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STRAIGHT OUTTA FILMS: A QUALITATIVE MEDIA ANALYSIS OF THE  
HYPERREALITIES OF YOUTH GANGS

by

Naima Lakha

Master of Arts, Wilfrid Laurier University 2020

THESIS

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## Abstract

Much of what people learn outside their neighbourhoods and personal boundaries is through mass media. As such, it is not surprising that the media has potential to significantly influence public perceptions (Bourke, 2013). Due to the media's profuse ability to influence public perceptions and the frequency in which gangs are depicted within the media, it is important to understand how they are portrayed. Involvement in a gang is depicted in the media as being intriguing for individuals, and as Preston et al. (2012), note that the media is often inclined to sensationalize criminal gang activity. They cite Gordon's 2001 research which proposes that gangs often benefit from media focus to glamorize gang memberships, increasing perceptions of recognition and power within specific communities (Preston et al., 2012). Although the media glorifies gang involvement, this is most often not the reality. Additionally, the issue of fake news is a recurring issue when looking at the accuracy of the media, particularly when it comes to the portrayal of youth gangs. The theory of the Social Construction of Social Problems is used to direct this research to determine the accuracy of the media representation of youth gangs. This study fills the gaps in the minimal research that has been completed on this topic, and its findings confirm that the media does not truly portray the true accuracy of youth gangs overall. Furthermore, it was found that films portray youth gangs as social problems in society; although they accurately depicted the events that occurred during the time the film was made, they did not correctly illustrate gangs, gang activity, and gang members within society.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The number of individuals watching television is growing, whether for leisure or for informative purposes, such as watching the news (*The Atlantic*, 2018). The media can, in fact, serve as a form of symbolic reality when individuals lack direct personal experiences. The mass media is a medium in which individuals first learn about the world beyond their neighborhoods and outside their borders (Bourke, 2013). However, it is important to note that the mass media also play a significant role in influencing one's reality (Bourke, 2013; Saefudin & Venus, 2007). Historically speaking, film was the first medium that was able to avoid the traditional socializing means of church, schools, family, and community to reach individuals with images and information (Surette, 2015). Additionally, the impact technology has on the day-to-day lives of people today is unprecedented. According to Statistics Canada (2007), 29 percent of Canadian adults reported having watched an average of 15 hours or more of television per week, and 19 percent reported 21 or more hours a week. Canada TV Media (2008) found that Canadians spent 25 hours a week on average watching television. Statistics indicate that, overall, individuals spend a great amount of time watching television; therefore, the frequency of viewing could mean that visual media plays a significant role in shaping the beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of its viewers. Since the rate of television watching is increasing, it may be said that the media has substantial impacts on shaping individual's beliefs regarding various topics.

Though one would expect news media to influence public perceptions of crime and justice issues, research increasingly suggests that popular entertainment, including movies, may have a similar impact. In a study exploring the relationship between media consumption and fear of crime, Ditton, Chadee, Farrall, Gilchrist, and Bannister (2004) found that on average both high and low consumers of media worried the same amount about the crime related content to

which they were exposed. In many cases, what one sees in the media is a distorted overall image of a certain topic or problem. According to Gerbner and his colleagues (2002, as cited by Jamieson & Romer, 2014), the dominant cultural medium of television fostered a social reality that was often different from objective reality. They were attentive to the effects that the violent television content had on creating fear in audiences and predicted that it would produce fear of others in the audience. Gerbner et al. proposed that heavy exposure to crime-filled television content in the long-term would gradually develop unrealistic fears and mistrust of others.

In a society where technology is expanding into all areas of life, one could expect that technology has a greater cumulative influence on our attitudes and beliefs due to the increased accessibility of media and media messages. The increased exposure to many forms of media can lead to the issue of fake news as a recurring phenomenon (Quintanilha, Tores da Silva & Lapa, 2019). According to Lazer et al. (2018), fake news is defined as "... fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (p. 1094). Misinformation regarding various topics may influence the opinions and understandings of the audience regarding their concerns. Most often, the media plays a significant role in influencing public perception, regardless of the topic on which it is focused (Nelson & Taneja, 2018). Increasing the public's exposure to technology means that media has begun to focus on films regarding crimes committed by young adults. I contend that the public's perception of youth gangs is predominately determined by their portrayal in the mass media – in this case feature-length films. My research explored this this issue.

While youth gangs may not be clearly visible in some communities, this does not mean they do not exist. According to Dunbar (2017), the existence of youth gangs in North America is on the rise. Previous research has looked at youth gangs in association to factors including race,



gender, and socio-economic status as well as the psycho/social aspects of gang involvement; however, there is a lack of research that addresses the media portrayal of young adults in films compared to the gang's presence in North America . The goal of this qualitative study is to conduct a comparative analysis of academic literature and feature-length films in order to address the similarities and differences in media portrayals of young adults. This study examines the following three questions: a) How does popular film construct gangs as social problems? b) Has media portrayal of gangs changed over time? If so, how? c) Do the media portrayals of gangs, gang members, and gang activity support or challenge research findings in these areas?

## **Chapter Overview**

This thesis is divided into six chapters. First, Chapter One offers the reader a brief introduction to the topic by introducing the three major research questions this study explores. Moreover, it discusses the importance of this study and its relationship to the significant impact of 'fake news' the media may have on its viewers. Chapter Two examines the theoretical orientation of social constructions in the social problems framework. I examine literature about the issue of fake news and how it impacts the public's perceptions of youth gangs through media representations. Chapter Three then discusses the methodological approaches used to collect as well as analyze my data. I used a deductive, qualitative content analysis to examine several feature-length films from three different time periods. The main data sources were feature-length films as well as academic literature. Next, Chapter Four entails findings of the data collected from the films as well as the academic literature used. This chapter also discusses the analysis of the films, drawing from academic literature. Chapter Five focuses on the discussion of my research, including the findings of the data. This section answers the following question: Do the

media portrayals of gangs, gang members, and gang activity support or challenge research findings in these areas? Lastly, in the final chapter of my study, I conclude by discussing the limitations and challenges, as well as the implications of my study, and how it reveals that the media portrays youth gangs. The directions for future research is also discussed.

## Chapter Two: Review of the Literature/ Theory

The first known research on gangs in Canada was a study of Toronto street gangs, specifically juveniles, conducted in 1945 by Kenneth H. Rogers. Since then, there have been several evaluation studies and research projects which have contributed to the knowledge base on gangs (Dunbar, 2017). Gang scholarship began emerging in the United States during the late 1920s when Chicago School sociologists began studies pertaining to the gang problems that were present in urban America (Enzeonu, 2014). This issue caught the attention of researchers in Canada again in the 1990s after various police departments and media outlets attributed several street shootings in metropolitan centers to youth gangs (Enzeonu, 2010).

Although there are several definitions of youth gangs presented in academic literature, I use the definition of a gang as stated in the Criminal Code of Canada. This is because many of the definitions developed by scholars are narrowly focused on particular gangs, whereas, the Criminal Code provides a broad definition of gangs that is more applicable for use when analyzing feature-length films. As defined by Section 467.1(1) of the Criminal Code of Canada, a gang is a criminal organization or group, regardless of the way it is organized that is

“a) composed of three or more people in or outside Canada; and b) has one of its main purposes or main activities the facilitation or commission of one or more serious offences that, if committed, would likely result in the direct or indirect receipt of a material benefit, including a financial benefit, by the group or by any of the persons who constitute the group” (Canadian Criminal Code, 1985).

It is important to note that the classification of a gang is often extended to include motorcycle gangs, terrorist gangs, and prison gangs, however, the focus of this research is specifically focused on youth gangs. Youth in this research are defined as individuals between 12 and 19 years of age. Focusing on the portrayal of youth gangs within films allows me to explore the accuracy of what is portrayed within the films in comparison to reality in North America.

