

NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

Study finds 'ratings creep'

Movie ratings categories contain more violence, sex, profanity than decade ago

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Violence, sex, and profanity increased significantly in movies between 1992 and 2003, according to a study by researchers from the Kids Risk Project at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH). Kimberly Thompson, associate professor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at HSPH and director of the Kids Risk Project, said, "The findings demonstrate that ratings creep has occurred over the last decade and that today's movies contain significantly more violence, sex, and profanity on average than movies of the same rating a decade ago."

The researchers developed a database that included movie ratings and rating reasons obtained from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) (<http://www.MPAA.org>) and information about movie content from two independent resources, Kids-in-Mind (www.kids-in-mind.com) and Screen It! (www.screenit.com). They then assessed the relationship between movie ratings and content and trends for films released between Jan. 1, 1992, and Dec. 31, 2003.

Thompson and co-author Fumie Yokota, formerly a researcher at HSPH, found a significant increase of violence, sex, and profanity in films over the 11-year period, suggesting that the MPAA became increasingly more lenient in assigning its age-based movie ratings. Their results suggest that the overall increase arose largely from increases in violent content in films rated PG and PG-13, increases in sexual content in films rated PG, PG-13, and R, and increases in profanity in films rated PG-13 and R. They emphasize that while this 10-year period represents recent experience, it does not represent the full timescale of all films.

Comparing the amount of violence in nonanimated and animated G-rated films, the authors found a significantly higher amount of violence in animated films than in nonanimated films. Thompson added, "Given the possibility of long-term fear and anxieties from children's exposure to media, physicians should

discuss media consumption with parents of young children and the fact that animation does not guarantee appropriate content for children.”

The MPAA provides voluntary age-based ratings and non-standardized, descriptive rating reasons intended to inform the public about the reasons a film has received a particular rating. Thompson and Yokota found the number of MPAA rating reasons assigned had increased on average with higher age-based ratings, but the study concluded that the lack of standardization of the MPAA rating reasons prohibits their use in correlating the amount or types of content with specific rating reasons. This study also finds large amounts of profanity in R-rated films and some evidence that the current age-based rating categories are more lenient about allowing violent content than sexual content.

With respect to information about the depiction of substances, the MPAA did not indicate smoking as a rating reason for any of the movies in the database, although 79 percent of the films included some depiction related to smoking. The MPAA mentioned alcohol or drugs in its rating reason for 18 percent of films, while 93 percent of films included depiction or use of tobacco, alcohol, and/or drugs, including 26 of the 51 G-rated films (51 percent). Only 5 percent of films contained no depictions of tobacco, alcohol, or drugs. Thompson added, “The findings clearly suggest the need for increased parental awareness about the prevalence of depiction of substance use in films, often in ways that normalize or glamorize their use, even if the amount of depiction in some rating categories continues to decline.”

In the first-ever attempt to correlate movie content with reported revenues, the study found significantly higher gross revenues for PG-13 and R rated films that received an MPAA rating reason only for violence compared with those films that did not. However, the authors suggest that looking at a crude measure of profit (revenues minus budget) for R-rated films showed better performance by movies that received only MPAA rating reasons for sex and profanity.

Thompson, who is also director of research at the Center on Media and Child Health at Children’s Hospital Boston, said, “It’s time for a significant research effort to explore the development and creation of a universal media rating system. A single system would provide the simplest tool for parents, if one can be designed and effectively implemented, and it promises greater clarity and transparency in media rating information.” She added, “The convergence of media and cross-marketing issues presents major challenges to parents and rating boards, and the industry needs to lead the effort to bring its rating system into the new integrated media environment.”

Several recent examples of cross-media marketing include “The Chronicles of Riddick” (PG-13 rated film) and “The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay” (M-rated video game); “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation” (TV 14 television program, DVD of collected televised episodes not rated, and M-rated video game); “Spiderman 2” (PG-13 rated movie, T-rated console video games, and E-rated PC and hand-held games) and “Shrek 2” (PG rated movie, E-rated computer game).

Thompson concluded, “Parents and physicians should be aware that movies with the same rating can differ significantly in the amount and types of potentially objectionable content. Age-based ratings alone do not provide good information about the depiction of violence, sex, profanity, and other content, and the criteria for rating movies became less stringent over the last decade. The MPAA rating reasons provide important

information about content, but they do not identify all types of content found in films and they may particularly miss the depiction of substances.”