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# A Content Analysis of the MPAA Rating System and its Evolution

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### **A Content Analysis of the MPAA Rating System and its Evolution**

The Purpose of this research is to determine whether or not there has been an increase, decrease or no change at all in the amount of explicit content within PG-13 and R-rated films over the last 40 years. The film industry has flourished over the last couple of decades. It has seen an increase in production and has established itself as one of the dominating forces in today's society. Today, huge movie studios produce a few big-budget films each year that reach a great variety of audiences domestically and internationally. With the emergence of new technology, movie production has seen a great increase in quality and quantity. Despite hindering problems such as piracy and illegal downloads, movies are still bringing in a great deal of money.

It was the Lumiere brothers, Auguste and Louis, and their invention, the cinematographe, which propelled the film industry forward. The brothers patented their invention in 1895. The cinematographe was based on Thomas Edison's kinetographe. The Lumiere brothers wanted to improve on the design, which they felt had two flaws. The first issue with the kinetographe was its size. The machine was too big and had to remain in one place. The second issue with the Edison's invention was the view-piece, which only allowed one person to view the film at a time. The cinematographe used rotating pictures and light to project the images onto a screen. Not only was it smaller and easier to handle, it was also manually operated. The most important aspect of the cinematographe was its ability of intermittent movement that allowed continuous movement. The Lumiere brother's invention allowed the era of silent cinematography to flourish ("Pioneer: The Lumiere Brothers," n.d). Through the years new technological advancements took place helping motion pictures continue to evolve. Film, as opposed to

using still images, could now record live footage. The transition from silent to talking pictures helped the film industry grow but also caused concerns (as to the content generated by such films) to rise (Brown, 2013).

In 1913, the Mutual Film Corporation had a confrontation with the Ohio state legislature after the latter passed a law creating a board of censorship for films. The purpose of the law was to review films before public showing to ascertain that no film corrupting the population's morals would be shown. Mutual Film Corp. refused to submit its films for review and took the matter to court on the basis that the law was unconstitutional (Wertheimer, 1993, p. 158-159). Despite taking the case as far as the Supreme Court the court rejected in a unanimous decision the unconstitutional argument and established, during the *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* case of 1915, that the First Amendment does not protect motion pictures (Miner, 2013, p. 21). The court decision meant that any censorship imposed on films by state legislature was not unconstitutional and should be obeyed by film producers. This decision, denying movies protection under the First Amendment, led to an increase in movie content regulation.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s the motion picture industry was under pressure for the controversial themes appearing in films. The introduction of sound in 1929 allowed for producers to take their films further. Adult content such as profanity and vulgarity increased after the post-sound years. Noel Brown states in his article, *A New Movie Going Public: 1930s Hollywood and the Emergence of the 'Family Film,'* that "it is well documented that in the aftermath of the integration of sound, the major Hollywood studios assumed a more overtly 'adult' trajectory in their production

strategies” (Brown, 2013, p. 1). Many religious groups were growing restless and calling for a form of censorship in the film industry. Producers trying to renovate the industry’s image knew it needed a form of self-regulation and they offered church bodies the opportunity to review and set some guidelines for future films. According to Gallagher, only the Catholic Church agreed to help review films and set forth guidelines to help monitor the content included in motion pictures (Gallagher, n.d, p. 137). The content of motion pictures presented various aspects of life and societal themes that could be interpreted in different ways. Therefore, to monitor the content to which citizens were to be exposed to, William Hays was placed at the forefront of the battle to balance both the need for profit from the film industry and the need to promote decency in films.

As a Presbyterian elder and President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), which later became the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Hays had long been trying to determine how to instill a set of morality rules that all filmmakers could follow (Association of Motion Picture Producers [AMPP] Inc. & MPPDA, 1930). At first he derived a list of “don’ts and be careful’s” for filmmakers to follow. The list was all but moot and no one really adhered to the general principles on the list (Miner, 2013, p. 22). Father Daniel Lord and other clergymen gathered together to determine the building blocks for a sterner set of rules; the result was the Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code) that was presented to Hays (Miner, 2013, 22). The code was not a law but instead was a form of self-regulation to which the film industry was submitted. The MPPDA adopted the code on March 1930. Hays worked closely with the Catholic Church to promote a sense of morality in the film industry. The purpose of the Hays Code was to monitor and determine what could be included in a

talking or silent film that would not jeopardize the morality or values of the nation's citizens. Hays Code was the first governing set of rules to which all producers had to abide and the code clearly stated what could or could not be part of the film. Among its general principles and guidelines, the Hays Code states that "no picture shall be produced that will lower the morality of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin" (AMPP Inc. & MPPDA, 1930, p. 594). The Hays Code touches on subjects such as sex, crime against the law, obscenity, profanity, vulgarity, costume, and religion.

The two main elements the code touches on are crime and sex. Hays Code requires that murder not be explicit or justified and that any crime not be expressed in detail so that others may want to imitate it. For sex, the basic goal is to not generate scenes that could "stimulate the lower and baser elements" (AMPP Inc. & MPPDA, 1930, p. 595). Passionate scenes should never be explicit and they should not be included in the film if it is not essential to the overall plot. The Hays Code goes as far as to state that "white slavery shall not be treated" and "miscegenation [sexual relationships between the white and black races] is forbidden" (AMPP Inc. & MPPDA, 1930, p. 595). Although the code was never perfect, the code did try to dictate what was morally correct for the nation's viewers to watch. If filmmakers did not adhere to the code, their movies were threatened with being banned from theatres.

Although the code was started with the purpose of guiding filmmakers on a set of moral rules and guidelines, the Production Code Office (PCA) was constantly being pressured by producers to relax its grip on Hollywood. According to Gallagher, the code was never truly honored and "Catholics sensed that the code was something to be paraded

around rather than obeyed” (Gallagher, p. 137). Filmmakers tested the limits of how much they could get away with while still receiving PCA approval. However, in this tug and pull on the code’s structure certain thematic elements were seeping into films that should not have if the code had truly been applied. To ensure the morality of the nation was secure, the Catholic Legion of Decency was formed in 1933 (Miner, 2013, p. 22). Founded by three archbishops, the Legion gave the Hays Code the teeth it needed to censor Hollywood (Miner, 2013, p.22).