In general, research shows the risk for antisocial and criminal behaviour is highest in adolescence and early adulthood (Fagan & Western, 2005; Shulman et al., 2013). Not surprisingly then, the issue of youth gangs is seen as an on-going social problem. Currently, Canada has 434 reported youth gangs with approximately 7,000 gang members nationally (Public Safety Canada, 2018). Often youth join gangs to gain a sense of belonging in a specific community, whether it be to fill in the void of the lack of relationships and/or social bonds (Preston et al., 2012). Involvement in a gang is often seen as being intriguing for individuals by its depiction in the media. The media is inclined to sensationalize criminal gang activity (Preston et al., 2012). As cited by Preston et al. (2012), research suggests that gangs often benefit from the media focus of the glamorization of gang memberships (Gordon, 2001). Although the media glorifies gang involvement, this is most often not the reality. Often films misrepresent the involvement of young adults in gangs. The misrepresentation of the involvement in gangs ultimately leads to the issue of fake news since all the portrayals in the media may not be entirely accurate. For some young adults, involvement in a gang accelerates their journey into adulthood since membership is seen as their pathway into being distinct from others (Preston et al., 2012). The following literature review explores the issue of fake news, as well as how gender, race, and socio-economic status all play a part in involvement in gangs. All themes found in the literature play a substantial role in understanding gang involvement among young adults.

### **Media Representations**

The media plays a significant role in the lives of individuals, so it is important that media representations are accurate to avoid a moral panic outcry. Topics such as youth culture and youth gangs often make for popular subjects in mass media due to its glamorization. Goode and

Ben Yehuda (1994, p.39) explain that, "... by their nature, moral panics are volatile; they erupt fairly suddenly (although they may lie dormant or latent for long periods of time, and may reappear from time to time) and, nearly as suddenly, subside" (as cited by Poynting et al., 2001).

Weegels (2018) looked at the meanings of youth crime and policing that were acquired contextually by their mediated representations on the news in Nicaragua. She found that the media representation of the apprehension and detention of the deviant youth was a significant event since news channels engaged its viewers' in a public manifestation of moral belonging in the community that clearly established who belonged and who did not. She concluded that the increase of youth crime events covered in the news can be seen as a strategy that was used to justify repressive policing practices against certain suspected offenders.

As discussed by Jiwani and Dessner (2016), many scholars focused on stereotypical representations in media narratives which made Muslims distinct, in both social and national contexts and made them prone to increased surveillance and criminalization. This indicates that the portrayals of Muslims in the media has contributed to them being a group viewed with suspicion. This relates to youth gangs in the same way since the media places emphasis on them as a group who are viewed as potentially violent. According to van Dijk (1993) headlines in newspapers act as 'cognitive organizers' since they summarize the story for the audience by telling us what to expect according to those writing it. Jiwani and Dessner (2016) state that within news media, particularly the press media, Muslim youth were perceived as being enemies both by themselves and others.

The media not only focuses on aspects of youth crime, they also take a special interest in representations of youth gangs. In their study about representations of gangs and delinquency, Perrone and Chesney- Lind (1997), found that the media often over-report news that is crime

related by exaggerating facts such as: the seriousness of the crime, the damage caused as well as the violence that occurred. While studying the contrasting media depictions of youth gangs with empirical evidence, Esbensen and Tusinski (2007), found that newspapers painted a distorted image of youth gangs. The portrayal leaned towards stereotypical depictions of the gang which was consistently seen in various media.

They further found a major contributing factor for the distorted image was the lack of attention paid towards distinguishing between youth gangs and other gangs such as prison gangs (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). Esbensen and Tusinski (2007) concluded that the media can be seen as being more focused on contributing to distorting the image of youth violence in general, as well as gang violence in particular, than it does accurately exhibiting the scope and nature of the overall problem. This misrepresentation of youth gangs may play a significant role in influencing public perceptions. Sacco (1995) claims that reports by the media have altered the perceptions of its viewers' by broadly influencing their ideologies (as cited by Perrone & Chesney-Lind, 1997). Violent incidents are often exaggerated, and the media bear little similarity to the actual reality of youth violence and crime (Esbensen & Tusinski, 2007). In addition, Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn (2011), explored whether there was a relationship between the type of programming watched and whether the fears and perceptions that individuals held about crime and crime rates were influenced. They found there was a complex relationship among the viewing patterns, attitudes towards the criminal justice system and the fear of crime. The researchers concluded that the more often nonfictional crime programming was watched by individuals the more fearful they were towards being criminally victimized (Kort- Butler & Sittner Hartshorn, 2011).

## **Gender of Gang Members**

Gender plays a significant role in an individual's association with gangs since gender is often an important organizational feature of groups. Historically, gangs were classified as male enterprises. Early studies on gangs briefly mentioned the existence of female gangs but presented little documentation of participation (Thrasher, 1927). This has significantly changed in recent years. A study conducted by Bell (2009) examined whether males and females varied in risk factors related with gang membership by looking at parent-child relationships, association with deviant friends, and community characteristics. Current research that explores the reasoning behind why youth join gangs found three common themes: having connections to gang involved family members or friends, neighbourhood disadvantages and experiencing problems within the family such as drug or alcohol addiction and lack of supervision and neglect (Bell, 2009). Bell (2009) goes on to study gender differences in gang membership.

Early adolescence is often a difficult period for females, during this time, one's peer group often have a stronger influence on the individual than their families do (Wang, 2000). Early adolescence can be classified as a period of time in which a middle school girl is often most vulnerable to the development of her ideas, attitudes, values and interests. Therefore, it can be said that the type of social environment in which an individual is raised in is an important indication to gang affiliation (Wang, 1996, as cited by Wang, 2000). According to Eghigian and Kirby (2006), girls often ranged from being hard-core members of the gang to groupies that were looking for somewhere to hang out and have a good time. They also found that most often girls joined gangs for the same reasons as boys did – identity and status, peer pressure, financial opportunity, and family dysfunction and protection. They also found that some girls joined the

gangs because they were present in their community and were viewed as an everyday part of life (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006; Bell, 2009).

Campbell (1991, as cited by Bell, 2009) found that female gang members usually came from more disadvantaged backgrounds compared to male gang members. She stated that females in gangs were more likely to come from broken and unemployed homes and reported family violence that included parental drug use compared to males (Bell, 2009). It was also argued that females were more likely to join gangs because they had fewer options in disadvantaged neighborhoods, while seeking ‘familial’ peer groups by filling in the void of not having emotionally fulfilled relationships in their lives (Bell, 2009). The study used data from Add Health, a national sample of adolescent from Grades 7 to 12 with data collected in three separate waves between 1994 and 2002. The study also found substantial gender differences regarding gang entry for individuals based on if they were immigrants. Non-immigrant females were more likely to engage in gangs compared to the males. However, research indicates that first generation immigrant females in the United States were less likely to engage in gangs compared to males of the same status.

When answering the question regarding whether there are gender differences in the risk factors associated with gang violence, the study found that there were sizable similarities between both females and males associated with gang involvement (Bell, 2009). Despite females having an increased involvement in delinquency, gang involved males are more significantly involved in the serious crimes than females, since they were known to purposely keep the females from participating in serious crime affiliated activities (Miller & Brunson, 2000). Miller and Brunson (2000) also found that the men in all-male gangs believed that young women do not belong in gangs, since they did not want females around them doing the things that ‘the fellas’ do



(p.443). Anderson (1994), found that teenage girls were beginning to mimic the boys to be able to establish their own sense of 'manhood', they wanted to gain respect, and to be known to be capable to a setting or maintaining a certain standard of their self-image in relation to their gangs. Often this was accomplished by following the behavior of the boys by using abusive language, posturing, and violence to resolve disputes. Males most often were concerned about their threat of justice at the hands of their peers rather than the police (Anderson, 1994). They felt that they did not have much to lose if they were to go to prison, instead they had something to gain – toughness. They believed that going to prison toughened-up an individual's experience, this would enhance their reputation when they were back on the streets (Anderson, 1994).

