency, which varies between 20 and 30 years old. The number of cases (N) is 85. There were 8 missing cases, because the Oscar for best supporting actor was introduced later, in 1937, compared to when the first time Oscars were awarded to leading actors. Most actors were 47 years old when they received the award (7 actors). And this time the age distribution is symmetrical.

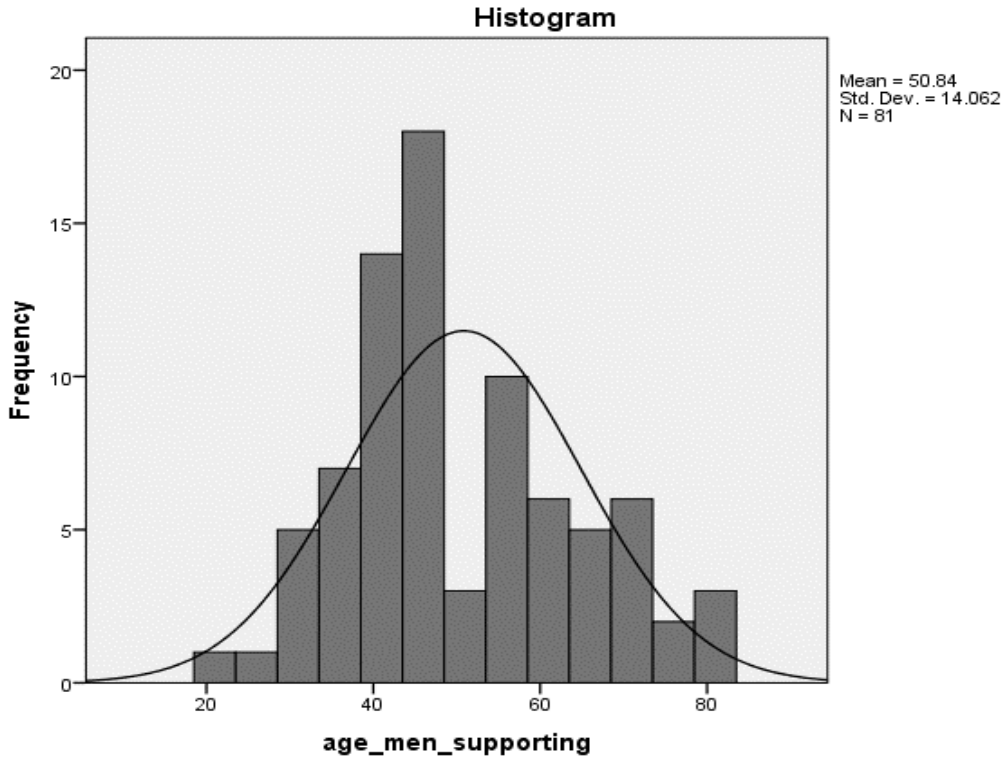

Figure 2 – Histogram for Best Actor in a Supporting Role.

Best Actress in a Leading Role – *Table 3* shows the average age for the category Best Actress in a Leading Role, which is 36.66 (37 years old). In this case, there is a difference between the mean (36.66) and the median (34.00), which means there can be some extreme values. The minimum age is 22 and the maximum age is 81. In this case, the mode is 27. Thus, I can say that the perfect age at which a woman can win an Oscar for a leading role is 8 years less than when male actors are more likely to win an Oscar, and it is is around 37.

Table 3

Statistics for Best Actress in a Leading Role

Mean	37
Median	34
Mode	27
Minimum	22
Maximum	81

Figure 3 (histogram) presents the highest frequency, which is around the age of 30, while the lowest frequencyvaries between 75 and 85 years old. The number of cases (N) is 93. It is important to notice the extreme values, which is around 80. Most actresses were 27 years old when they received the award (8 actresses).

