
MEAN GIRLS? THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER PORTRAYALS IN TEEN MOVIES ON EMERGING ADULTS' GENDER-BASED ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

By Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana E. Mastro

This two-part exploratory study utilized a social cognitive theory framework in documenting gender portrayals in teen movies and investigating the influence of exposure to these images on gender-based beliefs about friendships, social aggression, and roles of women in society. First, a content analysis of gender portrayals in teen movies was conducted, revealing that female characters are more likely to be portrayed as socially aggressive than male characters. Second, college students were surveyed about their teen movie-viewing habits, gender-related beliefs, and attitudes. Findings suggest that viewing teen movies is associated with negative stereotypes about female friendships and gender roles.



Research examining the effects of media exposure demonstrates that media consumption has a measurable influence on people's perceptions of the real world, and, regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions, they are used to help guide subsequent attitudes, judgments, and actions. For example, these results have been yielded for viewing media representations of race,¹ the mentally ill,² and the elderly.³ Past research additionally indicates that watching televised gender portrayals has an effect on individuals' real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors.⁴ Based on this research, and the tenets of social cognitive theory, it would be expected that consumption of teen movies would have an analogous influence on audience members' gender-based attitudes and beliefs. Despite the popularity of teen movies, the influence of such films on emerging adults has not been examined. This is particularly surprising given the upsurge in popular media coverage devoted to scrutinizing gender portrayals in these films.⁵ The present study explores this issue in two ways. First, the manner in which gender is depicted in teen movies is systematically documented. Second, the extent to which exposure to these images influences emerging adults' beliefs about gender and female relationships is empirically examined.

Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz is an assistant professor, Department of Communication, University of Missouri-Columbia; and Dana E. Mastro is an associate professor, Department of Communication, University of Arizona.

J&MC Quarterly
Vol. 85, No. 1
Spring 2008
131-146
©2008 AEJMC

**Effects
of
Mediated
Gender
Portrayals**

According to Bandura's social cognitive theory, media messages serve as a meaningful source for the acquisition of "gender-linked knowledge and competencies" and the development of expectations of gender roles and conduct, self-evaluative standards, and self-efficacy beliefs.⁶ It is argued that individuals adopt gender characteristics in part by monitoring the rewards and consequences associated with others' behavior. Thus, representation of female characters in the media would be expected to play a role in viewers' perceptions regarding gender identity, which may ultimately influence attitudes and beliefs about appropriate gender roles.

The period of life referred to as emerging adulthood is a particularly unique phase of identity development,⁷ during which time media messages may serve as one source of information used to make life choices. The increased independence and freedom emerging adults experience is thought to contribute to their heightened relational and work explorations.⁸ The lion's share of research on gender identity development, however, has focused on adolescents rather than emerging adults. Although the influence of teen movies on adolescent consumers is of import, the popularity of this film genre among emerging adults suggests that the impact of exposure on college students warrants consideration. Accordingly, the present study examines the influence of teen movies on emerging adults as the messages offered in these movies may provide examples of gendered behavior that subsequently guide real-world judgments about gendered friendship behaviors.

**Teen
Queens
of the
Big Screen**

According to a 2005 *New York Times* article, "In recent years, girls have been increasingly portrayed in everything from serious journalistic studies to light comedies like 'Mean Girls' as tyrannical, bullying and devoted to a ruthless caste system."⁹ This focus on the "queen bees" of female teenage friendships seems to dominate teen film portrayals of girls, when, in reality, this stereotype of the "mean girl" does not reflect the true variety in female friendship roles and the positive attributes of these friendship networks.¹⁰ Moreover, although academics and the popular media have long focused on the harmful effects of teenage, female social aggression,¹¹ the upsurge in the popularity and production of teen movies seems to have increased the attention to the negative features of female friendships.

For example, in 2004 the hit teen movie *Mean Girls* brought the portrayal of teen girls as socially aggressive to the forefront of popular discourse about female adolescence. *Mean Girls* was heralded by critics as "acutely hilarious sociology, nailing the servile malice of 15-year-old girls,"¹² and "not only funny but smart."¹³ Film critics, journalists, and talk show hosts jumped on the bandwagon to talk about the manipulative and mean behaviors committed by girls in female friendship circles. During this time, books such as *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*¹⁴ and *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence*¹⁵

received much attention. In fact, *Mean Girls* is loosely based on *Queen Bees and Wannabes*.

