Little women: study of female representations in teen films and how those representations have affected gender perceptions

2013

Maillim Santiago
University of Central Florida

Find similar works at: http://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorstheses1990-2015

University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIM 1990-2015 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact lee.dotson@ucf.edu.
LITTLE WOMEN: STUDY OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN TEEN FILMS AND HOW THOSE REPRESENTATIONS HAVE AFFECTED GENDER PERCEPTIONS

by

MAILLIM SANTIAGO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major Program in Film in the College of Arts and Humanities and in The Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Spring Term 2013

Thesis Chair: Andrew Gay
ABSTRACT

Although teen film is littered with tales of young women coming of age, the messages presented in most of these films follow a formula centered on a patriarchal nuclear family ideal, which leads to damaging perceptions regarding gender roles in teenage society. There is the main traditional model of stay at home mother with a father in the role of the breadwinner; the rise of rape culture; and the glass ceiling in the workplace. The young females consuming a mass amount of this media then reflect negatively on themselves. The research following this conundrum was broken into two parts: the production of a film looking to remedy the many problems of female representation in teen media and then monitoring the reaction to said film against its target audience: young females between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore what makes females within the teenage demographic react to certain kinds of media. If they react negatively or positively towards a media representation of themselves, to what extent does this affect the participants’ activity in their daily lives? Therefore, through a process of screening three short films focused on teen issues – including the one made by myself for this study – and then conducting a survey focusing on questions regarding the participants’ feelings towards the subject matter, their hopes for themselves, and teen media in general, there was an ability to gauge how deeply teen media affects the modern teenager.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis has been nothing but a labor of love amongst so many of my friends and teachers who have acted like a family amongst this production process for the past year. Thank you to Stephen Schlow, Andrew Gay, Jesse Wolfe, Lisa Mills, Ula Stoeckl, Lori Ingle, Christopher Harris, Bob Jones, and Samuel Rohdie whom have all taught me at some point in the past four years and have most definitely built me up to the point to be confident enough to direct a Capstone film, which I never thought was a possibility when I first started school four years ago. Thank you to the Volusia County Film Department and the Volusia County Police Department for allowing me to shoot most of my film in New Smyrna Beach, Florida – it was a pleasing experience and surprisingly, one of the easiest parts of this process. Thank you to my entire film crew for helping out but especially: Geoff Levy, my creative other half during this entire process; Erica Serio, my second brain during film production; James Reynolds, my biggest support system in the world and whom my film would not even be a real thing without; Rob Love, for always being there to give input when I am too neurotic to do so and making everything a million times better with his suggestions; and my fellow UCF Film classmates whom put just as much sweat and tears into this project that I have. The film would be nothing with my two lead actresses, Croix Provence and Tatiana Paris, who put my world in their hearts and minds and gave performances which have given us all chills. I would like to thank my last minute guardian angel in this process, Christine Hanlon, who single-handedly saved a huge part of this thesis with her guidance with pretty much no thanks on her part except for merely believing me after meeting me for fifteen minutes. Blows my mind. Most of all, thank you to my committee: Andrew Gay, Lisa Mills, and Martha Marinara – you three have been the fence I can fall back on although I know I am not totally here all the time and seem to pop in and out every once in a while just to prove I am still breathing. The security of the three of you there is all I really needed to be motivated to do this. And I needed that. Thank you to my dad for making sure I am always the best feminist I can be. Thank you to my two best friends – Delia Shahnavaz and Jillian Leonhardt – for keeping me alive this far and being my family for the past six years. I would not be anywhere without you two. Thank you to everyone who has been involved since the beginning of this process.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................. 1

BACKGROUND ................................................................................................................... 9

- Film History .................................................................................................................. 9
- The Female Role in Teen Films .................................................................................... 11
- The Beginning of the Process: Expectations for “Little Girls” ...................................... 13

FOCUS GROUP .................................................................................................................. 16

- The Surveying Process ............................................................................................... 16
- Demographics Results .................................................................................................. 18
- Reaction Towards Teen Media Results ........................................................................ 23
- Post-Survey Results ..................................................................................................... 24

REFLECTIONS .................................................................................................................. 31

- Pre-Production Reflection .......................................................................................... 31
- Production Reflection .................................................................................................. 35
- Post-Production Reflection ......................................................................................... 35

CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................... 37

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER ......................................................................... 41

APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE OF PRE-SURVEY .................................................................. 43

APPENDIX C: EXAMPLE OF POST-SURVEY ................................................................. 46

REFERENCES .................................................................................................................... 49
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Career Aspirations of Participants .................................................................19
Figure 2: Age of Participants ..........................................................................................19
Figure 3: Media Viewership ............................................................................................20
Figure 4: Media Viewership by Age Group .................................................................20
Figure 5: Cinema Viewership .........................................................................................21
Figure 6: Cinema Viewership by Age Group .................................................................21
Figure 7: Favorite Media of Participants .......................................................................22
Figure 8: Favorite Media by Age Group .......................................................................22
Figure 9: Representation in Media ...............................................................................23
Figure 10: Representation in Media by Age Group ......................................................23
Figure 11: Favorite Film .................................................................................................25
Figure 12: Favorite Film by Age Group .........................................................................25
Figure 13: Least Favorite Film .......................................................................................26
Figure 14: Least Favorite Film by Age Group ...............................................................26
Figure 15: Did the Participants Feel Represented? ......................................................27
Figure 16: Did the Participants Feel Represented? by Age Group ...............................27
Figure 17: Emotional Impact from Films? ...................................................................27
Figure 18: Emotional Impact from Films? by Age Group ............................................27
Figure 19: Would the Participant Prefer the New Teen Film Model? ........................................28
Figure 20: Would the Participant Prefer the New Teen Film Model? by Age Group .............28
Figure 21: Should More Independent Females Lead Media? ..............................................29
Figure 22: Should More Independent Females Lead Media? by Age ......................................29
INTRODUCTION

Western society has always imposed upon women a standard associated with wholesomeness. The domestic realm is the cage women inhabited from the beginning of American societal construction. Although women have “slowly drawn out from the domestic realm” over time, the construct still possesses a large percentage of women (Novack & Novack 58). Contemporary media (particularly cinema) has successfully enforced this cultural standard to its most influential and fragile demographic – female teenagers. The influence teen-centered media has on such an impressionable demographic is something that continues to be controversial and heavily studied. For example, a billboard in Los Angeles recently toted the question: “Which movie studios will cause me to smoke this summer?” with a website leading to statistics posted on the ad (Stern & Moore 184). A study conducted by Dong-Hee Shin and Jun Kyo Kim analyzed the placement of alcohol in teen media depicting underage drinking. In the study, “67% of teens and 72% of adults agree that liquor and beer ads target teenagers” (414). Directly in relation to female-centric media, Nancy Signorielli conducted a study to see how gender roles in teen media affected the male and female teen audiences viewing them. For the purposes of this project, I will define teen media as any media that portrays teenagers as the main characters in a narrative, including cinema, television, and Web-based media narratives. “In television programs favored by adolescent girls, twice as many men were seen ‘on the job’ than women”: this finding single-handedly explains a huge problem with gender perceptions in teen media (9). In such media that teen females favored, their own demographic is not shown as an equal; therefore, how would this reflect on the females’ own self-esteem for their goals in life?
To answer the question myself, I remember never being confident as a teenager. A lot of that had to do with my personal life – I did not have a strong family unit; I was socially awkward; I felt like books were the only ones who understood me. I watched a lot of media, but I cannot say it comforted me into feeling more confident towards myself. I had an equivocal way of viewing the world through the lens of media. I also did not feel warmth towards many female characters in these films or television shows. I liked *Pretty in Pink* (1986) because Duckie was really funny and sweet, but I thought Andie was one of the stupidest people ever. She hooked up with the cool guy and abandoned her lonely dad. That was so wrong to me. I liked *Mean Girls* (2004) because the characters were so sassy, and the one-liners were brilliant. However, I thought all the female characters were awful people. I never rooted for one of the characters in the film. When it came to television, I could not get into any of the teen shows at the time, such as *Lizzie McGuire* (2001). I felt like she was such an infantilized version of a teen. The Disney version of a teen queen – either Hilary Duff or Lindsay Lohan – did not appeal to me. Most of them were white, blonde, and had wholesome values attached to their image. It just confused me because that was not who I was in the least bit. Where was my representation on screen?

