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Portrayals of Relational Aggression in Popular Teen Movies: 1980-2009

Halie Foell Stout

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Portrayals of Relational Aggression in Popular Teen Movies: 1980-2009

Halie Foell Stout

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Master of Arts

The media is littered with various portrayals of aggression. This aggression has been shown to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent behaviors of its viewers (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Relational aggression is a newer concern for researchers and has become more prevalent in recent research. Relational aggression is prevalent in the lives of adolescents. Using social cognitive theory (Bandura 2002), information processing theory (Huesmann, 1988), and the general aggression model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) to justify how adolescents might be developing these relationally aggressive behaviors, this study seeks to expand the literature by evaluating the portrayals of relational aggression in popular teen movies; a genre primarily watched by adolescents.

This thesis is a content analysis of the top 30 grossing teen movies for the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s for a total of 90 movies. The study examines three types of relational aggression—direct, indirect, and nonverbal. The following variables were coded for each act of relational aggression: initiator and victim age, gender, sociometrics, attractiveness, SES, and role, their relationship to each other, the context, humor, and consequence of the act of relational aggression.

Analysis revealed that relational aggression is extremely prevalent (94.4%) in teen movies. Direct relational aggression is more prevalent in teen movies than both indirect and nonverbal relational aggression. Results indicate that females are portrayed as the primary initiators of relational aggression in teen films. Initiators and victims of relational aggression are primarily portrayed as characters of average attractiveness, average popularity, and as having middle class incomes. Acts of relational aggression are portrayed as not justified and not humorous. However, acts of relational aggression were portrayed as rewarded. No significant differences across decade were found for amount of relational aggression shown or for what type of relational aggression was portrayed. Results showed there were more male aggressors in the 1980s than expected and more female aggressors in the 2000s than expected.

Keywords: relational aggression, teen movies, aggression, social aggression, indirect aggression, mean girls



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## CHAPTER 1

**Introduction**

*“I am asking you to help him. If you don’t I’ll leave you. I’ll find work. I’ll do whatever it takes to get away from here. I’ll live in a tree to get away from you. Don’t you think I won’t.”* (October Sky, 1999)

*“The white zone is for cool people only, no geeks.”* (Cinderella Story, 2004)

*“If you break any of these rules, you can’t sit with us at lunch.”* (Mean Girls, 2004)

Coined by the popular teen movie, “mean girls” is a familiar term used to describe girls who bully, gossip, socially exclude, and use coercive tactics to get what they want. Empirical research describes this “mean girl” phenomenon as indirect, social, or relational aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Willer & Cupach, 2008). This covert type of aggression may start with innocent frustrations expressed by “you are not invited to my birthday party;” however, as children get older, this can turn into harmful aggressive behaviors.

Aggression can be displayed physically, verbally, and relationally. Any behaviors or actions taken towards another person that are intended to cause harm to someone who does not want to be harmed are termed aggressive (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995, Rohner, 1976). Physical aggression deals with harming or causing physical damage to another and verbal aggression deals with overt attempts to psychologically harm another. These types of aggression are extremely direct. However, there are also other aggressive acts that intend to harm individuals and relationships that are more indirect.

Indirect aggression has various definitions and has also been termed relational or social (Underwood, 2003) aggression. This type of aggression is often used and viewed as way to harm

others without them knowing, and is much less confrontational than physical aggression (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Relational aggression and social aggression are more concerned with harming relationships or social standings of individuals whether overt or covert (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2004). In an analysis of the terms Archer and Coyne (2005) determined that the sex differences, actions involved, consequences and the development of indirect, relational, and social aggression have few differences from one another.

Although the term indirect aggression is most commonly used in research and the terms are often interchangeable, relational aggression is the most useful term for the current research. This study is strictly focused on damage of relationships or social status through overt or covert forms of aggression. The term indirect aggression does not fully encompass the overt forms of aggression that are used to destroy relationships. Therefore, the term relational aggression will be used throughout the remainder of this paper due to the nature of this research study.

Various fields of research study how people develop aggressive behaviors. Media effects research focuses on how the media influences attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors concerning aggression. Mass media are littered with all forms of aggression. Physical and verbal aggression are especially apparent in television, film, and video games because of the direct nature of the behaviors. Research has confirmed and publicized that viewing aggressive behaviors can and do influence subsequent aggressive thoughts and behaviors (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). While relational aggression goes unnoticed by some audiences, researchers have pointed out its emergence in a range of media. Portrayals of relational aggression have been investigated in prime-time television shows (Feshbach, 2005; Glascock, 2008), popular British programs (Coyne & Archer, 2004), children's cartoons (Luther & Legg, 2010), Disney films (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008), teen films (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008), and reality television

programming (Coyne, Robinson, & Nelson, 2010).

As relational aggression has been more clearly identified and defined, researchers have pinpointed specific users of relationally aggressive behaviors. As relationships with others and social status become more important to children during pre-adolescence and adolescence, relational aggression becomes a more common form of harm to others than direct aggression. Both males and females use relational aggression at this age (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). Due to the potential harmful effects of relational aggression in real life, it is important to be informed where those behaviors and ideas are being cultivated.

The purpose of this study is to explore the portrayals of relational aggression in popular teen movies—a media enjoyed by large audiences of adolescents. As real life relational aggression has been seen to peak in adolescence (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992), portrayals of relational aggression may also be seen in this medium. The present study seeks to add to the empirical literature by focusing on a sample geared towards teen audiences and expand the analysis conducted by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008). The current study is a content analysis of the top 30 grossing teen movies of the past three decades and how relational aggression is portrayed. Research will be directed toward acts of relational aggression, demographics of aggressors and victims, and consequences, justifications, and humor of the behavior. Due to the media's ability to relate to viewers, contextual variables allow researchers to look at possible factors in the decision making process of subsequent aggressive behavior.

Information processing theory (Huesmann, 1988), social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2002), and the general aggression model (Bushman & Anderson, 2002) give insight into how portrayals of aggression are embedded into someone's values, beliefs and behaviors. As examinations of physical aggression show change in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, researchers

have also concluded that viewing direct or indirect aggression influences subsequent indirect responses (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2004). As these responses may be enacted in real life circumstances, media portrayals of relational aggression can ultimately be harmful to their audiences.

Chapter two of this thesis reviews empirical literature surrounding relational aggression—emphasizing definitions, prevalence of real life relational aggression, relational aggression in media contexts, effects of viewing on subsequent aggression, and the theoretical framework for this study. This chapter concludes with research questions and hypotheses for this research. Chapter three explains the quantitative methodology for this research including the media sample, coding scheme (with operational definitions), procedures and reliabilities. Chapter four reports the statistical results of the study, including analyses of posed research questions and hypotheses. Chapter five discusses the general research findings, conclusions and discussion surrounding the findings, possible implications of this research, limitations of the study, and ideas for future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Literature Review**

Crick and Grotpeter (1995) first defined relational aggression as “harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of ... relationships” (p. 711) including feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion (Crick et al., 1999). Simmons (2002) defined relational aggression as the act of “ignoring someone to punish them, excluding someone socially for revenge, using negative body language or facial expressions and sabotaging someone else’s relationships” (p. 21). Simply put, relational aggression is defined as the intent to harm a relationship or social status using direct, indirect, or non-verbal tactics. Overt relational aggression consists of excluding someone from a social group, blackmailing, etc. Covert relational aggression causes harm through talking behind someone’s back, gossiping, spreading rumors, ruining chances of romantic success, etc. Non-verbal relational aggression includes the silent treatment, rolling eyes, dirty looks, and other non-verbal gestures. These types of relational aggression are seen in actual relationships of all ages and genders and are prevalent in the media. Thus, it is important to investigate portrayals of relational aggression and its potential impact on media audiences.

### **Prevalence of Relational Aggression in Real Life**

**Age.** Aggression is a well-known universal way to express anger at any age. Kaukiainen et al. (1999) investigated how aggression is correlated with social intelligence. Researchers found that physical and verbal aggression were not correlated with social intelligence. This finding supports the claim that anyone of any age and gender can participate in physical and verbal types of aggression. On the other hand, relational aggression was significantly positively correlated with social intelligence in every age group (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). Thus, relational

aggression requires social competence and will emerge as social relationships develop—as children have greater maturity and concern in their relationships with others.

As friendships become more important and children are able to better understand manipulation, relational aggression begins to emerge on the playground. Studies have observed relational aggression in both preschool (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997; Nelson, Robinson, Hart, 2005) and elementary school settings (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Although relational aggression has been seen at young ages, the use of relational aggression depends on maturation and the existence of social networks that allow means for harming someone in that manner (Björkqvist et al., 1992). These social networks are more typical of pre-adolescent and adolescent relationships; as verbal and social skills are acquired, successful manipulation of peers is more accessible.

Adolescence is the most prevalent group studied in regards to relational aggression, however this type of aggression is also seen into adulthood. Nelson, Springer, Nelson, and Bean (2008) studied beliefs surrounding aggression reported by emerging adults. Results suggested that relational aggression is perceived to be *imperative* for the social functioning of this age group. The researchers pointed out that due to emerging adults becoming more self-reliant individuals “there may be times in which relationships are manipulated to achieve individualistic goals such as in competing for grades in a classroom, promotions in the workplace, or romantic partners in various social settings” (Nelson et al., 2008, p. 656). This change from adolescence to emerging adulthood parallels the identity development trend in the transition from childhood to adolescence. Individuals mature and develop new skills, which include more prosocial and more aggressive strategies. Different age groups possess different strategies for the use of aggression. Significant differences in the use of aggression among genders are also prevalent.

**Gender.** Historically people viewed men as more aggressive individuals than women.

Males have been recognized for engaging in more physical and verbal aggression than females, and have ultimately been described as the more aggressive gender. As research regarding relational aggression has increased, researchers have found that this claim does not hold up (Björkqvist, 1994). Although males do engage in relational aggression (Swearer, 2008; Tapper & Boulton, 2004; Tomada & Schneider, 1997), early research identified women as the main perpetrators of relational aggression (Björkqvist, 1994; Björkqvist et al. 1992; Côté, 2007; Crick et al., 1997; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Hess & Hagen, 2006; Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988; Österman et al., 1998; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004). Coyne, Archer, Eslea, and Liechty (2008) examined adolescent perceptions of relational aggression and found that “aggression by boys is still regarded as more justified than aggression by girls” (p. 581). This could be due to the stereotype and assumption that boys are more aggressive individuals. Nonetheless, research has shown that women consistently use covert aggressive behaviors and analyses should not overlook women’s aggression in favor of more visible forms of aggression displayed by men.

Both genders have been found to use covert aggressive behaviors as adults (Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1994). Archer (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of research regarding gender differences in aggression in a real world setting. This analysis revealed no great sex differences overall, however females aged 6-17 years showed an increase in relational aggression (Archer, 2004). Recent meta-analyses also confirm the trivial gender differences in relationally aggressive behavior (Card et al., 2008). However, this finding is contrary to most stereotypes.

As children develop their own gender identity around age three they acknowledge who they are in relation to other people and develop sex role stereotypes (Weinraub et al., 1984; Wood, 2007). These developing stereotypes facilitate gender specific behavior throughout life.

Although no gender differences are shown to exist, perceptions and stereotypes of relational aggression continue to reflect the trend that females are the primary participants (Giles & Heyman, 2005). Portrayals of relational aggression in the media paint a similar picture.

