Recognizing the Influence of Female Representation in Teen Movies on Young Adults' Behavior and Beliefs

Ayat Younis

Impact & Research Fellowship Program, Harvard Student Agencies, In collaboration with Learn with Leaders

ABSTRACT

This study will evaluate and identify the impact of the representation of women in tween/teen films in the early 2000s. In addition, the study will combine what is known about the tween/teen genre as well as social cognitive theories that suggest why teenagers are so drawn to these particular films. The study surveyed college students about their teen movie-viewing habits, gender-related beliefs, and attitudes and recorded their responses on a scale of (1) to (5). The findings suggest that viewing teen movies is associated with negative stereotypes about female friendships and gender roles.

Keywords: *Teenage, representation, attitudes, females, films, negative.*

Subject: Psychology

INTRODUCTION

The early 2000s were a pivotal point in the film industry, with the rise and success of the tween/teen genre (Cutts, 2022). Young girls are a very profitable demographic as these films include themes like family, friendship, revenge, rescue, transformations, and glow-ups, all playing into tweens' want for becoming a teenager while avoiding more mature themes such as sex, drugs, and alcohol. Moreover, tweens are susceptible to word of mouth and will encourage their friends and family to watch the movie, increasing the profit. The industry was also realizing how much profit the tween/teen girl audience brings, especially when a film stars an actor they are familiar with, such as Hillary Duff, the Olsen twins, and Lindsey Lohan. Thus, they began to cast them more, as well as include more feminist-based themes and lessons, considering that was a primary belief of the target audience. The early 2000s introduced some of the most iconic films of today, such as *Freaky Friday* (2003), *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen* (2004), and *Mean Girls* (2004). As time progressed, these films began to have cognitive effects on individuals' schema of female friendships and women in general. Particular social cognitive theories suggest that a number of factors influence the outcomes of exposure to media-modeled, gendered behaviors (Kubrak, 2020). Furthermore, the repetition of a particular message, along with liking and identification with the media models, are all factors that influence adopting certain behaviors. Therefore, the theory suggests that young adults who watch multiple teen movies, such as those listed, will be more likely to retain socially aggressive behaviors represented in these movies. Additionally, social cognitive theory, as well as many neurobiologists, suggest that the more consumers, specifically tweens and teenagers, relate to certain characters, the more likely they are to adopt the gendered behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes in these films. The combination of the early 2000s' theme of tween films along with social cognitive theories results in the hypothesis that the film industry in the 2000s stressed the relationship between females which has ultimately impacted the way women are treated in society now based on their attitudes and behaviors.

MATERIALS & METHODS

College-age students represent a very important demographic of the tween/teen film market, making them an appropriate sample for this study. The University of Missouri gathered one hundred thirty-five undergraduate students at a southwestern university to participate in a study. 64% of the participants were female and 36% were male.

Additionally, the average age of the participants was between 19 and 20 years old. 68% percent of the participants were white, 22% were Latino, 4% were African American, 3% were Asian, 1% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2% reported their race/ethnicity as "Other." Attitudes towards women, liking, affinity, female and male friendships, exposure, negative and positive evaluations of friends' behaviors, and consequences of social aggression were each individually measured through self-reporting. The independent variables were exposure, affinity, and liking, whereas the dependent variables were the female and male friendships, as well as consequences of social aggression, attitudes towards women, and negative and positive evaluations of friends' behaviors. All of the variables were measured using a 5-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

The exposure to teen movies was measured by asking participants to look at a list of teen movies and indicate how many of the movies they had seen, owned on DVD or VHS, or had seen more than once. Responses to these three items were summed to create one overall measure of exposure to teen movies. Moreover, familiarity and affinity with the movies and characters were measured by asking participants to respond to seven statements, such as, "I can relate to teen movies," "I would want to be friends with the characters in teen movies," and, "Characters in teen movies are similar to people I know." Liking was measured similarly, where participants were asked to respond to two statements: "I like teen movies" and "I do not enjoy watching teen movies." Female friendships were measured by having participants respond to four statements about their own beliefs about how females act with their female friends, such as "Females are very supportive with their female friends," "Females are often catty to one another," and "Females are often manipulative in their friendships." Similarly, male friendships were recorded with participants responding to three statements about their own beliefs about how males act with their male friends, such as, "Males are often manipulative in their friendships," "Males are very supportive with their male friends," and "Males often act in ways that are meaningful to other males." Participants' perceptions and negative evaluations of friends' behaviors were assessed by the following two items: "My friends can often be mean to each another," and "My friends can often be mean to other people." Oppositely, four items were used to develop a measure of participants' perceptions of their friends' positive friendship behaviors. Some of the statements included, "My friends are very supportive of me" and "My friends treat each other with kindness." Furthermore, participants' perception of the consequences of social aggression was measured by participants responding to the following statement: "Being mean to peers of lesser status can make a person more popular." Finally, participants' attitudes towards women were recorded by having participants fill out a modified version of the attitudes toward women scale in order to assess the impact of exposure to teen movies on views regarding women. The scale included twelve statements, some of which are about gendered roles, rights, and attributes, as well as nine items from the original attitudes toward women scale and three new items. The new items asked participants to respond to statements about female roles and relationships in the workplace such as "Men make better bosses than women."

RESULTS

A significant interaction on evaluation of female friendships was revealed such that as viewing teen movies increased among male respondents, favorable attitudes toward female friendships decreased, $\Delta f = 20.67$, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, df = 127, $\beta = -.33$, t = -4.55, p < .01.