Unlike the Hays Code, the Legion had its own set of ratings and it went with a standard ABC method. The A rating was given to films that were morally unobjectionable while the B rating was saved for films morally objectionable. What the Legion was most concerned with were films that received the C rating which stood for condemned (Miner, 2013, p.22). Aside from the straight ABC system, the Legion also added subsequent categories to the A rating, which went from A-I to A-IV. Each category reflected the content in the film with A-1 being suitable for all audiences and A-IV reserved only for adults. Each C-rated film would be followed by a simple explanation as to what the issue was in each film. According to Brad Miner, “the Legion never concerned itself with artistic merit (nor, until recently, have its successors)” (Miner, 2013, p. 22). The Catholic Legion of Decency started out small but over the years its membership grew and so did its power. While its influence on Hollywood grew, many began to wonder and critique the Legion’s impact on the film industry as a “threat to artistic freedom and individual rights, a threat all more menacing because it came from the Catholic Church” (Cadegan, 2001, p.256). Due to the its growth in membership to almost seven million in its first two years, the name of the Legion was changed to

National Legion of Decency. Many churches placed the Legion's list of film ratings outside their door and encouraged their members to take a pledge that condemned all motion pictures that contained indecent material and encouraged them to inform the public of immoral films and to unite in protesting against them (Miner, 2013, p. 22). The Legion maintained they were not forcing anyone to do anything; members who joined the Legion did so voluntarily. Their thoughts, they believed, reflected the values of the right-minded people speaking for the vast majority of voiceless and powerless citizens (Cadegan, 2001, p. 272).

In 1934 the Legion engineered the appointment of Joseph Breen, an Irish-Catholic, as head of the Production Code Administration. Hollywood was now under Hays's, Breen's, and the Legion's control. Due to his Catholic ties and deep faith, Breen made sure that the code was strictly followed and the Legion of Decency helped maintain immoral material from being shown on the big screen. Despite Breen's strict hand on filmmakers, the motion picture "Gone With the Wind" opened a debate that would not be completely resolved for another 20 years. At the end of the movie the lead male character, actor Clark Gable, says "damn;" a word that Hays Code strictly prohibits. Breen asked for the word to be removed from the dialogue but producer, David Selznick, managed to obtain PCA approval after petitioning for an exemption (Baar, 2009, p. 228). In his petition addressed to William Hays, Selznick states:

I do believe, however, that if you were to permit our using this dramatic word in its rightfully dramatic place, in a line that is known and remembered by millions of readers, it would establish a helpful precedent, a precedent which would give to Joe Breen discretionary powers to allow the use of certain harmless oaths and

ejaculations whenever, in his opinion, they are not prejudicial to public morals. (Selznick, 2010).

Victor Fleming's film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's best selling novel went on to win numerous awards and is to this day the highest grossing movie of all time when adjusted for inflation with over \$1.6 billion worldwide ("All time box office," 2015). After Selznick's minor victory over censorship, other filmmakers also began to push the limits as to how much they could get away with.

TV and foreign films had been hurting the motion picture's profits and it was clear that in order for the industry to survive, changes had to be made. "Gone with the Wind" was a clear indication that there was a profitable market for a less censored film industry. After William Hays's retirement in 1945, the Motion Picture of America Association (MPAA) was formed and the development of a movie rating system was set in motion. With pressure from both TV and foreign films, producers wanted a different set of rules, which would allow them more freedom. In 1952, film distributor Joseph Burstyn, brought forth a case that was a major victory for the film industry as it largely marked the decline of motion picture censorship (Strub, 2009, p. 871).

Burstyn was the distributor of a short film titled "Il Miracolo" (the Miracle) in which "a peasant woman assumes Virgin Mary—like grace through motherhood" (Strub, 2009, p. 872). The Catholic Church declared the movie to be harmful and blasphemous and despite the film passing its initial review, the New York state legislature gave into pressure and reversed its approval. Burstyn took the issue to the Supreme Court in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson* where the court ruled in favor of Burstyn establishing that movies are a form of expression and therefore should be protected under the First Amendment



(Strub, 2009, p.272). The decision was a giant step for the film industry allowing for more freedom of expression in films and condemning the previous ruling made during the *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* case of 1915.

The PCA and the Legion maintained control of cinematic censorship until 1954 when Breen retired. By this time the Hays Code seemed outdated and many filmmakers demanded a modernized version of the code that would represent the changing values of society. Hollywood wanted its liberation from the code as the profitability of adult cinema was being confirmed by few small films such as “Moulin Rouge,” “The Barefoot Contessa,” and “From Here to Eternity” who grossed over \$12.5 million (Simmons, 1997, p. 76). It was obvious that a production code written in 1930 could not survive in the 1950s environment where producers and theatres were openly disregarding altogether. In 1953, several theatres released “The Blue Moon,” a film that had not received PCA approval. Later that same year, Howard Hughes released “The French Line” also without PCA approval. According to Jerold Simmons, after these events “the industry’s solid front was broken and the code system was severely shaken;” “setting off speculation that the PCA might not survive to celebrate its twentieth anniversary” (Simmons, 1997, p. 76, para. 6).

After Breen’s retirement in 1954, Geoffrey Shurlock, who had been Breen’s chief assistant, took over the position. Unlike his predecessor, Shurlock understood the need for a reformed production code (although he was still believed firmly in the code) and alongside his colleagues helped draft a package to make minor amendments designed to eliminate elements of the code that were no longer pertinent to the times. The amendments prompted by the package focused mostly on miscegenation and forbidden

expressions. Despite ongoing pressure from Hollywood for the PCA to modify the outdated code, the conservative board of directors of the Motion Picture Association resisted any modification fearing any change would signify weakness and also fearing protests from members of the Legion. The two main words that caused controversy were “hell” and “damn;” two words that producers felt they should be able to use in their films. Shurlock and the board were confronted with several films that included either “damn” or “hell” within their scripts and producers asked exemption from the code just as Selznick had done with “Gone With the Wind” (Simmons, 1997, p.76).

Granting exemption from the code to some films and not others would have caused many protests from producers who accused Shurlock and the board of favoritism. Rather than risk any more problems with the film industry and asking for waivers regarding screen scripts he used the opportunity to once again ask the board to adapt the revision package drafted earlier that same year. Once the board of directors agreed to the amendments, filmmakers realized they could push the boundaries even more and became defiant adding more profanity into their scripts. Although the amendments did not liberate Hollywood it did give producers the courage to resist the code and Shurlock found it increasingly difficult to enforce it. The imprecise guidelines presented by the amendments caused problems as producers began bypassing the code altogether and more theatres began releasing their films without PCA approval. By 1966, the release of the drama “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf” and its excessive profanity brought the end to the Production Code of 1930 (Simmons, 1997, p. 76).

The Legion eventually also lost most of its membership and power as the production code lost its grip on Hollywood. The Legion’s legacy was the descriptive

portion placed below films rated C. The MPAA would eventually adopt this method of adding descriptors for the reasoning behind each rating. Hays code remained active for 38 years until the first modern version of the rating system, consisting of G, M, R, and X was established in 1968, as the Golden Age of Hollywood culminated (“*Why: History of Ratings,*” 2013). G-rated films meant that they were suitable for the “general audience” and that nothing in the content was perceived to be offensive to parents or children; there was no nudity, sex scenes, or drug use. M-rated films were for mature audiences and parental discretion was advised while R-rated films meant no one younger than 16 years of age was permitted without a parent or guardian. X-rated films were for adults only and no one under the age of 18 was allowed to watch them (“*How: Tips to be Screenwise,*” 2013).