Additionally, The National Institute of Health (2016) studied the health implications of gang involvement, specifically for females. Although, the rate of gang membership for youth is significantly lower in Canada than it is in the United States, youth gangs, particularly female gangs, are becoming a growing issue among Canadian jurisdictions. This is a significant public health concern since the participation of individuals in gangs is linked to serious adverse social and health outcomes. These include substance use, traumatic stress symptoms, delinquency and amidst females, sexual victimization and unintended pregnancy (Marshall et al., 2016). The findings of Marshall et al. (2016) supported a body of literature that found gang-involved females and females who reported gang affiliation in their social networks were at a considerably increased risk of sexual and physical violence. The risk factor of childhood sexual abuse for females who were gang involved proposed that gang intervention for females should aim to help both the harmful impacts of childhood sexual abuse and the continuing risks of physical and sexual violence after gang initiation (Marshall et al., 2016). Most females who were gang-involved had personal relationships with male gang members, as sisters, daughters, nieces,

granddaughters, or girlfriends. Those who did not have personal relationships with the gang members became involved through forced prostitution, sex trafficking, and sexual exploitation (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006; Totten, 2010). Having a relationship with a member of a street gang was often the reason in the birth of children who ultimately grew up indoctrinated to the way of life in a gang (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006).

A study conducted by O'Neal et al. (2014) studied differences and similarities between male and female experiences among gang members regarding disengagement. Prior research was referred to as several previous studies found that for both males and females a significant risk factor was the association with delinquent friends. The study analyzed data from interviews with 143 adolescents as well as young adults regarding their status as past gang members in Phoenix, AZ, and Los Angeles, CA in 2011 (O'Neal et al., 2016). Significant differences were found between males and females, including the age when they left the gang, and the number of children they had. On average, females had more children and left their gang three years earlier than males (O'Neal et al., 2016). However, they did not differ significantly in terms of race, parents' education level, whether they had children and the generation of immigrants they were (O'Neal et al., 2016). It was also found that female exit strategies for gangs intensely resembled males. The most common method of leaving gangs for both genders were passive strategies such as moving away, just leaving, and being allowed to leave by the gang.

### **Race of Gang Members**

In some cases, race plays a noticeable role in determining whether an individual belongs to a gang. One's ethnicity and skin colour often determine their social status in society. Within

Canada, the ethnic makeup of youth gangs crosses several cultural boundaries and youth often join groups of people from similar backgrounds since it provided them with a sense of comfort.

To date, in Canada, research has consistently reported that Indigenous peoples are overrepresented in the criminal justice system (Corrado et al., 2014; Martel et al., 2011; Mohammadi, 2018). Consistent with this finding, Indigenous youth are similarly overrepresented in the youth justice system (Mohammadi, 2018). Recent statistics show that Indigenous youth make up 21% of gang members (Public Safety Canada, 2018). Compared to the ethnic makeup of other gangs in Canada, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan have an extensive number of culturally similar youth gangs (Preston et al., 2012). Totten (2010) defines Indigenous youth gangs as “visible, hardcore groups that come together for profit-driven criminal activity and severe violence” (p. 255).

Although most Indigenous individuals do not become gang-involved despite growing up in high-risk environments, some become involved in gangs due to the suffering and challenges they have faced throughout their lives. In fact, many youths were recruited in facilities established to help them with their difficulties. These facilities include justice and child welfare centers (Totten, 2010). Indigenous girls and women are most vulnerable to gang recruitment due to the misogynist and sexist value and practices found in Indigenous as well as non- Indigenous communities. Reasons why Indigenous youth joined gangs included a means of identity development, protection, access to a steady income, and a sense of family (Totten, 2010). According to the US National Youth Gang Survey from 2008, 50 percent of all gang members were Latino/ Hispanic, 32 percent were black/ African American, and 11 percent were white/ Caucasian (National Gang Centre, 2010 as cited by Howell, 2010). In their study, Pyrooz et al. (2010) addressed the issue of gang memberships in large cities in the US. They aimed at

determining if racial and ethnic diversity constructed the relationship between economic disadvantage and gang membership.

Thrasher (1927) found that ethnicity, race and nationality were all important factors for gangs in neighborhoods in which adolescents allied with other youth of similar backgrounds (as stated by Pyrooz, 2010). This was also evident in the Chicago School research where the emphasis was on racial and ethnic patterns (Thrasher, 1927, as stated by Pyrooz, 2010). Thrasher (1927) also discussed the succession of an ethnic group to another in specific neighborhoods. This eventually led to the formation of ethnic groups in response to the changing 'racial complexion' of neighborhoods (Thrasher, 1927, as stated by Pyrooz et al., 2010). Furthermore, Thrasher (1927) noted that inter-ethnic European rivalries were prevalent (i.e. Jewish vs. Polish) as "old world antagonisms are carried over into gang wars" (Thrasher, 1927, as stated by Pyrooz et al., 2010, p.872). Adamson (2000) believed that many gangs were based upon 'defensive localism' purposes, in which the youth gathered in alliance when they faced cultural change (as stated by Pyrooz, 2010, p.872). Vigil (2002), in his study documented evident differences in cultural changes which caused gang formation among four distinct racial and ethnic groups in Los Angeles; Vietnamese, Salvadorans, Blacks and Mexicans (as stated by Pyrooz et al., 2010). Although these four groups differed from one another culturally, they shared alike paths in the formation of youth gangs. According to Vigil (2002), the four groups mentioned above experienced what he referred to as "multiple marginality," this occurred when breakdowns of economic and social factors led to an appropriation of 'street socialization' (as stated by Pyrooz, 2010, p.873).

According to Yiu and Gottfredson (2014), delinquent gangs most often involve intergroup conflict since most gangs have their own distinct ethnic and racial identities. Previous

research suggests that Latino and African-American youths are more likely to report more gang participation compared to Asian and White youths (Yiu & Gottfredson, 2014). According to the National Gang Centre, law enforcement agencies recorded a larger number of Latino/ Hispanic and African-American/ Black gang members compared to other ethnicities (2011). It is important to note that Black individuals are no more likely than White individuals to approve the values that justify the use of violence (Brezina et al., 2004 as cited by Anderson, 1994). Most psychological and sociological significant measures or classifications are often not based on race or ethnicity but of socioeconomic status and the level of socialization within ethnic cultures of origin or the several community cultures in the United States. In addition, as continual generations began living in heterogeneous communities, the heterogeneous cultural traditions and expectations may have resulted in less behavioral regulations and an increase in delinquency (Yiu & Gottfredson, 2014). Sampson (2008) proposes that the integration of immigrant individuals into American culture over a period of time or generations may deteriorate the successful cultural restraints against crime which will result in an increase of violence in line with integration into the country's fairly violent culture (as stated by Yiu & Gottfredson, 2014).

### **Socio-economic Status of Gang Members**

An individual's socio-economic status contributes to how they are perceived in relation to the likelihood of engaging in deviant behavior. Most often individuals from less advantaged neighborhoods are perceived as delinquent since they face socio-economic disadvantages. It is often perceived by society that the higher an individual's socio-economic status the less likely they are to engage in deviant activities. By simply living in a lower advantaged neighbourhood, young people are at risk of falling victim to aggressive behaviors (Anderson, 1994). Pyrooz et

al., found while some disadvantaged areas generate gangs, others do not (2010). Research found that as socio-economic status increased crime rates and social problems tended to decrease. They looked at economic disadvantage alongside two theories; social disorganization and anomie/strain theory, which both profoundly relied on economic disadvantage as being a crucial predictor for social problems (Pyrooz et al., 2010). Depending on the theory applied, the mechanisms by which economic disadvantage nurtures gang formation differ. The social disorganization perspective argues that poverty creates a breakdown of informal social controls. This results in the social reorganization, from which gangs form. Whereas strain/anomie theory posits that gangs form as a response to blocked structures of opportunity which results in a shift of what represents success, and a legitimate way to achieve that success for youth (Pyrooz et al., 2010). However, regardless of the theory that is used, it is difficult to argue that gangs and gang members are more likely to formulate in the more economically disadvantaged areas due to the fact that the mechanisms of economic disadvantage of gang formation are operationalized differently by each theory.