Additionally, a crucial interaction came to light in the belief in popularity as a reward for social aggression, which is that as teen film exposure increased among male respondents, perceptions regarding the positive consequences of social aggression increased, $\Delta f = 5.33$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, df = 128, $\beta = .21$, t = 2.31, p < .025.

DISCUSSION

This study and its results provide an understanding and answers the question of the relationship between tween/teen films and young adult behavior. Ultimately, this study provided an insight into how common gender-based images, among other things, are in the film industry, as well as the movies they grew up on. The representation of females and female relationship in these films influenced young adults' attitudes and beliefs about women, namely their female relationships and their role in society. The results suggest that the "quiet and sweet girl" trope is associated with being more popular than the "mean girl" trope, as it is the nice girl that is the "good" character and triumphs in the end, whereas the mean girl is the hyperfeminine, evil and usually dumb character.

Thus, as these teenagers watch these films and grow, they begin to have the same attitude about hyperfeminine women in general. These tropes also influence young adults' view on female friendships, in that female friendships are not about uplifting each other, but rather to use each other as competition. Males were found to hold more negative attitudes toward female friendships when their exposure to teen films was higher, as many of the films depicted female

friendships in a negative light. Therefore, it seems fair to suggest that females' gender identity or direct experiences in female friendships may have lessened the influence of teen films on their attitudes and beliefs about their own female friendships. This can also be explained through the Social Cognitive Theory, which suggests that personal experiences may moderate the relationship between exposure to media and observational learning outcomes. Therefore, the personal experiences of women with female friendships may be more important than media portrayals of female friendships when determining females' real-world attitudes and beliefs about such friendships, as they have more direct experience with these relationships than men.

Although the results of the study showed that affinity with tween/teen films is associated with perceptions that social aggression increases one's popularity with peers, stereotypical beliefs about female friendships, and unfavorable attitudes toward women, the study cannot confirm whether or not exposure, affinity, and liking of teen movies are associated with actual acts of aggression by viewers. Therefore, future studies should consider examining young adults' behavioral acquisition and production of certain behaviors. The study also does not confirm if individuals who watch more teen movies and who experience a greater level of affinity with the characters have characteristics that predispose them to make more negative judgments about female friendships and their friends' behaviors.

An individual may have prior negative experiences with female friendships, and therefore, have a bad perception of them that draws them to these movies, rather than the movies causing these perceptions to arise. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the socially aggressive behaviors are more memorable and therefore more cognitively accessible to teen movie viewers. Social aggression may stand out to viewers because of the association of positive rewards with these acts in the films. Thus, viewing teen movies and relating to them may make individuals more aware of social aggression in their own friendships.

Lastly, this study confirmed that there is a relationship between the films a child watches when they are young and the attitude they have as a young adult toward particular things or events. This conclusion is supported by the results of this study as well as a handful of neurobiologists, who state that teenagers' brains are more powerful and vulnerable at this moment than they will ever be for the rest of their lives, primarily due to neural plasticity. Furthermore, the way in which women and female relationships are represented in these tween/teen films impacts the ways in which viewers will view women in the future, considering they are likely to rewatch these films numerous times. A prime example is *Mean Girls*, which was followed by many taking on the personality of the main character – the shy sweet new girl – rather than the main mean girl, who is hyperfeminine and sexually open. To this day, many girls demonize the mean girl and associate her hyper-femininity with her evil.

CONCLUSION

While the film industry has made some socially aware progress over the years by ensuring that films today empower women rather than pit them against each other, it does not dismiss the fact that most of the films that this generation grew up on from the early 2000s included gender-based stereotypes, namely the mean girl. The entire genre of tween/teen films is overlooked as it is assumed that the films have no actual meaning and are as simple as the magazines girl read. However, teen films send a message that pitting women against other women is okay as long as it uplifts one of them by the end. For example, exposure to teen films sends the message that success in the female social world is obtained through the use of duplicitous means. Furthermore, these films play a major role in the behaviors and attitudes of their viewers when they evolve into young adults. Lastly, this study helps shed light on the influence of exposure to such portrayals on emerging adults' gender-based beliefs.

REFERENCES

[1]. Behm-Morawitz, Elizabeth &Mastro, Dana. "MEAN GIRLS? THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER PORTRAYALS IN TEEN MOVIES ON EMERGING ADULTS' GENDER-BASED ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS." *J&MC*. Vol. 85 No. 1. 2008.
[2]. Jensen, E. F. *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*. Harper Collins Publisher.
[3]. Kubrak, Tina. "Impact of Films: Changes in Young People's Attitudes after Watching a Movie." *National Center for Biotechnical Information*. 2020.
[4]. McCallagh, Ciaran. "The Demonization of Women in Popular Culture: Some Recent
a.   Examples." *Technological University Dublin*. 1993.
[5]. Murnen& Byrne. "Hyperfeminity: Measurement and Initial Validation of the Construct." *The Journal of Sex*. Vol 28 No. 3. 1991. P2-11.

[6]. Patch, Sophie. "Girlhood on film: The impacts of media on young women (research essay)." *Pressbooks*. 2020.

[7]. Tally, Peggy. "Re-imagining Girlhood - Hollywood and the Tween Girl Film Market." *Seven Going on Seventeen: Tween Studies in the Culture of Girlhood*. Vol 245. 2005. P311-329.

[8]. Cutts, H. (2022) "8 Teen Films That Defined the Early 2000s." *Collider*. March 7. Available at: https://collider.com/teen-films-that-defined-the-early-aughts/

[9]. Kubrak T. (2020). Impact of Films: Changes in Young People's Attitudes after Watching a Movie. *Behavioral sciences* (Basel, Switzerland), 10(5), 86. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs10050086