This tendency for teen movies to center on the social world of teens likely occurs for good reason—the teenage years are typically characterized by a time of relationship and identity growth and struggle.¹⁶ Moreover, it is not surprising that teen movies focus on the dominant teen girl as the “mean girl,” due to the generalization that social aggression is more prevalent among females (vs. males and physical aggression). Although research does suggest females engage in less physical aggression than do males,¹⁷ we cannot conclude that the stereotype of the socially aggressive girl is, in fact, accurate. Research indicates that this characterization may not be representative of the true nature of female friendships. For instance, some studies suggest that social aggression is equally common among males, and that females sometimes engage in physical aggression.¹⁸ This indicates that male and female friendships may not be so different in terms of aggression. Even more important, research indicates that female friendship circles produce important *positive* outcomes for adolescents.

Studies have demonstrated that female-to-female friendships may foster more adaptive outcomes than do male-to-male friendships.¹⁹ Female friendships have generally been found to be more supportive than male friendships²⁰ and are characterized by social cooperation.²¹ For example, Henrich et al. studied all-male and all-female cliques and found that female friendships were associated with numerous positive outcomes, such as adjustment at school, peer integration, and closeness with friends, whereas male friendships were not significantly related to such outcomes.²² These findings suggest that female friendships serve an important positive role for adolescents and young adults.

In contrast to these real world indicators, it appears that teen movies portray the social environment of the teenage girl as a context dominated by clique members who engage in social aggression with maladaptive outcomes. To date, however, no empirical investigations have been conducted to systematically document the manner in which gender and friendships are depicted in teen films. Study 1 of the present design undertakes this endeavor.

Based on media reports about teen movies, it is expected that female teen characters will be more likely than their male counterparts to engage in acts of social aggression, and that these socially aggressive acts will be positively rewarded with increased popularity, power, and/or feelings of pleasure. It is not expected that males and females will differ significantly in terms of enacting socially cooperative behaviors. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were developed.

Study One

H1: Female characters will be more likely to engage in social aggression than their male counterparts in teen movies.

H2: Teen characters will most often be rewarded, rather than punished, for their acts of social aggression in teen movies.

Method

Sample. The top 20 grossing U.S. teen movies released between 1995 and 2005 were included in the current sample. Based on Internet research, approximately 90 U.S. movies released during this time period were identified as teen movies. A teen movie was defined as a movie starring teenage characters that focused exclusively, or predominantly, on these characters, and that was marketed primarily to teens and young adults. Only movies meeting these criteria, released on DVD or VHS for home purchase, and rated G, PG, or PG-13 were considered. R-rated movies were excluded because, at the time of this investigation, even freshman and sophomore college students would have been too young to legally view them during this ten-year time period.

The following films were included in the analysis: *A Cinderella Story* (2004), *A Walk to Remember* (2002), *Blue Crush* (2002), *Bring It On* (1999), *Clueless* (1995), *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen* (2004), *Crossroads* (2002), *Drumline* (2002), *Freaky Friday* (2003), *Mean Girls* (2004), *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), *Orange County* (2002), *Princess Diaries* (2001), *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), *Save the Last Dance* (2001), *She's All That* (1999), *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* (2003), *What a Girl Wants* (2003), and *You Got Served* (2004).

Coder Training. Three undergraduate students served as coders in the examination of these films. They were trained for approximately forty-four hours on teen movies outside the actual sample. Reliabilities reported below were calculated with an overlapping subset of the actual sample (10%, $n = 2$) using Krippendorff's alpha.

Units of Analyses. Variables were designed to reflect the behaviors and characteristics associated with social cooperation and social aggression, as identified by psychology research. Judgments were made at the character level.

Characteristics. Coders assessed a variety of demographic variables for teen characters in each movie. First, the *gender* ($\alpha = 1.0$) of each character was coded as male or female. Second, the *role* of each character was identified ($\alpha = 1.0$). Only primary and secondary characters were coded. *Primary* characters were defined as any character in the story whose presence was crucial to the plot. *Secondary* characters were defined as characters that added depth/interest to the plot but were not crucial to its existence. Next, the *race* ($\alpha = 1.0$) of each character was assessed as White (non-Hispanic), Hispanic, Asian American/Pacific Islander, African American or Black, Native American, or Other. Finally, the *age* ($\alpha = 1.0$) of the character was assessed using Stern's age categories.²³ The following three categories were used: 19-20 years of age (post high school/in college), 15-18 years of age (high school), and 12-14 years of age (junior high/middle school).