Therefore, it is problematic to conclude that the areas of lower economic advantage form the same quantities of gangs and gang members. Vigil and Klein theorize that gangs usually form in communities where there is the presence of various forms of disadvantage coming together, including; lack of opportunities, family disruption, economic disadvantage and racial discrimination (Vigil, 2002, Klein, 1995, as stated by Pyrooz et al., 2010). The emergence, as well as the viability, of gang memberships and gangs rely on the degree to which the disadvantages are more prevalent within communities. A majority of cities across America with populations greater than 100,000 individuals experience a gang presence, however, it is

important to note, that cities that have an increased economic disadvantage often meet a larger presence of gang members (Pyrooz et al., 2010).

As cited by Yiu and Gottfredson (2014), Shaw and McKay (1942) discovered that communities characterized as having residential instability and high poverty rates tended to have greater crime rates. Their research suggested that the communities with high crime rates remained the same regardless of the changes in the ethnic composition overtime. Sampson and Groves (1989), explain the gap between economic characteristics and community demographics and the rates of delinquent behavior by arguing that delinquency was a phenomenon derived from unsupervised peer groups. They proposed that informal and formal social bonds within one's community would increase the communities' communal effectiveness in controlling its youth, which would result in the decreasing delinquency and crime rates (as stated by Yiu & Gottfredson, 2014).

According to Anderson (1994), in poor African-American communities there exists a 'code of the street', which pressures African-American men to respond to certain situations and disrespectfulness with violence. However, he found that the code of the street was not only visible within African-American communities, but also present within disadvantaged Latino and Caucasian communities. The code of the street was a function of the neighbourhoods that were economically disadvantaged rather than of race. Individuals were more likely to adopt the code if they were poor, male, victims of violence, engaged in violence, harshly disciplined by their parents and poorly supervised, experienced discrimination, held the belief that their opportunities were limited, and especially associated with violent peers (Anderson, 1994; Brenzina et al., 2004).

## **Fake News**

The issue of fake news is not recent; in fact, this problem has been present for many years. In 2012, the term “fake news” referred to late night television shows such as ‘The Daily Show’ and ‘The Colbert Report’ which distorted the line between news and comedy (As cited by Nelson & Taneja, 2018). However, more recently the term refers to misinforming information used to look like a news story-based fact to influence public opinions (Nelson & Taneja, 2018). In the United States, two in three adults believed that confusion created about current issues and events, along with basic facts, is caused by the presence of fake news (Barthel et al., 2016 as cited by Nelson & Taneja, 2018). According to Zaryan (2017), the definition of fake news within the media includes the various dimensions of hoax, satire, imprecise news as well as news that is poorly reported (Quintanilha et al., 2019). Researchers such as Hofseth (2017), believe that fake news serves two different purposes: 1) To sway the audience in the form of propaganda, and 2) for media outlets to benefit from the content that is being produced and widely spread by gaining more viewers (Quintanilha et al., 2019).

The likelihood of individuals being influenced is greater in society today due to the reoccurrence of the fake news phenomenon in the media. Bourke (2013) explains that individuals construct the meanings of films by filtering them through their own experiences and perceptions by viewing films. While watching the film the audience tends to connect to the space and time in which the film is in, creating a bond. A bond is formed through the medium of the film due to the belief that the film significantly connects to the audience’s realities (Bourke, 2013). This developing bond increases the potential for the film to become a dominant tool to shape the audience’s perceptions about various topics. A bond is essential formed through the medium of



the film due to the presence of believability that the film considerably connects to the audience's realities (Bourke, 2013).

In his study, Bourke (2013) examined the role college-themed films played in influencing the perceptions of international students. He found that although many international students resorted to films to get an idea of the college experience in the US, the films were not entirely accurate. He stated that resorting to films as a data source proposed significant implications to higher education. Films are intended to provide more than mere entertainment, they were to offer audiences opportunities to gain perspectives on the college experience (Bourke, 2013). Films play a significant role in providing entertainment to their audiences; however, they may also play a part in shaping the perceptions of issues in the general public. Although the role of films is not to offer social commentary, they may contribute to the altering perceptions of their audiences.

In their study, Wen et al. (2018) examined the influence of films and television on Chinese tourist's perceptions towards international destinations. They found that the exposure that individuals had towards the different types of media played vital roles in sharing their social and cultural activities. They discovered that television shows and films specifically acted as 'pull' factors by attracting tourists to certain locations where the filming occurred. Furthermore, they stated that the consumption of the images seen in films and on television influenced the understanding and perceptions of the audience towards certain destinations (Wen et al., 2018). The overall findings of their study proposed that a large portion of the Chinese population that traveled internationally were enthusiastic about films and television, and that stronger ties with films and television impacted on their international travel intentions. Media allows us to access experiences we could not otherwise access, however, we may not realize that these experiences may not reflect reality. In other words, we are exposed to mediated realities. Whether it is

intentionally or unintentionally, the media has a way of influencing the perceptions and understandings of its audiences, whether it be by films, television, or simply the news.

### **Social Problems Theory**

According to Loseke, a social problem is defined as "... a condition evaluated as wrong, widespread, and changeable... [it] categorizes conditions we believe are troublesome, prevalent, and can be changed" (2003, p. 7). Issues such as human trafficking, poverty, racism, drugs, etc. are all examples of social problems (Schneider, 1985). A social problem is based on what society classifies as a problem, according to Henry & Milovanovic (2000), social problems are significantly based on an individual's interactions with others as well as their cultural beliefs. Social problems offer an opportunity so a resolution to the problem can be found. Schneider (1985) explains that social problems are labels since they are adverse problems that need to be dealt with on higher scales since it affects society as a whole. Social problems vary from person to person, thus, what one may see as a problem others may not. That being said, the media plays a significant role in influencing the public to believe that a certain topic is a social problem.

Social constructionists contend that social problems are constructed through the process of claims-making. In this process, a claim may be classified as being visual, verbal, or behavioral action that tries to sway the public to take a certain social condition seriously, thus turning it into a social problem (Loseke & Best, 2003). Claims-makers make claims, they claim that a condition must be acknowledged as social problem and resolved. In order to convince the general public that a particular social problem exists, claim-makers are responsible for constructing the grounds/ conditions of the social problem (Loseke, 2008). The conditions used are defined in a way in which claims-makers are able to influence the public to characterize and perceive the condition to be problematic. Furthermore, claims-makers such as experts, powerful corporations,

filmmakers etc. assert a certain condition to be wrong and that something must be done about the condition (Best, 2008). Claims-makers put forth ideas to the public and use the media as a platform to bring their claims to the reach of wider audiences. According to Loseke (2003), the mass media is a significant aspect of social problems, as the popularization of the mass media has increased the publics' reliance and trust of mediatized information. He further states: "peoples' ratings of specific conditions as a 'problem important to society' depend more on the coverage they have seen on television than on their personal experience" (Loseke, 2003, p.41). In other words, what is presented to the public by mass media is what people often think to be true.

Often, claims-makers portray certain individuals as social problems. This can be problematic when these individuals are often constructed as villains in society; these include but are not limited to sexual deviants, dangerous outsiders, and murderers (Loseke, 2003). The process of constructing individuals as villains may lead to feelings of condemnation, punishment as well as blame among the public, ultimately influencing public perceptions (Loseke, 2003). In the case of my study, the youth that participate in the gangs are constructed as dangerous outsiders, ultimately as villains.

