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Discovering the Way of Challenging Adolescent Gender Stereotypes Through the Film Dangal

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Abstract: Currently, teenagers around the globe are all troubled by serious psychological problems. A certain group of teenagers has fallen into certain mental disorders at levels differing among individuals. The teenage years are a period when decisions are made, experiences gained, and self-understanding become very essential, so these years are frequently referred to as a critical or sensitive stage in one's life. What happens during this period is that the young people are not only growing rapidly physically, but also, typical of the age groups, developing their belief systems. Therefore, they are very easily disturbed and emotionally turbulent from the outside. In today's society, gender stereotypes can have a significant impact on adolescents' mental and behavioral health during their self-discovery and identity formation. This essay, based on a review of literature and film analysis, highlights methods to overcome adolescent gender stereotypes. This explores the role model, social influences, and self-confidence through the movie Dangal and supporting research. The paper finds that while these elements can challenge gender stereotypes, their effectiveness depends on factors like role-model relatability, social environment, and the balance of self-confidence. This research intends to help parents, educators, and policymakers intervene effectively, thereby overcoming adolescent gender stereotypes and fostering an environment conducive to gender equality.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, Adolescents, Role models, Social factors, Self-confidence

1. Introduction

Dangal is a 2016 Indian biographical sports drama film based on the life of Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former Indian wrestler, who trains his daughters Babita and Geeta as world-class wrestlers despite the resistance from societal expectations that restrict women to domestic work. *Dangal* became one of the highest-grossing Indian films of all time and won the Best Film award at the 62nd Filmfare Awards.

It lasts approximately 140 minutes and is targeted at a general audience, with a particular emphasis on inspiring young viewers since its content delves into themes of perseverance, empowerment, personal growth, and the breaking of traditional gender roles, making it a motivational and educational film experience for younger viewers. And the absence of sexual or violent content further establishes it as a safe and age-appropriate choice for young audiences.

On a global scale, approximately one in seven adolescents aged 10 to 19 is affected by mental disorders. These conditions contribute to 15% of the total disease burden faced by this age demographic around the world [1]. During this crucial stage of life, adolescents are particularly

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vulnerable to various external influences. The effect of gender stereotypes shall not be overlooked. There are many instances of gender stereotypes throughout the film. Gender stereotypes are preconceived notions about the behaviors and characteristics that are thought to be appropriate for individuals based on their gender or a relatively fixed way of viewing a gender. These stereotypes negatively impact self-esteem by making individuals evaluate their worth based on gender schemas and shape their self-perception by causing individuals to process self-relevant information in a gender-biased manner [2]. The misconception of oneself and a reduction in self-esteem may lead to a low mood or mental issues, especially among adolescents who are experiencing a special stage of life and are more prone to substantial emotional fluctuations. Furthermore, the experiment supports the hypothesis that people prefer remembering information that aligns with stereotypes [3]. These findings underscore the need to address these hidden adverse impacts on adolescents' mental and behavioral health.

Therefore, the paper investigates how to challenge adolescent gender stereotypes through this film. By analyzing the film Dangal's narrative and character development, this essay aims to explore the relevant content of gender stereotypes among adolescents and provide insights into reducing gender stereotypes and enhancing the health of adolescents.

2. The impact of role models on challenging gender stereotypes

2.1. The symbolic power of representational victory in *Dangal*

The very impressive conversation from the movie happened before Geeta's final match at the Commonwealth Games, which is the biggest game for Geeta at that moment, and she fought her way through multiple rounds of competition to earn this opportunity. When her father, Mahavir Phogat, offers her crucial encouragement. He told her that winning gold would make her an example, and if she won tomorrow, she would not win alone. Millions of girls like them would win along with her. It would be a victory for every girl who is considered inferior to boys, who is forced into household chores, and who is married off just to raise children [4]. And at the very end of the movie featured real-life photos of the people the characters are based on. Next to the photo of Mahavir, it reads that Mahavir Singh has now become a raging fire. His efforts have inspired thousands of girls across India to take up wrestling [4]. Mahavir's words emphasize that Geeta's victory would not only be personal but would serve as a beacon of hope for countless girls facing societal restrictions. This moment emphasizes the significant influence of role models in driving systemic change. The film reinforces this message by concluding with a real-life influence on female wrestling in India because of the story of the two girls. By portraying Geeta as a trailblazer, the film underscores the crucial role of representation in empowering marginalized groups.