I felt much more confident about myself as a teenager when I watched something more empowering towards females, such as *But I’m a Cheerleader* (1999). In this particular film, a cheerleader is sent to a homosexual recovery camp to cure her homosexuality. At this camp, she comes to terms with her sexuality without an explicit romantic storyline. No patriarchal figures aid her in her quest for clarity, and the film ends with the cheerleader moving on with her life with a renewed sense of herself. This was groundbreaking to my teenage self at the time because I wanted films to represent realities I encountered as a teenager. *But I’m a Cheerleader* tackled
the difficult topic of confusion with sexuality in a graceful way that empowered the female character instead of shaming her. The film also empowered the female character by making her independent of her sexuality and not reliant on the result of a romantic storyline. What would have happened if Andie from *Pretty in Pink* chose her studies in school over worrying herself crazy over a boy?

Once I became a filmmaker in college, I constantly flirted with the idea of writing the kind of teen film I hoped to see when I was young due to these strong, conflicting identification and self-esteem issues I had as a teenager. This was the beginning of the idea that became “Little Girls,” the thesis film I wrote and directed for this project. I was always drawn to more provocative stories in teen cinema because I felt those stories were the ones that portrayed actual life events. I did not think everything came packaged, pretty, and with a musical number to boot, such as in *High School Musical* (2006). Darker teen narratives such as *Jawbreaker* (1999) appealed to me because I could relate to how high school felt like a murder plot. Even then, *Jawbreaker* included a lot of girl-on-girl aggression, something that hindered a positive portrayal of any of the female characters since they were presented to be manipulative. This got me thinking – if I could manage to write a more provocative teen film that painted the female lead character positively, then I could start to figure out the representational issue women face in teen cinema. If something has to change, I have to be one of many artists who start making more female-friendly teen films with empowering messages for young females. Young women should be shown going through the realities of life; they can face hardships, but they come out of them with a stronger, independent sense of themselves – a story arc that should be depicted more
often. In *But I’m a Cheerleader*, she discovers her sense of self by uncovering her homosexuality on her own terms. This is the kind of positive, independent portrayal I am referencing.

“Little Girls” was written back in January of 2012 after watching *Heathers* (1988) and listening to “This Is What Makes Us Girls,” a Lana Del Rey song. *Heathers* – although a problematic film – was one of the first teen films to really subvert a norm and take a chance with a risky and dangerous narrative. Teen murder and suicide are still deeply taboo topics; in Reagan-era America, these topics were much more scandalous. “This Is What Makes Us Girls” is a song following the narrative between two young women who involve themselves with drugs and alcohol and lose their friendship in the process. Both pieces of media have a strong sense of nostalgia running through them as well as their own takes on relationships between teen females. They also expose a more provocative side of teen life – something that has always appealed to me as a teenager since I feel like those experiences are more relatable. These pieces of media inspired me to create my two female heroes: Bambi and Lizzie.

Bambi and Lizzie lead the narrative of “Little Girls”: a short film about the more dangerous side of teenage Americana that is not often correctly explored in cinema. Films with alarming content regarding teens are nothing new to the genre. *Kids* (1995), *Ken Park* (2002), and *Thirteen* (2003), are a few controversial films released in the past twenty years, which tried to expose the darker side of modern teen society. In fact, the tones of these films are very similar to the films of the 1920s: sensationalism at its very core. All three of these films deal with the introduction of alcohol, sex, and drugs at a very young age with barely any parental supervision. A lot of these films do not feel like accurate representations of teen society; they feel like hackneyed exploitations, as they were back in the 1960s with cheap films, such as *Teenage*
It also does not help that the directors at the helm of many of these films are over the age of forty, white, and male. These teen exploitation films permeate the genre for a good excuse to see someone young, female, and attractive in a compromising situation, succumbing to a male figure.

Instead, “Little Girls” comes from a different place. Bambi and Lizzie are two rebellious female teenagers who act out to live with a freedom glamorized by dangerous teen icons, such as James Dean. They abandon all obedience to authoritarian figures and live life on their own terms, for the most part. Bambi is the more rebellious of the two teenagers. She acts out the most, has a drug dealer boyfriend (Daniel), and presents an image of untamed femininity. Lizzie is my main heroine. She is more submissive to Bambi’s whims and not all that wise towards the consequences of her actions. However, when it comes time to make a decision that will change her life, she chooses to make an independent decision and aims to make her life better for herself.

While the film being made is the main product of this study, this project had to go beyond the scope of me making my film. As I previously explained, I felt strongly affected by teen media when I was a teenager. Therefore, it intrigued me to know if girls in a “teenager” age range still felt the same way towards teen media as I once did. I would have to test out my film’s effectiveness on the age group I wanted to target as an audience: women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. Thus, I had to do some cursory research behind the theories of media viewing. The one I identified closest to my research method was the method of cultivation analysis. The psychology behind cultivation analysis is pretty simple: media “viewing cultivates ways of seeing the world” (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli 35). Specifically, what is being
cultivated is a perception of roles within the audience’s realm of real life. Common depictions on screen are likely to be expected in the daily life of the audience member. Specific demographics – such as the teenager – that adhere to many forms of media, such as cinema and television, are “more likely to see the ‘real world’ in terms of images, values, portrayals, and ideologies that emerge through the lens” (Jowett, Jarvie, Fuller-Seeley 58). Visual cues, cultural references, and identifiable stereotypes in daily life are how teens and adults function more and more as a society as technology becomes more integrated in our daily lives.

In the 1950s, teenagers had the advent of television and post-war ideologies. In the 1960s and early 1970s, war ravaged the teen social construct. Emphasis on print media, such as magazines and newspapers, became the norm. Body counts of young men from the war were splayed across these sources of information, thus beginning an era of sensationalism in mainstream media. In the 1980s, MTV and John Hughes’ films hyped up the accessibility of teen-specific media. In the 1990s, the Internet made this accessibility much more widespread. In the 2000s and onward, the mobile network has seamlessly integrated television, cinema, and the Internet into portable devices. Nowadays, cell phones given for free in phone contracts have simple access to YouTube. Most teenagers are now carrying instant media on them at all times. This constant access to media shapes perspective. It cultivates ways of seeing the world. In the 21st century, this accessibility needs to be handled with more responsibility primarily by those in the media industry, such as filmmakers and producers.

