

Gender Discourse in American TV Series *The Big Bang Theory*

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Abstract— *This study highlights the issue of gender stereotyping with emphasis on the linguistic aspect. It identifies the male and female characters' linguistic features based on Holmes' (2006) theory of masculine and feminine style of interaction and analyses whether the characters conform or challenge the gender stereotype using Eagly's (1987) Social Role Theory. The findings demonstrate that the protagonists employed the linguistic features as cited by Holmes (2006) in their interactions. The male protagonists are observed to fit the agentic role whereas the female protagonist is noted to fit the communal role, hence proving that they conform to gender stereotypes. It is also shown that social psychology factors such as normative social influence and the presence of others caused the protagonists to conform to gender stereotypes.*

Keywords— *gender stereotypes, masculine and feminine style of interaction, linguistic features, agentic role, communal role.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically, gender stereotypes have long existed in our society. But they are perpetuated by the media which serves as a powerful socialising agent in our contemporary society. According to Carter and Steiner (2004), women are often portrayed in media based on their looks or their social roles i.e. daughter, wife and mother rather than as individuals, unlike men who are constantly observed to have high career status and they are dominant in various aspects of life such as work and family. Hence, when the audience especially young children and teenagers are presented with such representation of gender in movies and television, they internalise these ideals. As such, they restrict themselves within the boundaries of these stereotypes, hence unable to realise and expand their full potentials.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Brannon (2004) explained that the current gender stereotypes are attributed to the beliefs which appeared during the 19th century. The rise of the Industrial Revolution forced men to work outside their homes while women had to stay home to manage their households and

children. This then resulted in the two common beliefs: the Doctrine of Two Spheres and the Cult of True Womanhood.

The Doctrine of Two Spheres refers to the belief that men and women have their separate areas of influence. Women's areas of influence are home and children whereas men's spheres are work and the outside world (Lewin, 1984, as cited in Brannon, 2004). As for the Cult of True Womanhood, it dictates that the combination of four virtues- piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity- provides the promise of happiness and power to the Victorian women. Although the Cult of True Womanhood was dominant during the 19th century, its remnants still lingers in our present day culture and influence our views of femininity where women are still regarded as weak, dependent as well as timid and that the responsibility of giving birth and assuming tasks like cooking and washing in the home domain should fall upon women.

The 19th-century idealisation of women also resulted in the Victorian ideal of manhood. Masculinity, according to Pleck (1981), is viewed in four themes: "No Sissy Stuff", "The Big Wheel", "The Sturdy Oak" and "Give 'Em Hell". "No Sissy Stuff" describes the rejection towards the portrayal of traits highly associated with femininity in men's behaviour. "The Big Wheel" depicts how men should constantly strive to achieve success and high status. "The Sturdy Oak" component illustrates the notion that men should display confidence and independence during a crisis. The "Give 'Em Hell" aspect makes it acceptable for males to demonstrate violence and aggression in their behaviours. At present, these themes are still prevalent in our society, with the first theme constituting our modern views of masculinity.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempts to answer three research questions as follows:

- What are the linguistic features identified in the discourses of the protagonists in *The Big Bang Theory* based on Holmes' (2006) theory of masculine and feminine style of interaction?

- ii. How are the manifestation of the linguistic features in the discourses of the protagonists in *The Big Bang Theory* demonstrate that they conform or challenge the gender stereotypes?
- iii. What are the possible factors causing the protagonists in *The Big Bang Theory* to conform or challenge the gender stereotypes in relation to the linguistic features employed by the protagonists?

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Holmes' (2006) Theory of Masculine and Feminine Style of Interaction

Sung (2013) illustrated that males demonstrated masculine style of leadership by employing unmitigated directives, challenging questions and authoritative statements that begin with the pronoun "I" in their interactions with their team members. Females also displayed feminine style of leadership by employing pronouns (e.g. we) and passive voices in statements as well as utilising detailed and elaborate explanation to mitigate rejections and directives. Granqvist (2013) illustrated that the female protagonist in the TV show, *The Big Bang Theory* used a higher frequency of hedges, boosters and tag questions compared to the male protagonists.

Chan (2008) proved that males and females portrayed both masculine and feminine style of interaction. She revealed that female contestants used feminine style of interaction when they interacted in an indirect manner characterised by their tendency to ask questions to confirm decision. At the same time, they also employed aggressive and direct style of interaction when making decisions pertaining to the completion of the tasks in the show. The male contestants employed masculine style of interaction as they asked questions and replied in a straightforward manner but they used collaborative style of interaction by asking for help in finishing one of the challenges in the show.