### **Prevalence of Relational Aggression in the Media**

Just as physical and verbal aggression have been shown to be prevalent in the media (Bushman & Anderson, 2001), similar findings have been reported regarding relational aggression. A limited number of content analyses have examined the prevalence of relational aggression in different forms of media geared towards children, adolescents, and adults.

**Television.** Coyne and Archer (2004) first examined how relational aggression is depicted in popular (determined by adolescents) British television programs. Relational aggression was found in 92% of all programs examined, which exceeded the appearance of physical (56%) and verbal (86%) aggression in the same shows (Coyne & Archer, 2004). Social exclusion (71.57%) was found to be the most prevalent act of relational aggression portrayed. Most often, acts of relational aggression were shown as justified; depicting peer approval and pleasure from a suffering victim (Coyne & Archer, 2004). Females were found to be common perpetrators of relational aggression in these popular television shows. Females were also more rewarded and less likely to be punished than males. Interestingly, males were found to be the most common victim of acts of relational aggression in the shows. Coyne and Archer found that compared to other aggressive acts, relational aggression was more perpetrated by attractive individuals. As expected, individuals in relationships, ex-relationships and friendships most often used relational aggression. One explanation for this is that relational aggression often has to do with manipulating relationships in order to achieve a personal goal (Willer & Cupach, 2008).

Feshbach (2005) investigated prime-time television content geared towards adolescents and young adults for physical, verbal, gestural, and relational aggression. This study coded relational aggression as excluding, ignoring, gossiping, and rejecting behaviors. She reported similar findings overall—females express more relational aggression than males in prime-time television (Feshbach, 2005). In addition, she concluded that relational aggression was portrayed as normative for females, especially in the half-hour long programs.

Glascok (2008) examined physical, verbal, and relational aggression on prime-time television and found verbal aggression to be the most prevalent. However, he reported relational aggression to be more prevalent than Coyne and Archer (2004) with 97.3% of all shows containing at least one act of relational aggression. This warrants the postulation that adult programming contains more relational aggression than teen programming. Glascok similarly found that females were more often involved in relational types of aggression as the initiator. In contrast, females were found to be the victim of relational aggression as well (Glascok, 2008). Congruent with relational aggression research, “in terms of sex roles, the portrayal of aggression on prime-time television seems somewhat realistic in that males were depicted as more physically aggressive, females more indirectly aggressive, and both sexes equally verbally aggressive” (Glascok, p. 278).

Recently, reality television programming in the UK was also examined for physical, verbal, and relational aggression (Coyne, Robinson, et al., 2010). This study compared both reality and non-reality programming. Overall, verbal aggression was most prevalent (55.8%), followed by relational (39.8%) and physical (4.3%) aggression. Reality programming accounted for more relational aggression than non-reality programming in this study. When accounting for

gender populations on television (more males than females), this study also found females as initiators of relational aggression more than expected (Coyne et al., 2010).

This study (Coyne et al., 2010) did not find any significant results regarding justification of relational aggression. As a whole, aggression was portrayed as having few consequences. However, when interactivity of a show (i.e. audience participating by vote) was taken into account, relational aggression “was less likely to be shown as justified, but more likely to be shown as rewarded. This communicates a mixed message to the viewer that the aggression, although not right, will be rewarded in the end.” (Coyne et al., 2010, p. 295). Thus, reality programs present a negative view of relational aggression and its consequences. Since reality television is cheaper to produce and is becoming much more prevalent in the mainstream media, audiences are viewing a skewed version of realistic aggression.

Luther and Legg (2010) examined gender differences of physical and relational aggression in American cartoons. This investigation of children’s television programming reported male characters perpetrating 76.9% of the physical acts of aggression and females perpetrating 62.8% of the relational acts of aggression (Luther & Legg, 2010); again supporting aggression gender stereotypes. Males were found to be the primary victims of both physical and relational aggression. Children and teens were portrayed as the initiators and victims of aggression more than the adults in both physical and relational aggression. This supports the notion that aggression is more prevalent during adolescence than adulthood. This study reported that in most cases consequences were not apparent (Luther & Legg, 2010).

**Film.** Another analysis (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008) of children’s media observed the portrayals of relational aggression in animated Disney films. This analysis confirmed that film programming for children contains similar amounts of relational aggression as television

programming aimed at adolescents and adults (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). While there were similar results in the amount of relational aggression in Disney films, there were other findings that contradicted Coyne and Archer's (2004) analysis of popular television programs. Two differences were found: (1) no significant gender differences were found in the overall uses of relational aggression, and (2) relational aggression was portrayed as unjustified by "bad" characters.

Similar to other studies, "social exclusion was the most frequent type of indirect aggression portrayed, followed by indirect/physical, malicious humor, and finally by guilt induction" (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008, p. 391). Although no significant sex differences were apparent, males did engage in more malicious humor than females, and females used more guilt induction than males (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). Sex differences may not emerge in this type of media because children often engage in less relational aggression than adolescents. While relational aggression was portrayed as unjustified, social exclusion was more likely to be shown as justified than not. Coyne and Whitehead concluded that Disney films portrayed a better message to children regarding relational aggression than television. These differences in findings may be attributed to the audience (age group) of Disney films.

Cecil (2008) conducted an ethnographic content analysis of relational aggression in film. This study examined five movies where the plot revolves around relational aggression. This study reports that generally white, middle to upper class females were the main participants in relational aggression. Also, themes emerged that parallel real life relational aggression and other media portrayals of relational aggression. One quite obvious theme was that relational aggression is used inside and outside of group systems. A second theme present was a "mean girl" is

excluded from her group and eventually confronts her former friends (Cecil, 2008). This is a good outcome, however, it may not be seen as often in real life.

The final two themes represent the dangers of relational aggression for victims. In these movies girls put up with relational aggression in order to be accepted. In order to maintain a position in a group, a victim will endure relational aggression, no matter how cruel (Cecil, 2008). This inability to remove one self from a situation may cause damage to the victim. In addition, adults provide no support for characters experiencing harm. The common misconception of “girls are just being girls” reveals adults’ inability or unwillingness to help the victims (Cecil, 2008). This presents a huge dilemma for victims of relational aggression—feeling helpless in changing their situation. These same behaviors from victims and adults seen in the media are also true in real life (Bright, 2005).

Finally, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) conducted an exploratory content analysis on relational aggression in 20 teen movies from 1995 to 2005. This study explored socially cooperative and aggressive behaviors and their consequences. Relational aggression included behaviors such as gossiping, backstabbing, humiliating others, and excluding others. This study found that females more likely engaged in relational aggression than males and that there were no gender differences in socially cooperative behaviors (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). Behm-Morawitz and Mastro also found that females were more likely to be rewarded for relationally aggressive behaviors than males.

These researchers conducted a second exploratory study that investigated college students’ teen movie-viewing habits and their beliefs about gender-related behaviors (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). This study surveyed college students about their viewing habits of

teen movies, their affinity and liking with the movies and characters, and their emotions about female and male friendships. Results indicated that,

The longstanding picture of the “cloyingly sweet and kind” girl presented in the media 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. (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008, p. 141)

Illustrating that relationally and socially aggressive media may have an influence on perceptions of aggression. This also demonstrates the difference between stereotypes of relational aggression and real life relational aggression.

These media portrayals of relational aggression are vast and are continuing to litter the viewing worlds of adolescents. As shown by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) and other research explored in this paper further, the viewing and imitations of relational aggression have been shown to have various effects on beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of subsequent aggression.

### **Experiments and Effects**

Bushman and Anderson’s (2001) meta-analysis of the aggression literature is evidence of physical violence in the media impacting viewer’s aggressive behaviors. Can viewing indirect or relational aggression in the media influence aggressive behavior? Studies addressing perceived similarity (Potter, 1988) and affinity with characters (Greenwood, 2007) demonstrate that there is a connection between media viewing and behavior. One study concluded that individuals who have a desire to be like a female action hero is more important than what they have in common (Greenwood, 2007). In addition, “increased idealization of an action hero’s behavior is most robustly associated with increased aggressive behavior and feelings” (p. 730). As viewers seek to

identify with and desire to attain the certain status of familiar characters, aggressive behavior might be more easily transferred into scripts used in real life.

Ostrov, Gentile, and Crick (2006) conducted a longitudinal study to evaluate the relationship between media exposure, aggression, and prosocial behavior. Research generally focuses on adolescent media use and aggressive behavior. Conversely, this study is looking at aggressive behaviors and media habits in younger children. Results confirmed that television exposure is related to subsequent physical and relational aggression (Ostrov, Gentile, & Crick, 2006). The authors conclude that gender-related effects—females watched and used more relational aggression and males watched and used more physical aggression—were seen even when children were watching educational programming. Studies looking at causal connections have been even more telling.

Coyne, Archer, and Eslea (2004) examined whether or not children who view direct or indirect aggression would aggress indirectly after viewing the material if they were given the opportunity. The results of this experiment indicated that “viewing either direct or indirect aggression produced higher levels of subsequent indirectly aggressive responses, compared with the effect of viewing no-aggression” (Coyne et al., 2004, p. 248).

Coyne et al. (2004) suggest that information processing theory (Huesmann, 1988) and the activation of aggressive scripts support these results. This study found that even when physical and relational aggression scripts were activated, participants were likely to use those behaviors as a reaction to provocation; thus, supporting a cross-over effect. One limitation of this study is that only one form of aggression was offered as a response to provocation. However, with this limitation, the study still demonstrated that viewing indirect or relational aggression could influence attitudes, beliefs, values, and behavior.

Another study (Coyne & Archer, 2005) evaluated the relationship between media relational aggression and real life relational aggression using peer nominations and media viewing habits. Peers nominated each other regarding physically and relationally aggressive behavior. Then each participant indicated his or her five favorite television shows. The findings indicated that females watched and used more relational aggression and males watched and used more physical aggression. Furthermore, individuals who were nominated as relationally aggressive watched greater amounts of relational aggression on television (Coyne & Archer, 2005). Thus indicating that there is a relationship between viewing relational aggression and behaving aggressively. Further experimental studies demonstrate that relationship to a greater extent.

In order to support, expand, and improve the Coyne et al. (2004) study, Coyne and colleagues (2008) developed a similar experiment to allow for various types of aggressive behaviors after media exposure. To examine a crossover effect from relational and physical aggression media exposure to subsequent behavior there was an opportunity to aggress relationally and physically to provocation. They concluded, viewing any type of media aggression may increase subsequent aggressive behaviors in real life (Coyne et al., 2008). This examination found that viewing physical violence is associated with physically *and* relationally aggressive behaviors towards a confederate. Viewing relational aggression is also associated with more relationally *and* physically aggressive behaviors against a confederate (Coyne et al., 2008). As these studies show aggression's prevalence in the media and transferability from viewing to behavior, real world effects of relational aggression are in danger of escalating.

Relational aggression is important to understand because it does exist in the media and in real life. Aggression is often portrayed as "justified, rewarded, humorous, and portrayed by

attractive characters, all characteristics that have been shown to increase subsequent imitation by viewers (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961...)” (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008, p. 382). Similar findings (i.e. justified, rewarded, attractive characters) have also been found in regards to relational aggression. How does aggression in the media influence its viewers?

Experimental studies in lab and field settings have shown that the effects [of aggression in the media] are causal. Cross-sectional correlational studies have shown that exposure to media violence is linked to a wide array of aggressive and violent behaviors.