Today, R-rated films do not admit any children under 17 unless a guardian accompanies them. The rating system, as opposed to the Hays Code, did not approve or disapprove what the audience should see. The rating system tried to instruct parents and adults about the content of each motion picture so they could decide what their children viewed (Leone & Bissell, 2005). As the movie industry transformed and developed, some changes were made to the system, one of which included the addition of a PG-13 rating and changing of the M ratings to PG, which stood for Parental Guidance. The PG-13 rating was not established until 1984 and the first movie to be rated as such was “The Flamingo Kid.” PG-13 ratings were meant to inform parents of an increase in violence and offensive material in comparison with PG films (“*Why: History of Ratings,*” 2013). Motion pictures rated PG-13 are allowed to have violence, nudity, profanity, and drug use without being excessive to garner the R-rating. With respect to language in PG-13 films,

producers are allowed to use one of the harsher words—such as the f-bomb—in their picture so long as it is not used in a sexual way (“Classification and Rating Rules,” 2010). With the addition of PG-13 ratings, X-rated films were changed to NC-17 in 1990 and a description of the movie’s content was also added to every rating. This led to today’s rating system, which has become more parent-oriented.

The Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) is an independent division of the MPAA and helps inform parents about the content in motion pictures shown in the United States (“Classification and Rating Rules,” 2010). According to the classification and rating rules which CARA adheres to, “It is not CARA’s purpose to prescribe socially-appropriate values or to suggest any evolution of the values held by American parents, but instead to reflect the current values of the majority of American parents, so that parents benefit and feel fairly informed by the ratings system” (“Classification and Rating Rules,” 2010). CARA is constantly changing as elements in society change. With the new rating system in place “filmmakers were free to make the film they wanted, which would then receive an appropriate rating” (Leone & Osborn, 2004, p. 85). The PG-13 rating was established to inform parents that the film contained material that was not appropriate for PG rating but not excessively to garner the R rating. The issue lies in determining what falls into a PG-13 film. In today’s society, producers try to include as much as they can get away with into PG-13 films. They try to push the limit without breaking into the R-rated category. The purpose of this is simple. PG-13 films bring in the most money because they have no restrictions, just cautionary warnings. R-rated films have restrictions, meaning no child can buy a ticket without an adult present; this, however, is not the case for PG-13 films. Producers want to attract the

largest audience possible and it is much easier to do it through a PG-13 film that encompasses a wider margin of age groups; they can be appealing to young and older viewers.

Many people could argue that the PG-13 movie rating is inconsistent and that some films get away with compromising scenes while others do not. Because the ratings are assigned by a group of people who view and determine the ratings, there are bound to be some errors. But the concern lies within this aspect. The wide and grey spectrum in which PG-13 lies is constantly wavering. One movie may contain one F-bomb and receive the PG-13 rating while another movie with the same profanity plus violence and sexual scenes may receive the exact same rating. According to the classification and rating rules, CARA is made up of a chairperson, senior raters, and regular raters. To become a member of the Rating Board one must be a parent and have children between ages five and fifteen. Once all of your children turn 21 you must leave the rating board unless you are asked by the chairperson to become a senior rater. There are various issues with this; one being that not every rater will view the film the same way. Some raters may have older children and therefore may be less sensitive to the movie's elements and vice versa. The fact is there are definitely some loopholes and producers and filmmakers take advantage of this and try to test the limits of PG-13.

As the boundaries of PG-13 ratings are pushed, the question whether ratings creep is evident or not arises. This "ratings creep" pattern refers to the increasing amount of adult content in films with adult content encompassing everything from profanity to violence and sexuality (Potts & Belden, 2009, p. 267). The issue with ratings creep is the effects it can potentially have on children. Many studies and research have been

conducted to determine if and how violence on screen affects young children.

Experiments such as the famous bobo doll experiment conducted by Albert Bandura and his colleagues in 1961 showed that children who view violent behavior on screens are more prone to replicate the same behavior. In the study, children were divided into three groups of 24 children consisting of 12 girls and 12 boys. One group was exposed to scenes in which a model was behaving aggressively towards the bobo doll. A second group was exposed to scenes in which the model showed non-aggressive behavior towards the doll. The third group of children was used as a control group and was not exposed to any scenes (Bandura, 2001).

The children who viewed someone playing violently with the bobo doll onscreen reacted the same way when they were placed in a room with a bobo doll and other toys as opposed to the other children who were not exposed to such violent scenes. The kids punched it, hit it with a hammer, pretended to shoot it with a toy gun, and did other violent acts. The experiment was replicated and the same outcomes were seen. This experiment showed that violence onscreen viewed repeatedly over time could have a negative effect on young children as they try to replicate it (Bandura, 2001). During Bandura's experiment the children saw the violent act and replicated it. The results do not necessarily indicate that watching violent material makes a child violent but rather that it has the potential to increase a child's aggression as the child views violence and tries to imitate it. This is part of the social cognitive theory in which people see something, learn it, and in turn replicate it. The social cognitive theory is just one of many to try and explain the effects of violence on screen.

It is also possible to apply George Gerbner's cultivation theory to understand how media content affects young viewers. At its basis, the cultivation theory means that viewers (in this instance children) adopt a false notion of a violent world (ChallengingMedia, 2006). The cultivation theory seeks to explain that frequent viewing of themes can produce a false notion of reality. If children frequently view violent films over a period of time then they may become more susceptible to adopting the notion that the world is in fact a violent and dreadful place. Gerbner refers to this as the "mean world syndrome" which leads to consequences such as posing a "greater degree of danger onto the world. That you are less sensitive to violence that is going on because you believe that that's the norm of the outside world" (ChallengingMedia, 2006).

George Gerbner established his idea of cultivation in the 1960s (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p.337). Although Gerbner's focus was on television, the same approach can be taken with movies. The basis is simple; you reap what you sow. If a viewer repeatedly watches a violent show or film that contains explosions, gunfire, murder, death, and chaos then that person is more likely to perceive reality as such. The idea is that repeatedly viewing violent content can make viewers hostile and hostility leads to violence and therefore is cause for concern. Gerbner states in his article, "these institutional processes of the mass-production of messages short-circuit other networks of social communication and superimpose their own forms of collective consciousness—their own publics—upon other social relationships" (Gerbner, 1970, p. 69) In other words what Gerbner is saying is that the media can drown out reality by superimposing it's own social communication on viewers who repeatedly watch it; meaning that the viewers adopt the media's perception of reality rather than reality itself.