4.2 Conformity and/or Challenge towards Gender Stereotypes

Azmi, Radzuwan, Mairas and Safawati (2016) showed that both male and female protagonists conformed to and challenged gender stereotypes. The female protagonists employed hedges and tag questions when they conversed, all of which signified expressive behaviour. They fulfilled the communal role, thus conforming to female stereotypes. The male protagonists were also found to use a large number of tag questions and hedges in their speech, hence challenging the male stereotypes.

Reutler (2013) also illustrated that the male and female protagonists conformed to and challenged gender stereotypes. The female protagonist was observed to use more empty adjectives to express their feelings which are synonymous to expressive behaviour, hence they depicted the communal role and conformed to female stereotypes. At the same time, they used swear words while interacting. They did not fit the communal role, hence challenging the female stereotypes. The male protagonists incorporated swear words in their speech, which coincided with assertive behaviour, thus they displayed the agency role and conformed to male stereotypes. But they also asked tag questions when interacting. They did not fit the agency role, hence challenging the male stereotypes.

4.3 Factors Contributing to Conformity and/or Challenge towards Gender Stereotypes

Eagly, Diekmann and Wood (2000) explained that social psychology factors such as *normative social influence* and *the presence of others* contribute to males and females conforming to gender stereotypes.

Yang, Chiu and Chen (2011) revealed that the need to be accepted as part of the social groups by their college friends played a significant role in influencing college students to engage heavily in online games. Eagly, Wood and Fishbaugh's (1981) experiment had shown that males demonstrated less conformity compared to females when they were required to express their opinion under surveillance of the other group members. It was elaborated that males felt the need to fill in their agentic role by demonstrating autonomy in the eyes of others. Similarly, females were driven to assume their communal role by preserving social harmony and saw conformity as a way to achieve their goal.

Feminism is also observed as the crucial factor as to why males and females challenge gender stereotypes. A study conducted by Cahyani (2009) showed that the act of the female protagonist in the movie *Mona Lisa Smile* challenging gender stereotypes was influenced by the notion of feminism. She revealed that the protagonist, Katherine Watson's feminism perspectives not only had allowed her to break gender stereotypes, but also changed her students' life as she successfully made them realise that there was more to life than marriage and motherhood.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This study is a qualitative research which utilises textual analysis to evaluate the dialogues spoken by *The Big Bang Theory* protagonists'.

5.2 Sampling

The data are retrieved from the dialogues of the main characters in the TV series, *The Big Bang Theory* (Season 1) and the drama transcripts obtained at <https://bigbangtrans.wordpress.com>.

The Big Bang Theory is chosen because it has been observed to receive various reviews concerning the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in the said TV series. Gender studies conducted by McIntosh (2014) and Viscuso (2015) revealed that the portrayal of the female protagonists in the said series reinforced gender stereotypes and such stereotypes were used to achieve comedy effect. Given the popularity of the series, it is assumed that it has been seen and most likely, liked by many. Therefore it might have had a big widespread influence on the society's view towards gender stereotypes.

5.3 Data Collection

Preliminary viewing of the full episodes of *The Big Bang Theory* Season 1 is conducted before the data collection process. At this stage, all the episodes are viewed by the researcher for a total of three times. This is done not only to collect the relevant linguistic features but also to assist the researcher to comprehend better the context in which the dialogues are spoken, thus facilitating the pace at which the linguistic features are identified. The drama transcripts are inspected for any possible mistakes, for instance, omission of certain words spoken by the protagonists. This is to ensure that the materials crucial in answering the research questions presented in this paper are correct and reliable.

After the preliminary stage, the scenes where either or both of the male protagonists, Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter are interacting with each other and with the female protagonist, Penny are then extracted. From the selected scenes involving the three protagonists, masculine and feminine style of interactions which match the criteria of the theoretical framework of the study are then recorded for a more in-depth analysis.

5.4 Data Analysis

The recorded speech features, which are the data for the present study, are analysed using Eagly's (1987) Social Role Theory to answer the second research question that are to determine whether the male protagonists do play the agentic role and to validate whether the female protagonist portrays the communal role within the TV show from the linguistic perspective. When the male protagonists are demonstrated to portray the agentic role, they are then deduced to conform to male stereotype and challenge gender stereotypes if proven otherwise. Female stereotypes are then manifested if the female protagonist depicts the communal role from the linguistic point of view. On the other hand, she is said to overcome the boundaries of gender stereotypes if she does not fit the communal role in relation to linguistic viewpoint.