Claims-makers construct frames that openly blame individuals, thus urging the audience to feel hatred towards them. Most of the time, claims can be effective if they construct grounds that include pure victims and extremely horrifying consequences, for example, an elderly woman who is raped in her apartment by male who broke into her house (Loseke, 2003).

In this case, the film industry are the claims-makers, since they appeal to their wide range of audiences through the portrayal of individuals or groups within their films (Loseke, 2003). A variety of mass media, particularly the film industry, has greatly contributed to the emergence of the false portrayal of youth gangs. The presence of youth gangs has been advertised and

projected as both news and entertainment within society. It is commonly acknowledged that media plays a significant role as claims-makers within the creation of social problems (Best, 1989 as cited by Xu, 2015). Since the act of claims-making involves convincing others to believe that a certain issue is a social problem, it is important to note that not all claims made will be successful, thus the claim is sometimes altered to better fit society's opinions. Best (2013) further explains that as time passes claims-making becomes uninteresting, over-saturated and over-used; resulting in reworking the impending social problem in newer ways in order to capture the attention who the claim is intended for. The claim being exaggerated by the claims-makers can then result in the meaning of the social problems being misinterpreted by the targeted audience.

### **Summary**

The media plays a significant role in constructing public perceptions. Thus, the reoccurring phenomenon of fake news plays a significant role. Therefore, media may intentionally use fake news tactics to change the audience's perspectives to benefit from personal gain. For example, filmmakers may base the direction of their films based on their beliefs and values, which may instill fear in the eyes of the public even though information may not be accurately represented. Studies also explore the various factors that play a significant role in determining a young adult's likeliness to be involved in a youth gang. Gender, race, socio-economic status were the themes I prevalent throughout many of the studies examined. Each theme was related to the likeliness of a young adults involvement in a gang. These studies took various approaches into measuring the role each factor played into the role youth played in gangs. Although, researchers have studied youth gangs in relation to gender, race and socio-economic status, there is a substantial lack of research conducted regarding the media portrayal

of their presence in North American released feature-length films. For this study, I analyze 12 different films over three time periods; the pre-1980's, 1980 to 2010 and 2010 to 2019.

Identifying the differences between the portrayal of young adults in feature length films compared to their presence in real life can allow us to differentiate between what is real and fake.

This differentiation may contribute to better understanding how fake news influences public perception. Utilizing three different time periods will allow me to better understand whether the depictions of youth gang activity has changed over the years.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

This research project used a qualitative media analysis to examine the portrayal of youth gangs in popular film media (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Briefly, the aim of qualitative research is to understand everyday life's social processes (van den Hoonaard, 2015). In addition, a qualitative media analysis is beneficial in conducting an extensive analysis of frameworks, images and discourse. Given the purpose of the present study, I adopted a document analysis approach to qualitative content analysis. Specifically, a media and/or document analysis is a form of qualitative research utilized to gain a clearer understanding of themes, frames, and discourses present in documents (Altheide & Schneider, 2013 van den Hoonaard, 2015). According to Altheide and Schneider (2013), analyzing documents is a crucial process within a media analysis since it is "an integrated and conceptually informed method, procedure, and technique for locating, identifying, retrieving, and analyzing documents for their relevance, significance, and meaning" (p. 17). The method of document analysis is used to understand social meanings, culture and even institutional relations (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

#### **Research Goals and Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine media portrayals of youth gangs in popular film. The analysis was conducted through a Social Problems theory lens. My intent is to look at how the mass media - popular films in particular portray youth gangs on the big screen. I am specifically interested in seeing whether their portrayal changed over the decades, as the production of films increased. In addition, I wanted to examine whether the portrayals of the gangs in respect to factors such as ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status within popular film contrast the research that has been done throughout time. While I acknowledge that there is

a relationship between psychological and social factors of gang involvement, I chose to focus on the social factors within content due to the scope of the project as many of the films did not delve into the psychological elements of the characters. Three specific research questions were proposed:

1. How does popular film construct gangs as a social problem?
2. Have the media portrayals of youth gangs changed over time and if so, how?
3. Do the media portrayals of gangs, gang members, and gang activity support or challenge research findings on real-world gangs in these areas?

### **Data Source/ Data Collection**

Feature-length, English language films that received a theatrical release (limited or otherwise) in North America were the main data source used in this study. The films were selected based on the key terms found in synopses provided on the International Movie Database (IMDb) website, which is an online database that provides information about various media sources such as films, home videos, television programming, video games and more. The films analyzed derived from three different time periods: pre-1980, from 1980 to 2010 and from 2010 to 2019. The reason for analyzing films from three different time periods was to compare whether the portrayal of youth gangs changed overtime.

The films that were analyzed from the pre-1980 era are: *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961), and *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979). The films that were analyzed from 1980 to 2010 are: *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton, 1991), *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005), *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006). Lastly, the films that were analyzed

from 2010 - 2019 are: *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010), *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013), and *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015). A brief synopsis of all nine films is found in appendix A.

The second data source I used was academic literature. The academic sources looked extensively at youth gangs. I used broad search terms such as; 'deviant youth', 'youth subcultures', as well as more focused terms such as 'youth gangs', 'youth violence', 'delinquent youth' in order to gather the academic literature. Much of my literature search focused on the different factors of youth gangs such as, age, gender, race and socio-economic status.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Briefly, I analyzed nine films in total, all ranging from three different time-periods. Three time periods were chosen to ensure I could analyze whether the portrayal of gang activity has changed over time within the films. While watching the films I recorded common themes that appeared as I was watching them. In particular, I looked at: race, gender, socio-economic status, age, type of activity, outcome of the activity, severity of the activity, and police response to the activity, as well as the purpose of the gang in the film. I watched each film three times throughout my data collection phase.

During the first viewing, I recorded the themes that I saw emerging within the films. After the first viewing I created a template with the emergent themes I found to use during the second viewing. In the second viewing, I used the template and expanded on the specific themes previously found. Watching the films more than once allowed my data to be saturated. This helped me clearly draw out the commonalities and differences in the films allowing me to better answer my research questions. Once I had collected my data, the information on the template was inputted onto my computer and saved in a word document. Using the word document



allowed me to organize the notes I had collected and allowed me to look at the commonalities that occurred within my data.

### **Coding Procedures**

Both open coding and focused coding were used to code the films that were selected. Open coding is the first step in the coding process, which involves the labelling of themes that are found within the data (van den Hoonaard, 2012). After watching each of the nine films for the first time, I went through the data from each film and highlighted sentences and words that connected to my pre-established characteristics using a template that I created. Through my data analysis, I found that there were other themes present throughout, so I began making notes in the margins, this helped me organize the new important themes that surfaced from each film data set. After each film was coded, I reread the data one more time to make sure no major codes or themes were overlooked. The initial themes were gender, race, age, and socio-economic status.

Once the initial state was complete focused coding was conducted, which is the second major phase within the coding process. Focused coding involves going through the material related to each open code, recoding them for more particular and important themes (van den Hoonaard, 2012). In this step my preliminary themes were organized and re-coded into more significant themes, by keeping the themes that were more significant to the data. The new codes were race, gender, socio-economic stats, type of crime/ activity, outcome of crime/ activity, severity of activity/ crime, police response, and the use of the gangs. Under each new theme added, I made notes regarding the description of the theme. Once I established the final codes/ themes I made a new template and transferred the data for each film onto the new template.

## **Chapter Four: Results and Analysis**

I conducted a qualitative media analysis through a social constructionist lens, with a sample of films to examine the portrayal of youth gangs. In this chapter, I outline the analysis of those films in order to identify the differences in portrayals of the young adults in these films, and answer the following research questions:

- a) How does popular film portray gangs as a social problem?
- b) How has the media portrayal changed over time,
- c) Do the media portrayals of gangs, gang members, and gang activity support or challenge research findings on real-world gangs in these areas?