The effects of teen media on the teen demographic are what are essential to the understanding of gender perceptions in teen society. Therefore, testing my film in a focus group of the demographic it targets is paramount. For the focus group, I found a group of twenty young
women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one: ten were under eighteen and ten were over eighteen. The teenagers I found through a teacher at Hagerty High School in Oviedo, Florida. The adults I found through canvassing the University of Central Florida and other local colleges. I showed two other University of Central Florida teen short films along with my own to give the women a buffer for comparison. If I just showed my film, there would be no comparison to alternate films in its medium, genre, and budget limitations. These women took a pre-survey, indicating their thoughts on teen media as well as basic demographic questions. Then, they viewed the films and took a post-survey. The survey questions focused on how the films made them feel about their self-esteem; how the films influenced their perception of the female role in teen media; and how the films made the women feel about their morale as a female in modern society. A lot of their answers were also discussed with me in the post-survey portion of this study to clarify their feelings towards independent female characters in teen media. The age range of the participants is important because someone who is fifteen perceives her role in society very differently from someone who is twenty-one. The expectations in mainstream society for the two age ranges are vastly different. However, it is still only a six-year age difference.

Some challenges I expected to encounter have to deal with the experiences of the women in the focus group. Some of the women would come from a household that has both traditional mother and father figures. Some of the women would come from religious households. Some of the women could have been raised by a single parental figure. However, I tried to normalize my focus group as much as possible by finding women of the same age range, of the same location, and with similar career goals (by pursuing higher education). Given all those control variables, it
is still difficult to predict what socioeconomic background a person comes from without being explicit in questioning. Therefore, it will be difficult to measure exactly why results may differ if not all variables in the women’s demographics can be controlled. Also, it is difficult to try and rate an emotional reaction and hold everyone to the same scale. Some women may be on certain medications altering moods. Some women may not be as predisposed to media as others. There are many different sociological and cultural aspects that factor into the assessment. It also serves as a disadvantage to make the group’s demographics as uniform as possible. For example, what would happen if I do not have homosexual input in my focus group? What about the African-American voice?

Another thing I am worried about is the content of the other two films. I have spoken to the filmmakers, and they are on board for the experiment. Still, I do not know what their intentions were upon making the films. Also, would showing a film drastically different from my own influence how the women feel about my film? In the end, I decided that it is only fair if I try to hold my work against the work of my contemporaries in the genre. It is not necessarily fair that I go ahead and show a clip of Clueless (1993) next to my film because they were made through drastically different methods. Distracting factors, such as budget differences, would be apparent and would detract from the message of either film. Therefore, holding my film against other teen shorts that were made at the University of Central Florida’s film program seems to make the most sense.
BACKGROUND

The following chapter introduces the history of the teen film as well as the actual production process for “Little Girls.” The history of the genre is essential to understanding where the problem of female representation stems from and how it has negatively affected gender perceptions in teen society. All these reasons were a catalyst to making “Little Girls” and also led to the idea of the focus group to garner results from the consumerism of a specific type of teen media: the cinematic short film. Since the history of teen film is so large, I have limited the discussion to that of the 1980s and onwards since it is most directly the teen media that I personally grew up with.

Film History

The history of teen films begins as early as the 1920s with “youth films,” such as Prodigal Daughters (1923). However, the teenage film hit its pinnacle in popularity with the 1980s. The John Hughes’ film was invented – films that celebrated teenage life and held an enormous amount of respect for anyone who was under the age of eighteen. Instead of being the outsiders, the teens ruled the world in these films. John Hughes cemented the teenage film model, and the celebration of true delinquency (as well as female objectification) began. Sixteen Candles (1984), The Breakfast Club (1985), Pretty in Pink (1986), and Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1986) are all perfect examples of Hughes’ brand of teen films. Although largely iconic and still relevant, none of these films score a win for the independent female – the one trying to make decisions for herself without the influence of any patriarchal figure. Two of the films – Sixteen Candles and Pretty in Pink – were centered on one female’s quest for the dream boy. It was the female’s quest – a point towards the protagonist. However, especially in the case of Pretty in
Pink, all else in her life was ignored for the plight of the male character’s own desires. The Breakfast Club is probably the most progressive of the teen narratives in Hughes’ films. Nevertheless, a couple plot issues do set it back: 1. All of the women find their conclusion with a male figure; 2. None of the female characters have a narrative exploring their independence whereas at least one of the male characters does in the film. Ferris Bueller’s Day Off uses Simone, Ferris’ girlfriend, as an object of the male characters’ own pipe dreams throughout the film. Ferris and Cameron’s desires are all explored while Simone is just there for the ride, being used as a pretty face, an object of division between Cameron and Ferris, or their ticket to a seamless day out of school. There is no conclusion for her at all in the film.

Young females have come “to expect very little” of themselves because that is what young women’s portrayals on screen have often endured in teen media (Hentges 1). If the advent of these portrayals was in the John Hughes’ era, then what do the representations in these films say about how females should behave? In three of the four films, the young women had to change enough in order for the guy to give her a happy ending. In Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, Simone had no narrative outside of her boyfriend. Right here is an example of the patriarchy in teen films winning over the independence of the female character, even when her narrative is the main one explored. By the 90s, the teen film was a societal construct. The formula cemented in the 80s with films, such as Better Off Dead (1985) and Weird Science (1985), was repeated in films, such as Can’t Hardly Wait (1998) and Drop Dead Gorgeous (1999).

For a decade, there were at least two summer blockbusters centered on teens to look forward to at the theater. With the turn of the millennium, the factory of teen films became oversaturated, and the trend quickly dissipated into television movies or straight-to-DVD fare. In
today’s cinema, the teen film has hit a slump. Nevertheless, the recycled tropes from the 1960s found in films, such as *Splendor in the Grass* (1963), repeat themselves in the twenty-first century. In *Splendor in the Grass*, Deanie is hospitalized after breaking up with her boyfriend. She loses all sense of herself and is coddled throughout the rest of the film; she is looked down upon by her ex-boyfriend’s family as well as her own parental unit and only finds a somewhat happy ending through an engagement to another male character. Bella in *Twilight* (2008) follows an eerily similar narrative. Once Edward breaks up with her, she goes on a rebellious streak and tries to end her life by jumping off a cliff. At the series’ end, she is happy with Edward despite all the damaging, patriarchal, and manipulative things he has done to her. She has no narrative outside of this domineering character. Her ending is Edward.

**The Female Role in Teen Films**

The 1978 film, *Grease*, can wrap the attitudes towards teenage women in teen films succinctly well: the Sandra Dee – the “embodiment of the virginal adolescent girl” and the Rizzo – “the wisecracking female sexual hood” (Scheiner 89). There is rarely any in between in teen cinema, and these tropes have been recycled over and over since teen films began in the 1950s. The whole transformation of Bella Swan into Bella Cullen from *Twilight* was from “the Sandra Dee” persona into her own kind of Rizzo once she is affected by vampirism. However, she is then tamed by her man, much like the original Sandra Dee and Rizzo were. In the 90s, Laney Boggs from *She’s All That* (1999) was the geek version of Sandra Dee, ridiculed for her oddities. Then, she is transformed into a Rizzo until Zack -- the male character sent to transform her into a teen queen -- has to explain that she is neither one nor the other. Laney belongs to him because she became a product of his patriarchy.
To assess the female role in teen film, it would be wise to return to an early incarnation of a specific teen trope. Rebel Without a Cause (1955) is the quintessential teen film from the green days of the genre. It was a film that was the purest representation of delinquency at the time led by the poster child for the time: James Dean. Rebel was also the first teen film to “present teenage culture through their eyes rather than through the eyes of adults” (Fujiwara, “The Rebel”). If such is the case, then it is important to analyze Natalie Wood’s character in the film. From the get go, she is labeled as property of the school bully, Buzz; although James Dean’s character sees through the façade, he openly accepts this situation as the norm. Back in the 1950s, ideals such as independence from the male figure were not openly acceptable. These ideals would then be satirized in Grease, which would set apart the two distinct tropes to permeate cinema landscape in regards to teen females: the virgin and the slut. And so the beginning of the teen film’s ability to deteriorate female teens’ self-esteem begins.