Socially Cooperative Behavior. Coders recorded how many times each primary and secondary character intentionally enacted a *socially coopera-*

tive behavior, which was defined as the use of cooperative and inclusive behaviors that fostered a supportive environment and adaptive outcomes. These behaviors involved making peers feel included, emotionally supported, and secure. Coders were provided with five subcategories of cooperative behaviors, which were later combined to form the variable social cooperation. The following five categories were chosen based on the psychology-based literature related to social cooperation and teenagers:²⁴ *providing support* ($\alpha = .75$), *including others* ($\alpha = 1.0$), *teamwork* ($\alpha = .78$), *sharing* ($\alpha = .72$), and *resolving conflict* ($\alpha = .88$)

Socially Aggressive Behavior. Coders also recorded how many times each primary and secondary character intentionally enacted the following socially aggressive behaviors during the course of the film. *Socially aggressive behavior* was defined as the use of "indirect" aggression to damage another's status or self-esteem such as bullying tactics, spreading rumors, silent treatment, note-passing, backstabbing, public or private humiliation, and other malicious acts.²⁵ It does not include physical aggression. The following four subcategories, derived from existing literature, were combined to form the variable: *gossiping* ($\alpha = .86$), *backstabbing* ($\alpha = .78$), *humiliating others* ($\alpha = .88$), and *excluding others* ($\alpha = .77$).

Consequences. In addition to recording the above relational behaviors, coders assessed the outcomes of these behaviors. They were instructed to code any explicit consequence for any socially cooperative and socially aggressive behaviors enacted by teenage primary and secondary characters. To be considered an explicit consequence, the outcome must have been demonstrated in the movie. To avoid complication, only short-term consequences (i.e., within twenty-four hours of the act) were recorded. Positive consequences ($\alpha = .72$) were defined as a reward, benefit received, a gain, or something positive that follows a behavior. Negative consequences ($\alpha = .76$) were defined as a punishment, a loss, suffering, or something negative that follows a behavior.

Among the 20 movies in the sample, 139 characters were identified. The gender breakdown of the characters consisted of 54.7% ($n = 76$) female and 45.3% ($n = 63$) male characters. White/caucasian characters were the most prevalent at 73.4% ($n = 102$). African American/black characters constituted 20% ($n = 28$) of the character set; 3.8% ($n = 5$) were Latino; 0.8% ($n = 1$) were Asian; and 2.2% ($n = 3$) were identified as other. Among the age ranges included in the study, the majority of characters were identified as being 15-18 years old/high school students ($n = 121$, 87%), followed by 19-20 year olds/college students ($n = 17$, 12.2%) and 12-14 year olds/middle school students ($n = 1$, 0.8%). In terms of movie rating, 60% were rated PG-13 ($n = 12$), 40% were rated PG ($n = 8$), and none were rated G.

Socially Aggressive Behaviors. Overall, 337 incidents of socially aggressive behavior were coded. Independent sample *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether or not gender differences existed in the enactment of the relational behaviors of interest. Results indicated that

Results

male and female characters differed in terms of enacting socially aggressive behaviors, $t = -3.15, p < .05$. Female characters ($M = 3.08, sd = 3.13$) were significantly more likely to engage in socially aggressive behaviors than males ($M = 1.63, sd = 2.03$).

Socially Cooperative Behaviors. Overall, 534 instances of socially cooperative behaviors were coded. As a whole, there were no significant gender differences in the rate of these behaviors, $t = 0.05, p > .05$.

Consequences. The positive and negative consequences associated with the enactment of socially aggressive behaviors and socially cooperative behaviors were coded to gain an understanding of how male and female characters were rewarded or punished for socially positive and negative behaviors. Results indicated that there were no gender differences in the rewarding of socially cooperative behaviors, $t = 0.27, p > .05$. Additionally, there were no gender differences in the negative consequences associated with socially cooperative acts, $t = 0.78, p > .05$. However, there were gender differences in rewarding socially aggressive behaviors, $t = -2.29, p < .05$, such that females ($M = 0.70, sd = .46$) were significantly more likely to be rewarded for socially aggressive behaviors than were their male counterparts ($M = 0.53, sd = .50$). Finally, there were no significant gender differences in the punishment of socially aggressive behaviors, $t = 0.77, p > .05$. Moreover, means reveal that both male and female characters were more often rewarded than punished for socially aggressive acts. Male characters were rewarded ($M = .53, sd = .50$) more often than punished ($M = .25, sd = .43$). Similarly, socially aggressive acts committed by females were more often rewarded ($M = 0.70, sd = .46$) than punished ($M = .19, sd = .39$).

Discussion

As hypothesized, results indicate that female characters are significantly more likely to engage in and be rewarded for socially aggressive behaviors than are male characters in teen movies. This thematic portrayal of female teenagers indicates that teen films have a tendency to rely on the stereotype of teen girls as "mean girls." Further, results reveal that both males and females were more often rewarded than punished for engaging in social aggression with females significantly more likely to be rewarded than males. This suggests that teen movies portray socially aggressive acts as rewarding, particularly for females.