Longitudinal studies have linked early repeated violent television exposure to later aggressive and criminal behavior. (Bushman & Anderson, 2002, p. 1679)

Harm from relational aggression is just as significant as harm from physical and verbal aggression, especially if enacted in real life. Relational aggression in the media is also just as easily transferred into thoughts, values, attitudes, and behaviors as physical aggression.

Corresponding with general aggression research, information processing theory, social cognitive theory, and the General Aggression Model (GAM) allow a theoretical base for looking at relational aggression in the media.

### **Theory**

As with almost every developmental topic, temperament and environment both play a huge role in how people learn and behave. Individual differences allow each person to experience different effects from every experience in life. Theorists suggest that people learn through direct experience or through observational learning (watching others behave); however, they also acknowledge that individual differences can influence learning (Bandura, 2002; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Huesmann, 1988). The following theories examine possible explanations for media effects to violence, which can also be applied to relational aggression.

### **Information Processing Theory**

Huesmann (1988) presents an information-processing model of aggressive behavior that addresses how children develop aggressive habits. According to this model, people watch a model (person enacting a behavior) and remember or encode behaviors they observe (i.e. aggression). As a person continues to see persistent models, often times in various media, the behavior becomes more embedded in their memory. If the model behavior is also experienced in a viewer's real life, the likelihood of the behavior being encoded and rehearsed is greater. As audiences begin to relate to or compare themselves to the model, the model behavior may provide a cue as to appropriate behaviors to be enacted. The result is a linkage of scripts that emphasize aggressive responding. "If these scripts are rehearsed, their recall in the future will be more likely. If undampened, this cumulative learning process can build enduring schemas for aggressive behavior that persists into adulthood (Huesmann, 1988, p. 24).

Aggressive behaviors can and will be encoded by watching the media. This model emphasizes the media's ability to influence children's behaviors as they view and process aggression throughout childhood and adolescence. Previous processing encourages people react to certain situations by retrieving scripts, schemas, or memories, evaluate the behavior, and then act accordingly.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

In regards to media and aggression models are necessary. The assumption that it is impossible for everyone to learn every lesson there is to learn independently of each other results in the need to learn vicariously. Learning everything on your own would take an excessive amount of time and observational learning allows for more efficient learning of life lessons. Bandura (2002) suggests that there are four processes that govern observational learning: (1)

paying attention, (2) retention or frequency of attention, (3) enacting the retained, and (4) motivations to act. The media is an extremely efficient way for people to view a variety of model behaviors. Aggression is a behavior that has found to be transmitted from models to individual scripts and behaviors through various media (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).

As a behavior is rewarded and the viewer has commonalities with the model, the behavior is more likely to be imitated. For relational aggression, watching a rewarded behavior encourages the viewer to enact that behavior and come closer and closer to the behavior in order to get the same positive results. For example, if a viewer witnesses social exclusion being praised by other members of a social group, the viewer is encouraged to enact the same behavior to be praised by his or her social group. The motivational process is when the viewer weighs the costs, benefits, and social implications while evaluating whether or not he or she will enact the observed behavior. Individual media effects differ greatly due to agency; however, due to the excitement, rewards, justifications, humor, and other positive outcomes of violence portrayed in the media, viewers are likely to pay attention, retain, and enact aggressive behaviors they see.

Social cognitive theory assumes that models are necessary for the learning process. Two different circumstances may unfold when evaluating behavior from social learning. (1) Personal experiences may trump vicarious experience. If a person has good relationships with others, he or she will be less likely to harm the relationship for social gain. (2) The viewer may relate to the aggressive character portrayed in the media. The viewer will see the rewards of the action and evaluate if he or she wants to climb the social ladder using relational aggression to get there.

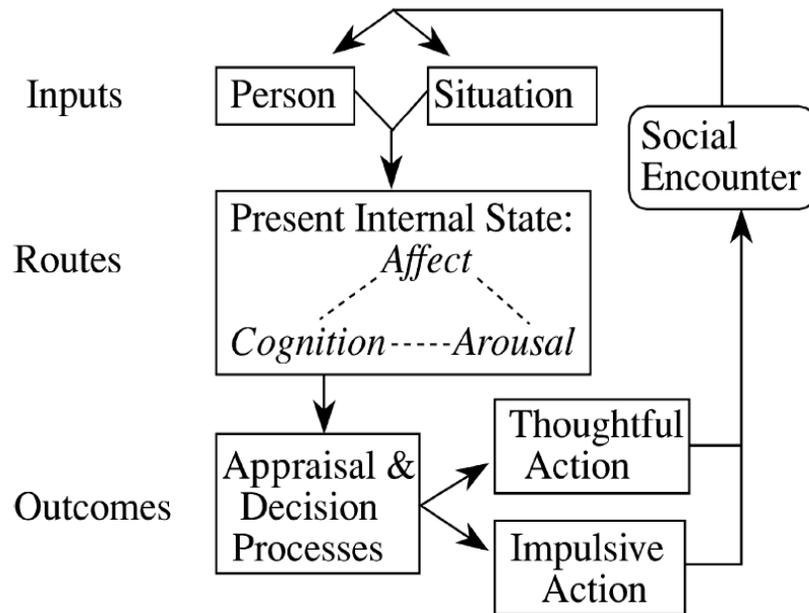
### **General Aggression Model (GAM)**

Anderson and Bushman's (2002) aggression model strengthens the argument of the media playing a role in developing aggressive behaviors. This model accounts for both

information processing theory and social cognitive theory playing a role in the development of aggressive behaviors. This model explains how exposure to *any* media aggression in *any* form may increase the possibility of subsequent aggressive behavior by viewers during short- and long-term durations (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). The GAM assumes a combination of temperamental (nature) and environmental (nurture) factors playing a part in the decision of an individual to act aggressively.

The short-term (single episode) model “suggests that recent exposure to violent media can cause short-term increases in aggression through its impact on a person’s present internal state, represented by cognitive, affective, and arousal variables” (Bushman & Anderson, 2002, p. 1680; See Fig. 1). The viewing of aggression (i.e. violent video games or watching relational aggression) primes scripts and schemas to create an aggressive emotional state (Bushman & Anderson, 2002). The individual still continues through the decision making process in how to act. However, if aggressive scripts are at the forefront of the mind, it is easier to enact what you are thinking about (impulsive action) rather than think through a more prosocial behavior (thoughtful action).

The multiple episode GAM proposes that repeated exposure to violent media influences the learning, rehearsal and reinforcement of aggression-related knowledge structures. These knowledge structures influence aggressive beliefs and attitudes, aggressive perceptual schemata, aggressive expectation schemata, aggressive behavior scripts, and aggression desensitization (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). In general the GAM confirms that violent media can manipulate the quantity of aggressive expectations a viewer might have after watching.



**Figure 1: The General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002)**

Coyne and Whitehead (2008) apply the GAM (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) to relational aggression asserting that when children are exposed to persistent amounts of relational aggression, they are more likely to develop scripts and use these behaviors in real life. The GAM accounts for possible negative effects when it comes to the learning and behaving aggressive scripts seen in the media. By adapting the GAM to account for viewing acts of relational aggression in the media, it is apparent that relational aggression can also be adapted into beliefs, expectations, and behaviors of the viewer.

As demonstrated, the GAM can be a useful theory when attempting to understand the relationship between exposure to relational aggression in the media and subsequent values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors regarding aggression. The various media portrayals of relational aggression may be a representation of the scripts and schemas that children and adolescents are adhering to while making decisions regarding their behavior. Significant exposure to aggressive media may lead to consumers becoming “more aggressive in outlook, perceptual biases,

attitudes, beliefs, and behavior than they were before the repeated exposure, or would have become without such exposure” (Anderson & Bushman, 2002, p. 42).

The GAM allows a theoretical framework to assume that high amounts of exposure to relational aggression may have a negative impact on subsequent aggressive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. This study will not test these theories; however, these theories will serve as justification for the current research. This study, hand in hand with other research, seeks to evaluate the amount of relational aggression that is available to audiences on a regular basis, and the possible messages teen movies might send to audiences.

### **Research Direction**

Research has shown that violence in the media is ever increasing and that violent behaviors are linked to viewing violent media (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Although physical and verbal aggression are the most easily identifiable, relational aggression is also prevalent throughout the media and in real life. This form of aggression can be just as harmful or more harmful than physical violence. Examples of social exclusion, gossiping, backbiting, stealing romantic partners, blackmail, trying to get others to dislike someone, dirty looks, and other relationally aggressive behaviors are common in the media and are likely to have various effects in real world relationships and social circles (Bright, 2005; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001).

The development of aggressive attitudes and behaviors starts when children are young and progress through adolescence. Because adolescents are more aware of relationships and seem to be the most at risk for using relational aggression, it advantageous to look further into portrayals of relational aggression in media geared towards that age group. The increase in portrayals of relational aggression in the media has many implications for adolescents who are

still figuring out what relationships are and how they work. Adolescents may gain a great amount of knowledge about relationships from the media, and if relational aggression continues to be portrayed as justified and rewarded, it is likely these actions will be repeated in similar real life social situations. Due to the implications of the GAM, it seems significant to evaluate the content of movies geared towards adolescents.

The purpose of this study is to further examine the content of media geared towards adolescents in regards to relational aggression. The present study seeks to expand Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's (2008) exploratory study investigating portrayals of relational aggression in teen movies. The current study expands the sample size (from 20 to 90 movies) and more clearly operationalizes variables beyond that of the previous study. The previous study only defines relational aggression in the four limited areas of gossiping, backstabbing, humiliating others, and excluding others. This study investigates direct, indirect, and nonverbal relational aggression and separates them into 16 subcategories. Other variables such as humor, context, and sociometrics, socio economic status, and attractiveness of the characters involved were also added to this research. This content analysis will allow for greater knowledge about what themes of relational aggression are being portrayed in the media for adolescents to observationally learn. Due to the nature of the sample the following research questions will be examined.

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What is the prevalence of relational aggression in teen movies?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What *type* of relational aggression is most prevalent in popular teen films?

This study will also examine contextual variables surrounding the act of relational aggression. Variables such as age, gender, attractiveness, sociometrics, socio economic status, justification of the act, and the consequences of the act will provide scenarios of which may influence adolescents or children to enact relational aggression. The theoretical framework of

this study demonstrates that similarities between characters and viewers may influence subsequent aggressive behaviors (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bandura, 2002; Huesmann, 1988); thus, examining characteristics of characters that may be similar to an adolescent audience is significant.

Media research has found females to be the primary perpetrators of relational aggression (Coyne & Archer, 2005; Coyne et al., 2010; Feshbach, 2005; Glascock, 2008; Luther & Legg, 2010) and they most often use indirect means of aggression. Thus, the following hypotheses were adopted in the present study.

H<sub>1</sub>: Female characters are predicted to be the primary initiators of relational aggression.

H<sub>2</sub>: Female aggressors will be portrayed as perpetrators of *indirect* relational aggression (as opposed to direct or non-verbal relational aggression) more than expected compared to males.

Scattered research surrounding attractiveness, sociometrics, and socio economic status of the relational aggressor has provided limited insight into how these characteristics are portrayed in the media. Some research indicates that attractive (Coyne & Archer, 2005) and wealthy characters (Cecil, 2008) are more involved in relational aggression than other characters. Findings are not conclusive; therefore, the following research question seeks to clarify mixed findings regarding these characteristics.