Crime, sex, and violence are what sell and the screens have become obsessed with it. Gerbner (1998) states, "For the first time in human history, children are born into homes where mass-produced stories can reach on the average of more than 7 hours a day. Most waking hours, and often dreams, are filled with these stories" (p. 176). Children exposed to so much violence may form their reality on a false basis that the world is a violent place and the only way to survive is with violence. Surveys conducted show that frequent viewers of violent content are the people most likely to believe their neighborhoods are unsafe and are also most likely to buy locks and guns for protection (Gerbner, 1996, p.11). It is, in a way, a never ending cycle. The more violent material the media puts forth the more restless frequent viewers become, increasing the probability of them engaging in a violent act.

Although research has been done with regards to the effects of screen violence, very few studies concerning the effects of sexual media content on children have been conducted. Previous studies have used pornography and other explicit material and therefore have not used children as subjects (Leone & Osborn, 2004, p. 87). Despite the barriers for such research other studies have shown that children look to movies and TV and learn from such media whether it be intentional or unintentional.

Ross O'Hara, a post-doctoral professor at the University of Missouri, along with his colleagues conducted a six-year study to examine the effects of movie sexual exposure (MSE) on children before the age 16 and its relation with risky sexual behaviors. The study involved 1,228 adolescents within the age range of 12-14. The subjects reported which movies they had seen from a collection that had been randomly selected. They were surveyed six years later to determine what their sexual behavior was



like and at what age they became sexually active. The results of the study showed that higher MSE at an early age does predict more risky sexual behaviors in adulthood.

“Restricting adolescents’ MSE would delay their sexual debut and also reduce their engagement in risky sexual behaviors later in life” (O’Hara, Gibbons, Gerrard, Li, & Sargent, 2012). Therefore children who are exposed to PG-13 films that contain a higher dosage of sexual material are the ones being affected the most. Sexuality is abundant in movies and often times it is shown without the consequences of a one-night stand or the issues that can come with a promiscuous lifestyle engaged in risky sexual activity. The teenage years are the most influential years in which children learn new experiences and often times these experiences are heavily influenced by what they see.

The same issue arises with profanity. During the implementation of the Production Code of 1930, profanity had been almost completely eradicated. It states within its rules that “pointed profanity or vulgar expression however used, is forbidden” (AMPP Inc. & MPPDA, 1930, p. 596). Today, what was once a taboo has become the norm. “Interestingly, just as language changes over time, so too does societies’ reaction to it” (Cressman, Callister, Robinson, & Near, 2009, p. 128). This all has to do with the changes in societal values. Some words have become obsolete and this is because words in themselves are not inherently good or bad; society decides. If you place a child in front of a TV screen and repeatedly play a movie containing bad language, it will not be long before the child learns and repeats a bad word without necessarily understanding what the word means.

Just as with violence the social cognitive learning theory can be applied here as well. A child replicates behavior learned from observing others. Unlike radio and

television, which share the same rules, the film industry has more liberties being only being affected by its potential rating. According to psychology professor Lora L. Jacobi, “There has been a general increase in the use of profanities spoken in both public and private settings. Words that would have been censored by the media twenty-years ago are now commonplace” (Jacobi, 2014, p. 262). In a study conducted by Coyne, Stockdale, Nelson, and Fraser to better understand attitudes and behavior regarding profanity use and aggression, results showed that adolescents who are exposed to profanity through their preferred media are more likely to view it positively and adopt the usage of such language. “Profanity use sometimes can represent aggressive behavior; therefore, it is not surprising that use is associated with aggression subtypes” (Coyne, Stockdale, Nelson, & Fraser, 2011, p. 870). In movies there are only a few rules against profanity. If a film uses one of the heavy words more than once or in a sexual manner then that film is rated R. In a study analyzing the profanity of teen movies from 1980-2006 conducted by Dale L. Cressman and his colleagues, results showed that there has been an increase in the usage of mild and sexually profane words but a decrease in the usage of the heavier, dirtier words (Cressman et al, 2009). The issues then are the mild words that tend to run rampant within PG-13 films intended for teens. There is also the probability of hearing one of the harsher words such as f\*\*\* once throughout any given PG-13 film.

If viewing violent and sexual scenes and listening to profane language can cause children and adolescents to adopt similar behaviors then viewing drug and alcohol usage can also cause children and adolescents to replicate the modeled behavior. According to a study conducted by Dal, Gibson, Zanna, Shumate, and Fong with regards to smoking in movies and the potential influence on young audiences, results showed that “identifying

with the protagonist led to a greater implicit association of smoking with the self, but only when the protagonist smoked” (Dal, Gibson, Zanna, Shumate, & Fong, 2007, p. 561). After studying and monitoring several undergraduate males who were either exposed to scenes in which the protagonist smoked or did not smoke, the data collected shows how the media exerts its influence. After a viewer identifies with the protagonist there are subtle influences that activate associations between the self and smoking. (Dal et al, 2007) Alcohol and drug use scenes appear in many PG-13 and R rated films and although they are not directly telling the viewers to pick up smoking or drinking, they are however portraying it to be acceptable. Smokers and drinkers might be encouraged to continue with their habits through scenes portrayed in the media such as movies.

Due to all the potential issues that these types of scenes can cause on children it is important to determine if the MPAA and CARA have allowed more adult content to seep into films rated for a younger audience. The results from a study conducted by Leone and Osborn show an indication of ratings creep in PG-13 movies. After analyzing a complete list of movies from 2000-2002 based on their rating descriptors, the results showed over time “the MPAA has allowed more intense and lengthy depictions of various types of content that could be considered inappropriate for children into movies that are categorized (by their PG-13 rating) as appropriate for children” (Leone & Osborn, 2004, p. 97).

### **Research Hypotheses**

Due to the higher probability of attracting larger audiences and therefore larger profits, most film studios try to make their films obtain the coveted PG-13 rating. To do

so, they will try to incorporate edgier material into the film's content as much as possible without reaching into R-rated territory; therefore the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: PG-13 films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in adult content.

Since this research focuses on four areas in film content: violence, sex, drug/alcohol abuse, and profanity, a separate hypothesis was made for each area of concern.

H1a: PG-13 films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in violence.

H1b: PG-13 films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in sexual content.

H1c: PG-13 films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in drug/alcohol abuse.

H1d: PG-13 films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in profanity.

R-rated films will also be analyzed to determine whether an increase has or has not occurred just in PG-13 films or if it is a trend that can be seen across the board, indicating a cultural change in society's values. Therefore the following hypothesis is proposed for R films:

H2: R-rated films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in adult content.

H2a: R-rated films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in violence.

H2b: R-rated films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in sexual content.

H2c: R-rated films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in drug/alcohol abuse.

H2d: R-rated films beginning in 1984 until 2014 will see a steady increase in profanity.