From the perspective of social cognitive theory, it would be expected that exposure to such messages among the appropriate audience could potentially result in the development of unfavorable beliefs about female friendships and negative attitudes toward women in general. Moreover, viewing the rewards associated with the socially aggressive behaviors depicted in these movies may send the message that actions of this nature are an effective means to gaining status and other positive rewards. It should be noted, however, that socially cooperative behaviors outnumbered socially aggressive behaviors in the films on the whole. Thus, it is possible that the presence of socially cooperative behaviors in teen films may lessen the negative effects resulting from exposure to the modeling of social aggression.

One limitation of this content analysis that should be considered, however, is the coding of only short-term behavioral consequences in the movies. Due to the complicated nature of accurately identifying and matching long-term consequences with specific socially aggressive and socially cooperative behaviors performed earlier in the movie, coders only identified short-term consequences. This does not provide us with a picture of how social aggression and social cooperation are ultimately rewarded or punished at the conclusions of the movies. Future research should attempt to account for such overarching messages and themes about friendship behaviors represented in teen movies that cannot be captured in short-term behavioral consequences alone. On the other hand, many of these short-term occurrences of social aggression and social cooperation comprise significant plot elements of the films and are likely not easily forgotten. So, although it is possible that social aggression is punished at the end of some of these films in the communication of a broader moral message, the instances throughout the films where these acts are rewarded are significant and likely very memorable to audiences.

Study 2 investigated the extent to which individuals' gender-related beliefs and attitudes were influenced by exposure to these teen films. The assumptions of social cognitive theory were again applied to explicate this process. Social cognitive theory suggests that a number of factors influence the outcomes of exposure to media-modeled, gendered behaviors. Repetition of the message, liking and identification with the media models, and motivation are all factors that influence the adoption of such behaviors.²⁶ This would suggest that emerging adults who report watching multiple teen movies, and, perhaps, watching some of these films numerous times, will be more likely to retain the socially aggressive behaviors represented in these movies for later use when contextually relevant. Additionally, social cognitive theory would suggest that the more the consumers identify with the movies and characters, the more likely they are to adopt the gendered attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors portrayed in these movies.²⁷

In the present case, it seems reasonable that a viewer's feelings of similarity (i.e., homophily) to the characters and teen movie stories, and wishful identification (or desire to be like/act like)²⁸ with teen movie characters will work together to create a feeling of affinity with these characters. Consistent with social cognitive theory, greater affinity with the media models would increase the likelihood that individuals attend to, remember, and apply the observed behaviors in their own lives.

Together, these assumptions suggest that both amount of exposure to teen movies and affinity with teen movie characters will influence the acquisition of gendered beliefs, perceptions of female friendships, evaluations of friends' behaviors, and perceptions regarding roles of women in society. In order to test these theoretically derived relationships, the following predictions were formulated:

Study Two

H1: As levels of teen movie viewing increase, higher levels of affinity with teen movies and characters will be associated with increasingly negative attitudes toward female friendships and women in general.

Further, social cognitive theory suggests that liking is an important factor in observational learning, such that the more an individual likes the media models, the more likely he/she is to adopt the modeled behaviors.²⁹ Therefore, it is possible that the more individuals report liking teen movies, the more likely they are to report attitudes and beliefs consistent with the behaviors modeled in these movies. As such, an interaction effect between exposure and liking is predicted.

H2: Teen movie exposure and liking teen movies will interact in predictions regarding gender-based attitudes and beliefs about female friendships and women in society.

Finally, research suggests that the sex of the participant is likely to influence knowledge acquired from viewing the movies. Studies suggest that individuals may identify with media characters based on gender, thus influencing one's attention, retention, and production of observed behaviors.³⁰ As a result, it is predicted that an interaction effect between exposure to teen movies and sex is likely to occur.

H3: Exposure to teen movies and sex will interact in predicting gender-based attitudes and beliefs about female friendships and women in society.

Method

Participants. The important development stage of emerging adulthood combined with the fact that college-age students represent a significant portion of the target market for teen movies makes undergraduate students an appropriate sample for this study. One hundred thirty-five undergraduate students in an introductory communication course at a large southwestern university participated in the study. Sixty-four percent of the participants were female ($n=87$) and 36% were male ($n=48$). The average age of the participants was between 19 and 20 years old. Sixty-eight percent of the participants were white ($n=92$), 22% were Latino ($n=29$), 4% were African American ($n=6$), 3% were Asian ($n=4$), 1% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ($n=1$), and 2% reported their race/ethnicity as "Other" ($n=3$).