RQ<sub>3</sub>: What are the primary characteristics of initiators of relational aggression?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What are the primary characteristics of victims of relational aggression?

Research investigating portrayals of relational aggression in media geared towards adolescents have established clearer findings regarding justification and consequences of

relational aggression. Studies have shown that most acts of relational aggression in media geared towards adolescents are portrayed as justified and rewarded generally by peer approval (Coyne & Archer, 2005; Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). Other studies geared towards children and adults reported limited or no consequences for acts of relational aggression (Coyne et al., 2010; Coyne & Whitehead, 2008; Luther & Legg, 2010). The movies in this study are geared towards adolescent audiences; thus, the following hypotheses were adopted for this study.

H<sub>3</sub>: Acts of relational aggression will be portrayed as justified more than expected compared to non justified acts. Specifically, male characters will be shown as more justified in their acts than female characters.

H<sub>4</sub>: Consequences to acts of relational aggression will be primarily portrayed as rewarded more than expected compared to punished or no consequence.

One contextual variable that has not been examined in other studies is humor. Humor can be used in the media as a satirical way to justify inappropriate behavior. Cecil (2008) observed, “movies take a primarily comedic take on mean girls and their victims” (p. 264). This study seeks to evaluate the humor surrounding the act of relational aggression with the following research question.

RQ<sub>5</sub>: Are acts of relational aggression more likely to be portrayed as humorous or non-humorous?

Finally, In order to provide a complete perspective of portrayals of relational aggression in teen movies, this study examines films from the past 30 years. Movies were chosen from three decades in order to allow investigation of the changes in portrayals of relational aggression over time. Research surrounding relational aggression and media attention to bullying has been increasing since the late 1990s. Thus, there may be cause to assume that relational aggression in

the media is demonstrating that trend. Evaluating these films for trends in the media will allow for discussion surrounding correlations between media portrayals and real life relational aggression. This research will also provide a basis for dialogue surrounding public concerns on the subject of relational aggression during adolescence. Regardless of whether the media is portraying relational aggression due to recent research, or if they are portraying real life trends, portrayals of aggression are dangerous models for viewers. The following research question will be examined to evaluate any possible trends in media portrayals of relational aggression before and after this time period.

RQ<sub>6</sub>: How does the frequency and type of relational aggression change during the course of three decades?



## CHAPTER 3

### Method

#### Sample

In order to sample popular and frequently viewed teen movies, the top thirty grossing teen films from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s were selected for this study (See Appendix A for Movie Titles and Box Office Gross) from [boxofficemojo.com](http://boxofficemojo.com). This selection indicates popularity of a film in the theaters, home rentals, and downloads. Teen movies were defined by three characteristics: (1) the storyline had to center around teens, (2) the central character had to be a teen, and (3) the film had to feature teens in major and minor roles (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). Movies with an R-rating were excluded from the sample because they generally did not fit the criteria for a teen movie, they contain more adult themes, and they are less accessible to teen audiences. Dal Sin et al. (2008) confirmed that fewer adolescents view R-rated movies compared to G/PG and PG-13 movies. Sequels were also excluded from the final sample due to reoccurring themes. This eliminated overlap or an over report in acts of relational aggression committed by a single character.

#### Procedure

All of the 90 movies were coded. Each act of relational aggression was coded on the following variables: type of relational aggression, humor, context, and consequences. The initiator's and victim's gender, age, sociometrics, attractiveness, socio-economic status (SES), and role were also coded (Appendix B is the Code Book). The conceptualization for the coding guidelines regarding relational aggression came from Nelson, Springer, Nelson, and Bean (2008). An act of relational aggression was coded if the aggressor intended to harm or damage a relationship or social status of the victim (See Appendix C for Coding Sheet).

## **Coding Scheme**

**Behavior type.** Relational aggression was operationally defined as any behavior that intended to harm or damage another individual's relationship or social status (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). This aggressive behavior could be direct, indirect, or nonverbal relational aggression (Nelson et al., 2008). Subdivisions of these types of aggression were recorded as further descriptors of the type of aggression. Direct relational aggression included overtly destroying or threatening to destroy a relationship, social exclusion, blackmail, making friends under false pretenses, emotional abuse, and an other category. Indirect relational aggression included covert social exclusion, gossiping, spreading rumors, other ways of trying to get others to dislike, covertly destroying relationships, and other type of indirect relational aggression. Nonverbal relational aggression consists of silent treatments, rolling eyes, dirty looks, and other nonverbal gestures that intended to harm relationships or social status.

**Gender and age.** The gender of the aggressor and the victim was coded as either male or female. The aggressor was also coded as an unknown gender or both genders when the situation allowed. The initiator and victim's age was defined as child, teen (13-18 years old), adult (18-65 years old), and elderly (65+ years old). If ages were not given they were determined by the grade they were in school (i.e. high school, elementary school, college, etc.). If the age of the aggressor was unable to be determined it was coded as unknown.

**Sociometrics.** Initiator and victim characters were classified as popular, rejected, neglected, controversial, and average. Popular characters were defined by being liked by most characters around them in the film. Rejected characters were disliked by most and neglected characters were not noticed by most. Controversial characters were liked by many and disliked

by many. Characters of which had a combination of above or did not fit into a specified category of being liked or disliked by most people were classified as average (Nelson et al., 2005).

**Attractiveness.** The initiator and victim's attractiveness was determined by the deliberate portrayal of attractive characteristics. Characters were coded as attractive if they had many characteristics that are considered attractive in Western culture. These included females having large eyes, small chin and nose, prominent cheekbones, large smile, average body weight, of good health, and good skin complexion (Cunningham, 1986; Singh, 1993). Attractive male characteristics included V-shaped physique, large eyes, prominent cheekbones, good complexion, good muscle tone, and high-status clothing (Cunningham, Barbee, & Pike, 1990; Singh, 1995). If the character displayed very few attractive characteristics they were coded as unattractive. Characters that displayed common characteristics, and were not portrayed as extremely attractive or unattractive, were coded as average.

**SES.** The initiator and victim's socio-economic status (SES) was coded as lower class, middle class, and upper class. Lower class was operationalized as blue-collar workers who often lived in slum-type, old, run-down neighborhoods. The possessions of these characters were few in number and were old or worn out. Middle class was defined by more sales people, clerical workers, supervisors, teachers, contractors, owners of small stores. These characters lived in or owned homes in the suburbs or well-kept urban neighborhoods. Their clothing was modest without too many brand names, and they have their basic needs met. Upper class was defined as characters who held professional positions, independent businesspeople, or executives. Their possessions were above average, their clothing is always brand name, they own luxury cars and other items not common to the middle class. These characters lived in wealthy or society-type

neighborhoods. The SES of the teen character in the movie was determined by their parent's socio-economic status.

**Role.** The classification of a major role was given if the character was central to the story, their presence directly affected the plot or subplot of the movie, and they had multiple lines in the movie. Characters were coded as minor if they were central to the given subplots or other parts of the story. These characters often did not have any speaking parts or very few lines.

**Relationship.** The relationship of initiator and victim was also coded as a descriptive variable. Categories of relationship included: husband/wife, parent/child, siblings, other family relationship, dating/ex-dating, friends, classmates, teacher/student, co-worker, enemy, neighbor, prisoner/guard, acquaintance, strangers, and other. Categories were developed from Coyne and Archer's (2004) content analysis of British television programming. If characters fit into two different categories, the primary or more apparent relationship takes precedence and was coded. For example, two characters may be classmates and may also be dating. The primary relationship was identified as the more important or significant relationship. In this example, dating is a more specific category than classmates and thus would be coded as such.

**Humor.** Acts of relational aggression were coded as humorous if use of speech, actions, or behaviors were intended to amuse the viewer (Wilson et al., 2006). One example of a humorous act of relational aggression was in *She's All That* when Laney paints a clown face on Misty's face when she is drunk in order to make her look bad in front of her friends. Acts that were funny to characters in the movie, but were seen as cruel to members of the audience were coded as not humorous.

**Context.** Relationally aggressive acts were coded as justified if the initiator was portrayed as having a valid reason for aggressing. Acts that are necessary to achieve a moral or

greater good and acts in self-defense were coded as justified (Coyne et al., 2010; Coyne & Whitehead, 2008). Another example from *She's All That* is when Zach feeds pizza with hair on it to two bullies. He is doing this for the greater good of the school and defending Laney's younger brother. This act is coded as justified. Unjustified acts of relational aggression are if the initiator was trying to achieve a selfish goal.

**Consequences.** Outcomes of relational aggression were classified as rewarded, punished, both, or no consequence. An act was coded as rewarded if the initiator received some type of long- or short-term positive consequences. These things can include something tangible, reduction of annoyance, peer approval, increase in self-esteem, increase in power, the victim suffers, and apology from victim (Coyne & Archer 2004; Coyne et al., 2010). Acts of aggression were coded as punished if there were long- or short-term negative consequences to the initiator. An example of this is in *She's All That*, Dean makes a comment that Zach has slept with a bunch of other girls on the beach to make Zach look bad in front of Laney. One of Dean's friends tells him to shut-up and punishes Dean for what he said to hurt Zach or Laney's feelings. An act of aggression that causes both rewards and punishments for the aggressor was coded as both. The most common example of this is if the act was rewarded because the victim was hurt in the short-term, and then was punished in the long term by a retaliation of the victim. Acts that were coded with no consequence did not show any consequence of the act to the initiator or the victim.

### **Reliability**

A group of researchers coded 10% of the sample (9 films) of teen movies to check for reliability. Interrater reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's Alpha (Krippendorff, 2004a). The reliabilities for each variable were as follows: type of relational aggression (0.75), initiator's gender (0.98), initiator's age (0.90), initiator's sociometrics (0.63), initiator's

attractiveness (0.76), initiator's SES (0.70), initiator's role (0.70), victim's gender (0.99), victim's age (0.87), victim's sociometrics (0.58), victim's attractiveness (0.64), victim's SES (0.79), victim's role (0.65), humor (0.78), context (0.70), and consequences (0.65). Although the threshold for very good reliability (.70) was not met for initiator and victim sociometrics, victim attractiveness, and consequences it is acknowledged as a limitation. According to Krippendorff, the reliability cutoff point should reflect the potential "costs of drawing invalid conclusions," and should not be less than .667 (Krippendorff, 2004b, p. 429). Thus, the consequences variable was slightly below the acceptable reliability so this variable should be viewed with caution. Statistics were not run for variables not reaching above .65 reliability (initiator sociometrics, victim's sociometrics, and victim attractiveness).

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

This study explored relational aggression in teen movies during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s and was guided by four hypotheses and five research questions. Movies were coded using the previously mentioned guidelines and statistical analyses were performed.

#### Prevalence of Relational Aggression

RQ<sub>1</sub> asked about the prevalence of relational aggression in teen movies. Of every teen movie coded, 94.4% (85 movies) contained relational aggression. Five movies had zero acts of relational aggression, *Power Rangers*, *Transformers*, *Red Dawn*, *Drop Dead Gorgeous*, and *Big Fat Liar*. Overall, 783 acts of relational aggression were coded; an average of 8.7 acts of relational aggression per movie. The movies with the greatest amount of relational aggression were *Mean Girls* (59 acts), *Mighty Ducks* (30 acts), *My Bodyguard* (21 acts), and *Just One of the Guys* (20 acts). The movies with the least amount of relational aggression were *Hackers*, *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*, *Hot Pursuit*, *Mystery Date*, *The Blindside*, *When a Stranger Calls*, and *The Goonies*; which only contained one or two acts of relational aggression.