## **Methods**

For the purpose of this research, two movie ratings were chosen to undergo a content analysis: PG-13 and R. It was essential to use PG-13 because of its wide spectrum of audiences; it is what most would call the “grey area” of the MPAA rating system. PG-13 is the bridge between motion pictures intended for the general audience and restricted movies. Due to this unique format of PG-13 rating, some adult content can get caught in the ongoing traffic and end up on the big screen. The purpose of analyzing R-rated films as well is to determine if ratings creep is a trend across the entire ratings spectrum. If the results show a strong indication that ratings creep has indeed allowed more adult content to seep into PG-13 movies, then is it just filmmakers trying to constantly push the boundaries or is it a trend that can be seen in R-rated films as well? To determine this, a content analysis was conducted using PG-13 and R-rated movies from the years 1984, 1994, 2004, and 2014. The starting year of 1984 was chosen because it was the year PG-13 ratings were implemented; before this the MPAA rating system was still undergoing various changes. A gap of 10 years was left between selected years to allow for a clearer picture of ratings creep if the final results indicated there were any. According to CARA Senior Vice President Joan Graves, CARA is constantly

undergoing changes as the values of society change and it may be hard to see it at first but as years progress it becomes more evident (Graves, n.d).

Determining which films to use proved to be a difficult task. At first, a randomly selected film was chosen for each rating and each year. During the content analysis it was determined that there were two variables rather than one. The film's genre was not taken into account, creating an issue in the research and potentially skewing the final data. Movies labeled as drama and comedies often times have more sex scenes than movies labeled as action and vice versa. To correct this, the randomly selected movies had to fall under one genre and for the purpose of this research action thrillers were chosen. The website [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com) was used to determine the 25 highest grossing movies of the selected years and each movie was assigned a number from 1 to 25 in the order it was listed. A random number generator was used to randomly select each action thriller film used in the study. The PG-13 movies chosen for the study were the following: Red Dawn 1984, Clear and Present Danger 1994, The Bourne Supremacy 2004, and Nonstop 2014. The R-rated movies chosen were: Missing in Action 1984, Pulp Fiction 1994, Collateral 2004, and Lucy 2014.

Profanity was defined as any word considered a "curse" word in today's modern language, words referring to sexual organs other than their scientific name and used out of context, and racial words that are considered demeaning. Therefore, if a movie had a scene in which the word penis was used and it was referring to the male reproductive organ then it was not considered profanity because it was in context. However, if a scene contained the word p\*\*\*y, and it was referring to a woman's reproductive organ than it was considered to be profane as it is not the scientific name and it was used in a profane

manner. Another example would be the use of the “n-word,” when referring to blacks in films. The “n-word” is meant to be demeaning and is inappropriate; therefore, it was considered profanity. The films chosen were viewed various times to make sure the data collected was accurate and no profane words were omitted when counting the quantity of times they occurred. The same coding scheme was adopted that was used by Dale Cressman and his colleagues in their study (Cressman et al., 2009). The profane language coded was separated into six categories: seven dirty (shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, tits), sexual words which include body parts when used sexually (e.g. jackoff, screw, boobs, pussy, dick, bone, boner, etc.), excretory words (e.g. asshole, crap, ass, dick, etc.), mild which includes blasphemy (e.g. damn, Goddamn, hell, Christ, Jesus Christ, etc.), strong (e.g. bastard, bitch, prick, bullshit, etc.), and racial slurs (e.g. nigga, wetback, spick, gooks, slopes, etc.). The last category was not used in Cressman’s study but it was decided that it should be included in this content analysis. The seven dirty words are words that the FCC does not allow to be spoken on broadcast. It was expected that R-rate movies would have a more substantial amount of profanity than PG-13 films causing the ratings to be what they are.

Drug and alcohol scenes were defined as any scene in which a character was either personally in taking it, distributing it, purchasing it, or feeling the after effects of taking it. Sexual references and nudity were grouped together because most of the times they go hand-in-hand. Scenes including sex and nudity were defined as any scene in which excessive kissing and fondling led to removal of clothing, passionate scenes in which the act of sex was occurring or implied, scenes in which sex was occurring but could only be heard, and scenes in which there was some form of nudity. A shower scene

in which the man or woman's buttocks can be seen would be considered nudity and therefore would be included. Another example would be a scene in which a couple is having sex and it cannot be seen but only heard and therefore what is happening is obvious to the viewer.

From the four categories analyzed, the hardest to examine was violence. Violence varies in degree from soft, such as punching a wall, to hardcore violence such as ripping someone's heart out. In all movies chosen to examine there was bound to be all kinds of violence but they would all vary in severity. To analyze the different violent scenes a method was derived in which a scene would fall into a designated category depending on the severity of the violence. There are different aspects that make a violent scene graphic such as: sound, point of view, blood, type of action, and duration. Taking each element into consideration each scene was rated from 1-4. Depending on the number the scene received, it was then placed under one of the following categories: Soft=(1), Mild=(2), Hard=(3), Severe=(4). For the purpose of this research soft violence was defined as any scene in which a character was shouting while throwing or destroying things, acting violently and recklessly, pushing or man-handling others. Mild violence was defined as fighting scenes in which weapons were used (such as bats, guns, tasers, etc.) but no blood was shown and no deaths occurred. Strong violence was defined as scenes in which there were shootings, some blood, and deaths. Strong violence, however, did not include severed body parts or torture. Severe violence was defined as scenes containing torture, slow deaths, severed body parts, and gore. After all scenes were analyzed for each film, the data was plotted on a line graph representing each category to determine any significant trend.



Before collecting the data, a secondary person was trained and instructed on how to conduct the content analysis of each film. To ensure Inter-rater reliability for violence, the trainee was shown multiple random clips containing certain degrees of violence and was asked to rate each one from 1-4 according to their severity in violence after having been explained what each rating included. Each film was viewed three times to make sure there was the least amount of error in the data collected. The reason for defining each violent rating was to avoid the errors of possible desensitization that may occur from repetitive viewing. By setting a clear definition it increased the reliability of each rating.

## **Results**

After analyzing each PG-13 film for the four main categories, rater (a) results showed an overall increase in profanity with a minor dip in the 2004 movie “The Bourne Supremacy.” Overall, 101 words were recorded as mild, 12 were excretory, 1 was sexual, 19 were strong words, and 17 were in the seven dirty category (see appendix 1, table 1). No racial slurs were found in either of the films. Both strong and excretory language showed an increase (except in 2004) with 41.67% of all excretory words found in the 2014 movie “Nonstop.” The Liam Neeson action-thriller also contained 52.63% of all the strong words as well as 43.5% of all the mild language. There was a minimum increase between 1984 and 1994 with regard to the overall amount of profanity. The 1994 film “Missing in Action,” however, contained the majority of the seven dirty words for a total of 41.18% followed by 2014, 2004, and 1984 respectively.

The data shows there has been an overall increase in profanity within PG-13 movies in last 40 years. The data collected by rater (b) indicated a similar pattern with similar results (see table appendix 1, table 2). Only 98 mild words were recorded out of

which nearly half (42.86%) were found in the 2004 movie. The same film also contained the most excretory and strong words. “Clear and Present Danger,” made in 1994, contained the most words from the seven dirty category. Although there was not a large amount of excretory words the overall result indicates an increase in mild, excretory, and strong words with racial slurs and sexually explicit words not being a factor. The average was taken after the totals between both raters were added to establish a more accurate set of data (see appendix 1, table 3).