Independent Variables. Factor analysis was conducted in the construction of all scaled constructs, with Cronbach's alpha reported below. Items were assessed using principal-axis factoring and with a varimax rotation. Only items that achieved a factor loading of 0.50 or higher were retained.

Exposure. 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, and/or had seen more

than once. These responses to these three items were summed to create one overall measure of exposure to teen movies.

Affinity ($\alpha = .90$, $M = 2.69$, $sd = 0.79$). Affinity with the movies and characters was 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." Responses were measured using a 5-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Liking ($r = .57$, $M = 3.45$, $sd = 0.93$). In order to assess liking of teen movies, participants were asked to respond to two statements: "I like teen movies" and "I do not enjoy watching teen movies." The items were measured using a 5-point scale from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). Negatively worded statements were reverse coded.

Dependent Variables. Dependent variables included the following gender-related attitudes and beliefs pertaining to friendships and roles of women in society.

Female Friendships ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 2.53$, $sd = 1.06$). Participants responded 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." These items were measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1), indicating negative beliefs about female friendships, to "strongly agree" (5), indicating favorable beliefs about female friendships.

Male Friendships ($\alpha = .69$, $M = 2.52$, $sd = 0.78$). Participants responded 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 mean to other males." These items were measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Negative Evaluations of Friends' Behaviors ($r = .63$, $M = 2.98$, $sd = .94$). The following two items were used to assess participants' perceptions regarding the mean-spiritedness of their friends' behaviors: "My friends can often be mean to each another," and "My friends can often be mean to other people." The statements were scored on a 5-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Positive Evaluations of Friends' Behaviors ($\alpha = .70$, $M = 3.85$, $sd = 2.31$). Four items were used to construct a measure of respondents' perceptions of their friends' positive or prosocial friendship behaviors. Statements included "My friends are very supportive of me" and "My friends treat each other with kindness." These items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Consequence of Social Aggression. Participants were asked to respond to the following single item measuring beliefs about the relation-

ship between social aggression and popularity: "Being mean to peers of lesser status can make a person more popular." Response options ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Attitudes toward Women ($\alpha = .84$, $M = 2.00$, $sd = 1.10$). Participants were asked to fill out a modified version of the attitudes toward women scale³¹ in order to assess the impact of exposure to teen movies on views regarding women. This twelve-item scale, which includes statements about male and female roles, attributes, and rights, consisted of 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." Response options ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5), where higher scores indicate less favorable attitudes toward women.

Results

H1. Multiple regression results, all controlling for the participant's age, level of television consumption, and movie preferences (e.g., liking/enjoyment of particular movie genres), provide partial support for **H1**. As postulated, a significant character affinity by movie exposure interaction was revealed on evaluations of friends' cruelty, $\Delta F = 4.26$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $df = 128$, $p < .05$, such that as affinity increased, unfavorable evaluations of friends' behavior were increasingly associated with higher rates of viewing teen movies ($\beta = -.17$, $t = -2.06$). In other words, the more emerging adults identified with teen movies and characters and the greater the exposure to teen movies, the more likely they were to report negative perceptions of their friends' friendship behaviors. No significant effect was found for character affinity by movie exposure for participants' positive evaluations of their friends' behaviors, $\Delta F = 0.06$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $df = 129$, $p = .81$. Neither character affinity ($\beta = -.11$, $p = .26$) nor movie exposure ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .81$) had any effect on respondents' evaluation of their friends' positive friendship behaviors.

Partial support was additionally provided for **H1** based on examinations of attitudes regarding (a) female friendships, (b) the role of women in society, and (c) the belief that popularity is a reward for social aggression. Although interaction effects were not revealed, significant and negative direct effects for both exposure to teen movies ($\beta = -.51$, $t = -6.23$) and affinity with characters in teen movies ($\beta = -.20$, $t = -2.62$) were emergent for attitudes regarding female friendships, $\Delta F = 26.74$, $\Delta R^2 = .25$, $df = 128$, $p < .01$, indicating that increases in viewing teen movies as well as greater affinity with the characters in teen movies each were associated with more unfavorable evaluations of females' interactions in their friendships. Similarly, significant direct effects of teen movie viewing and affinity with characters in teen movies were found for attitudes regarding the role of women in society, $\Delta F = 4.90$, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $df = 127$, $p < .01$. Here, increased exposure ($\beta = -.22$, $t = -2.18$) was associated with less favorable attitudes toward women's rights, whereas increased affinity ($\beta = .25$, $t = 2.64$) was associated with more optimistic attitudes regarding women's rights and roles in society.