Additionally, the data are also analysed and discussed to seek for possible reasons causing the protagonists in *The Big Bang Theory* to conform or challenge the gender stereotypes in relation to the linguistic aspect. At the end of the data collection and analysing process, the episodes are re-watched numerous times in order to attain data saturation as well as to ensure that the data analysed and interpreted are accurate and consistent.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Holmes' (2006) Theory of Masculine and Feminine Style of Interaction

6.1.1 Masculine Style of Interaction

According to Holmes' (2006), masculine style of interaction are identified as follows: competitiveness, aggressive interruptions, confrontational, direct, autonomous, task or outcome oriented and referentially oriented. Table 1 illustrates each linguistic feature outlined by Holmes' (2006) which is exhibited in both male protagonists', Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter, dialogues when they interact with each other as well as with the female protagonist, Penny.

Table.1: Holmes' (2006) Masculine Style of Interaction Demonstrated by Male Protagonists, Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter

Style of Interaction	Linguistic Features (Types/ Reasons)	Episode & Title	Excerpt(s)
Masculine	(i) Competitive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verbosity 	Episode 2: The Big Bran Hypothesis	Excerpt 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon and Leonard utilized various physics mechanism to win the argument in regards to the Superman movie scene.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boasting 	Episode 9: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarisation	Excerpt 2: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon showed that he thought of himself as better than Leonard because he was the lead author of their research

			paper.
	(ii) Aggressive Interruptions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To show disagreement 	Episode 9: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarisation	Excerpt 3: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon interrupted Leonard aggressively because he was offended by Leonard's comment about his hypothesis as a lucky hunch.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To show disagreement To dominate the floor with the intention of changing the topic of conversation 	Episode 7: The Dumpling Paradox	Excerpt 4: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon harshly interrupted Leonard when they were still in the midst of a discussion because he was annoyed that his daily routine was interrupted and that he wanted to dominate the floor with the intention to chase everyone out of the house.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To show disagreement To dominate the floor without the intention of changing the topic of conversation 	Episode 11: The Pancake Batter Anomaly	Excerpt 5: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon interrupted Penny harshly because he wanted to dominate the floor and reasserted his question as well as showing his displeasure that Penny could not answer his question.
	(iii) Confrontational <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imperative sentences 	Episode 3: The Fuzzy Boots Corollary	Excerpt 6: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leonard used the imperative phrase, "Give me the phone" to Sheldon.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insults 	Episode 12: The Jerusalem Duality	Excerpt 7: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon insulted Penny about her lack of understanding towards his predicament because she had never excelled at anything.
	(iv) Direct	Episode 1: Pilot Episode	Excerpt 8: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leonard replied Sheldon's questions with a curt "no" and a direct "I don't care".
		Episode 1: Pilot Episode	Excerpt 9: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon bluntly told Penny that they had "tried to masturbate for money".
	(v) Autonomous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authoritative statements 	Episode 4: The Luminous Fish Effect	Excerpt 10: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon used authoritative statement, "I need eggs. Four dozen eggs should suffice".
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authoritative statements 	Episode 11: The Pancake Batter Anomaly	Excerpt 12: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sheldon expressed his demand, "I want soup" to Leonard. Leonard replied Sheldon with an equally authoritative statement: "Then, make soup."
	(vi) Task or Outcome-Oriented	Episode 2: The Big Bran Hypothesis	Excerpt 13: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leonard provided efficient suggestion

			to construct Penny's furniture as seen in this sentence: "How about if we replace panels A, B and F and crossbar H with aircraft grade aluminium?"
		Episode 12: The Jerusalem Duality	Excerpt 14: • Sheldon discussed his problem faced while building a transporter with Leonard.
	(vii) Referentially-Oriented • Factual, informative speech	Episode 1: Pilot Episode	Excerpt 15: • Sheldon stated aloud that Leonard was lactose-intolerant.
		Episode 15: The Porkchop Indeterminacy	Excerpt 17: • Sheldon explained to Penny that he and his twin sister were fraternal twins, hence they did not look like each other.
	• Discourse marker, <i>so</i>	Episode 2: The Big Bran Hypothesis	Excerpt 16: • Leonard used <i>so</i> when he compared Penny's waitress job to the human body's carbohydrate delivery system

6.1.2 Feminine Style of Interaction

Holmes (2006) listed the following features as feminine interactional styles: facilitative, supportive feedback, conciliatory, indirect, collaborative, person or process-oriented and affectively oriented. Table 2 shows each linguistic feature outlined by Holmes' (2006) that is exhibited in the female protagonist, Penny's dialogues when she interacts with the male protagonists, Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter.