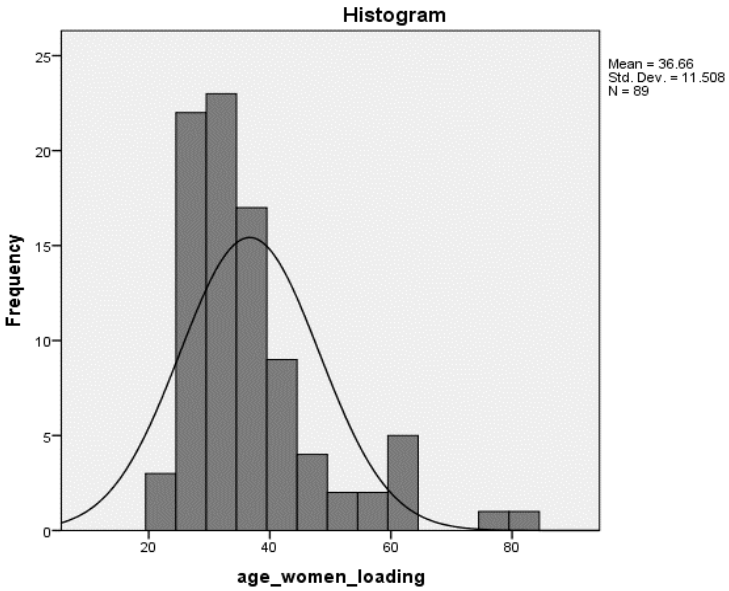

Figure 3 – Histogram for Best Actress in a Leading Role.

The database analyzed in this study includes four distributions of the ages for the Oscar winners, namely: actors in the Leading Role, actors in the Supporting Role, actresses in the Leading Role and actresses in the Supporting Role. Of these four distributions, the only one that rejects the null hypothesis is the distribution of ages for actresses who have won the Oscar for best actress in a Leading Role, with

a statistical significance under 5 %. The hypothesis test was realized in SPSS (*Table 4*).

Table 4

The hypothesis test

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of age_men_loading is normal with mean 44.72 and standard deviation 8.84.	One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test	.408	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of age_men_supporting is normal with mean 50.84 and standard deviation 14.06.	One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test	.058	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of age_women_loading is normal with mean 36.66 and standard deviation 11.51.	One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test	.009	Reject the null hypothesis.
4	The distribution of age_women_supporting is normal with mean 40.80 and standard deviation 13.91.	One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test	.209	Retain the null hypothesis.

Hypothesis Test Summary

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is 0.05.

Best Actress in a Supporting Role – *Table 5* shows the average age for the category Best Actress in a Supporting Role – which is 36.66 (37 years old). There is a small difference between the mean and the median, that leads to the conclusion that there aren't any extreme values. The minimum age is 11, while the maximum age is 78. In this case, the mode is 31. Thus, I can say that the perfect age at which a woman can win an Oscar for a supporting role is 10 years less than men, more precisely around the age of 41.

Table 5

Frequency for Best Actress in a Supporting Role

Mean	41
Median	39
Mode	31
Minimum	11
Maximum	78

Figure 4 (histogram) presents the highest frequency, which is around the age of 35 and the lowest frequency, which varies between 15 and 20 years old. The number of cases (N) is 85. There were 8 missing cases, because the Oscar for best supporting actor was introduced later, in 1937. Most actresses were 31 years old when they received the award (6 actors).