Specifically, I discuss major themes that I identified from the coding process. Numerous important common themes about gang member identity were prevalent throughout all nine films, some of which include race, gender, and socio-economic status. There were also many gang activity themes found, such as type and severity of the activity/crime committed, police response, and the purpose of the gang overall.

### **Identity Themes**

#### ***Ethnicity of Gang Members***

One of the most common and significant themes that is evident within all nine films was race. This is an important observation because many races are constructed in media discourse as being violent in nature or responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime. For example, US media sources frequently construct African Americans as ‘violent’ or ‘dangerous’ which contradicts what is known about the circumstances of crime from previous research (Oliver, 2003). A recurrent observation I made was that the films depicting youth gangs primarily consisted of Caucasian as well as African American gangs. In 78 percent of the films, I found

that there was one or more Caucasian gang member(s) seen. In the film *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), for instance, the gang consisted of various Caucasian members who worked together towards their goal of harassing the various teachers employed in their school.

Another film in which the gang consisted of one or more Caucasian members was *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961); in this film, the Caucasian gang participates in a turf war against the Puerto Rican gang. In the film *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979), there are various Caucasian gang members participating in deviant activities, which ultimately leads to a riot involving all the youth in the town. *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005) displays various Caucasian individuals coming together and committing various deviant acts as well and ends in a big brawl against two firms in the United Kingdom. *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006), also has various Caucasian members who are a part of the school gangs that were present within the film. Another film which has one or more Caucasian gang member was the *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010), which was set in a youth correctional facility; the deviant behaviors of the young men ultimately leads to a riot outbreak. Lastly in the film *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013) was observed having Caucasian members in their gangs, who worked together to commit thefts in the houses of many celebrities.

Furthermore, I found that in 56 percent of the films there was one or more African American gang member(s) present. In the film *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955) there were select African American youth present within the gang who took part in deviant activities. In *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) African American individuals are also a part of the gang wars in their neighborhoods. African American gang members are also seen in the film *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005), and they participate in the riot that takes place. Furthermore, in the film *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006) the participation of African American gang members is also seen

repeatedly. Lastly, in *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015), there is also more than one African American member present within the gangs who were seen standing up for the institutionalized racism that Black people faced in the United States.

Moreover, I observed that only two out of the nine films (22 percent) strictly had only Caucasian gang members. Throughout the film *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979), Caucasian youths are a part of the gang which leads to the riot. This was also seen in the film *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010), in which once again all the members participating in deviant acts were all Caucasian. Additionally, only two out of the nine films had strictly African-American members. *Boyz N the Hood* (1999) is one film in which all the gang members involved are strictly of African-American descent. The other film this was noticed in was *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015) in which all members of the gang are also of African-American descent.

Another trend that emerged within the analysis of films was that many of the gangs were diverse regarding its members' ethnicity. Approximately 44 percent of the films had gang members who came from various backgrounds and races' that made up their gangs. For example, the gang in *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955) has Caucasian members as well as African-American members. This was visible in *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005) in which the gangs also consisted of both Caucasian and African-American members as well. In the film *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006), Caucasian and African-American individuals are a part of the same gangs. Additionally, the gang of youth in *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013) is comprised of Caucasian individuals as well as Asian individuals who worked together towards their common goals rather than against one another. This is an important observation due to the fact that most literature illuminates the makeup of gang members being solely based on one specific ethnicity (National Gang Centre, 2011, Yiu & Gottfredson, 2014); whereas in the film the ethnic makeup

of gang members is ethnically diverse. It can be claimed that the gangs present in these films are seen as being colour-blind in the western society. Presenting a diversified gang membership within the films could be seen as having a great impact towards erasing the problems of racism and inequality in society today. However, it is important to note that if the films were consistent with real-world research, it could add on to the media stigmatization of racialized communities, along with the negative images being extended to a broader community. Moreover, it is important to note that the all films analyzed are fictional, their purpose is generally not to address social problems, however their depictions might impact the public perception of those social problems. Surprisingly, out of all nine films watched only one film depicted a gang from one ethnicity against a gang of another ethnicity. This was seen in the film *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961), where the Sharks (a Caucasian gang) fought the Jets (a Puerto Rican gang).

Furthermore, I found that the findings in this area are not consistent with literature. The National Gang Centre (2011) found that law enforcement agencies documented a large number of African-American/ black and Latino/ Hispanic gang members compared to any other ethnicities. Additionally, Yiu and Gottfredson (2014) discovered that Latino and African-American youth were more likely to report gang affiliation compared to Asian and Caucasian youths. To some extent, these findings align with the current study's sample where 56 percent of the films analyzed had one or more African-American gang members. However, across the film sample, Caucasian youths were the most commonly featured gang members.

The media portrayal of gangs in the films analyzed in relation to race leads the audience to believe that gangs are most often segregated by ethnicity. The films in this study use race to construct gangs as a social problem, based on descent of the gangs. Research has shown that race is a strong factor in explaining youth engagement in delinquency (Contreras, 2018; Mendez et

al., 2020). Due to the media, often times people of a certain race are explicitly marginalized and stereotyped as being delinquent because of the colour of their skin even though that assumption of delinquency is not always accurate. For example, in *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991), it is seen that social marginalization and the race of the characters played a significant contributing role in delinquency. This is also evident in *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015), as the African-American individuals are racialized time and time again. However, in *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), the film indicates that Caucasian individuals joined gangs due to the lack of a present male role models in their lives and had nothing to do with their race. The difference between these films is important to note because it illustrates the contrasting explanations for why both ethnicities participate in gangs. While race was a determining factor of delinquency in those films with African-American characters, the absence of a male role model as a factor in the other film shows that, for some ethnicities, race plays a substantial factor in determining delinquency, whereas for other ethnicities it does not (Unnever et al., 2016). These films along with other similar films can be seen as serving as a warning to the audience by stigmatizing certain races as being deviant as a whole, as opposed to certain individuals only.

### ***Gender of Gang Members***

Another major theme that emerged from analyses of the films was gender. Various patterns were observed regarding the genders of the gang members, these ranged from all male gangs to male gangs with females playing a secondary role, as well as some mixed gendered gangs. Throughout the analysis of this theme, I found that 56 percent of the gang members within the films watched were all males, whereas 44 percent of gangs included both male and female members. *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) as well

as *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005) were all films that found all male characters present during the analysis. All male gang members are also present in the film *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010). Lastly, in the film *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015), all of the gang members who committed deviant acts are also males.

Furthermore, I observed that throughout the three distinct time periods there was a lack of films available to the public that specifically focused on all female gangs. Out of all nine films that analyzed, none of the films had gangs with all female members. In fact, out of the 44 percent of the gangs that were mixed gendered, 75 percent of the females involved in the gangs were only involved due to their relationships with gang members (girlfriends, sisters, wives, etc.), consequently not having a prominent role in the gangs. For example, in the film *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961), the men in the gangs participate in the physical and violent activities such as brawls, whereas the females who considered themselves a part of the gangs in the film are not involved in any of these activities. The other film this was seen in was in *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006), the males often fought each other in place of their female partners. According to the literature, the majority of females that were gang affiliated tended to have personal relationships with gang members, these roles included; girlfriends, sisters, daughters, nieces and granddaughters (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998, Campbell, 1990 as cited by Moore & Hagedorn, 2001, Totten, 2010, Eghigian & Kirby, 2006). The films in this case are consistent with what the research indicates - the research suggests that females are only connected to gangs due to their relationships with gang members, this was accurately depicted in various films.

On the other hand, I observed that two of the nine films included females who played an equal role as the males in the functionality of the gangs. For example, in the film *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979), both male and female members play an equal role in the participation of deviant

acts and behaviors. This was also evident in *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013) in which both males and female gang members equally engage in deviant acts and behaviors.