Table.2: Holmes' (2006) Feminine Style of Interaction Demonstrated by Female Protagonist, Penny

Style of Interaction	Linguistic Features (Types/Reasons)	Episode & Title	Excerpt(s)
Feminine	(i) Facilitative • Pragmatic phrases	Episode 2: The Big Bran Hypothesis	Excerpt 18: • Penny used phrases such as <i>well</i> and <i>you know</i> when talking to Leonard.
	• Tag questions	Episode 4: The Luminous Fish Effect	Excerpt 19: • Penny used tag question, "so you got canned, huh" towards Sheldon.
		Episode 7: The Dumpling Paradox	Excerpt 20: • Penny directed the tag question, "he's kind of a sore loser, isn't he" towards Leonard.
	(ii) Supportive Feedback • Minimal response, <i>oh</i> . • Short phrase, "that's nice".	Episode 1: Pilot Episode	Excerpt 21: • Penny replied Leonard and Sheldon's greetings with a minimal response, <i>oh</i> followed by a short phrase, "that's nice".
	• Minimal response, <i>uh-huh</i>	Episode 9: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarisation	Excerpt 22: • Penny responded with an <i>uh-huh</i> when Leonard talked about his bottled city replica.
	(iii) Conciliatory • Discourse markers, <i>well</i> and <i>maybe</i>	Episode 4: The Luminous Fish Effect	Excerpt 23: • Penny used <i>well</i> and <i>maybe</i> in her reply towards Sheldon's criticism.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modal verb, <i>might</i> 	Episode 17: The Tangerine Factor	Excerpt 24: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny used the modal verb, <i>might</i>, in the sentence “What I’m saying is Leonard might be different in a good way” when she conversed with Sheldon.
(iv) Indirect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To avoid confrontation 	Episode 1: Pilot Episode	Excerpt 25: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny inquired Leonard’s willingness to do her a favour prior expressing her request.
	Episode 7: The Dumpling Paradox	Excerpt 26: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny indirectly rejected Leonard’s invitation to join video game tournament by saying that “we could just have a life”.
(v) Collaborative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging previous speakers 	Episode 9: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarisation	Excerpt 27: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny acknowledged Leonard’s justification regarding his Halloween outfit choice with an “okay, alright.”
	Episode 17: The Tangerine Factor	Excerpt 28: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny acknowledged Sheldon’s childhood trauma by replying “of course”.
(v) Collaborative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging previous speakers 	Episode 9: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarisation	Excerpt 27: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny acknowledged Leonard’s justification regarding his Halloween outfit choice with an “okay, alright.”
	Episode 17: The Tangerine Factor	Excerpt 28: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny acknowledged Sheldon’s childhood trauma by replying “of course”.
(vi) Person or Process-Oriented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-ended question to create a friendly and supportive atmosphere 	Episode 3: The Fuzzy Boots Corollary	Excerpt 29: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny asked Leonard an open-ended question, “what’s new in the world of physics” to ease the awkward tension between them.
	Episode 9: The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarisation	Excerpt 30: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny asked Sheldon an open-ended question, “well, how do you feel” to prompt him to reconcile with Leonard.
(vii) Affectively-Oriented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linguistic filler, uh 	Episode 1: Pilot Episode	Excerpt 31: <p>Penny used linguistic filler, uh, to give herself time to plan her next utterance as she didn’t want to offend Sheldon and Leonard further.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hesitations 	Episode 3: The Fuzzy Boots Corollary	Excerpt 32: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Penny hesitated to answer when Leonard asked about her “hallway friend” because she was afraid that her answer might not be received well by Leonard.

6.2 Conformity and/or Challenge towards Gender Stereotypes

In reference to protagonists' linguistic features in *The Big Bang Theory* analysed in the previous subsection, the protagonists are found to conform to gender stereotypes.