Finally, a significant and positive direct effect was revealed for the influence of affinity with the teen movies/characters on the belief that social aggression is rewarded through increased popularity with peers, $\Delta F = 4.80$, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $df = 129$, $p < .01$, demonstrating that as affinity rose, belief in popularity as a reward for socially aggressive behaviors increased ($\beta = .27$, $t = 3.03$).

H2. Partial support was provided for H2. Significant interaction effects emerged on evaluations of interactions in both female, $\Delta F = 9.19$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $df = 127$, $p < .01$, and male friendships, $\Delta F = 8.64$, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $df = 128$, $p < .01$. In particular, increasing exposure to teen movies was associated with favorable attitudes toward female ($\beta = .28$, $t = 3.03$) and male ($\beta = -.27$, $t = -2.94$) friendships, as liking of teen movies rose. No other significant relationships were yielded.

H3. Finally, some support was revealed for H3. Specifically, 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, $\Delta F = 20.67$, $\Delta R^2 = .08$, $df = 127$, $\beta = -.33$, $t = -4.55$, $p < .01$. In addition, a significant interaction emerged in the belief in popularity as a reward for social aggression, such that as teen film exposure increased among male respondents, perceptions regarding the positive consequences of social aggression increased, $\Delta F = 5.33$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $df = 128$, $\beta = .21$, $t = 2.31$, $p < .025$.

This study lends insight into the nature of gender-based images in teen films and the influence of exposure to these representations on emerging adults' attitudes about female friendships and women's roles in society. Results of the content analysis indicate that the longstanding picture of the "cloyingly sweet and kind" girl presented in the media³² has been replaced by a new dominant image, that of the "mean girl." Moreover, findings cautiously suggest that exposure to this imagery is associated with negative stereotypic beliefs about female friendships as well as unfavorable attitudes toward women in general—differentially so for men and women. Because males were found to hold more negative attitudes toward female friendships when their exposure to teen films was higher, it seems reasonable to suggest that females' gender identity and/or direct experiences in female-to-female friendships may have lessened the influence of teen films on their attitudes and beliefs about female-to-female friendships. Social cognitive theory suggests that personal experiences may moderate the relationship between exposure to media and observational learning outcomes. Thus, the personal experiences of women with female friendships may be more important than media portrayals of female friendships when determining their real-world attitudes and beliefs about such friendships.

More generally speaking, this study's findings tentatively suggest that affinity with teen movies is related to: (1) stereotypic beliefs about female friendships, (2) more unfavorable attitudes toward women, and (3) perceptions that social aggression increases one's popularity with

Discussion

peers. Alternatively, it appears that the more viewers enjoy (i.e., like) this genre of film, the less likely they are to report negative beliefs about female friendships.

It is unknown whether or not exposure, affinity, and liking of teen movies are associated with actual acts of aggression by viewers. This study examined viewers' stereotypic beliefs about male and female friendships and their perception of their friends' behaviors, but it did not measure viewers' intention to engage in socially aggressive acts. Future research should consider examining emerging adults' behavioral acquisition and production of such behaviors. It is a reasonable argument that one very important outcome of viewing teen films may be the impact on individuals' actual relationship behaviors.

It is also unclear whether or not individuals who watch more teen movies and who experience a greater level of affinity with the characters have characteristics that predispose them to making more negative judgments about female friendships and their friends' behaviors. For example, perhaps individuals who watch these movies and identify with the characters have had prior real world negative experiences with, and therefore perceptions of, female friendships that draw them to these movies and cause them to identify with them more greatly. In this case, there would not be a direct causal link between viewing teen movies and friendship attitudes and beliefs.

On the other hand, perhaps greater exposure and affinity with these films make negative friendship behaviors more salient to individuals, influencing their perceptions of their friends. Despite the evidence of occurrence of substantially more socially cooperative than socially aggressive behaviors in teen movies, the results of study two seem to indicate that the socially aggressive behaviors are more memorable and therefore more cognitively accessible to teen movie viewers. Social aggression may stand out or be more memorable 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.

Given these remaining questions, this study should be considered exploratory in nature, and the findings should be viewed as representing only associations between teen movie exposure and affinity and the studied outcomes. Nonetheless, these findings provide a solid starting point for future research on this understudied topic.