After the teen film tropes were repeated over and over again in cinema, these particular gender-specific portrayals became expectant in teen society. Not only did gendered behaviors become expectant, they became integrated into teen reality to the point of barely any detection. This is representative in the documentary, American Teen (2008), which follows five high school students in America to get a glimpse of real teen life. “The ‘American Teen’ characters are drawn from a number of teen flicks,” which is no doubt a product of clever marketing (Sweeney 37). Yet, it is also reflexive to how teen media has affected the high school societal structure. In the film, there is “the jock, the geek, the princess, the heartthrob, and the rebel” (Sweeney 37). These true-life narratives end similarly to the teen films whose marketing they copy as well. If this is happening in teen society in 2008 after such popular movies were made thirty years ago
(many before the young women were born), then it is safe to assume that: 1. Gendered behavior is being recycled in current teen media; 2. Gendered behaviors are a steadfast expectation in both the fictional world of most teen media and the real world of the teen societal structure. These tropes are now real life.

Movies that have pushed against common tropes have been quickly buried as “counterculture” or “filth” – such as But I’m a Cheerleader or Foxfire (1996) – films that celebrated the ascent of womanhood rather than shame the females. For example, Foxfire was one of the few teen films of the 1990s, which celebrated female friendships. The film dealt with difficult topics, such as drug addiction, rape, and consensual sex at a young age. Yet, it never felt exploitative. All the teen females in the film helped each other out and rebounded against patriarchal figures trying to exploit their independence. Foxfire subverted the norm expected in mainstream teen media but was not rewarded too well for its difference despite starring one of the biggest teen icons at the time, Angelina Jolie. The film did not do well commercially or critically and has been buried with the passage of time. Nevertheless, the model of this kind of teen film serves as an impetus to make “Little Girls.” If I had the correct role model to look up to when I was sixteen, maybe I would not have grown into a hot bed of insecurities and self-doubt.

The Beginning of the Process: Expectations for “Little Girls”

If there would be any major change to teen media anytime soon, it would happen now in the recess of the teen film. I do not think making my short film will suddenly change everything that is wrong with teen cinema. In fact, I do not know yet if my short film will be successful in its reach or goal. The recognition of this problem and learning from the mistakes or successes my short film has will then help me recognize the problems I can resolve for future projects. French
director Olivier Assayas once said, “When you’re a filmmaker you have to remain so very close to your youthful ideals, to the things that you have been.” The older I get, the more out of touch I am with the teen side of myself so it is important that I keep close to this goal.

I centered the narrative on two teenage females to depict a positive homosocial relationship, such as those explored in Foxfire. The teens do not fight until the very end of the short film where a decision is made as to who is moving on positively with their life. Otherwise, they are shown happy together throughout the film, which was important to me. A friendship between females is a precious thing, especially at a young age, and depicting solidarity and warmth between females is definitely something lacking in recent teen cinema. Beautiful Creatures (2013) is the latest teen film to have a wide release at the time this was written (April 2013). There is not one positive portrayal of a female teen friendship in that film. In fact, the film is similar to Twilight’s own narrative: 1. Young female involved in the supernatural falls in love with a boy. 2. Young female must decide between boy or living her own life. 3. She chooses boy. This was the absolute opposite of I wanted to convey with my own short film. These females and their friendship is the driving force behind the narrative.

There are two male characters in my short film – one is Bambi’s boyfriend, Daniel, and the other is Lizzie’s hookup for the night, Zachary. I approached these characters a little differently than most teen films because I wanted the story to be focused on the young women. Daniel is the antagonist of the film and the cause of the rift between the two women. This is a cliché used before, but I utilized him as a catalyst for Lizzie to move on from her life. The ending of my film does not focus on him because it is not his story. It is Lizzie and Bambi’s. Although Bambi returns to Daniel at the conclusion of my film, it is Lizzie’s narrative of moving
on with her life independent of others that portrays the situation positively, or at least that is what I was aiming for. Zachary’s only significance in the narrative revolves around Lizzie wanting a sexual partner and receiving it through this character. Otherwise, he is of no other importance in the short film. I wanted to have a scene where Lizzie took charge of a situation sexually to show empowerment with female sexuality in the film. Zachary is the one who gets intimate with her as to what is shown on screen. I am proud that I did not have Lizzie submit to Zachary because that exchange has already been previously depicted in teen cinema.

These were the most important distinctions I could make when I was writing the script. Production and post-production of the film helped me realize a couple of things I could have remedied in the pre-production process to help me achieve my goals more effectively. These will be detailed in the “Reflections” chapter. However, I went into production of my short film with the best intentions for the young audience I wanted to reach. I was hoping these young participants would view the relationship between the two females in my film as empowering. I hoped they would cherish their own female friends and understand obtaining the best for their own futures. Despite my intentions, the results from the focus group helped me learn how others viewed “Little Girls,” which was not necessarily as close to the goals I set out for this project.
FOCUS GROUP

Creating the film was only a small part of the process in this study. The whole study is more intrinsic and in tune to the reaction of teens against teen media, including cinema. The following details the process of finding the focus group used in this study, their results, and conclusions drawn from this process.

The Surveying Process

“Youth now begin monitoring their own thoughts and making judgments about societal rules, institutional values, and group morals;” teenagers are starting to become more aware of their own media (Hall & Brown-Thirston 21). This very idea is the catalyst for the discussion of surveying the participants to see what their analysis is from the media screened to them. It was essential to go ahead and sample the target audience of teen media – young females between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. In their early twenties, young females are still trying to transition out of teendom hence the age range of the study being expanded. Ten teenagers from Hagerty High School in Oviedo, Florida were recruited to watch three short films produced at the University of Central Florida: my own “Little Girls”, Max Rousseau’s “Safety First”, and Debby Wolfe’s “Cat’s Bad Hair Day”. This process was repeated for ten females between the ages of nineteen to twenty-one. I found these ten females through canvassing the University of Central Florida during the daytime at the Nicholson Communications Building and the Student Union.

The survey came in two parts: a pre-survey and a post-survey. The pre-survey focused on demographics information as well as media viewership. The survey also asked the females about their happiness regarding the state of teen media, in general. A copy of the pre-survey is in Appendix B. These questions were asked to determine demographics of the participants. These
questions would help me decipher distinctions between participants since all the surveys were anonymous and to see if there were any trends amongst sexuality, race, or age. Media viewership was also an important thing to know as a precursor in order to see if there were trends amongst teen females who were actively viewing media. Before I screened the films to the women, I answered their questions to clarify their understanding.