Movies that fell outside of plus or minus three standard deviations from the mean (*Mean Girls*) were considered outliers. These movies were scaled back to the number of acts that represents the high limit of three standard deviations from the mean (33 acts). Using a random number generator, 33 acts of relational aggression were randomly selected and those acts were calculated in the analysis. For statistical analysis a total of 757 acts of aggression were analyzed.

The most common relationships of the aggressor and victim in the coded teen movies were classmates/teammates (32.0%), friends (16.9%), and dating relationships (9.0%). The least common relationships of the aggressor and victim were neighbor (1.2%), extended or other

family relationship (.9%), and husband and wife (.4%). This could be due to the nature of teen movies that many scenes take place in school.

### **Type of Relational Aggression**

RQ<sub>2</sub> asked about what type of relational aggression is most prevalent in popular teen films. Of the coded acts, 58.9% (446 acts) were direct relational aggression, 23.0% (174 acts) were indirect relational aggression, and 18.1% (137 acts) were nonverbal relational aggression. A one-way chi-square (goodness of fit) revealed more acts of direct relational aggression than expected,  $\chi^2(2) = 225.67, p < .001, \phi = .55$ , compared to indirect and nonverbal (See Table 1).

Descriptive frequencies show that 24.8% (188 acts) of relational aggression fell into the other direct relational aggression category. These acts included guilt trips in order to manipulate, erratic emotional behavior, using a relationship for personal gain and then ending the relationship, setting someone up for fall/embarrassment in front of others, and many others. Also, 13.9% (105 acts) of relational aggression comprised direct threatening to or overtly destroying friendships or relationships and 12.7% (96 acts) were coded as direct social exclusion. These three categories comprise half (51.4%; 389 acts) of all the relational aggression in these teen movies.

**Table 1: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Type of Relational Aggression**

	Observed N	Expected N
<b>Direct</b>	<b>446 (58.9%)</b>	<b>252.3</b>
Indirect	174 (23.0%)	252.3
Nonverbal	137 (18.1%)	252.3

### **Gender of Aggressor and Victim**

To conduct analyses on the initiator and victim's gender, the categories of both and unknown were excluded due to lack of frequency. Of the acts of relational aggression coded,

female characters initiated 46.1% (349 acts) and male characters initiated 52.6% (398 acts).  $H_1$  proposed that female characters would be the primary initiators of relational aggression. Females are underrepresented in these teen films and expected counts were adjusted to reflect this trend; characters are approximately 66% male and 34% female (Coyne, Callister, & Robinson, 2010). With the adjustments, females were found to be the initiator more than expected compared to males,  $\chi^2(1) = 53.86, p < .001, \phi = .27$ , confirming the hypothesis. Evaluation of the victim's gender revealed there are more male victims than expected,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.02, p < .05, \phi = .08$ , compared to females. Only 29.6% (224) of the coded acts of relational aggression had female victims and 68.7% (520 acts) had male victims.

$H_2$  proposed that females would be greater perpetrators of *indirect* relational aggression as opposed to direct and nonverbal relational aggression. Pearson chi-square analysis (test of independence) relating to initiator gender and the type of aggression indicated a significant difference overall. The results specify that more males were portrayed using *direct* relational aggression than expected,  $\chi^2(2) = 22.28, p < .001, \phi = .17$ . Table 2 shows the frequency of type of aggression portrayed by males and females. However, females were portrayed as using significantly more *indirect* relational aggression than expected compared to males,  $\chi^2(1) = 40.24, p < .001, \phi = .48$  (See Table 3). Thus, the second hypothesis was supported.

Table 4 shows Pearson chi-square analysis relating to type of aggression and the victim's gender. These results show that females are portrayed as victims of *indirect* relational aggression more than expected compared to direct and nonverbal relational aggression,  $\chi^2(2) = 17.53, p < .001, \phi = .15$ . Furthermore, a one-way chi-square was calculated to compare victim's gender of *indirect* relational aggression. Females were portrayed as being the victims of *indirect* relational aggression more than expected compared to males,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.19, p < .01, \phi = .21$  (See Table 5).

**Table 2: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Type of Relational Aggression and Initiator's Gender**

Relational Aggression Behavior Type	Initiator's Gender	
	Male	Female
Direct	<b>266, 66.8%</b> <b>(234.4)</b> 2.1*	174, 49.9% (205.6) -2.2*
Indirect	76, 19.1% (92.2) -1.7	97, 27.8% (80.8) 1.8
Nonverbal	56, 14.1% (71.4) -1.8	78, 22.3% (62.6) 1.9

Note. Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.  
Percentages are based on vertical comparisons within columns.

\* Standardized Residuals > + or - 1.95.

**Table 3: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Indirect Relational Aggression Initiator's Gender**

	Observed N	Expected N
Male	76 (43.9%)	115.3
Female	97 (56.1%)	57.7

**Table 4: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Type of Relational Aggression and Victim's Gender**

Relational Aggression Behavior Type	Victim's Gender	
	Male	Female
Direct	327, 62.9% (308.2) 1.1	114, 50.9% (132.8) -1.6
Indirect	95, 18.3% (116.7) -2.0*	<b>72, 32.1%</b> <b>(50.3)</b> 3.1*
Nonverbal	98, 18.8% (95.1) 0.3	38, 17.0% (40.1) -0.5

Note. Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.  
Percentages are based on vertical comparisons within columns.

\* Standardized Residuals > + or - 1.95.

**Table 5: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Indirect Relational Aggression Victim's Gender**

	Observed N	Expected N
Male	95 (56.9%)	111.3
Female	72 (43.1%)	55.7

**Table 6: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Initiator Gender and Victim Gender**

Initiator Gender	Victim's Gender	
	Male	Female
Male	<b>310, 60.7%</b> <b>(270.8)</b> 2.4*	<b>79, 35.4%</b> <b>(118.2)</b> -3.6*
Female	<b>201, 39.3%</b> <b>(240.2)</b> -2.5*	<b>144, 64.6%</b> <b>(104.8)</b> 3.8*

Note. Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.  
Percentages are based on vertical comparisons within columns.  
\* Standardized Residuals > + or - 1.95.

Analysis was also conducted to compare initiator gender to victim gender. Results reveal that there were more male on male and female on female relational aggression,  $\chi^2(1) = 39.70, p < .001, \phi = .23$ , compared to cross gender relational aggression (Table 6). When males initiated the aggression there were more male victims than expected. When females initiated the aggression, there were more female victims than expected compared to male victims.

### **Sociometrics, Attractiveness, and SES of Initiator**

RQ<sub>3</sub> asked about the primary characteristics of the initiators of relational aggression. Since intercoder reliability was not achieved for initiator sociometrics, those calculations will not be reported. Acts of relational aggression were portrayed as mainly perpetrated by characters of average attractiveness (69.1%; 523 acts) and attractive characters (27.1%; 205 acts). Only 3.8% (29 acts) were portrayed as perpetrated by unattractive characters. One-way chi-square analysis

reveals that characters of average attractiveness initiate relational aggression more than expected,  $\chi^2(2) = 496.88, p < .001, \phi = .81$ .

Analysis was also conducted to see if attractiveness differed by decade. Results indicate a significant difference over the three decades. There were more acts of relational aggression initiated by unattractive characters in the 1990s than expected compared to attractive or average characters,  $\chi^2(4) = 15.99, p < .05, \phi = .10$ .

Furthermore, acts of relational aggression were mainly perpetrated by characters in the middle class (72.3%; 547 acts) followed by characters in the upper class (24.4%; 185 acts). Only 25 acts (3.3%) of relational aggression were portrayed as perpetrated by characters in the lower class. One-way chi-square analysis reveals that more middle class characters initiate relational aggression than expected,  $\chi^2(2) = 566.88, p < .001, \phi = .87$ .

### **Sociometrics, Attractiveness, and SES of Victim**

RQ<sub>4</sub> asked about the primary characteristics of the victims of relational aggression. Since intercoder reliability was not achieved for victim sociometrics and attractiveness, those calculations will not be reported. Similar to the initiators, portrayals of relational aggression show victims as middle (72.5%; 549 acts) and upper (21.0%; 159 acts) class characters. Lower class aggressors only account for 6.5% (49) of the acts of relational aggression. One-way chi-square analysis reveals that more middle class characters were victims of relational aggression than expected,  $\chi^2(2) = 547.16, p < .001, \phi = .85$ .

### **Context**

H<sub>3</sub> predicted the context of relational aggression to be justified, and more specifically for males. One-way chi-square analysis revealed that more acts of relational aggression were portrayed as not justified than expected compared to justified acts of relational aggression,  $\chi^2(1)$

= 139.53,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .43$ , contradicting the hypothesis. Of all the acts of relational aggression, only 28.5% (216 acts) were portrayed as justified acts of aggression.

A Pearson chi-square was conducted to investigate if context or justification was portrayed differently for gender. The results indicate a significant difference, that acts of aggression committed by females are portrayed as justified more than expected compared to males,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.54$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\phi = -.09$ . However, this result may not hold any practical significance.

A Pearson chi-square was also conducted to analyze if context of relational aggression differed across decades. Overall, context was as expected across the three decades,  $\chi^2(2) = 3.46$ ,  $p = .177$ ,  $\phi = .07$ . Another chi-square was conducted to analyze if context of relational aggression differed depending on type of relational aggression. Results indicate that indirect relational aggression is justified less than expected and non verbal is justified more than expected,  $\chi^2(2) = 28.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\phi = .20$  (See Table 7). Direct relational aggression was justified as expected compared to not justified.

**Table 7: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Context and Type of Relational Aggression**

Relational Aggression Behavior Type	Context of Relational Aggression	
	Justified	Not Justified
Direct	128 (127.3) 0.1	318 (318.7) 0.0
Indirect	<b>28 (49.6)</b> -3.1*	146 (124.4) 1.9
Nonverbal	<b>60 (39.1)</b> 3.3*	77 (97.9) -2.1*

Note. Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.  
Percentages are based on vertical comparisons within columns.

\* Standardized Residuals  $> +$  or  $- 1.95$ .

## Humor

RQ<sub>5</sub> asked about humor surrounding portrayals of relational aggression. Statistical analysis showed that more acts of relational aggression were portrayed as not humorous than expected compared to humorous acts,  $\chi^2(1) = 280.74, p < .001, \phi = .61$ . Of the acts of relational aggression only 19.6% (148 acts) were portrayed as humorous.

A Pearson chi-square analysis revealed that when relational aggression was portrayed as justified, it was also portrayed as humorous more than expected compared to not humorous,  $\chi^2(1) = 31.76, p < .001, \phi = .21$  (See Table 8). This shows that although acts were mostly portrayed as not humorous and not justified, when it was justified it was also portrayed as more humorous.

**Table 8: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Context and Humor**

	Context of Relational Aggression	
	Justified	Not Justified
Humorous	<b>70, 32.4%</b> <b>(42.2)</b> 4.3*	<b>78, 14.4%</b> <b>(105.8)</b> -2.7*
Not Humorous	146, 67.6% (173.8) -2.1*	463, 85.6% (435.2) 1.3

Note. Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.  
Percentages are based on vertical comparisons within columns.  
\* Standardized Residuals > + or - 1.95.