For the drug/alcohol and sexuality/nudity categories, both raters’ results were the same. There were seven scenes showing legal consumption of alcohol, drugs, or tobacco products. Another three scenes portrayed the usage of illegal drugs for a total of 10 scenes. The 1984 film contained no drug or alcohol scenes followed by 2004 with only two scenes, then 1994 with three, and 2014, which contained four scenes. According to the data collected, there was a slight increase in the amount scenes containing legal drugs or tobacco products but there was no clear indication that portrayal of illegal drug usage has increased in the last 40 years. With regards to sexuality and nudity, there were only two scenes in total. One scene was found in the 1994 film, “Clear and Present Danger,” and the second was found in 2014 film, “Nonstop.” Both scenes were very mild and the results showed no real evidence indicating there has been an increase in sexual content over the past 40 years.

Violence was found to waiver between years. Each violent scene was rated on a 1-4 scale with 1 being the softest violence and 4 being the most severe form of violence. The ratings were then added to give each movie a total score; the higher the score, the more violent the movies was. In the top spot was 1984 film, “Red Dawn,” which

contained the majority of hard violent scenes totaling 11 for rater (a) (see appendix 1, table 4) and 10 for rater (b) (see appendix 1, table 5). Hard violence seemed to show a slight decrease from 1984-2014, with 2014 containing the fewest hard violent scenes (see appendix 1, table 6).

The data collected, however, indicates an increase in soft and mild violence (see appendix 1, table 7) with the 2014 film containing the majority of the mildly violent scenes and 2004 having the majority of the soft violent scenes (see appendix 1, table 8). The films received the following scores after their data was collected and totaled: 1984 = 36, 2004 = 30, 2014 = 29, and 1994 = 23. The data shows an increase in violence from 1994 but an overall decrease in violent content over the past 40 years (see appendix 1, table 9).

R-rated films were expected to contain more explicit material than PG-13 since R-rated films have fewer limitations as to what can and cannot be included within its content. The data collected for profanity in R-rated movies shows the wide spectrum that that rating contains. The 1994 film, "Pulp Fiction," is notorious for its frequent usage of f\*\*\*. The word was said over 255 times. Sometimes the word was used over three times in the same sentence making it hard to record the amount of times it was said throughout the movie. The films were reviewed three times by each rater and the average of those three times was then taken to form one set of data for each rater.

In contrast with the 1984 film that contained 489 profane words according to rater (a) (see appendix 2, table 1) and 482 according to rater (b) (see appendix 2, table 2), the 2014 film, "Lucy," only contained a total of nine profane words. If ranked in order of

most profane, the list would be the following: 1994, 2004, 1984, and 2014. Going by the results and data, the only clear trend is a decrease in all categories of profanity over the last 30 years. The results show no clear indication of an increase or decrease in profanity from 1984-2014 (see appendix 2, table 3).

R-rated films contained more alcohol and drug scenes than PG-13; almost three times as much. In this category there was also only one trend visible, which was a decrease in the past 30 years regarding scenes containing legal drug, alcohol, or tobacco use. There was no clear indication of an increase or decrease in scenes containing illegal drug, alcohol, or tobacco use according to both raters. The 1994 film contained the most alcohol and drug scenes, totaling 13 according to rater (a) (see appendix 2, table 4) and 12 according to rater (b) (see appendix 2, table 5). Both raters collected the same exact data for sexuality and nudity scenes. A total of 12 scenes were recorded overall with the 1984 film, "Missing In Action," containing half. The 1994 film contained three scenes while the 2004 Tom Cruise film contained one, and the 2014 film contained two. The analysis indicates a slight decrease in sexuality and nudity scenes over the past 40 years.

After analyzing the violent content and the severity of each scene the most violent movie turned out to be the 2014 film, "Lucy," followed closely behind by the 1984 film, "Missing in Action." Soft violence showed a slight decrease from 1984-2014 (see appendix 2, table 6) across the data collected by both raters. Mild violence seemed to increase in 1994, but the overall trend indicates a slight decrease in the past 40 years (see appendix 2, table 7). Hard and severe violence were a different matter. Hard violence

demonstrated an increase from 1994-2014 (see appendix 2, table 8). This, however, does not prove that there has been an increase in hard violent scenes in the past 40 years.

The 1994 and 2014 film contained almost the same amount of hard violent scenes. The data collected for severe violent scenes also showed no indication of an increasing or decreasing trend as the results showed a wave pattern (see appendix 2, table 9). As opposed to PG-13 films that have had an overall decrease in violence according to the collected data, the total score of each R-rated film indicates that there has been a decrease from 1984-2004 but an increase from 2004-2014 (see appendix 2, table 10). An overall decreasing or increasing pattern, however, cannot be established over the past 40 years.

## **Discussion**

The results do not prove H1, hypothesizing a steady increase in adult content in PG-13 films over the past 40 years. Rather, the results indicate the opposite; a decrease in adult content in PG-13 films over the past 40 years. The only hypothesis that is supported by the results is H1d, an increase in profanity contained in PG-13 films from 1984-2014. H1a, H1b, and H1c are not supported by the findings. With regards to R-rated films none of the hypotheses were supported by the results. There was no clear indication to support an increase in overall adult content in R-rated films to support H2. H2a hypothesized a steady increase in violence over the 40-year timespan but there was actually a decrease from 1984-2004. An increase could only be seen from 2004-2014 but there was not enough evidence to indicate a trend over the past 40 years. H2b, H2c, and H2d were not supported. There was no clear evidence by the collected data indicating an increasing or decreasing trend in each category. Although the results of the content

analysis do not indicate an increase in adult content in PG-13 films, there is still need for future research.

Some things to keep in mind for future research are the sample size and genre. For the purpose of this study only action/thriller films were analyzed. A combination of multiple genres could potentially provide more information on ratings creep. Another limitation in this study was the number of films chosen. Only a total of eight films were analyzed. A larger sample size per year could help pinpoint a possible trend in content.