Then, the three short films were shown to the young women. The other two shorts were selected based on the criteria that they were narratives focused on teens and that they were produced at the University of Central Florida. The ten teenagers viewed “Safety First,” then “Little Girls,” and then “Cat’s Bad Hair Day.” They were all in their teacher’s classroom during the viewing at a lunch break while the films were projected on an overhead screen. The ten adults watched the films in the comfort of their home after I provided a link to the surveys via e-mail. They accessed the films online via links I provided in e-mails as well. After the three films were viewed, the participants took a post-survey. An example of the post-survey can be found in Appendix C.

The first qualifying question would be to see which film had the most positive response with the participant and to know why. The next most important qualifier is to see if any of the films actually represented current teen troubles. If the narratives on screen are dated or out of touch with reality, the target audience will not be able to relate. Therefore, the intention behind the films would have been futile, if not successful. Reflecting on the study’s hypothesis regarding more progressive teen film models is important to ask afterwards to see if the audience enjoyed the model. Some of the participants were confused by this question. This is where I explained about the independent female role model depicted in any or all of the short films.
Therefore, a lot of the answers I received responded to my clarification of the question. Finally, asking the young women about their futures after the film’s viewing was important. The more progressive teen model where stronger female characters are leading the way is the model “Little Girls” wants to follow in order to inspire the target audience to be more independent. If these films influenced them in any way towards their goals, then the study is successful in its goal. If not, then the approach to the teen film model would have to be re-evaluated.

**Demographics Results**

To begin with, all of the females were heterosexual. I was hoping for some bisexual or lesbian voices in the mix. All of them were Caucasian except for one African-American female. The career interests between these young women were split pretty evenly between medical interests and media interests with two or three young women wanting to study law. However, they all uniformly agreed that they pursued or want to pursue higher education in order to support themselves financially. This is something that was great to discover – that these women had ambitions of their own and wanted to go to school for themselves rather than anyone else. The only person who said college might not be an option said it was because of monetary issues and not personal issues. Age and career results are depicted in Figures 1 and 2.
Media Viewership Results

As for media viewership and consummation, the answers ranged widely. Forty-seven percent of the women said that they do not pay too much attention to media nor watch it that often. The rest were evenly split between watching media constantly and just watching a couple hours of television a day. The results of these are detailed in Figure 3; Figure 4 shows the divide between those participants under eighteen and those eighteen and over. Media viewership was
divided between low, medium, and high. Low means that the participants only watched television two hours or less a day and rarely went to the theater. Medium means that the participants watched over two hours of television a day but rarely went to the theater. Many participants in the medium category also watched clips on YouTube often. Participants who scored high watched over four hours of television a day and watched movies at least once a week.

When it came to cinema viewing, even fewer females said they frequented the theater. Sixty percent said it was once a month whereas the rest said it was even less than that – either once every two months or a couple times a year. Renting movies from Redbox or Netflix currently are more common choices. These choices should be taken into consideration for another study – considering it is a source of cinema as well. However, since this study concerns itself primarily with the marketing of films at the time of their release, the source of a theater as the main avenue of cinema will only be considered. These results are depicted in Figure 5;
Figure 6 breaks down the results by age group. The “rare” column means that these participants viewed movies in a theater fewer than six times a year.

When it came to which type of media was their favorite, television won with fifty-four percent of the vote. The teen series, *Pretty Little Liars* (2010), won an overwhelming number of that vote with the other teen series, *The Vampire Diaries* (2009), being another favorite. Films came next as a favorite with thirty-three percent of the vote. The favorite genre of film mentioned was romance films, such as Nicholas Sparks-penned screenplays. Nicholas Sparks has produced and written two teen-centric films that should be considered: *A Walk to Remember* (2002) and *The Last Song* (2010). The rest of the females said Internet media, such as YouTube, were their personal favorite source. These results are depicted in Figure 7; Figure 8 depicts results by age group.
The interesting thing about the success of *Pretty Little Liars* is that it is a television show becoming more accustomed to the changing landscape of viewership through social media; it “changes how the TV industry views success – one tweet, keek, and status update at a time” (Stransky 40). With how little most of these women watch media, this seems to be a new trend amongst media viewership – watch it on your own time. The television show itself is about homosocial aggression between females – one common problem in recent teen media. However, it is also a teen show led by four strong-minded but boy-crazy female protagonists with an anonymous bully trying to spill their darkest secrets of teen lust and drama. Granted, it is slightly better than the other alternative mentioned, *The Vampire Diaries*, which can essentially be described as *Twilight*-lite for the cable networks. Nicholas Sparks’ films fall more along the traditional line of media and are one of the many examples of nuclear family propaganda. *A Walk to Remember* was about how a teen female with cancer changed for the bad boy at school and how the bad boy learns from her death by turning to Christ. *The Last Song* similarly follows the same traditional storyline.
Reaction Towards Teen Media Results

The last part of the survey questioned the women’s feelings towards representation. Interestingly enough, sixty percent of the young women felt represented in the media. When it came to how they felt towards the representation though, sixty-seven percent had a problem with the representation with thirteen percent of that group feeling very strongly about it. The most surprising answer amongst those questioned was the African-American female who took part in the survey. She did not have a problem with her demographics’ representation in media and also felt represented in mainstream media. Nevertheless, this all gave me a good idea to contrast with the answers I received post-survey, which made the participants re-evaluate their answers. These results are depicted in Figure 9; Figure 10 is the results broken down by age group.

![Figure 9: Representation in Media](image1)

![Figure 10: Representation in Media By Age Group](image2)

After the pre-survey was taken, the females watched the three short films. “Safety First” was directed by Max Rousseau and centers on a group of preteens trying to buy condoms from a gas station. “Little Girls” directed by myself is about two rebellious teenage females who get into a compromising situation they have to figure out by themselves. “Cat’s Bad Hair Day” is about a
teen female coming to terms with her awkward middle school existence. All films show teen females in leading positions with completely different narratives that showcase how unique the teen experience can be. Each one was directed by a different student at the University of Central Florida and also had similar budgets. These were the basic components of controlling the sway of bias amongst the participants.