## Consequences

H<sub>4</sub> proposed that the consequences of relational aggression would be portrayed as rewarded. There was a significant overall difference found between the different portrayed consequences of relational aggression. Descriptive frequencies show that relational aggression was rewarded in 58.7% of cases. Also, aggressors experienced no consequences 18.1% of the

time. Thus, 76.8% of relationally aggressive acts either were rewarded or not punished. Chi-square analysis revealed that more acts of relational aggression were rewarded than expected compared to punished or no consequence,  $\chi^2(3) = 468.06, p < .001, \phi = .79$ . Table 9 illustrates the observed and expected frequencies for consequences of relational aggression.

A Pearson chi-square was also conducted to analyze if consequences of relational aggression differed across decades. The results indicated that there is a significant difference of portrayals of consequences across the three decades,  $\chi^2(6) = 13.47, p < .05, \phi = .09$ . There were less punished acts of aggression in the 1990s than expected. However, the result may not hold practical significance.

**Table 9: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Consequences of Relational Aggression**

	Observed N	Expected N
Punished	103 (13.6%)	189.3
Rewarded	<b>444 (58.7%)</b>	<b>189.3</b>
Both/Mixed	73 (9.6%)	189.3
No Consequences	137 (18.1%)	189.3

### Decade of Release

Researchers also classified each movie by decade of release to assess RQ<sub>6</sub>, if relational aggression has changed over time. A one-way ANOVA was computed to compare the average amount of acts of relational aggression per decade across each decade. No significant differences across decade were found,  $F(2, 87) = .127, p = .88$ . Similarly, a one-way chi-square analysis showed that there were expected amounts of acts of relational aggression across each decade,  $\chi^2(2) = 1.17, p = .558, \phi = .04$ .

A Pearson chi-square analysis was conducted to examine type of relational aggression used across decades. However, no significant differences across decades were found,  $\chi^2(4) = 4.48, p = .345, \phi = .05$ .

Finally, a Pearson chi-square analysis was conducted to examine gender of initiator across decades. There were more male aggressors in the 1980s than expected and more female aggressors in the 2000s than expected,  $\chi^2(2) = 24.82, p < .001, \phi = .18$  (See Table 10). These results do indicate a change of portrayals of relational aggression across the three decades.

**Table 10: Expected and Observed Frequencies for Decade of Release and Initiator's Gender**

Decade of Release	Initiator's Gender	
	Male	Female
1980s	<b>173, 43.5%</b> <b>(142.3)</b> 2.6*	94, 26.9% (124.7) -2.8*
1990s	121, 30.4% (127.3) -0.6	118, 33.8% (111.7) 0.6
2000s	104, 26.1% (128.4) -2.2*	<b>137, 39.3%</b> <b>(112.6)</b> 2.3*

Note. Expected frequencies are shown in parentheses.  
Percentages are based on vertical comparisons within columns.

\* Standardized Residuals  $> +$  or  $- 1.95$ .

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

Throughout each decade of teen movies only slight differences in frequency and type of aggression were found. Generally throughout each decade type of relational aggression, amounts of relational aggression, context, and consequences were as expected. Overall, the portrayal of relational aggression is prevalent in most (94.4%) of the top grossing teen movies from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. Of the five movies that did not contain acts of relational aggression, four of them portrayed physical violence as a main storyline (i.e. war, good battling evil, etc). This finding is congruent with other relational aggression content analyses geared towards adolescent and adult audiences. Coyne and Archer's (2004) study of relational aggression of popular British television shows found 92% of shows contained relational aggression. Glascock (2008) also found that around 97% of prime-time programming contained relational aggression. This supporting research suggests that whatever adolescents are watching on television or film will likely expose them to acts of relational aggression. These findings also support the assertion that relational aggression is being reinforced through a variety of different media. Information processing theory (Huesmann, 1988) asserts that the more a viewer sees a behavior, the more he or she enacts the behavior over and over in his or her mind. Various media portraying relational aggression makes the memory or script grow stronger. Thus, various media portrayals can potentially be harmful to scripts and schemas regarding relational aggression.

This study found direct relational aggression to be the most prevalent in popular teen movies. Behaviors such as manipulating, guilt trips, erratic emotional behavior, using someone for personal gain, setting someone up for fall or embarrassment, threats of destroying friendships, blackmail, and direct social exclusion comprise over half of the acts of relational

aggression. Direct relational aggression may be more prevalent in media because it is easier to portray and easier to pick out by audiences, similar to verbal and physical aggression. Covert relational aggression, although present to the viewer, may be more difficult to define and identify. If the behavior is more direct, it may be easier to be comprehended or encoded into memory; again influencing perceptions. According to the GAM, it is apparent that any portrayals of relational aggression may influence viewers' attitudes and beliefs (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Thus, all direct, indirect, or nonverbal acts of relational aggression may influence a viewer's perceptions regardless of which type is most prevalent in various media.

Gender is an important factor when studying aggression. Females in this study were found to be more relationally aggressive than expected compared to males. Females were also portrayed as using more indirect forms of relational aggression than do males. These results are similar to other analyses of relational aggression in the media (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Coyne & Archer, 2004; Feshbach, 2005; Glascock, 2008; Luther & Legg, 2010). These findings give audiences the perception that it is expected for females to behave using relational aggression and more specifically indirect relational aggression.

Additionally, findings are also congruent with the belief that males use more direct forms of relational aggression than indirect or nonverbal forms. Direct forms of aggression (i.e. physical aggression) are also often portrayed as being committed by males (Glascock, 2008).

In the same vein, past research shows mixed results regarding victims of relational aggression—both males (Coyne & Archer, 2004) and females (Glascock, 2008) have been portrayed as victims of relational aggression. Results of this study indicate that females are portrayed as victims of relational aggression more than expected compared to males. Due to the

stereotype that women are more engaged in relational aggression in general (Coyne et al., 2004; Feshbach, 2005; Glascock, 2008), these results are not surprising.

However, current research findings suggest that these media portrayals of relational aggression gender differences *do not exist in real life* (Card et al., 2008). Relational aggression research and literature exploded in the late 1990s and the earliest studies (Björkqvist et al. 1992) suggested a female trend of relationally aggressive behavior. The publishing of this research may have reasonably supported the development of the “mean girl” in the media. However, these mean girls have not exited the big screen, even with new trends in relational aggression research. Consequently, media portrayals of relational aggression, including teen movies, are perpetuating an image of relational aggression that is incongruent to real life experiences of adolescents. Thus, perceptions regarding relational aggression may be skewed and should be studied further.

In addition to the increase awareness of female relational aggression, reports have also indicated an increase in female violence overall (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999). Increases in portrayals of female physical violence in the media have also been reported (Coyne, Callister, et al., 2010). This description of increase female violence can also explain the following finding of the current study. Although relational aggression was consistent across decades, males were found to be the initiators more than expected in the 1980s. In the 1990s the trend was as expected—men and women were portrayed doing similar amounts of relational aggression. In the 2000s females were portrayed as doing more acts of relational aggression than expected.

This trend may suggest either an increase in female aggression or in increase in awareness of female aggression. Coyne, Callister, et al. (2010) explained that the perception of females has changed from nonaggressive, compassionate, and submissive individuals to independent individuals “capable of significant aggression” (p. 397). This awareness of increases

in female aggression is now being reflected in teen movies for audiences to incorporate into their attitudes about aggressive behavior.

Furthermore, results suggest that there are more female-to-female and male-to-male acts of relational aggression rather than male-to-female or female-to-male acts. On a positive note, this result indicates that there are fewer opposite gender aggressive acts portrayed in these teen movies. This result suggests more friendship aggression instead of romantic relationship aggression.

In order to explore characteristics of relationally aggressive behavior that might influence a viewer's attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviors, the primary characteristics of the initiator and victim of relational aggression in teen movies were examined. A general belief is held that popular, middle to upper class (Cecil, 2008), attractive (Coyne & Archer, 2004) female characters would be the main perpetrators of relational aggression. Additionally, we would expect to see a higher proportion of popular and attractive characters than we saw in this study. These findings indicate that generally people of *average* popularity, attractiveness, and socio economic status are the initiators and victims of relational aggression. Although average characters are depicted the most, it is important to note over 95% of the acts were committed by characters with average or high attractiveness and middle and upper socio economic status.

The limited number characters portrayed with extreme characteristics (i.e. wealthy or poor, attractive or unattractive, popular or rejected/neglected) explain this result. For example, there were very few movies that had portrayals of poor, unattractive, neglected characters. Two possibilities can be formulated from this finding. (1) Viewers are likely to relate to these "average" characters and see that using relational aggression is a normal part of life. Thus, perpetuating the notion that this is a normal and acceptable behavior. Social cognitive theory

refers to this as a vicarious motivator (Bandura, 2002); the success of others that are *similar* to the viewer will motivate them to imitate behavior. (2) Viewers that are of lower popularity, attractiveness, and socio economic status may aspire to attain higher status. Thus, supporting their desire to use relational aggression to climb the social ladder. This causes concern especially for viewers of lower socio economic status who spend greater time watching television than those in the middle or upper class (Greenberg & Dominick, 1969).

Relational aggression was most often portrayed as not justified in this study; however, 28.5% of the acts were portrayed as justified acts of relational aggression. Justification in other studies (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008) referred to the action as being socially sanctioned. Disney movies have a greater ability to portray relational aggression as socially sanctioned because of the “good wins over evil” message that is consistently portrayed. In the case of teen movies not all characters are fighting “evil.” One act of relational aggression could be socially sanctioned within a peer group of the aggressor; however, it may be seen as socially unacceptable to other characters of the movie or to the audience. Although limited in this study, there still remains concern for any portrayals of justified relational aggression. These behaviors might encourage adolescents to use aggression in this way more frequently because it is sometimes seen as acceptable in the media.

Real life relational aggression research found that males are usually seen as more justified in their aggressive behaviors (Coyne et al., 2008). This study did not find support for this belief. However, results did indicate a difference between type of relational aggression and the context of the act. Direct relational aggression was justified as expected, indirect relational aggression was portrayed as less justified than expected, and nonverbal relational aggression was portrayed as justified more than expected compared to unjustified. Nonverbal relational

aggression deals with dirty looks, silent treatment, rolling eyes, etc. These actions may generally be viewed as a retaliation of an aggressive act and are thus portrayed as justified more often. Again, any justified act of relational aggression regardless of type may influence an audience to see the act as acceptable. Overall, these are positive findings. Acts of relational aggression are being portrayed as not justified. Viewers may be less likely to behave aggressively if the action is not socially sanctioned.

A less studied area of aggression is humor. This sample found about 20% of the acts of relational aggression to be humorous. Although humorous relational aggression is in the minority, it is important to address that any act that is intending to harm someone should not be considered funny. Humor is one way people enjoy media, and enjoyment of someone's pain is not a good message to portray even in small quantities. The more a viewer enjoys the media, the more he or she will pay attention and likely seek that same type of media out again (Bandura, 2002). Thus, any humorous acts of relational aggression are encouraging the formation of normative aggressive behavior scripts (Huesmann, 1988).