This aligns with a study that concludes that women's automatic gender stereotypes about their own group can be weakened when they are placed in environments where female leaders are more prevalent [5]. Turning our attention to more recent research, it has demonstrated again in 2020 that role models have a positive effect since the girls' expectations in math and preference in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) areas increased while the effect of gender-role stereotypes decreased after role-model-based intervention [6]. This finding validates the idea that direct exposure to female role models is a successful way of challenging and redefining gender stereotypes.

2.2. The paradox of role model attainability

Alyssa Carson, a 24-year-old girl who has been determined to become an astronaut since age six and has been attending a number of space-related programs and camps to get closer to her dream. Narrating by her own journal, it took her more than a year to find another girl in astrobiology, which

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is the major she's majoring in. Apart from the societal environment and biases, another major reason is a lack of female mentors and role models [7]. She also mentioned that she was very fortunate to meet Sandra Magnus, a female astronaut who made her realize that her dream was attainable and not out of reach [7]. The attainability is quite important since, conversely, young girls may be demotivated by role models at some points. Young girls might find these role models too exceptional to relate to, making their success seem unattainable and ultimately reducing their confidence and interest in STEM [8]. This indicates that although role models are designed to motivate, they might unconsciously strengthen a sense of insufficiency among young girls. This occurs when these girls view the accomplishments of role models as not in line with reality or too difficult to achieve. Moreover, it is insufficient for aspiring women to merely be aware of the existence of female achievements within a specific domain. What matters more is that they perceive a sense of similarity with these role models. Only when a role model is seen as relevant to them can it effectively challenge and reshape how young women view themselves. Also, young women are likely to recognize successful women as role models only after establishing a personal connection with them [9].

Thus, while successful role models can positively influence adolescents' gender stereotypes, building personal connections with role models and finding attainability is quite necessary.

3. The impact of social factors on challenging gender stereotypes

3.1. Family perspective

There are many social factors in the movie *Dangal*, including family, school, neighbours, and so on. Starting with family, in Dangal, after witnessing the wrestling talent of his two daughters, Mahavir realized that he was desperate for a son so he could win a gold medal in wrestling for India. But what didn't occur to him was that gold is gold. Whether won by a boy or a girl [4]. At that moment, his gender stereotype that wrestling is a male-dominated sport began to change. Even when Geeta and Babita themselves doubted their abilities, he firmly believes in them, leading and guiding their training. Mahavir treated his daughters just like he would have treated sons. His progressive gender perspective provided the two girls with an opportunity to change their destinies, allowing them to move from accepting themselves to believing in themselves and ultimately to taking pride in themselves. Mahavir's egalitarian gender concept was also a crucial factor in their success. The movie indicated that the influence of gender equality awareness on adolescents is closely connected with their parents. Since parents influence their children's gender role socialization by demonstrating traditional or non-traditional attitudes towards gender roles, as well as by encouraging or discouraging their children from engaging in specific gendered activities [10].

As a part of the family, siblings are not supposed to be neglected as well. The influence between siblings is bidirectional. In particular, younger children tend to imitate the gender concepts of their older siblings, which may lead to either more egalitarian or more stereotypical gender concepts [11]. This could continuously sustain until puberty. Looking back on *Dangal*, Babita, as a younger sister of Geeta, became even more determined to pursue a career in wrestling after Geeta enrolled in a sports university. A few years later, Babita herself enrolled in a sports university. Notably, in the years following Geeta's Commonwealth Games victory, Babita went on to win a silver medal and later a gold medal. This progression exemplifies the influence between siblings. These two influences can also be interpreted by Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which suggests that people learn through observation and with four processes, including attention, retention, motoric reproduction, reinforcement, and motivation [12]. The subtle influence of parents and siblings, along with adolescents' observational learning, contributes to the family's impact on gender stereotypes.

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3.2. Societal and environmental factors

In *Dangal*, when the villagers first saw the two girls training, their expressions were filled with either shock, confusion, or ridicule and disdain. In addition, one day after school, the two girls even considered quitting their training because other girls at school mocked Geeta, saying she looked like a boy. These situations emotionally hurt them, and such social motives also negatively impacted the correction of Geeta and Babita's gender stereotypes. Especially in today's society, the widespread use of the internet and social media has made information spread at a faster speed. The Internet can disseminate various forms of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and other inappropriate information, which can confuse and mislead the concepts and mentalities of teenagers [13]. Also, in the process of school teaching, teachers' behaviors, such as grouping children by gender or encouraging boys to play games related to mechanical operation or technology and girls to play gentle games like playing house, will deepen children's perception of gender stereotypes [14]. These kinds of groupings or preferences exist in middle schools and high schools as well.