**Post-Survey Results**

After the films were viewed, all the participants answered the post-survey. Only one teenager did not feel comfortable finishing all the films but still filled out much of the survey. Due to her extremely religious upbringing, she said that she had never been exposed to media that dealt with serious teen issues. Therefore, she felt uncomfortable viewing such media for a study. The rest of the participants finished the surveys. As for a favorite film, there was no clear winner. All three films got an equal number of votes. “Safety First” was more skewed towards the younger participants who enjoyed the film because it was “funny.” “Little Girls” was more relatable to the older participants because they had experienced such situations in later years. “Cat’s Bad Hair Day” was enjoyed equally because of how relatable it was to the females’ situations at that age. What is a common thread amongst the answers – regardless of the answer chosen – is that they chose the film because they related to the situations with the exception being “Safety First,” which was chosen more often on the basis of being light-hearted and “funnier.” These results are broken down in Figure 11; Figure 12 depicts the results by age group.
For least favorite film, “Little Girls” was actually an overwhelming least favorite with forty-six percent of the vote. What many of the participants did not enjoy about “Little Girls” is that it was “too mature” and it made them uncomfortable. As for “Safety First” and “Cat’s Bad Hair Day,” the participants who did not enjoy those films found them to be non-relatable. This is intriguing because it furthers evidence that the audience wants to feel a connection with what they are seeing on screen. If it is too alienating by being too mature or too non-relatable, then it is easy for a participant to reject it and not be able to understand the narrative. Although it disappoints me that “Little Girls” did not hit the mark I wanted, it gives me insight as to how the younger audience responds to teen media. I thought showing a narrative that would expose a truth to a young audience would impact them more. Instead, the younger audience said it alienated them and they preferred something more light-hearted to consume at that age. These results are depicted in Figure 13; Figure 14 depicts the results by age group.
Another important factor of the study is to make sure that the females felt represented on screen. Disappointingly enough, this also was not as successful. Only thirty-one of the participants felt represented on screen and most of them referred back to “Cat’s Bad Hair Day.” They thought Debbie Wolfe did a good job putting a representation of “how awkward middle school life” can be for a young woman. The rest of the participants did not feel represented in the films but did not necessarily elaborate as to why. What was the most interesting response was the participant who did not watch any of the films due to the media being too disturbing for her. She specifically said that although she did not watch the films, she does know that the media dealt with “common situations facing her age group” and it made her “sad that such things happen.” As earnest as that response is, it really struck me how self-aware it was even if the participant did seem to live in a more sheltered media bubble than most teen females. These results are depicted in Figure 15; Figure 16 depicts results by age group.
The next question was whether the participants felt any emotional impact from the films. This was a bit more evenly spread but again, it did not necessarily sway the way I hoped. Thirty-eight percent of the participants said that they did feel an emotional impact from it. One participant said the films made her “feel grateful for having a good circle of friends.” Another participant said she felt like she “learned from the characters’ experiences.” The rest of the participants did say no, and many of them felt that they could not relate to the characters. Therefore, they were not as emotionally invested in them. These results are depicted in Figure 17; Figure 18 depicts results by age group.
After asking about their emotional impact, I proceeded to question if they feel like the model of any of the films shown were good models for the future of teen media. This was more rewarding as sixty-nine percent of the participants did recognize a change in the teen cinema model with at least one of the films and viewed it as an improvement to current teen media. It is still not as unanimous a vote as I had hoped it would be. However, it was more rewarding to see the change in the narrative acknowledged by the target audience. These results are depicted in Figures 19; Figure 20 depicts results by age group. Another rewarding result was the answer as to whether the participants were happy with the state of teen media today. Seventy-three percent of the participants (with seven percent of that group feeling strongly) said that they were not happy at all with teen media in its current state.

New Teen Film Model?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 19: Would the Participant Prefer the New Teen Film Model?

The crown jewel of the questions was whether any of the females wanted to see more independent female teenagers lead media, whether it be cinema, Internet media, or the television. This was a very overwhelming result with ninety-three of the participants saying that they would greatly enjoy this shift in the mediascape. Only one of the participants admitted she had no
opinion towards female representation in media though she did not elaborate. Although the specific questions regarding the films did not please me as much as I hoped that they would, the rest of the questions did make me feel accomplished. There is clearly more work to be done in media effects with young teen audiences. These results are depicted in Figure 21; Figure 22 depicts results by age group.

The last questions I asked were regarding the participants’ futures. All the answers to this pleased me greatly since it showcased a strong streak of independence. None of the participants mentioned starting a family or abandoning any kind of dreams for a nuclear family ideal. The closest “traditional” answer was of one particularly religious participant who said if she did not go to college, she would go on a religious mission. However, this mission appears to be a personal ambition of the participant. Therefore, it fulfills her independent need of helping others through religion. Otherwise, all the participants either noted that they hoped to be independent and have their own careers in five years or they stated that they would be in college. One participant even specifically mentioned she did “not want to be pregnant” in five years, which was a hilarious, poignant, and honest answer.
The last question asked the participants if they felt that media perceptions made them feel any differently as to how they felt about their futures. This was also evenly split in votes. However, the ones that said that media did influence how they felt towards their futures referenced specific characters in media as role models to their own careers. Leslie Knope was a referenced model for adulthood amongst one of the participants. Leslie Knope is a character in the adult comedy show, *Parks and Recreation* (2009). Leslie has her own career and a non-existent love life through most of the series. This answer was nice to hear, that an independent woman like that was a reference to someone’s future. However, I only hope that such references can be built much younger in the cinemascpe or television scope of media. I wish someone could say Hannah Montana inspired her because she always stood up for herself. Instead, what seem to attract the younger participants are stories of homosocial aggression, such as in *Pretty Little Liars*. Once of the most enlightening answers I read was from one of the older participants. As a response to the questions, the participant said they did not realize “what teen media was when I was a teenager…and now I realize how damaging the films and shows I watched then are.”
REFLECTIONS

In this chapter, I will reflect on the various aspects of actually making my short film. At the end of the day, this project was a selfish one out of my own artistic ambitions. Trying to explain why I handled the narrative and filmmaking decisions a certain way would help put such decisions in perspective.

Pre-Production Reflection

As previously stated in this paper, I was always drawn towards a more provocative story in teen cinema. Since I did not have a happy childhood or teenage life, I believe this stems from identifying with darker incarnations of teenagers. I could relate to the misfit who wanted to kill herself. I could relate to toxic relationships. I could relate to encountering many adult situations at a very young age. I wanted to depict a positive portrayal of one of these situations with “Little Girls,” and that was shown through my attempt of the shooting script. This was the most selfish part of the filmmaking process because I wanted to make a film I could relate to as a teen. What I did not think about was whether my perfect teen film would translate well to the quintessential positive teen film I wanted to make.

If I were to do something differently, I would have done more research in the pre-production process. I would have conducted interviews with young teenagers and see what they would have liked to see on screen and then try and make that my own. I forgot that I was twenty-one when I wrote this short film – not sixteen. Although five years have passed, many things about teen media and teenagers have changed. A lot more of them have smartphones now. I did not get my first smartphone until I was eighteen. Miley Cyrus came and went as a teen queen – a phase I even missed out on as a teenager. I do not even know who is the current face of the
Disney Channel. I should have been more in touch with the generation I wanted to target to try and write a more relevant film to their interests.

Other than writing the film, the most important thing I had to do during the pre-production process was choose the cast and crew of my short film. These five individuals would be the closest people to me, ensuring my vision and goals to the best of their ability. The first person I sought out was a director of photography. My first choice was Geoff Levy, a fellow classmate of mine whose work I greatly admired. Geoff is excellent in shot composition, colors, and interesting imagery, which all I felt was essential to my short film. I remember one of the first questions I ever asked Geoff was, “Are you sure you can help me make a film that young girls can relate to?” He laughed and said, “Well, I have a seventeen year old sister who is a lesbian that I worry about every day so yeah, I think I can try and figure it out.” I was sold after that conversation. In the past year, Geoff has been paramount in aiding my creative vision. My primary goal concerned the narrative. Regardless of that intention, I am more than happy with how my short film actually looks.

The next person I had to find was my Lizzie, the main actress. Her storyline was the whole reason for this project. Finding an actor to discuss the role with months in advance was my ideal situation. My perfect vision of Lizzie was a pixie, blond character since that image went against the norm for “bad girls.” Usually, blonds in teen films are pure characters, but I wanted to sully that image of the cute, adorable blond girl next door. I found an actress for the part through a mutual friend, and she seemed to be completely on board for all the content in the film. There is a scene in my short film where Bambi and Lizzie kiss as a sign of solidarity to one
another. This is a scene I refused to compromise with, but the actress assured me she was enthused as well as compliant with all the content in the film at least six months in advance.

