

Nova Miller

Aiko Yoshioka

Current Issues 3

11 July 2025

### Feminism and Gender Performance in *Charlie's Angels*

Out of all genres of film, action is possibly where female leads and feminism are the hardest to come by. The number of female action heroes has noticeably increased in the last few decades with popular films and series such as *Kill Bill*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Old Guard*, but men still dominate both standalone films and franchises by a large margin. In films where women are not the center of attention, they are frequently one-dimensional and forced to be either attractive or intelligent and strong, but not both. If there are multi-dimensional female characters, they often remain in the shadows of the main male hero. Therefore, a film like *Charlie's Angels* that includes three female leads who can be both physically tough and outwardly feminine is uncommon. Although elements of the male gaze are still present in scenes where the girls show off their beauty, the decision to focus on talented, independent women was remarkably feminist in an era of the action genre where women were rarely given importance.

When *Charlie's Angels* begins with the main characters riding a boat in bikinis and shaking out their hair in slow motion, it immediately feels like it will play into anti-feminist stereotypes. However, it becomes clear that the women in this film are strong, adaptable, and intelligent while still being beautiful and feminine. They possess an almost endless number of skills: they can speak several languages, defuse bombs, break into high-security vaults undetected, fight with their hands tied, and create elaborate disguises, to name a few. They are also physically strong and have extensive martial arts training, with Alex even mentioning

casually that she can break blocks using her head. When they design a plan, they consider every detail, and in challenging situations, they trust each other and remain confident. Although they are under the leadership of a man, Charlie barely influences the plot outside of informing them of assignments and he expresses absolute trust in their abilities, so his oversight does not diminish their strength. These traits do not make them any less feminine either; they are still portrayed as women despite having characteristics typically associated with men. Considering these details, it becomes obvious that the characters in *Charlie's Angels* defy tradition and embrace a multi-faceted form of womanhood that aligns with modern feminism.

The film also resists traditional gender roles by portraying the women as realistic individuals with their own interests and weaknesses. Female characters in older Hollywood movies were often reduced to one trait or only included as a love interest, feeding into a stereotype that women lack complexity and individuality. In *Charlie's Angels*, each girl has her own personality, love life, interests, and special skills. Natalie is bubbly and socially awkward, falls in love with a bartender she meets on the job, and has unique knowledge of bird calls that allows them locate Bosley after he is captured. Alex is more serious, has a boyfriend who she struggles to reveal her identity to, and takes interest in cooking but fails to make things correctly. Dylan is sarcastic, boyish, and enjoys playing Scrabble, but accidentally puts herself in a vulnerable position by sleeping with Knox without knowing his true intentions. Although they also have many similarities, these differences emphasize their individual importance to the team and make them feel more real to the audience. Showing them be vulnerable and occasionally fail to make observations or catch people helps this further, as it shows their humanity and conveys that women do not have to be perfect or ignore their personal desires to be strong.

In addition to expressing non-traditional femininity through their strength and skills, Alex, Natalie and Dylan also use beauty and performative femininity to trick men or catch them off guard. This typically involves them dressing up in revealing clothing and going undercover to distract men while one of them collects evidence. In one instance, Natalie and Alex dress up as belly dancers and perform for unassuming men while Dylan takes one of their beer bottles to get a fingerprint from it. When they go to break into the vault, Alex goes undercover as an efficiency expert in a tight leather suit and proceeds to yell at, intimately touch, and compliment the company's workers to intimidate and distract them while Dylan and Natalie disguise themselves as her bodyguards. In these examples, they utilize an exaggerated version of femininity to get what they need from men and seem less suspicious. While some may interpret this as the film playing into stereotypes, the characters only use it in the context of their work, and it appears to be included to display the sexism they suffer from and how men often only see women for their beauty. Rather than being anti-feminist, it is instead a strategic form of arguing for feminism and conveying that femininity is a constantly evolving performance that women use in specific circumstances to achieve a particular effect.

Despite these positive portrayals, *Charlie's Angels* has been subjected to harsh criticism by viewers who believe that the film is just another example of women being sexualized for male enjoyment. They argue that because the main characters are conventionally attractive, wear tight clothing, and use their looks to their advantage, it reduces them to their appearance and deemphasizes their abilities (Gauntlett 76). These opinions are seemingly influenced by the campy, upbeat nature of the film, as some critics may feel that if the story is not serious or non-traditional enough then it is a waste of time. However, these complaints primarily come from male viewers who have no experience with gender discrimination and therefore cannot

understand the importance of seeing a woman on screen who can embrace both her femininity and intelligence to young women. Female viewers, on the other hand, felt uplifted seeing three powerful women take down enemies with ease while also feeling beautiful and bonding with each other (Gauntlett 78). This displays that even if a film does not tackle feminism in a serious manner and sometimes gives into stereotypes, whether women feel empowered and understood after viewing is likely a more accurate indicator of positive representation.

Another sign of the film's feminist messaging is the inclusion of themes from the second and third waves of American feminism. The second wave of American feminism dominated from the 1960s to the 1980s and focused on fighting social and legal discrimination and re-evaluating traditional gender roles that forced women into depending on men. The third wave began in the 1990s and instead focused on promoting diversity and individual expression of sexuality and gender along with solving lingering issues such as workplace harassment and lack of female representation in high-ranking positions (Pruitt). Coinciding with these social changes was improvement in media representation where popular films such as *Charlie's Angels* began centering around powerful women. Several aspects of these eras of feminism appear in *Charlie's Angels*, such as showing women in traditionally masculine fields, resisting stereotypes about being weak, and expressing their individuality and sexual desires. A focus on diversity and intersectional feminism is noticeably lacking in this film, especially when they are shown wearing stereotypical non-Western attire to entertain men, but more recent films such as *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* have begun tackling this issue. Although there was room for improvement, the film uses many ideas from second and third wave feminism to portray women in a positive light and encourage female viewers to embrace their strength.

*Charlie's Angels* is by no means the best example of a feminist film. There are scenes where the sole purpose seems to be emphasizing the beauty of the main characters, and each of them are still given love interests. However, it is impossible to ignore the characterization of them as tough, independent, smart, and multi-faceted women and its connection to feminist ideas. They are not only skilled spies, but they are also regular women trying to balance their work with a normal life, each with their own hobbies and goals. This emphasis on empowerment and independence takes inspiration from American feminism, particularly the second and third waves that focused on changing traditional gender roles and encouraging women to hold positions of power. While the writers could have improved in areas such as diversity, complexity of the plot, and not heavily featuring their looks, *Charlie's Angels* acted as a step in the right direction for feminist film in the early 2000s and beyond.

Works Cited

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