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APPENDIX 1

(table 1)

<b>Amount of Profanity in PG-13 Films (Rater A)</b>					
Category	Film Year				total
	1984	1994	2004	2014	
mild	26	21	10	44	101
excretory	2	2	3	5	12
sexual	0	1	0	0	1
strong	2	6	1	10	19
racial slurs	0	0	0	0	0
seven dirty	2	7	3	5	17
<b>total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>64</b>	

(table 2)

<b>Amount of Profanity in PG-13 Films (Rater B)</b>					
Category	Film Year				total
	1984	1994	2004	2014	
mild	26	20	10	42	98
excretory	2	2	3	5	12
sexual	0	1	0	0	1
strong	2	6	1	10	19
racial slurs	0	0	0	0	0
seven dirty	2	7	3	5	17
<b>total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>62</b>	

(table 3)

<b>Amount of Profanity in PG-13 Films (Average between both raters)</b>					
Category	Film Year				total
	1984	1994	2004	2014	
mild	26	20.5	10	43	99.5
excretory	2	2	3	5	12
sexual	0	1	0	0	1
strong	2	6	1	10	19
racial slurs	0	0	0	0	0
seven dirty	2	7	3	5	17
<b>total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>36.5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>63</b>	

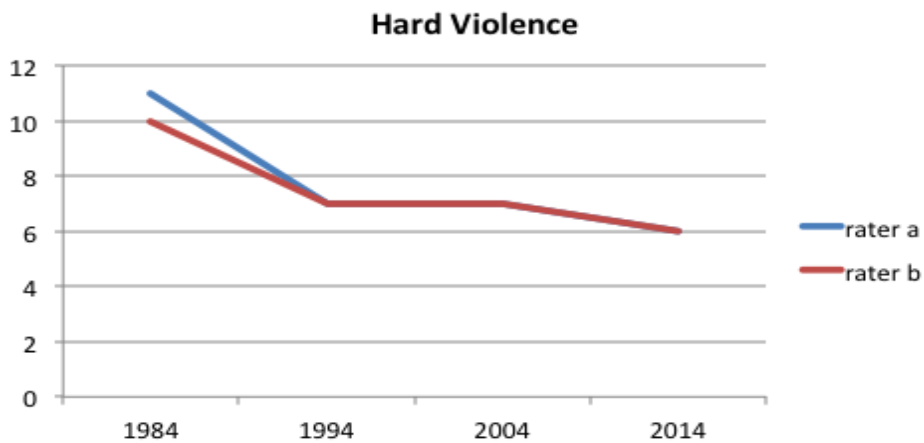
(table 4)

		Film Year				
		1984	1994	2004	2014	total
Severity	1	1	0	3	1	5
	2	1	1	3	5	10
	3	11	7	7	6	31
	4	0	0	0	0	0
	<b>total scenes</b>	13	8	13	12	
	<b>total score</b>	36	23	30	29	

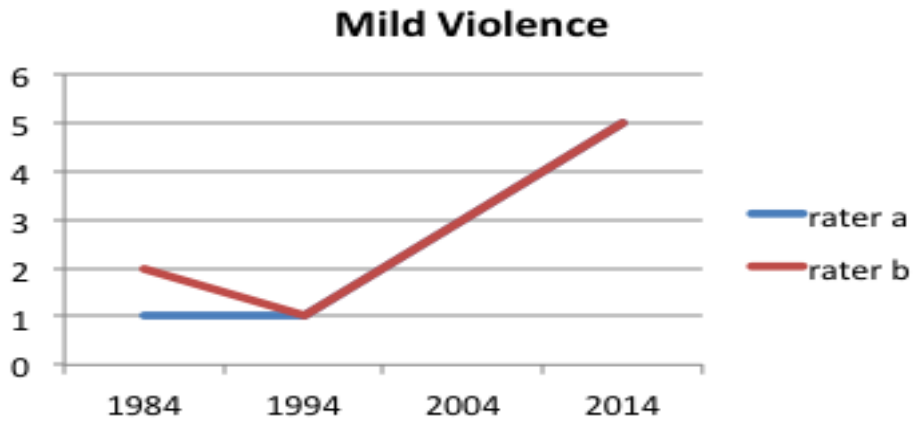
(table 5)

		Film Year				
		1984	1994	2004	2014	total
Severity	1	1	0	3	2	6
	2	2	1	3	5	11
	3	10	7	7	6	30
	4	0	0	0	0	0
	<b>total scenes</b>	13	8	13	12	
	<b>total score</b>	35	23	30	30	

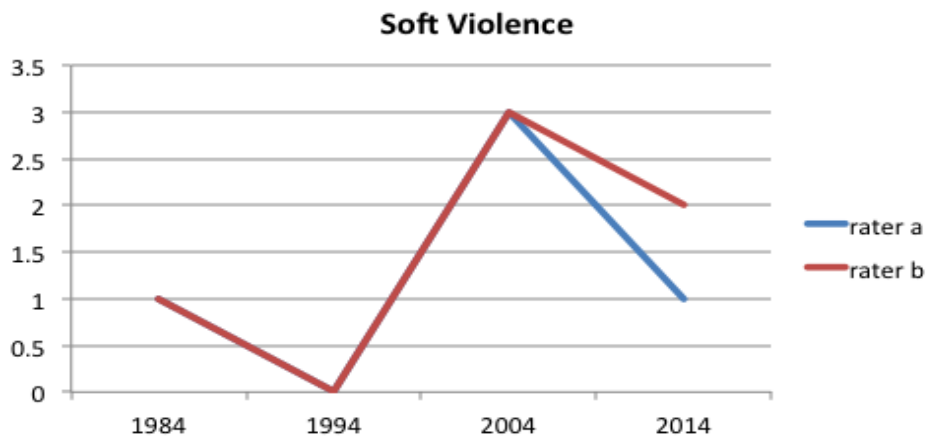
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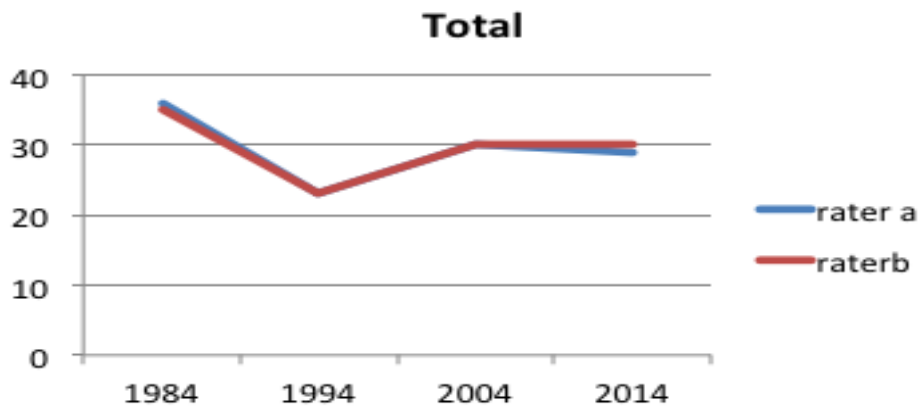
(table 7)



(table 8)



(table 9)



APPENDIX 2

(table 1)

<b>Amount of Profanity in R-rated Films (Rater A)</b>						
	<b>Film Year</b>					
	<b>1984</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>total</b>	
<b>Category</b>						
	mild	17	55	17	2	91
	excretory	2	41	16	3	62
	sexual	1	5	2	0	8
	strong	5	17	8	0	30
	racial slurs	0	28	0	0	28
	seven dirty	8	343	48	4	403
	<b>total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>489</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>9</b>	