However, the overwhelmingly positive result that acts of relational aggression are generally portrayed as not humorous reflects good messages to audiences of teen movies. This result (along with acts being portrayed as unjustified) suggests that most acts of relational aggression are not being associated with positive emotions. Thus, these portrayals are less likely to be adopted into scripts, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

An interesting finding is that although most of the acts were not humorous and unjustified, many of the justified acts were humorous to an audience. This might be explained by the internal and external audience's desire for aggression to take place. When the act was socially sanctioned, they were more likely to think the act is humorous. One implication might

be that acts of relational aggression that are humorous are seen as more justified. This assumption needs to be further explored; however, adolescents viewing the media are developing scripts for aggression. Applying the GAM, increases in aggression influence the individual's emotional state (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Humor would also influence emotions, usually positive, in this situation. Thus, humor associates positive emotions with aggressive acts. Humor can also be seen as a cue or a motivation for relational aggression. If an individual can make someone laugh while being relationally aggressive, they may find it acceptable to behave aggressively.

The overall outcome or consequence of relational aggression was found to be portrayed as extremely rewarded. This finding is congruent with Coyne and Archer's (2004) report that relational aggression was rewarded more than punished in popular British television programs. The idea that relational aggression is more often rewarded than punished demonstrates that relational aggression is a successful tactic to use when seeking to harm a relationship for selfish reasons. As adolescents continually see aggression to be rewarded they are likely to adapt those scripts as positive. Social cognitive theory affirms that rewarded behavior is a direct motivator to imitate behavior (Bandura, 2002). These research findings suggest to audiences that relational aggression is not only a typical and an expected female behavior, but that it is an okay and often rewarded behavior. This will encourage adolescent viewers to find similarities between themselves and the characters that justify their acts of relational aggression.

This study has found that in popular teen movies female characters of average attractiveness and socioeconomic status enact relational aggression. These portrayals are unjustified, non-humorous, rewarded acts of relational aggression. This portrayal is congruent with the "mean girls" stereotype. Suggesting that mean girls are not justified, however, they are

rewarded for acting aggressively. The result is contradicting perceptions about relational aggression—it is not socially sanctioned but can help one achieve rewarding social goals.

As established, information processing theory, social cognitive theory, and the GAM provide an appropriate context for learning relational aggression from the media. Popular teen movies from the previous three decades were watched in theaters and homes of a large number of people. As children and adolescents make decisions regarding their behavior, these portrayals of normative and rewarded relational aggression may be a representation of the scripts they are adhering to. The GAM proposes that exposure to many of these films will influence learning and behavior through influencing attitudes and beliefs, the development of aggressive scripts, and through desensitization or the acceptance of aggressive behavior.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation in this study is the inability for the coders to achieve reliability on the initiator and victim sociometrics, victim attractiveness, and consequence variables. The consequences variable was only slightly below the acceptable reliability to compute statistics. With over half (59.1%) of the consequences being rewarded, this result should not be taken lightly. However, these results should be interpreted with caution. Since these variables have not been researched extensively, further research should be sure to evaluate these variables to allow for more concrete evidence of initiator and victim characteristics.

A limitation regarding the gender variable is the inability to account for male and female media population in the two-way chi-square analyses. Although some of these statistics achieved significance, it is important to calculate them again in relation to the proper proportions of males (66%) to females (33%) in media portrayals.

This research study is simply a description of the portrayal of relational aggression in teen movies. This study does not tell us that teen movies have a causal relationship with subsequent relational aggression. However, when the content of this study and other studies are applied to information processing theory, social cognitive theory, and the GAM conclusions may be assumed that the content of these teen movies can influence behavior. As most of these analyses are consistent with real life, it is likely that adolescent females will view this material and develop schema that can be reinforced again through the media or in their own lives. However, further analysis should be conducted to see if real life relational aggression is similarly viewed as unjustified.

### **Future Research**

There is a need to continue to look at the content of teen media because teens are more readily able to use relational aggression to their advantage. Willer and Cupach (2008) point out that in high school boyfriends present a new vulnerability to relationships, social status, and relational aggression. Future research should examine how relational aggression differs with the use of romantic relationships as a manipulator versus just destroying general friendships or social status using other means. Research on all forms of media, including teen movies, video games, music, books, magazines, and websites, would provide a greater picture of the attitudes and behaviors teens are being exposed to in the media. Also, examining how adolescents are using new media is important because it allows for teens to access greater amounts of media that have physical, verbal, and relational aggression portrayed in large quantities.

Coyne et al. (2008) found that viewing physical and relational aggression—which are extremely prevalent in the media today—does influence subsequent physical and relational aggression. New media poses interesting implications for teen's future use of relational

aggression. Teens are technologically savvy and have been exposed to excessive amounts of physical and relational aggression in the media. Research concerning new media and subsequent aggression should be conducted. New media such as social networking sites give teens a more efficient, anonymous, non-threatening environment to relationally aggress. Thus, perpetuating the reinforcement of relationally aggressive behaviors that may have lasting consequences.

Future research should also investigate how ethnicity plays a role in acts of relational aggression. Specifically if the media is portraying differences in acts of relational aggression across cultures. Media portrayals of minorities are just that, minor. Cross-cultural research would be helpful in determining if relational aggression is only a part of mainstream American media or if it crosses cultural boundaries.

Another addition to the current research would be to study the gender-related beliefs and attitudes of viewers of these popular teen movies. Similarly, studying the beliefs about relationally aggressive behaviors of those who were adolescents during the time of these popular films. An expansion of Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's (2008) study would be an interesting addition to the findings regarding the portrayals of relational aggression in popular teen movies. Examining if viewers have similar beliefs as the portrayals of relational aggression in these movies would provide support for information processing theory, social cognitive theory, and the GAM. It would be beneficial to not only measure beliefs about relational aggression, but also perceived aggressive behaviors using Bjorkqvist et al.'s (1992) and Crick & Grotpeter's (1995) peer nomination or self-report scales for aggressive behavior.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, relational aggression is prevalent in the media. One researcher stated the following inevitable effects, which may extend across various media.

Given the average viewer hours spent in front of a television set, it seems safe to say that regardless of what one watches on prime-time network television [or other various media], they will, on average, be exposed to substantial amounts of aggressive behavior, and subject to the inevitable, ensuing social learning and cultivation processes.

(Glascock, 2008, p. 278)

According to information processing theory, social cognitive theory, and the general aggression model there is cause for concern of how children and adolescents will behave after viewing aggressive models. The literature supporting the relationship between media exposure to relational aggression and subsequent relational aggression is growing.

These internalized aggressive models are dangerous and can be damaging for adolescents that adopt the behaviors of these models. Cecil (2008) described the harmful effects that these films may have on adolescent girls by simplifying the problems girls are facing. "In reality relational aggression can range from minor comments to more serious harassment" (p. 274). Mass media images of relational aggression are showing people that these acts are normative. This is a very big problem when it comes to young girls being victims in school. Their parents, teachers, and adults alike might just say, "Its just a girl thing." When really it is a huge problem that should be combated against. Relational aggression can be very harmful and often times it is not identifiable to adults (Bright, 2005). Because of this it is important to continue publishing research about this topic until it receives more attention. More adults need to know about relational aggression in order to prevent or stop it from happening.

This study provides some comfort in knowing that not all media portrayals of relational aggression encourage aggressive behavior. Although these popular teen movies depict gender differences and rewards for relational aggression, these acts are also portrayed as unjustified and

not humorous—suggesting that relational aggression is not socially sanctioned. Another encouraging finding is that relational aggression in teen movies has not increased throughout three decades. This finding combats perception of aggression increasing in the media. Different from other media research, these teen movies provide some positive portrayals of relational aggression.

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## Appendix A

**Domestic Box Office Gross**  
(in Millions)

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 2000s Movies (2000-2009)
 

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1. Spider Man	\$403,706
2. Transformers	\$319,071
3. Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	\$290,013
4. The Blind Side	\$233,678
5. Twilight	\$192,769
6. Juno	\$143,495
7. Hairspray	\$118,871
8. Remember the Titans	\$115,645
9. Freaky Friday	\$110,230
10. The Princess Diaries	\$108,248
11. Save the Last Dance	\$91,057
12. High School Musical 3	\$90,559
13. Mean Girls	\$86,058
14. Hannah Montana: the movie	\$79,576
15. Hotel for Dogs	\$73,034
16. Bring It On	\$68,379
17. Holes	\$67,406
18. Race to Witch Mountain	\$67,172
19. Step Up	\$65,328
20. 17 Again	\$64,167
21. Sky High	\$63,946
22. The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift	\$62,514
23. Friday Night Lights	\$61,255
24. Snow Day	\$60,020
25. Cinderella Story	\$51,438
26. My Sister's Keeper	\$49,200
27. Big Fat Liar	\$48,360
28. Fat Albert	\$48,116
29. Agent Cody Banks	\$47,938
30. When a Stranger Calls	\$47,860

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 1990s Movies (1990-1999)
 

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1. Caspar	\$100,328
2. She's All That	\$63,366
3. Clueless	\$56,634
4. Rookie of the Year	\$53,165
5. The Mighty Ducks	\$50,752
6. Little Women	\$50,038
7. The Brady Bunch	\$46,576

8. Romeo and Juliet	\$46,351
9. Encino Man	\$40,693
10. Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers	\$38,187
11. 10 Things I Hate About You	\$38,178
12. Richie Rich	\$38,087
13. October Sky	\$32,547
14. First Kid	\$26,491
15. Can't Hardly Wait	\$25,605
16. Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead	\$25,196
17. Good Burger	\$23,712
18. Flipper	\$20,080
19. Drive Me Crazy	\$17,845
20. Buffy the Vampire Slayer	\$16,624
21. Mad Love	\$15,453
22. Excess Baggage	\$14,515
23. School Ties	\$14,453
24. Class Act	\$13,272
25. Little Big League	\$12,267
26. Drop Dead Gorgeous	\$10,571
27. Cry Baby	\$8,266
28. Hackers	\$7,536
29. Dick	\$6,262
30. Mystery Date	\$6,166

#### 1980s Movies (1980-1989)

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1. Back to the Future	\$210,609
2. Honey I Shrunk the Kids	\$103,724
3. Dead Poets Society	\$95,860
4. Karate Kid	\$90,815
5. Footloose	\$80,035
6. War Games	\$79,567
7. Ferris Beuller's Day Off	\$70,136
8. The Goonies	\$61,389
9. Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure	\$40,485
10. Pretty in Pink	\$40,471
11. Red Dawn	\$38,376
12. T.A.P.S.	\$35,856
13. Adventures in Baby Sitting	\$34,368
14. Teen Wolf	\$33,086
15. Can't Buy Me Love	\$31,623
16. The Outsiders	\$25,697
17. Weird Science	\$23,834
18. Sixteen Candles	\$23,686
19. My Bodyguard	\$22,482
20. License to Drive	\$22,433

21. Say Anything	\$20,781
22. Young Sherlock Holmes	\$19,739
23. Some Kind of Wonderful	\$18,553
24. One Crazy Summer	\$13,431
25. She's Out of Control	\$12,065
26. Just One of the Guys	\$11,528
27. Better Off Dead	\$10,297
28. Lucas	\$8,200
29. Girls Just Want to Have Fun	\$6,326
30. Hot Pursuit	\$4,215

Highlighted Movies Indicate Pilot Study Sample

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## Appendix B

**Coding Guidelines: Teen Movie Study****THE GUIDELINES BELOW ARE THE SAME FOR INITIATOR AND VICTIM**

**Initiator/Victim:** write down the name of the character that began the act of aggression. If the initiator for an act of aggression was not an individual but a group, write it down. Write down the name of the person who received the aggression. If the action was not specifically target at any one write down: NOT SPECIFIC.