6.2.1 Agentic Role

Eagly (1987) explained that men's social behaviour and personality originated from the contrasting distributions of men and women into their respective social roles- men as paid employee and women as resource provider and homemaker. When the division of labour between men and women is realised in modern societies, "women and men adjust to their sex-typical roles by acquiring the specific skills and resources linked to successful role performance and by adapting their social behaviour to role requirements" (Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000, p. 126). In order to accommodate their employment role, men favor agentic qualities such as self-assertion, independence and personal efficacy, all of which convey dominance, authority and control. Given men more than often occupy roles that require predominantly agentic behaviours for successful role performance, such tendencies become stereotypic of men and hence incorporated into a male gender role (Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000). Within the constraint of this study, both Sheldon and Leonard are noted to conform to male stereotypes because they demonstrated agentic role marked by their display of traits such as self-assertion, independence and personal efficacy.

6.2.1.1 Self-Assertion

Self-assertion "is the confident and forceful expression or promotion of oneself, one's views or one's desires" ("Self-assertion", 2017). It is manifested in the form of aggressiveness, ambitious and dominance.

Aggressiveness, in this context, refers to men's competitiveness to outshine people of same and different sex. Sheldon evidently expressed aggressiveness when he interrupted Leonard harshly with "Don't you ever speak to me again" in Excerpt 3 and "No more talking. Everybody go" in Excerpt 4. Ambitious is also another self-asserted trait associated with men, coinciding with what Holmes' (2006) cited as competitive and confrontational. Sheldon and Leonard demonstrated their need to possess dominance and power over others in terms of their social status as physicists. Excerpt 1 showed evidence of Leonard and Sheldon's competitiveness as noted by their need to assert dominance over the other in terms of knowledge. Leonard's competitiveness is noted by his adamant

insistence to present their research paper at a prestigious conference in Excerpt 2.

Additionally, individuals utilizing confrontational styles of interaction often speak in a manner which imposes on their listeners including explicit instructions and insults as seen in Excerpt 6 where Leonard gave Sheldon an explicit instruction to pass the phone to him and Excerpt 7 where Sheldon had insulted Penny for her inability to attain academic achievement in her life. Males' dominant behaviour in social interaction is reflected in terms of direct disagreement and interruptions. Excerpt 8 and Excerpt 9 serve as evidences that both Sheldon and Leonard exhibited dominance in their interactions with each other as Leonard disagreed with Sheldon explicitly in the former excerpt and Sheldon cut in Leonard's words in the latter excerpt.

6.1.1.2 Independence

Eagly (1987) highlighted that display of independent trait is expected of men if they want to succeed in a highly competitive paid employment industry. In reference to Holmes' (2006) masculine styles of interaction, males who are independent are usually confident about themselves. Hence, they have sufficient motivation to use autonomous speech style which is often manifested in the form of authoritative statements. From what were observed in Excerpt 10, Excerpt 11 and Excerpt 12, when Sheldon and Leonard enunciated their demands in the form of authoritative statements, they were said to possess a significant level of self-confidence, hence they were in fact independent males.

6.1.1.3 Personal Efficacy

Individuals with high levels of personal efficacy stay committed to goals and show higher levels of task engagement (Beattie, Hardy and Woodman, 2015). Males' high levels of personal efficacy correlated to the provider roles occupied by males. As men that undertake provider roles are perceived to have a higher status than women who take on the domestic role, they are regarded to make better decisions and resolve conflicts, hence boosting their beliefs about their capability to attain challenging objectives (Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000). This trait matches with the features listed by Holmes (2006) which is task or outcome-oriented. As observed in Excerpt 13, Sheldon and Leonard were task or outcome-oriented when they focused in assembling their friend, Penny's furniture. Similar trait was also seen in Excerpt 14 where Sheldon sought out for solutions to his problem when designing a transporter.

6.2.2 Communal Role

Eagly's (1987) *Social Role Theory* explained that housemaker roles are assigned almost exclusively to women in most societies. People then form their gender role expectations from observing women around them and perceive women, owing to their homemaker roles, enacting communal behaviour such as caring and nurturant, emotionally expressive and interpersonally sensitive. In the constraint of this study, Penny is said to conform to female stereotype because she exhibited traits such as caring and nurturant, emotional expressiveness and interpersonally sensitivity in her interactions with Leonard and Sheldon.

6.2.2.1 Caring and Nurturant

The attributes, caring and nurturant, encompass qualities such as affectionate, able to devote self completely to others, eager to soothe hurt feelings, helpful, kind and sympathetic (Eagly, 1987). It is suggested that the centrality of childrearing on women fosters women's orientation to display concern and nurturance (Canary & Dindia, 2009). Such trait is manifested in the form of facilitative, supportive, collaborative, person or process-oriented and affectively oriented.