Once my actor was cast as Lizzie, I solidified my producer role and my other acting roles. I co-produced the short film since I work very closely to all aspects of my filmmaking, but I did employ a second brain to help me out through the whole process. It was imperative that this person was a female and one I could relate to. She had to understand where the narrative was coming from; she had to understand my creative vision; she had to step in for me if there was a decision to be made and I was not readily available. This perfect person came in the form of Erica Serio, a classmate of mine. I modeled a lot of Bambi’s appearance in my head from Erica whom dresses in the most grunge-chic fashion in the world. We hold a lot of the same interests in music, movies, and television; once she read a script, she was completely on board. Throughout the filmmaking process and to this day, Erica is my knight in shining armor. She completely gets what I was trying to do, which is the best thing any producer can do.

The last important crew role worth mentioning is the one filled by my best friend, James Reynolds. He was the only person I discussed my script with during the writing process, and he was the first person to volunteer to do anything on my film. James is also one of the best actors I know so I enlisted him as both my editor and the actor for my antagonist, Daniel. James is the other half of my head, and he completely understood the inspiration and role of Daniel within the narrative. In the post-production process, James and I have been cutting and re-cutting to create the perfect version of my short film that would relay the message I want it to. As of April of 2013, I do not think we are anywhere near that perfect version, especially given the results of the study. But I have all the faith in the world that he and I will get there.
The last bit of pre-production reflection would fall on the casting of my two actresses. As aforementioned, I cast Lizzie very early on in the process. Once I had my main crew positions filled, I cast Bambi. Tatiana Paris took on the role. Throughout the production process, Tatiana asked me a million questions about Bambi’s background and motivations in the narrative. I loved this. She embodied Bambi – an emotional wreck of a character to play – and did it wonderfully since it was such a fragile mindset to inhabit. I could not be more proud of her. After months of rehearsing Lizzie’s actress and Tatiana, shooting for the film would begin on the first weekend of November 2012. Something came up about three days before filming started.

I received a call from Lizzie’s actress. She told me that after much discussion with her mother, she wanted the kiss between Lizzie and Bambi written out. I was appalled. I had discussed the reasoning behind the kiss six months beforehand. Now, three days before shooting was set to begin, my actress was threatening to leave if I did not change an event in my narrative. I mention this because it is a perfect example of the norms in society. This kiss was not written in the narrative to be gratuitous – it was a celebration of the friendship between two young women. Suddenly, my film is viewed as “too lesbian” for an actor’s mother. This same actress was on board with appearing next to nude with a male, but a kiss between two females at a poolside was too intense. I managed to replace Lizzie with actress, Croix Provence, and she did better than I think anyone could have done with the role. Yet, to this day, the conundrum presented to Lizzie’s original actress bothers me and incensed me even more to make my film the way I wanted it. The double standard as to what is acceptable in female sexuality is ludicrous, and I want my film to be one of many that would help subvert the norm.
**Production Reflection**

Actually making the film was one of the easier parts of this entire study. It was a lot of hard and collaborative work. Yet, I do not know how it could have gone any better. On the first day, we shot a lot of scenes involving the female characters building their relationship. The next three days were spent at New Smyrna Beach, Florida where we utilized their shores as the crux of most of the narrative. The party takes place at the beach; the confrontations take place at the beach; the beginning and ending of the film were to be done at the beach. It was a pain to commute back and forth to Orlando, but it was my choice in the narrative to do that. The beach symbolizes freedom to me, and I planned the shoot dates intricately so it worked well.

I had to reshoot the ending of the film in January 2013 because there were camera issues when we first shot the ending. Otherwise, there would have been nothing I would have changed about the actual stage of production in my film. I had an excellent extended crew that showed up every day with enthusiasm and vigor to help me make my film. If anything, making this film was my proudest moment as a filmmaker because it relied on so many people believing in my vision. In my previous films, I kept the crew as minimal as possible because I did not really trust anyone with helping me attain my goals. I am glad I took that risk for this film. It needed as many voices as possible on board.

**Post-Production Reflection**

Most of my frustrations are now left in editing what I can with the footage I have. Some of my frustrations, including how many of the younger participants thought my film was too provocative, will not be able to be fixed for this short film. I cannot change anything about the actual narrative I wrote now. I cannot tone down the content, and I cannot change the ending
drastically. But I believe there will be a way I can depict the portrayal of Lizzie’s plight more positively through more editing revisions and perhaps with the use of a voiceover. There are a lot of things I can play around with, and I am confident that James and I will figure something out by the end of the summer.

What making my film and doing this study has taught me the most is that the audience’s voice is the one that matters. It is something I forgot about constantly in the pre-production process although I was fully aware of my study’s goals. I acted selfishly for a lot of the production process as well until everything was over, and I had to cut from the footage already shot. If I had kept my young audience in mind more when I was writing or shooting the film, perhaps it would be more relatable to the younger participants. Maybe they would not find it so dark. Perhaps I should have included more information of the characters’ roles at their high school. I ignored that whole construct because I wanted to play around with ambiguity as to how old they were, what were their pursuits in school, et cetera. It is very likely that this construct is what makes teen cinema relatable to the younger participants. I want to be a filmmaker that empowers women and makes films that inspires them to be the best person they can be. Film has done this for me before I was even aware of it. If I can do the same for one other young female, then I believe I have achieved my overall goal as a filmmaker.
CONCLUSION

Conducting this study has honestly surprised me. To begin with, I selfishly hoped that I was successful in my hypothesis. I wanted my film to be the favorite; I wanted the younger participants to have more self-awareness in the media they consumed. Instead, my film seemed to be just as harmful as many of the types of media I critiqued. The characters did not seem strong enough for some participants or others found the material to be too edgy. My own perspective of what I liked to view as a teenager might have clouded my judgment too much to make a teen short film objectively enough. “Cat’s Bad Hair Day” seemed the most relatable to younger participants because it dealt with the awkward transition of middle school. My own film jumped right into delinquency in youth with drug use and promiscuity. Both of these narratives are as valid as the other; they are just extraordinarily different. Granted, all three films were short films, which grants a lot less time with a character and story space. However, this does not excuse any of the narratives – a strong story is a strong story.

I am about to enter grad school for film, and the prospect of furthering my study greatly appeals to me. I am not sure if I would make “Little Girls” the feature film given the pros and cons. To secure funding for the film, I have a short film to market to investors. However, I want to write films to make female representations more realistic and independent – not continue to set them back like much of the media already does. Since this current study did not favor my short film, it leaves me hesitant to use a failed product as a marketing devise. Nevertheless, the information I reaped from the participants will assist me in the future in writing better female-centric narratives.
My biggest regret in this study is not being able to find a more diverse research group. I wanted a homosexual and bisexual representation in my demographics. I wanted more minorities. I wanted more participants, and I wanted to get more specifics as per their socioeconomic backgrounds. Given the time frame and the kind of study it is, securing all of these factors was extremely difficult. Getting underage participants is extraordinarily cumbersome due to age restriction issues – more than I expected. If someone asked me what I liked when I was a teenager, I would merely give my opinion and move on. Actually securing underage participants’ opinions for the films was a daunting process due to the permissions needed. However, I completely understood why all these permission blocks were needed because of the one participant who wanted to stop because she was not prepared for the media being shown. It was surprising because I was not raised in a strict household. Yet, some families hold traditional ideals to their children. If I had not obtained permission for the young participant to be in the study, I can only imagine what kind of mess that would rise with ethics in research studies. If I were able to repeat this study again, I would definitely take about three times as much time carefully selecting the participants.