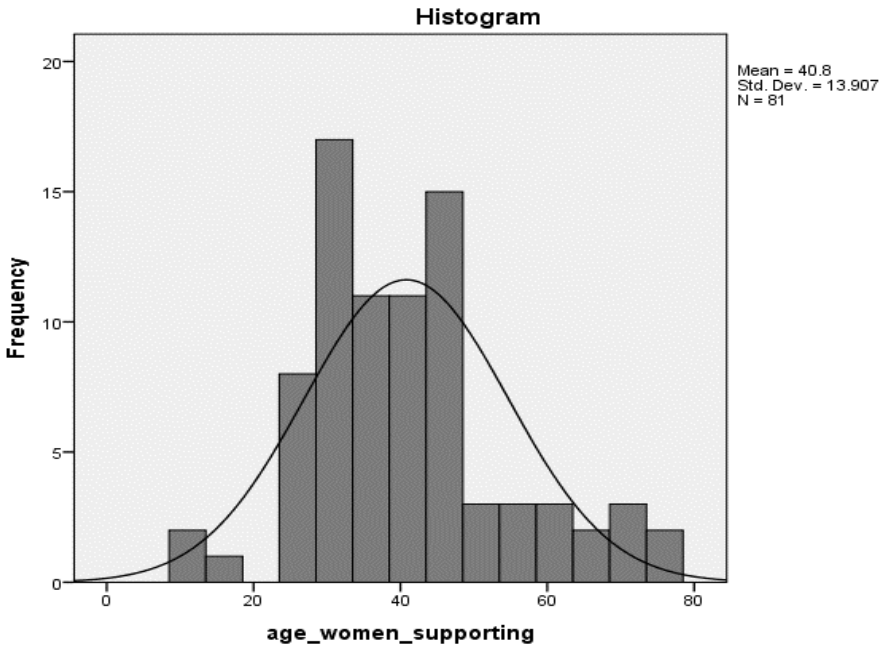

Figure 4 – Histogram for Best Actress in a Supporting Role.

Table 6

Measures of central tendency for the data set

	N (valid)	Mean	Median	Mode	Min.	Max.
Best Actor in a Leading Role	93	45	43	39	30	77
Best Actress in a Leading Role	93	37	34	27	22	81
Best Actor in a Supporting Role	85	51	47	47	21	83
Best Actress in a Supporting Role	85	41	39	31	11	78

Following the four different analyzes according to gender and type of award, I can say women are more likely to win the award at younger ages than men. Their average age is lower than the average age of men, both for the main roles and for the secondary roles. The age difference between women and men who won the award for a leading role is eight years (45 for men, 37 for women), and for the supporting role is ten years (51 for men and 41 for women).

Because we cannot discuss movies and gender without including the Bechdel test, I incorporated this test into my analysis on the films for which those actors and actresses won Oscar awards. Most of the films in which the men won the award for

best actor did not pass the test – 39, while only 25 did so. Regarding the films in which the men won the Oscar for a supporting role, the number of those who passed the test is higher (30 films) than those who failed the test (28 films). Regarding the films in which the women won awards, the situation is different: leading role – 59 films passed the test, 13 did not pass the test, and for supporting roles: 45 films passed the test, while 19 films failed the test (*Figure 5*). The other movies (those that are not included in this specific side analysis) were not identified in the database available at *https://bechdeltest.com/search/*.

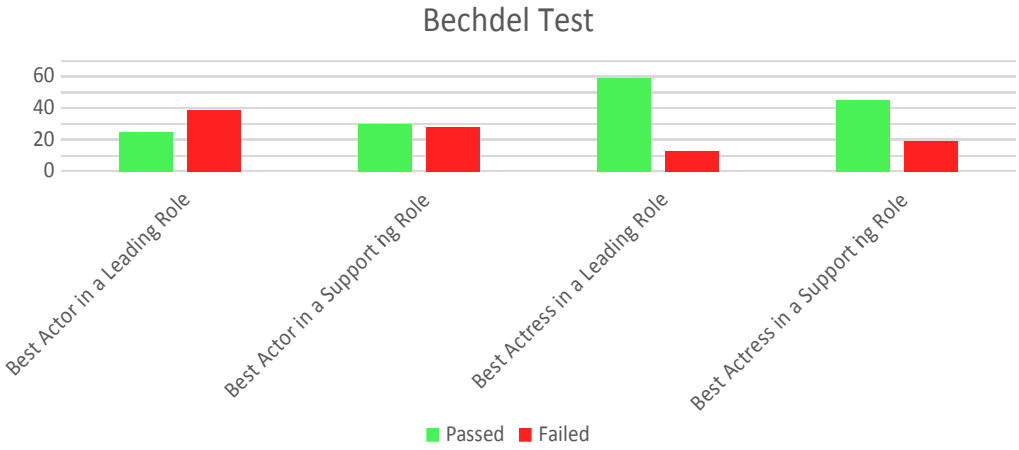

Figure 5 – Bechdel Test – applied on my research corpus.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