(table 2)

<b>Amount of Profanity in R-rated Films (Rater B)</b>						
	<b>Film Year</b>					
	<b>1984</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>total</b>	
<b>Category</b>						
	mild	17	57	18	2	94
	excretory	2	40	15	3	60
	sexual	1	5	2	0	8
	strong	5	16	8	0	29
	racial slurs	0	26	0	0	26
	seven dirty	8	338	49	4	399
	<b>total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>482</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>9</b>	

(table 3)

<b>Amount of Profanity in R-rated Films (Average between both raters)</b>						
	<b>Film Year</b>					
	<b>1984</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>total</b>	
<b>Category</b>						
	mild	17	56	17.5	2	92.5
	excretory	2	40.5	15.5	3	61
	sexual	1	5	2	0	8
	strong	5	16.5	8	0	29.5
	racial slurs	0	27	0	0	27
	seven dirty	8	340.5	48.5	4	401
	<b>total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>485.5</b>	<b>91.5</b>	<b>9</b>	

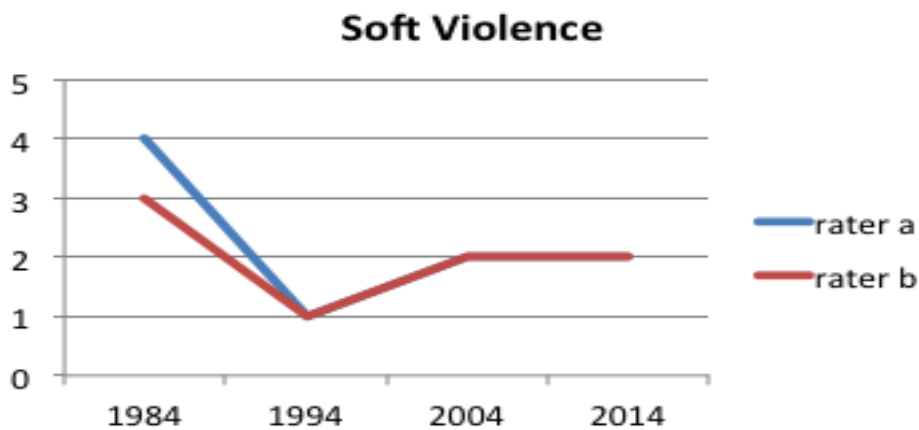
(table 4)

		Film Year				
		1984	1994	2004	2014	Total
	alcohol and legal drugs	4	9	3	2	18
Category	Illegal drugs	0	4	0	4	8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	

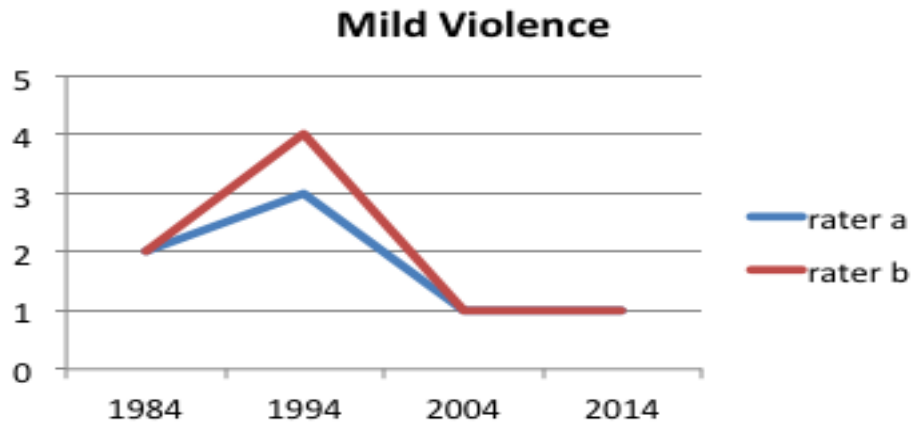
(table 5)

		Film Year				
		1984	1994	2004	2014	Total
	alcohol and legal drugs	4	8	3	2	17
Category	Illegal drugs	0	4	0	4	8
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	

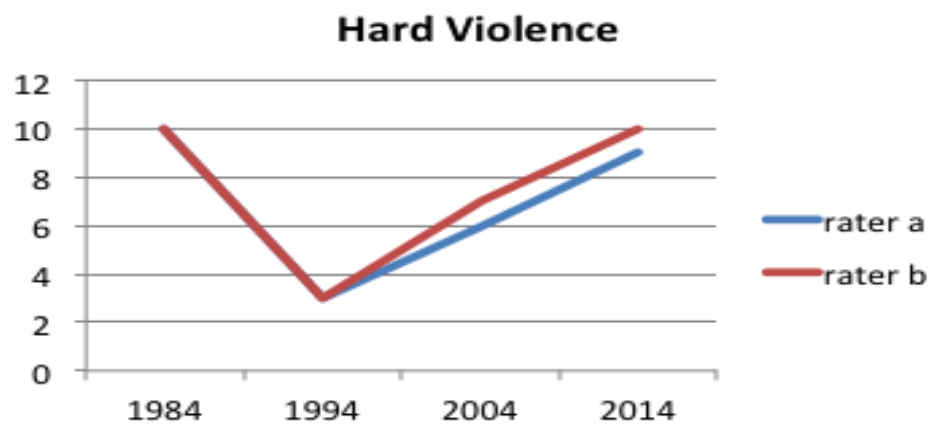
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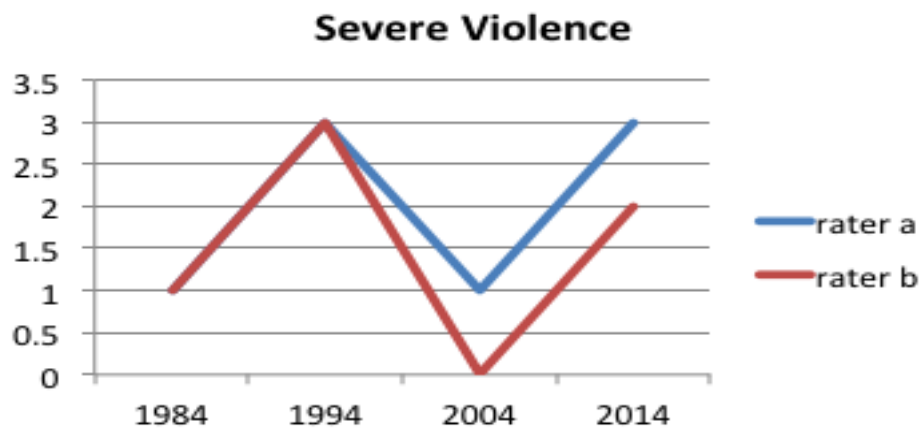
(table 7)



(table 8)



(table 9)





(table 10)