**Gender:****Male****Female****Both:** Used when the initiator/receiver is a group of people with men & women.**Unknown**

**Age Group** (Best Judgment, 100 year old elf in high school should probably be coded as teen)

**Child:** a person in elementary school age, usually below the age of 12 years.**Teenager:** a person in junior high/ high school age, usually between 13-17 years old.**Adult:** a person that has attained the age of majority, usually between 18- 54 years old.**Elderly:** a person that is 55 years old or more, often portrayed as grandparent or retired.**Unknown:** the text/visual description doesn't describe or mention age related info

**Relationship:** relationship between the Initiator and victim, such as:

**Husband/Wife****Co-Worker****Parent/Child****Enemy****Siblings****Neighbor****Other family relationship****Prisoner/Guard****Date****Acquaintance****Friends****Strangers****Classmates****Other****Teacher/Student**

**When in doubt, write down more information than is needed and we can check it later!!**

**Role****Major Character:** central to story, presence directly affects plot or subplots of movie.**Minor Character:** central to given subplots, or parts of the movie.**Sociometrics****Popular:** Liked by most**Rejected:** Disliked by most**Neglected:** Not noticed by most**Controversial:** Liked by many, disliked by many

**Average:** A combo of the above

### Attractiveness

**Attractive**

**Non-attractive**

**Average**

### Socio-Economic Status

**Lower Class:** Skilled and semiskilled blue-collar workers. Slum-type neighborhoods or old, run-down housing tract. : Limited Possessions. Older/ dilapidated car, simple/worn-out clothing,

**Middle Class:** Sales people, clerical workers, supervisors, teachers, contractors, owners of small stores. Own tract homes in the suburbs in well-kept urban neighborhoods. modest clothing without too many brand names, basic needs met. Comfortable, but not luxurious home furnishing/possessions.

**Upper Class:** Professionals, independent businesspeople, or executives. Possessions: above average. Memberships in country-clubs, luxury cars, clothing always brand name, extra items not common to middle class:, , grand technology gizmos not common to population. Live wealthy or society-type neighborhoods.

## THE GUIDELINES BELOW ARE FOR THE TYPE OF RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

*Aggression is here defined as actions taken with the intent to hurt or harm another individual who does not wish to be harmed*

### Relational Aggression

*The “key” for Relational Aggression is to remember that it must aim to harm social status or relationship*

**Direct Relational Aggression** (overt and/or confrontational behaviors which directly harm others through damage (or threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion; usually verbal in nature, may be reactive or proactive)

**Threaten to destroy friendship/relationship:** Threatening or overtly acting to dissolve a friendship or romantic relationship (without due cause)

i.e.: “I’m not going to be your friend anymore unless...”

“I don’t want to be your friend anymore...”

“I don’t love you anymore...”

**Direct Social exclusion:** Threatening or overtly orchestrating exclusion from the peer group (cause is irrelevant)

i.e.: “You can’t be in our group unless...”

“We don’t want to play with you. Go away...”

“We are going to be in a group and you’re not going to be in it...”

“You can’t come to my party unless...”

*Whispering in a friend’s ear in front of another person with the intent to make the target uncomfortable*

**Blackmail:** Threatening to divulge another's personal secrets (engage in gossip) in order to gain control over a peer

**Make friends under false pretenses:** Making friendships under pretense and dissolving them in a public manner that demoralizes the victim (friendship as a cruel mind game)

**Emotional Abuse:** Put down partner in relationship to dominate or have control over another person. Very often Emotional Abuse and Insulting overlap. Remember, emotional abuse is about getting control over another person, so it is a judgment call: is the intent to gain control over a person or just to hurt them?

**Other:** Any other type of Direct Relational Aggression not covered above. For example:

i.e. *Laying guilt trips on another in order to manipulate*

*Erratic emotional behavior*

*Acting hot and cold in order to manipulate another*

*Using somebody (a relationship) for personal gain and then ending the relationship*

*"Physically disrespect her then ditch her"*

*"Play the man by teasing him"*

*"Lead them on and then drop them"*

*"Set up a guy to be slammed emotionally"*

*Setting somebody up for a fall/embarrassment in front of others*

*"Invite somebody to a party and tell them to dress up as a character when it is a formal dinner"*

*Calling an unpopular girl and acting to be her friend and then humiliating her with others listening (3-way calls)*

**Indirect Relational Aggression** (consistent with indirect aggression, covert and/or nonconfrontational behaviors which harm others through damage to relationships or feelings of acceptance, friendship, or group inclusion; may be verbal or nonverbal, reactive or proactive)

**Covert Social Exclusion:** Covertly orchestrating exclusion or isolation from the peer group or peer group activities

*"Let's not invite her to our birthday parties, okay?"*

*"Don't be friends with him!"*

Trying to get others to dislike a peer, using any of the following methods:

**Gossiping:** Revealing personal or sensational facts about others

i.e.: *Sharing a friend's secrets with others*

**Spreading Rumors** (trash talk) Talk or opinion widely disseminated with no discernible source, without known authority regarding the truth of the matter (lies)

i.e.: *May be passed verbally or nonverbally (passed or "planted" notes, spraypainting, snide comments written on the walls of the bathroom stall)*

**Other ways of trying to get others to dislike:**

i.e.: *Covertly calling another names (verbal or nonverbal)*

*Covertly making fun of another (verbal or nonverbal)*

*Talking behind another's back (Backbiting)*

*"Yap about it to her friends FOREVER."*

**Covertly destroying relationships**

i.e.: *Stealing a romantic partner*

*"Taking her man"*

*Flirting with another's romantic partner or love interest*

*"Make them jealous"*

*Renewing relationships with former romantic partners (in the context of a subsequent, ongoing relationship)*

*Cheating, being unfaithful*

*"Making him think he's the one and then dating his roommate"*

*Ruin the person's chances of having romantic success with others*

**Other:** Any other type of Indirect Relational Aggression not covered above. For ex.

i.e.: *Covertly shifting alliances (Treasonous conduct; Backstabbing)*

*Being friendly with a friend's enemies (loyalty issues)*

*Sharing a friend's negative thoughts about a particular person with that person*

**Non verbal Relational Aggression:** (nonverbal and gestural behaviors intended to exclude, alienate or embarrass others)

**Silent Treatment:** (ignoring, avoiding): Threatening or overtly acting to withhold attention or affection (without due cause)

i.e.: *Walking away when the target seeks to engage the actor in play*

*Deliberately not listening to another*

*"Brush them off"*

*Withholding or refusing physical affection*

**Rolling eyes:** Rolling one's eyes in derision

**Dirty Looks:** Harsh or dirty looks

**Other:** i.e.

*Producing facial expressions of disgust or dislike*

*Staring in a disapproving or intense manner*

*Rolling one's head*

*Glancing sideways or downward*

*Smiling insincerely*

*Turning up one's nose*

*Certain types of backchannel responses (e.g., exasperated sighs)*

*Chin thrusts*

*Shaking one's fist at somebody*

*Negative hand gestures*

*"Give them the bird"*

*Showing obvious disinterest or boredom in the presence of another*

*Saying nothing is wrong but acting as if something is wrong*

*Being brusque or short with them*

*Treat them like they are stupid / act in a condescending manner*

## **Humor**

**Humorous:** The act should be coded as "humorous" should it appear to the audience to be funny. This does not include if the act is humorous to characters in the movie.

**Not Humorous:** The act should be coded as "not humorous" if it appears to the audience that the act was not funny, mean, cruel, not justified, or other feelings of disapproval of action.

**Context**

**Justified:** The act should be coded as “justified” should the perpetrator be seen to have a valid reason for the aggression, and if it would be agreed to be necessary to achieve a moral or greater good (e.g.: super heroes chasing a murder). Also acts that are a reaction to other’s aggression (i.e. self defense) should also be coded as justified, provided the act is proportionate and not excessive (e.g., If someone steals my lunch and as retaliation I shoot him/her back in the head it wouldn’t be considered justified form of aggression).

**Unjustified:** Aggression is “unjustified” if it is acted to simply achieve a selfish goal

**Consequences:** the effects and outcomes of the aggressive act (**note: list specific consequence if there is one**) that can be categorized into:

**Rewarded:** when the aggressive action results in short or long term positive consequences to the initiator. E.g., 1. **Tangible (something physical, e.g., money)**; 2. Reduction of annoyance (e.g., someone stops complaining when shouted at); 3. Peer approval (e.g., laughs from others at an insult); 4. Increase in self-esteem (e.g., feeling better at someone else’s loss); 5. Increase in control or power (e.g., the aggressor gets more control over the victim); 6. Victim suffers (e.g., physical pain from a punch); 7. Apology (e.g., the victim apologizes for something).

**Punished:** when the aggressive act results in short or long-term negative consequences to the initiator or to the victim. (see above for examples, but opposite)

**No Consequences:** when the initiator does experience neither a positive nor a negative consequence as a result of his/her aggressive action.

Appendix C

Coding Sheet

Relational Aggression

Coder: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of the Movie:

Year: Genre:

	Scene/Time of Occ	Behavior	Sub-behavior	Initiator's name	Initiator's Gender	Initiator's Age	Initiator's Sociometrics	Initiator's Attractiveness	Initiator's SES	Initiator's Role	Relationship to Victim	Victim's name	Victim's Gender	Victim's Age	Victim's Sociometrics	Victim's Attractiveness	Victim's SES	Victim's Role	Humor	Context	Consequences	Description	
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LABELS

Depiction

1. Textual
2. Visual
3. Both

Behavior

1. Direct Relational Aggression
2. Indirect Relational Aggression
3. Nonverbal Relational Aggression
4. Other

Sub-behavior

1. Threatening to Destroy Friendship/Relationship
2. Direct Social Exclusion
3. Blackmail
4. Make friends Under False Pretenses
5. Emotional Abuse
6. Other Direct Relational Aggression
7. Covert Social Exclusion
8. Gossiping
9. Spreading Rumors
10. Other Ways of Getting Others to Dislike
11. Covertly Destroying Relationship
12. Other Indirect Relational Aggression
13. Silent Treatment
14. Rolling Eyes
15. Dirty Looks
16. Other Nonverbal Aggression

Initiator/ Victim's Gender

1. Male
2. Female
3. Unknown
4. Both

Initiator/ Victim's Age

1. Child
2. Teen (13-17)
3. Adult (18-65)
4. Elderly (65+)
5. Unknown

Initiator/Victim's Sociometrics

1. Popular
2. Rejected
3. Neglected
4. Controversial
5. Average

Initiator/Victim's Attractiveness

1. Attractive
2. Non-attractive
3. Average

Initiator/Victim's Socio-Economic Status

1. Lower-Class
2. Middle Class
3. Upper Class

Initiator's Relationship to Victim

1. Husband/Wife
2. Parent/Child
3. Siblings
4. Other family relationship
5. Dating
6. Friends
7. Classmates
8. Teacher/Student
9. Co-Worker
10. Enemy
11. Neighbor
12. Prisoner/Guard
13. Acquaintance
14. Strangers
15. Other

Initiator/Victim's Role

1. Major
2. Minor

Humorous (to audience)

1. Yes
2. No

Context

1. Justified
2. Not Justified

Consequences

1. Punished
2. Rewarded
3. Both/Mixed
4. No Consequences