In summary, social factors can have both beneficial and harmful effects on adolescents' gender stereotypes. The impact of social factors on adolescent gender stereotypes can be minimized to the greatest extent by correcting and standardizing practices, such as regulating school teaching methods or promoting education and awareness among society members and guardians of minors.

4. The impact of self-confidence on challenging gender stereotypes

In the film, Geeta's life is shown in two phases. When she was a child, in the early periods of wrestling practice and matches with her father, she was extremely introverted and doubting. Whenever her father took her to competitions, she was shy. However, when Geeta later entered the sports school, her environment changed dramatically. Surrounded by new friends and a more open, supportive social network, she and her friends train together, watch movies, and even go out together. She began to develop both confidence and independence. She started planning her own competition and training strategies and makes decisions on her own rather than relying on her father's traditional methods only. She grew stronger day by day in her self-acceptance, and she has now fully embraced her identity as a female wrestler and is proud of it. Geeta's transformation highlights the crucial role of confidence in breaking gender stereotypes. Studies have demonstrated that there is an association between negative stereotypes and girls' lower self-confidence, which in turn, causes them to be more inclined towards conservatism when making choices and to avoid participating in challenging tasks [15].

But even with these favorable advancements, the movie also quietly suggests some drawbacks that arise when the concept of self-assurance is pushed to the extreme. As Geeta becomes more self-assured in herself, she starts to disregard her father's traditional training techniques, although his techniques are from deep knowledge about her capabilities. This excessive confidence causes her to briefly fail to recognize the importance of the guidance offered by those with experience. Dunlosky and Rawson's experiment indicated that overconfidence has a negative impact on learning outcomes [16]. Their research on individual differences has found that there is a negative correlation between students' overconfidence during the practice stage and their final retention rate in class [16]. Overconfident students may think they have mastered the definitions during the practice stage, but in fact, they may be without having truly grasped them. Due to overconfidence, they stop practicing, resulting in a smaller number of definitions remembered in the end, which further confirms the negative effect of overconfidence on learning.

To sum up, confidence can help adolescents eliminate or weaken gender stereotypes to a certain extent. However, if it turns into overconfidence, it will be counterproductive and have negative impacts.

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5. Discussion

Schools and communities should build platforms to match young people with same-gendered role models based on their interests and strengths. For example, for girls who love programming, female programmers can be arranged as mentors to conduct regular communication activities. Since in the context of education and career development, role models have a significant positive impact on teenagers, they can not only inspire teenagers' learning motivation and help them set goals but also enhance self-confidence. Moreover, role models can alter teenagers' self-perception, and by reducing gender stereotypes, they make teenagers believe that more goals are achievable [17].

Considering that the traditional view of gender roles of teachers would possibly transfer to students and bring out negative consequences, especially for girls [18]. Education departments should formulate and implement teaching guidelines for gender equality and clearly require teachers to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes in the teaching process. Teachers should not make specific requirements or imply that one gender is more suitable for a certain activity in class grouping or activity arrangement.

Given that being exposed to screen media has a connection with people's beliefs about particular gender-related roles [19], the media should strictly limit the dissemination of information that contains explicit or implicit gender stereotypes and spread the concept of gender equality through forms like public service advertisements, positive social media topic discussions, and so on.

It is essential to know how to reduce adolescent gender stereotypes in today's world. Adolescence is a phase of life where one discovers himself or herself and forms his or her identity, and gender stereotypes can play a significant role in the process, defying it is necessary for building a more inclusive society. When adolescents are not bound by the constraints of such stereotypes, they can give back to society in various ways.

6. Conclusion

The analysis finds that while role models, positive social environments, and self-confidence can challenge these stereotypes, their effectiveness depends on various factors. This research is significant as it promotes individual growth and a more equitable society.

However, this research has certain limitations. Primarily, this study predominantly focused on female characters from Dangal, but without analyzing male adolescent experiences. As a result, this study's lack of gender diversity restricts the research's ability to comprehensively capture the range of experiences related to gender stereotypes. This not only negatively influences understanding of how these stereotypes operate across genders but also limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader adolescent population since the story in the movie *Dangal* occurs in India. Whether or not it could be generalized to more places and regions shall still be doubted.

Future research ought to employ a multi-pronged approach. Conduct surveys with a wide range of male and female adolescents to quantify their views on gender stereotypes. Combine this with interviews in order to delve deeper and longitudinal studies that can track attitude changes over time. This two-pronged approach will provide readers with deeper insights and more effective means to counter such stereotypes.

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