According to much of the literature males were primarily more involved in serious crimes than females, and they were shown to intentionally keep the females from participating in serious crime associated activities. From a historic point of view, gangs were viewed as being male enterprises (Thrasher, 1927, Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998, Moore & Hagedorn, 2001). Males strongly believed that women did not belong in the gangs since they did not want females doing the things that the men were supposed to do (Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998, Miller & Brunson, 2000). However, as time passed, the involvement of girls who also played the roles of primary gang members became more prevalent in society. Over the years, there has been an increase of all girl gangs (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006). During the analysis of all the films I observed that as the time periods changed the make-up of the gangs in regard to the gender alternated as well.

During the first time-period, I observed that two of the gangs within the films were made of males who played a primary role within the gangs. During the second time-period, the makeup of two of the three gangs were all male members, and one gang had female members who played secondary roles within the gangs. Lastly, during the third-time period, while two gangs had males as primary members of the gangs, one gang had both males and females playing prominent equal roles within the gang. These findings support the literature since they show that over the years, females began to have more prominence within the gangs they are affiliated with (Miller & Brunson, 2000). In regard to gender-based gang involvement, the films accurately represent the occurrences that took place in society during each time period. Over time the involvement of females in gangs substantially began to increase, with their roles transitioning from secondary members to primary members.



### *Socio-economic Status of Gang Members*

The next theme that emerged during the analysis of all nine films was the theme of socio-economic status (SES). In many of the films the socio-economic status of the gang members ranged from low income families to middle class families. Forty-four percent of the films had members whose socio-economic status ranged from low income to middle class families. The film *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955) was comprised of gang members who came from low-income neighborhoods which was seen as a factor that led to their deviant behaviors. This was also evident in the film *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961); the members of gangs are seen living in an economically depressed neighbourhood. Gang members were especially living in low-income neighbourhood from which they participate in deviant activities in the film *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991). Lastly, in *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015), gang members also originate from low income neighborhoods. Only one out of the nine films had a gang made up of middle-class members. This was found in the film *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005), in which all the members of the gangs live in middle-class neighbourhoods with their families.

The findings from the analysis of the films regarding low socio-economic status and its connection to gang activity is consistent with research findings in this area. As stated by Pyrooz et al. (2010), gangs generally emerge from the various disadvantages in neighborhoods, a prominent factor being the economic disadvantage and discrimination individuals' face. This was also cited by Yiu and Gottfredson (2014), who claimed that the communities which were characterized as having high poverty rates and prominent significant residential instability tended to have higher crime rates than those with lower rates of poverty (Shaw & McKay, 1942). This was observed in four out of the nine films (*Blackboard Jungle*, *West Side Story*, *Boyz N the*

*Hood*, and *Straight Outta Compton*) in which, many of the gang members originated from economically depressed neighborhoods.

Additionally, I observed that while some gangs originated from low-income neighborhoods, many gangs were mixed-income gangs, meaning that while some members came from low-income neighborhoods, others in the gangs were from middle-class families. Thirty-three percent of the films included gangs from mixed-income neighborhoods. For example, in the film *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979), some of the gang members live in more economically depressed areas of the town compared to the other gang members who have better living conditions. Another example of this is from the film *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006), in which the gang members originate from both low-income and middle-class families and neighborhoods. Lastly, this was also observed in the film *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010), in which the gang is made up of members who come from both low-income and middle-class families and neighborhoods. Furthermore, in one out of the nine films I observed that the gang consisted of a mixture of middle class as well as well of families in regards so their socio-economic status. This was evident in the film *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013), in which the gang members committing the crimes originate from middle class as well as higher income families.

The representations of socio-economic status amongst the gang members were consistent with the time-period of the film. The majority of the time I found that many of the gang members were products of low-income neighborhoods. As the time periods progressed, I observed the gangs began originating from middle-class as well as well-off families. This finding indicated that belonging to a low-income neighborhood was not the ultimate explanation of involvement within gangs. I believe that some films were making political statements in regard to this variable. Since many films did significantly focus on socio-economic status, the variable was

used as a primary explanation to rationalize gang involvement. For example; in *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991), the main characters reside in crime filled low-income neighborhoods, and this was consistently shown to the audience. This film along with other similar films can be seen as serving as a warning to the audience by stigmatizing those who reside in low-income neighbourhoods, by avoiding them as they are drastically filled with crime and deviant individuals. Films like these often fear monger their audiences, ultimately resulting in the construction of a moral panic.

### **Activity Themes**

The set of themes in this section convey the activities that are associated with gangs that were found within the analyzed films. These themes include type and severity of the activity/ crime committed by the gangs, officer response to the presence of gangs, and overall purpose of the gangs in the films. These themes answer the three posed research questions. They indicate an explanation as to why gangs are portrayed as social problems within popular film along with being conscious of the changing portrayals over time by the media. Lastly, they draw a comparison to the real-world research findings within each specific theme as well.

#### ***Type & Severity of the Activity/ Crime Committed by Gangs***

The severity of the activity or crime committed was another interesting theme which emerged through analysis. The severity of the crime and behaviors in each film were gauged by the 2019 Crime Severity Index (CSI) of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019). This research used broad parameters based on the Canadian Criminal Code which allowed me to place the crimes seen into three different levels of severity while allowing me to talk about the crimes seen based on the films viewed. It is important to note that while gangs participate in a wide range of crimes,

only the crimes that were visible throughout the films have been gauged according to their severities. Throughout the analysis, I observed that the crimes committed in the films ranged from being extremely severe to mildly severe. The most severe crime that was committed in the films was first-degree murder. According to Section 231 of the Criminal Code of Canada (1985), a murder is considered in the first degree when it is planned and deliberate. Contracted murder, murder of a peace officer, high jacking, sexual assault or kidnapping, criminal harassment, murder during terrorist activity, murder in a criminal organization and intimidation are all forms of first degree with an exception to the ‘planned and deliberate’ condition of the section. In two out of the nine films the crime that was committed was first degree murder. In the film *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979), a riot broke out which ultimately results in the death of a police officer. The death of a police officer is classified as first-degree murder - according to the CSI it is weighted as the most severe crime. Another film that first-degree murder was seen in was *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991). This film displayed multiple acts of first-degree murder – starting with the murder of Ricky (a gang member), followed by the murder of three individuals from the rival gang, ultimately resulting in the murder of Doughboy, another member from Ricky’s gang (*Boyz N the Hood*, 1991).

According to the CSI, second-degree murder is the next most severe crime that can be committed. Second-degree murder was committed in four out of the nine films. According to Section 231(7) of the Criminal Code of Canada (1985), “all murder that is not first degree is second degree.” The first film this was seen in was *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961), the Sharks and the Jets fight each other during a rumble, which ultimately results in the death of Tony, a member of the Jets. Another film in which the gangs commit second-degree murder was *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005). In this film, the ultimate fight between the two

gangs' results in the death of Pete, the head of the firm (gang) (*Green Street Hooligans*, 2005). The next film that the act of second-degree murder was seen in was *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006). In this film, gang member Sam, physically assaults Trevor and his two friends at a party, which ultimately results in the death of Trevor (*Kidulthood*, 2006). Lastly, it is seen in the film *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010), in which Angel, Davis, and Butch all end up dying at the hands of various gang members within the correctional facility.

The next most severe crime that was committed as per the CSI was assault level 2. According to Section 267 of the Criminal Code of Canada (1985), assault level 2 is defined as:

- a) carried, uses or threatens to use a weapon or an imitation thereof, b) causes bodily harm to the complainant, or c) chokes, suffocates or strangles the complainant.

The act of assault level 2 was seen in many of the films (i.e., *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005), *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006), and *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010)). Moreover, it significantly stood out in one particular film- *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955). In this film, the students in the schools (gang members), are seen committing physical acts of violence towards teachers such as threatening them with knives and getting into physical altercations.