Facilitative style of interaction which encourages the addressee's participation in conversations demonstrates the speaker's affection towards the addressee. In Excerpt 18, Penny used hedges like *well* and *you know* to signal Leonard to contribute into their conversation and her consideration for Leonard's involvement in their conversation implied her affection towards Leonard. When listeners use minimal responses while hearing the speakers talk, they not only can show social support to the speakers to continue but also to prevent misunderstanding that the listeners are not paying attention, which often can lead to conflicts. As seen in Excerpt 21, Penny responded minimally towards Leonard and Sheldon's greetings with a minimal response *oh* followed by a short comment, "that's nice". In this situation, by showing that she was listening to them, she was already conveying her positive attitude towards her neighbours. In Excerpt 22, Penny replied with *uh-huh* to Leonard's fond explanation about his replica. She wanted Leonard to know that she was paying attention to what he had said, demonstrating her apparent affection towards the latter.

Women place great interest in others, so they value cooperation in their social interactions to provide social support to their listeners. This is illustrated in Excerpt 27 when Penny acknowledged Leonard's answer to show cooperation. In Excerpt 28, Penny demonstrated her affection and sympathy towards Sheldon as she prompted him to recount his unpleasant experience of receiving an unwanted birthday gift, hoping that talking

about the trauma could soothe his hurt feelings. Women are person or people-oriented in the sense that they care about their relationship with others and express their consideration by putting in efforts in creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere for others. In Excerpt 29, Penny had asked Leonard: "So, what's new in the world of physics?". The purpose of her asking such question was to ease the awkward tension between her and Leonard. By asking question relevant to Leonard's interest, she intended for Leonard to feel more comfortable to engage in conversation with her. In Excerpt 30, Penny's concern about Sheldon's friendship with Leonard was evident when she enquired the former about his feelings after his fight with his best friend as noted by her question, "Well, how do you feel?"

The term affectively oriented individuals describes those who are aware of people as well their own emotional states and they utilise these knowledge to guide themselves in social interactions (Booth-Butterfield & Booth-Butterfield, 1994, p. 331). As seen in Excerpt 31, Penny felt guilty when Sheldon and Leonard had been stripped off their pants when they attempted to retrieve her television set from her ex-boyfriend. She was aware that this had caused them both embarrassment and damaging their self-esteem, hence she used fillers such as *uh* to fill in the conversation as she thought of the appropriate words to say to her friends without injuring further their pride and also to soothe their hurt feelings. In Excerpt 32, Penny's hesitancy to talk about her "hallway friend" also attributed to the fact that she was aware that her answer might cause displeasure to Leonard.

6.2.2.2 Emotional Expressiveness

Emotional expressiveness is a term which describes the ability of one showing their emotions explicitly. Parsons (1964) attributed women's emotional expressiveness to their specialized role due to the division of labour in modern societies. Women were socialized to care for others within home and such a role required emotionality – the ability to display emotions. In the context of the present study, emotional expressiveness is manifested through affective oriented style of interaction.

In Excerpt 31, Penny's emotion of guilt was exhibited in her speech, "I'm so sorry, I really thought if you guys went instead of me he wouldn't be such an ass" and her promise to buy Sheldon and Leonard dinners as noted by the line, "I'll get my purse and dinner is on me, okay?" when she realised that she had caused her friends trouble for doing her a favor in retrieving her television set from her ex-boyfriend. In Excerpt 32, Penny revealed her anxiety when she was asked about her relationship with her "hallway friend" whom Leonard found she was kissing with.

6.2.2.3 Interpersonal Sensitivity

Interpersonal sensitivity refers to how well one 'reads' and appropriately responds to other people's behaviours which can be manifested in verbal and nonverbal (Hall & Andrzejewski, 2009). In the context of this study, interpersonal sensitivity coincides with Holmes' feminine styles of interaction: supportive feedback, conciliatory, collaborative and person or process-oriented. In the context of Excerpt 21, Penny was conscious of the importance of returning her neighbour's greetings as a form of social manner, hence her minimal reply *oh* and *that's nice* to both Sheldon and Leonard.