The most important lesson I have learned is how subjective teen media narrative truly is. All three short films were written with certain intentions in mind. I wanted to write a forward-thinking piece of female teen independence, and many of the participants felt the complete opposite upon viewing the short film. On that note, then all media is subjective. Therefore, maybe John Hughes did not intend to write such restrictive narratives on females. There is no doubt a precedent in teen cinema regarding stereotypes, female representation, and inequality in gender roles. Yet, would it be fair to lambast every narrative with a romantic story line? Would it
be fair to disregard strong male narratives because no females are present? I assumed the issue of
teen media and gender representation would be more cut and dry; it is not in the slightest.

What I would love to follow up on in this study would be where the participants will be five years from now. Will the female who was so adamant on not getting pregnant actually end up pregnant? Will the younger participants discover less mainstream media that then changes their tastes? Personally, my taste in films and media changed drastically from ages sixteen to twenty-one. The same could very well happen for these teen participants. However, the teen audience at this very instance is the most important voice to consider. Teenagers are highly impressionable. The landmark made on a young female at twenty-one would probably not be as strong as the young female who experiences the same situation at sixteen. Therefore, it is near irrelevant to know what happens in the futures of these participants. Curiosity does hold the better of me all the while, and I am intrigued to see if their opinions would change.

What I hope my study does is help other filmmakers and artists accept a social responsibility with their art. I know art is a personal matter, but I believe that becomes mostly invalidated once shared with others. I do not expect all artists to make personal sacrifices to be more accessible to a certain audience. But if someone were writing a teen film for a mainstream audience, I would hope they consider the messages they send to their impressionable audience. Media does not cause school shootings or genocide or murders, but it strongly shapes perceptions of the world we live in. If one teen film helps young men respect young women at an earlier age, maybe rape culture would not be such a divisive issue when discussed. If one teen film helps a young woman cope with her depression, then that one teen film is making the difference. That is what I hope to do. I most certainly want to be selfish with the art I make. With
“Little Girls,” I probably was more selfish than objective. Yet, I have a responsibility as an artist and as a young woman to try and send a positive voice to my fellow women and young viewers. I can only hope that with time, especially in grad school, one of my films will be successful in its goal. Then, a little girl watching the movie at home, at school, or at a theater will feel less alone and accepted in this world.
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER
Approval of Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA0000351, IRB0001139

To: Andrew K. Gay and Co-PI: Madlin Santiago

Date: March 25, 2013

Dear Researchers:

On 3/25/2013, the IRB approved the following human participant research until 3/24/2014 inclusive:

Type of Review: UCF Initial Review Submission Form
Project Title: Little Women: Study of Female Representation in Teen Films and How Those Perceptions Affect Gender Politics
Investigator: Andrew K. Gay
IRB Number: SBE 13-09152
Funding Agency: Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR)
Grant Title: UCF Student Research Grant
Research ID: N/A

The scientific merit of the research was considered during the IRB review. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted 30 days prior to the expiration date for studies that were previously expedited, and 60 days prior to the expiration date for research that was previously reviewed at a convened meeting. Do not make changes to the study (i.e., protocol, methodology, consent form, personnel, site, etc.) before obtaining IRB approval. A Modification Form cannot be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at https://iris.research.ucf.edu.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 3/24/2014, approval of this research expires on that date. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in IRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. The new form supersedes all previous versions, which are now invalid for further use. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Participants or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Drejzelewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Marzorati on 03/25/2013 12:21:09 PM EST
APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE OF PRE-SURVEY
1. What is your age?
    15

2. What is your race? Mark one or more.
   - White
   - Black or African American
   - Asian
   - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   - American Indian or Alaska Native
   - Hispanic/Latino
   - Other

3. What is your sexual orientation?
   - Heterosexual
   - Bisexual
   - Homosexual

4. What high school did you attend?
   
   Hagerty High School

5. What college did you attend or are you attending? What was/will be your major? Explain if college is/was not an option and why.
   
   Pampeu Fabra University, major in International Law. College is an option because I want to be able to support myself.

6. How often do you view media a day? This includes television, YouTube or similar websites, and cinema.
   
   I use computers a lot in my newspaper class, and I text several times a day. I don't watch TV & I see a movie once a month sometimes. Constantly check emails, sometimes scroll down Twitter or Instagram.
7. How often do you watch a movie at a theater?

Sometimes once a month, sometimes not even that.

8. What is your favorite type of media? This can be everything from a web series to a television show to a film. Please give specific examples.

Favorite television show, when I do watch TV, is Pretty Little Liars.

9. I feel like I am represented in media.
   - [ ] Strongly agree
   - [x] Agree
   - [ ] Disagree
   - [ ] Strongly disagree

10. I have a problem with how my demographic (age & gender group) is represented in media.
    - [ ] Strongly agree
    - [ ] Agree
    - [x] Disagree
    - [ ] Strongly disagree
APPENDIX C: EXAMPLE OF POST-SURVEY
May@knights.ucf.edu

1. Which film was your favorite? If possible, please explain why.
   - Safety First: http://vimeo.com/25302344
   - Little Girls: http://vimeo.com/59859953
   - Cat's Bad Hair Day: http://vimeo.com/30128643
   Why?
   I liked how the girl's friend stuck up for her and defended her against her boyfriend. She was strong and tried to make sure she didn't get hurt.

2. Which film did you most have a problem with? Please explain why.
   - Safety First
   - Little Girls
   - Cat's Bad Hair Day
   - Why?
   I think the girl Alicia was too insecure about herself and didn't know what she was doing. Her friend was too young to be dressing the way she did & talking about having sex.

3. Do you feel like any of your past or present experiences were represented on screen? If they were, did you find them accurate?
   - Yes
   - No
   If yes, were they accurate?
   How?

4. Have any of these films had an emotional impact on you? Do you feel any less or more secure of yourself afterwards?
   - Yes
   - No
   Can you please explain?
   I think it proves the point that there are dangerous & abusive men that you have to watch out for & be able to stand up for yourself or get away.
5. I would like to see more teen films follow the model of any of the films I saw today.
   ○ Strongly agree
   ○ Agree
   ○ Disagree
   ○ Strongly disagree

6. I am happy with what is the state of teen media today.
   ○ Strongly agree
   ○ Agree
   ○ Disagree
   ○ Strongly disagree

7. I believe more independent females should lead teen media, no matter the medium.
   ○ Strongly agree
   ○ Agree
   ○ Disagree
   ○ Strongly disagree

8. Where do you see yourself in five years?

   I want to be in college focusing on being able to have a career

   Where do you see yourself in five years?

9. Has media impacted any of your visions regarding the question above? Please be as specific as possible with examples.
   ○ Yes
   ○ No
   ○ Explain why.

   I've seen women who are focused & become successful on TV & I've also seen girls who get pregnant or screw up their lives in some way & it makes me want to avoid doing something stupid like that
REFERENCES


*Baby Take a Bow.* Dir. Harry Lachman. Perf. Shirley Temple and James Dunn. Fox Film, 1934. DVD.


Bryant, Jennings, and Mary Beth. Oliver. "Growing Up with Television: Cultivation