Conclusions and Further Consider- ations

Although many teen films claim to empower young women, it is also clear that they rely on gender-stereotyped portrayals, such as the mean girl. This study helps shed light on the influence of exposure to such portrayals on emerging adults' gender-based beliefs. Exposure to teen films seems to send the message that success in the female social world can be obtained through the use of duplicitous means. Future research in the area would be well-served by experimentally examining the effects of exposure to such messages in teen movies on individuals' engagement in socially aggressive behaviors as well as by further probing the specific

rewards and consequences associated with teens' actions in film. By so doing, greater clarity can be offered in terms of the specific media messages that provoke particular responses in viewers.

Additionally, the measure of affinity used in the present study could be improved by assessing affinity with specific characters, rather than merely with teen movies as a whole. The present study did not differentiate between affinity with socially aggressive versus socially cooperative characters. Moreover, our measure of affinity was limited in that it combined the concepts of similarity and wishful identification. Although this is not inconsistent with Bandura's³³ conceptualization of identification, more recent research suggests that feelings of similarity and identification are conceptually different and may produce different outcomes.³⁴ Therefore, future research in this domain should explore the unique contributions of each.

Lastly, this study focused on emerging adults as the population of interest due to the unique features associated with this developmental age-range (characterized by greater identity and life exploration than adolescence). Although this group is a critical audience segment, it is important to additionally recognize the potential influence of these films on adolescent audience members. Given the focus on the high school experience in many teen films, it is likely that the influence of exposure to these movies may be quite different, and perhaps greater, for teens, than for older, college-aged audiences. Future studies should examine the unique influences of teen movies on both emerging adults and younger teen audiences.

NOTES

1. Travis L. Dixon and Keith B. Maddox, "Skin Tone, Crime News, and Social Reality Judgments: Priming the Stereotype of the Dark and Dangerous Black Criminal," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35 (8, 2005): 1555-70; Thomas E. Ford, "Effects of Stereotypical Television Portrayals of African-Americans on Person Perception," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 60 (September 1997): 266-78; Yuki Fujioka, "Television Portrayals and African-American Stereotypes: Examination of Television Effects when Direct Contact Is Lacking," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 76 (spring 1999): 52-75; Dana E. Mastro, "A Social Identity Approach to Understanding the Impact of Television Messages," *Communication Monographs* 70 (2003): 98-113.

2. Sandra Dietrich, Dirk Heider, Herbert Matschinger, and Matthias C. Angermeyer, "Influence of Newspaper Reporting on Adolescents' Attitudes Toward People with Mental Illness," *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology* 41 (April 2006): 318-22; Darcy H. Granello and Pamela S. Pauley, "Television Viewing Habits and Their Relationship to Tolerance Toward People with Mental Illness," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* 22 (April 2000): 162-76.

3. Mary Dellmann-Jenkins, Donna Lambert, and Dorothy Fruit, "Fostering Preschoolers' Prosocial Attitudes Toward the Elderly: The

Effect of an Intergenerational Program," *Educational Gerontology* 17 (1, 1991): 21-32; Jake Harwood, "Sharp! Lurking Incoherence in a Television Portrayal of an Older Adult," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 19 (1, 2000): 110-40.

4. Emily S. Davidson, Amy Yasuna, and Alan Tower, "The Effects of Television Cartoons on Sex-Role Stereotyping in Young Girls," *Child Development* 50 (June 1979): 597-600; Jennifer Herrett-Skjellum and Mike Allen, "Television Programming and Sex Stereotyping: A Meta-Analysis," *Communication Yearbook* 19 (1996): 157-85; Paul McGhee and Terry Frueh, "Television Viewing and the Learning of Sex-Role Stereotypes," *Sex Roles* 6 (April 1980): 179-88; Michael Morgan, "Television, Sex-Role Attitudes, and Sex-Role Behaviors," *Journal of Early Adolescence* 7 (3, 1987): 269-82; Nancy Signorielli, "Television's Gender Role Images and Contribution to Stereotyping: Past, Present, Future," in *Handbook of Children and the Media*, ed. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2002), 341-58.

5. Claudi Puig, "On Screen: Teen Queens of Mean," *USA Today*, April 28, 2004, sec. D, p. 4; Jason Zinoman, "When Mean Girls Are Not Stopped," *New York Times*, January 26, 2005, sec. E, p. 1.

6. Kay Bussey and Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation," *Psychological Review* 106 (4, 1999): 686.

7. Jeffrey J. Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties," *American Psychologist* 55 (May 2000): 469-80.

8. Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood."