Women are conscious of others' thoughts and feelings, thus as an attempt to prevent from offending their listeners' feelings, they do not engage in conflicts with others including confronting them directly and giving explicit instructions. This is illustrated in Excerpt 23 where Penny used hedges, *well* and *maybe* to avoid from being involved in conflicts with Sheldon despite his direct criticism towards her. As for Excerpt 24, Penny also strived not to sound offensive as noted by her use of hedges, *might* when she commented about Leonard during her conversation with Sheldon.

Women's inclination to manifest selflessness and to be at one with others prescribes them to display cooperation towards their listeners. As observed in Excerpt 27, Penny's acknowledgment towards Leonard's answer as noted by her reply, "Okay, alright" signified her wish to attain mutual understanding. In Excerpt 28, despite Penny's reluctance, she was aware of the need to show cooperation so that they could reach joint comprehension, hence her prompting for Sheldon to talk about his terrible childhood experience of not being able to receive his desired birthday gift as marked in her question, "what trauma".

Speakers using person or process-oriented styles of interaction are more concerned with the receivers or the process of communication rather than attaining the goal of the communication (Liu, Volcic & Gallois, 2015). This is illustrated in Excerpt 29 when Penny used questions such as "So, what's new in the world of physics?" and "Really, nothing?" to encourage Leonard to talk, which is an evidence of Penny's accommodation towards Leonard. In Excerpt 30, Penny's question, "well how do you feel?" in reference to Sheldon and Leonard's quarrel reaffirmed that Penny was indeed concerned about Sheldon's feelings rather than wanting to know about their quarrel.

6.3 Factors Contributing to Protagonists Conforming/Challenging the Gender Stereotypes

In reference to *The Big Bang Theory* protagonists' conformity to gender stereotypes, it is found that the factors contributing to protagonists' conforming to gender stereotypes are *normative social influence* and *the presence of others*.

6.3.1 Normative social influence

Normative social influence stems from people's desire to be socially approved and accepted by others, hence they behave and speak of matters which they might not necessarily believe, agree or accept so that others' expectations are met. The occurrence of normative social influence has certainly contributed to the protagonists, Sheldon, Leonard and Penny in conforming to their gender stereotypes.

In most societies, it is expected of a male to be competitive in their interactions. Sheldon and Leonard's argument regarding a misrepresented physics mechanism in a movie in Excerpt 1 is a demonstration of them attempting to gain their friends, Howard, Raj and Penny's approval as 'real men'. Sheldon's overstatement about his intelligence in Excerpt 2 is also seen as a way of conforming to the society's expectation about males' linguistic behaviour. Sheldon also tried to portray himself as a manly man before his friends to gain their approval by interrupting aggressively as well as being confrontational and direct. This is seen in Excerpt 3 where he interrupted Leonard harshly with a "Don't you ever speak to me again", Excerpt 7 in which he outrightly insulted Penny's average life.

Most societies especially the American society expect men to be independent and this trait is highly associated with self-confidence (Cuddy, Crotty, Chong & Norton, 2010). To show his confidence, Sheldon was driven to use autonomous statements such as "I need eggs" in Excerpt 10 and "I want soup" in Excerpt 12. Furthermore, men are also commonly presumed to be competent in tasks especially those requiring intelligence and physical strength. Both Leonard and Sheldon strived to meet the expectation as noted by their task or outcome-oriented utterance, "How about if we replace panels A, B and F and crossbar H with aircraft grade aluminium?" in Excerpt 13 and referential speech style, "Fraternal twins come from two separate eggs. They are no more alike than any other siblings" in Excerpt 17.

Similarly, being the only female among her group of friends, Penny certainly felt the pressure to behave like what the society considered as 'a woman' from the linguistic perspective in order to gain approval and acceptance from her friends. Penny used features of feminine styles of interaction including facilitative, supportive feedback and collaborative so that her friends, Sheldon and Leonard would accept and approve her as

part of their group. Based on facilitative styles of interaction marked by the phrase like *you know* in Excerpt 18, Penny clearly attempted to get Leonard to look at her positively despite she was about to make a request that might impose on him. As observed in Excerpt 19, when Penny realised that Sheldon was fired from his work, she used tag question to demonstrate her concern to him. This was because she understood that she needed to demonstrate the communal role expected of her if she wanted to build mutual affinity with Sheldon.

Supportive feedback, which is manifested in the form of minimal responses, is also used as a strategy utilized by Penny so that she would be approved and accepted by Sheldon and Leonard. This is seen in Excerpt 22 where Penny answered with an *uh-huh* to signal Leonard that she was listening when the latter proudly explained about his Supercar model of Bottled city of Kandor based on the *Superman* movie.