My findings demonstrate that the assumption that older actors have more chances to win an Oscar because they are more famous than the younger ones, whereas the younger actresses are more prone to succeed due to their beauty, was confirmed. According to the results, the most eligible candidates to the Oscar awards are younger actresses and older men. The average age for the category Best Actor in a Leading Role is 45 years old, without extreme values whereas, in case of Best Actor in a Supporting Role, it is 51 years old, with the likeliness of extreme values. As for the actresses, the average age is 37 years old for Best Actress in a Leading Role, with the likeliness of extreme values, and 41 years old for Best Actor in a Supporting Role, without extreme values. The age difference between women and men who won the award for a leading role is eight years and for the secondary role is 10 years.

According to the statistics results, the average age of men in a leading role receiving an Oscar is 45, while for women in the leading role of is 37. As Feasey argues, the topic of aging in film stardom tends to focus primarily on the negative

treatment (such as being marginalized or ignored, not being distributed etc.) received by the older actresses at Hollywood, even if it hasn't been explored extensively. There is a significant difference between the age of men and women who won an Oscar, but this can be explained by the fact that women are more visible in the movie world as long as they are young and beautiful. (Adamec, 2021)

The actors winning these awards are considered to represent the "viewer's vision". (Women & Hollywood, 2015) That is why roles such as the one played by Leonardo di Caprio in Titanic has won many awards and has been appreciated by all categories of people. Such a role played at a young age could provide the recipient a lifetime popularity, but it cannot promise them an Oscar.

It is important to say that the films in which the actors and actresses appeared can create certain beliefs about how we should or should not act or look like as a "woman" or as a "man". (Women & Hollywood, 2015) Some of the characters are simple and minor passers-by, whereas others remain as outstanding figures in the public's memory or become a landmark for teenagers, offering them the opportunity to interpret everyday life in relation to the movies they watch. Cosima Rughiniş (2015, p. 643) argues that building a perceptual grid is the key to the development of characters who can both motivate and be daunting. Even if there are some visible differences between the age of actresses and actors who won an Oscar, these differences come in a natural way (Adamec, 2021) and this does not attract the attention of the spectators.

Regarding the women and their presence or representation in films, I consider that the analysis of the Bechdel test is relevant. This showed that several films for which the women won the Oscar passed the test, while the films that brought Oscar roles to men did not pass the test with the same frequency.

In conclusion, the results of my research show a difference in terms of age between the actors and actresses who won the Oscar. Thus, it can be seen that actresses are more likely to be awarded an Oscar around the age of 39 (leading role – 37 years, supporting role – 41 years), and actors around the age of 48 (leading role – 45 years, while for supporting role was 51 years). This topic is worth being researched further on, in a close connection to the implications and reflections of how age, gender, and the film industry shape our views of the world nowadays.

Hegemonic masculinity, as cultural norms that legitimize the dominant position of men in society and justify the subordination of women and other marginalized types of masculinity, may represent a new direction of research, applicable on the same database. Specifically, I think it's interesting to note how the characters played by the Oscar-winning actors relate, narratively, to the other characters in those films.

By looking at the Bechdel Test correlated results, I can outline some new research conclusions and directions. At a first glance, I might think that the films that led to winning of an Oscar for leading actor are more patriarchal than the ones in which the supporting character is better defined, thus overturning stereotypes about the superhero characters. Also, looking at the data related to the films that led to winning an Oscar for best actress in the leading or supporting role, a tendency can be grasped that the stronger the female character, the more likely it is for the film to be feminist or to have a more feminist message.

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