9. Zinoman, "When Mean Girls Are Not Stopped."

10. Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler, *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Christopher C. Henrich, Gabriel P. Kupermine, Amy Sack, Sidney J. Blatt, and Bonnie J. Leadbeater, "Characteristics of Homogeneity of Early Adolescent Friendship Groups: A Comparison of Male and Female Clique and Nonclique Members," *Applied Developmental Science* 4 (1, 2000): 15-26; Bill McCarthy, Diane Felmler, and John Hagan, "Girl Friends are Better: Gender, Friends, and Crime Among School and Street Youth," *Criminology* 24 (November 2004): 805-35.

11. Donna Eder, "The Cycle of Popularity: Interpersonal Relations Among Female Adolescents," *Sociology of Education* 58 (July 1985): 154-65; Lawrence Owens, Rosalyn Shute, and Phillip Slee, "'I'm In and You're Out...': Explanations for Teenage Girls' Indirect Aggression," *Psychology, Evolution, and Gender* 2 (1, 2000): 19-46; Rachel Simmons, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (Fort Washington, PA: Harvest Book Company, 2002); Marion K. Underwood, *Social Aggression Among Girls* (New York: Guilford Press, 2003); Nicole E. Werner, "Maladaptive Peer Relationships and the Development of Relational and Physical Aggression During Middle Childhood," *Social Development* 13 (November 2004): 495-514.

12. Jessica Winter, "Cruel Intentions: Loser Teens Burst Alpha Girls' Plastic Bubble," *The Village Voice*, winter 2004, <http://www.village>

voice.com/.

13. Roger Ebert, "What the Critics Have to Say," <http://www.mean-girls.com/>.

14. Simmons, *Odd Girl Out*.

15. Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003).

16. Adler and Adler, *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity*; Simmons, *Odd Girl Out*.

17. Werner, "Maladaptive Peer Relationships and the Development of Relational and Physical Aggression During Middle Childhood."

18. Joan Letendre, "'Sugar and Spice but Not Always Nice': Gender Socialization and Its Impact on Development and Maintenance of Aggression in Adolescent Girls," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 24, (August 2007): 353-68.

19. Henrich et al., "Characteristics of Homogeneity of Early Adolescent Friendship Groups: A Comparison of Male and Female Clique and Nonclique Members"; McCarthy, Felmlee, and Hagan, "Girl Friends are Better: Gender, Friends, and Crime Among School and Street Youth."

20. Henrich et al., "Characteristics of Homogeneity of Early Adolescent Friendship Groups: A Comparison of Male and Female Clique and Nonclique Members"; McCarthy, Felmlee, and Hagan, "Girl Friends are Better: Gender, Friends, and Crime Among School and Street Youth."

21. Adler and Adler, *Peer Power: Preadolescent Culture and Identity*; Henrich et al., "Characteristics of Homogeneity of Early Adolescent Friendship Groups: A Comparison of Male and Female Clique and Nonclique Members"; McCarthy, Felmlee, and Hagan, "Girl Friends are Better: Gender, Friends, and Crime Among School and Street Youth."

22. Henrich et al., "Characteristics of Homogeneity of Early Adolescent Friendship Groups: A Comparison of Male and Female Clique and Nonclique Members."

23. Susannah R. Stern, "Messages from Teens on the Big Screen: Smoking, Drinking, and Drug Use in Teen-Centered Films," *Journal of Health Communication* 10 (June 2005): 331-46.

24. Owens, Shute, and Slee, "'I'm In and You're Out...'" ; Simmons, *Odd Girl Out*; Underwood, *Social Aggression Among Girls*; Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes*.

25. Underwood, *Social Aggression Among Girls*.

26. Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986); Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2d ed., ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Philadelphia, PA: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 121-54.

27. Bandura, *Social Foundations*; Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory"; Bussey and Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation."

28. Cynthia Hoffner and Martha Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification with Television Characters: The Role of Perceived Similarity and Character Attributes," *Media Psychology* 7 (January 2005): 325-

51.

29. Bandura, *Social Foundations*.

30. Kay Bussey and Albert Bandura, "Influence of Gender Constancy and Social Power on Sex-Linked Modeling," *Personality and Social Psychology* 47 (December 1984): 1292-1302; Bussey and Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development"; Signorielli, "Television's Gender Role Images."

31. Janet T. Spence and Robert L. Helmreich, *Masculinity and Femininity: Their Psychological Dimensions, Correlates, and Antecedents* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1978).

32. Eleanor Maccoby, "Foreward," in *Social Aggression Among Girls*, Marion K. Underwood (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), ix.

33. Bandura, *Social Foundations*.

34. Keren Eyal and Alan M. Rubin, "Viewer Aggression and Homophily, Identification, and Parasocial Relationships with Television Characters," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 47 (1, 2003): 77-98; Hoffner and Buchanan, "Young Adults' Wishful Identification."

Copyright of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* is the property of Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.