Collaborative devices like acknowledging the speech of one's conversation partner is also employed in Penny's interaction with Sheldon and Leonard. These interactions also served as evidences that Penny behaved against her actual thoughts and opinions and conformed to the social norm. In Excerpt 27, although Penny evidently disagreed with Leonard's choice of outfit, she still acknowledged his reason why he had not worn the specific outfit during her Halloween party because she knew that it was necessary to do so if she wanted to gain approval from Leonard. In Excerpt 28, despite her reluctance in the beginning, Penny still encouraged Sheldon to talk about his unpleasant childhood experience to show that she cared about him because she did not want Sheldon to shun her.

Penny also knew she had to conform to what the society expected a woman to behave, hence her usage of conciliatory devices, indirect and person oriented speech styles in her interactions with Sheldon and Leonard. As observed in Excerpt 23, despite that Sheldon had made a direct confrontation by criticizing her choice of multivitamin supplements, she did not retaliate and instead used hedges such as *well* and *maybe* to avoid herself from getting into conflict with him because it is unlikely for women to be confrontational. As seen in Excerpt 24, Penny also ensured to employ modal verb like *might* to lessen the impact of her comment about Leonard because it was unconventional for women to criticize a person directly and performing direct criticism would not help her to acquire approval from Sheldon.

In Excerpt 25, Penny's awareness that she needed to display communal qualities so that she could gain acceptance and approval by her friend, Leonard had dictated her to use indirect features in her speech. Similarly, in Excerpt 26, Penny was able to perceive that

her direct rejection towards Leonard's suggestion might impose on his face and that such outcome would be against the societal norms, resulting in her not being able to obtain positive judgment from her friend. Thus, she utilized indirectness to convey her answer.

As women are known to be warm and communal, societies naturally perceive that women utilise person or process-oriented style of interaction (Rosette & Tost, 2010). Based on Excerpt 29 where Penny used open-ended question to accommodate Leonard's feelings and Excerpt 30 when she asked Sheldon about his thoughts and feelings for not being in talking terms with his friend, it was evident that Penny understood that she needed to portray her communal role in order for her to be liked by her friends.

6.3.2 Presence of others

Eagly, Wood and Diekmann (2000) highlighted that people inherently feel the need to present themselves positively in front of others. In this study, the protagonists, Sheldon, Leonard and Penny interacted in ways that conform to male and female stereotypes in the presence of each other and their friends, Raj and Howard due to their desire to make a positive impression about themselves on their friends.

Given competitiveness is often associated with one's superiority, Sheldon and Leonard were seen to compete their knowledge in physics to show that they were smarter than the other with the purpose of trying to impress their other friends. This is demonstrated in Excerpt 1 where both Sheldon and Leonard argued about the scientific accuracy of Penny's favourite *Superman* movie scene in the presence of Howard, Raj and Penny.

Moreover, Sheldon was also observed to use confrontational features of speech in Excerpt 7 when he had forthrightly insulted Penny about her being unable to achieve academically in the presence of their friends, Howard and Leonard, hence Sheldon's inclination to demonstrate that he was of higher status than Penny in order to impress his friends. Sheldon's autonomous statement, "I forbid it" in his argument with Leonard in front of Howard and Raj in Excerpt 11 also served as evidence that he indeed wanted to show that he was of higher status and thus making a good impression on his friends.

Correspondingly, Penny was also inclined to present herself positively in the eyes of her male friends. As seen in Excerpt 20, Penny directed a tag question, "Gosh, he's kind of a sore loser, isn't he?" towards Leonard in Raj's presence. Given tag question is used to encourage the other to participate in the current conversation, her use of tag question might lead Raj to think of Penny as kind and caring. In addition to that,

Penny's indirect rejection towards Leonard's proposal to take part in video game tournament in Excerpt 26 also served as proof that the former did not want to offend Leonard, hence wanting to establish a positive image in the eyes of her friend, Leonard.

VII. CONCLUSION

To summarise, the male protagonists in *The Big Bang Theory* demonstrated the masculine styles of interaction and feminine styles of interaction as proposed by Holmes (2006). From the manifestation of the linguistic features in the protagonists' discourses, they were found to conform to their gender stereotypes. They conformed to gender stereotypes due to two social psychology factors which are *normative social influence* and *the presence of others*.

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