Lastly, the crime/activity identified as being the least severe throughout all nine films was theft over \$5,000. The main crime that took place throughout *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013), was theft over \$5,000. In the film, the group of youth break into the houses of various celebrity while they are absent from the country to steal their possessions such as high-end clothing, jewelry, purses, shoes, cash, drugs, cars, and other accessories (*The Bling Ring*, 2013).

One interesting observation I made was that in one particular film there was no specific crime or criminal activity committed that was measured on the CSI. In the film *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015), the youth are a part of the NWA rap group, who speak out about the

police brutalities and discrimination that African American individuals face in the US in today's day and age. Since the 'gang members' did not specifically part take in a criminal activity, it is difficult to gauge the severity of the activities they part take in.

Throughout the findings, it is evident that our understanding of crime and criminal activity has changed significantly throughout the years as seen in the films. This is because although some activities are constituted as serious crimes in society in the earlier years, they are not classified as crimes in society today. For example, in earlier years the use of marijuana was criminalized, whereas, in society today the use of marijuana is decriminalized and not considered to be a serious offence. However, new crimes that were not previously criminalized have been classified in society today, such as criminal harassment, online bullying, terrorist acts, etc. In regard to the severity of the crimes committed in all nine films, I believe that they are an accurate representation of what was happening in society during that specific time period.

It is also important to note the difference in the treatment of women throughout the different time periods. Women back in the 1950s were not treated as being equal to men in society. This was a period where traditional gender roles were in place, giving great power to men. The role of women was to uphold the traditional roles of the family through socialization of gender roles. Women were seen as being caring and nurturing individuals in society. However, in society today, women have achieved some equality with men. Previous literature has shown that women often played secondary roles in their involvement with gangs rather than being equals to gangs (Campbell, 1990 as cited by Moore & Hagedorn, 2001, Esbensen & Deschenes, 1998, Eghigian & Kirby, 2006, Miller & Brunson, 2000, Totten, 2010,), this was also seen in many of the films from the early time periods. However, as the years passed females began having more prominent roles within the gangs, striving to be equal to men playing dominant

roles. As previously discussed, gender and race both play a significant role in portrayals of violence. Historically, males have been known to be more violent and engage in violent behaviors compared to females, this is often explained by their high levels of testosterone (Demause, 2007). Since they are prone to being more violent, males are often viewed as being primarily involved in violence, in this case gang related, as opposed to females.

Race is seen as a significant factor as well since the media often isolates a particular race classifying them as violent in the eyes of the public. Some groups (primarily minority groups) are more likely to be victims of violence compared to others. For example, Canadian African-American individuals are often victims of police carding, American-African Americans are often victims to police shootings, not to mention the over-representation of Indigenous people in prisons. Typically, certain ethnic groups are often known to be more involved in violent crimes compared to other groups. For example, African Americans are more likely to be involved in violent crimes as opposed to corporate crimes. In many cases, we as the audience see African-American individuals as violent, which may influence to view all African-Americans are violent. This is not only the case with African American individuals, but other ethnicities as well. The media has constructed the viewers to see certain races as being problematic compared to others when that is not the case. In fact, in comparison to literature the films do not accurately depict the real-life realities of violence in regard to gender, race and delinquency.

### ***Officer Response to the Gangs***

The next theme that was evident throughout the analysis was the way that the officers responded to the crimes being committed. The responses of the officers are important to note because it depicted the attitudes of the officers towards the gangs and gang members in each

film. The officers seen during the films were all Caucasian males except for one. The one film that had an African-American Police officer present was in the film *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015). An interesting observation made through the analysis was that an law enforcement officers displayed an increased amount of racism when they were attending to African-American individuals compared to when they were in contact with individuals who were from a different race, such as Caucasian or Asian individuals. This was specifically seen in the films *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) as well as *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015), in which police officers time and time again racialize African-American individuals more severely, whereas, in other films the officers often treat Caucasian individuals with less severity. While some films showed active police presence, as well as subsequent response once the crimes were committed, other films showed absolutely no police response. Fifty-five percent of the films analyzed have immediate police responses after the crimes are committed. When the final rumble broke out between the Sharks and the Jets in *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961), the police immediately arrive on scene after the death of a Jet, Tony, however, they were not present during the rumble itself despite being aware of the rumble's occurrence. This was also seen in *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979): when the riot in town takes place, there is an instant police response during which they begin arresting all individuals who are a part of the riot. The police arrive on scene as soon as one of the main characters is killed by another in the film *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006). *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010) also shows correctional officers instantly trying to contain the situation once the riot breaks out in the juvenile facility. Lastly, in *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013), there is active police response to the allegations of celebrities' houses being robbed by the five individuals, who are eventually arrested and charged.



Additionally, only three out of the nine films that were analyzed found that although there was some police presence throughout the film, there was no police response shown once the crimes were committed. For example, in *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991), time and time again the individuals experience racism as they are pulled over by the police without cause and assaulted, however, at the end of the film when four characters are shot and killed there is no active response from the police. This was also seen in the film *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005), in which the police arrest some individuals after the first fight takes place out between the two Firms, however, they are nowhere to be seen following the second fight at the bar, or the third fight at the football ground.

Moreover, I discovered that only two out of nine films had consistent police presence all throughout the films. The first film that this was seen in was *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955). In this film, the police are present from the very beginning telling the teachers of the school to take a stance and press charges against their deviant students to prevent them from partaking in illegal behaviors. The other film the police were steadily present in was *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015). In this film, the police are actively abusing and harassing the African-American individuals, accusing them of being criminals. The police justified their behaviors by saying things like "... they look like gang members" (*Straight Outta Compton*, 2015). Such statements are also mentioned by the African-American police officers in the film. This exemplifies that systemic racism was a part of the police force.

In regard to officer response, I believe that the representation has not changed over time. This leads me to believe that for this variable specifically, the films did a good job accurately depicting the officer response, to what was happening in society at the specific time when the film was produced. The films portrayed the level of urgency that the law enforcement officials

showed in regard to their responses to the crimes being committed. While some films showed urgent responses once a crime was committed, others showed no response at all. For example, in *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991), there was no active police response shown after the death of four of the gang members. In the film one of the main gang members, Doughboy, states “don’t know, don’t show, or don’t care about what’s going on in the hood” when talking to his friend about the police officer’s response to his brother’s death during the film (*Boyz N the Hood*, 1991). This depicted that the police officers had a bias towards their African American, low-income neighbourhood, since they did not have a response to the deaths that occurred. The filmmakers could be perceived as showing the public the systemic racism that takes place in the law enforcement against certain ethnicities in this case, the African Americans. This was also evident in *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015). I believe that this film along with other similar films all serve as a warning to the audience regarding the racial discrimination and inequality that African American individuals face in the justice system. This could be a warning aimed at not only African American individuals but also individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds.

### ***Purpose of the Gang***

The final theme that emerged through analysis was the purpose of the gang. This theme was diverse in its outcomes compared to the other themes. The purpose of the gangs in the film ranged from representing the struggles that youth faced in small towns to bigger issues like taking political stances. Thirty-three percent of the movies used the gangs to display struggles that the youth faced as a reason for the formation of the gang. For example, in *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), the gang is used to highlight the violence that is existent in urban schools. *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979) focused on portraying the youth in the suburbs who have no

access to any city centers, ultimately resorting to drugs, alcohol and engaging in petty criminal acts. The purpose of this film was to highlight the lack of social bonds/resources for the youth. Additionally, in *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006) the gangs portray the struggles and pressures that urban youth face on a daily basis in Britain.

The gangs in *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961) portray many things, specifically, the sense of belonging, sense of power, sense of protection and the sense of community within the film. Another film in which the gang theme was used to gain a sense of power was in the film *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005), in which the Football gang (in this case known as a 'Firm') fights the other firm in order to gain power. The last film this was displayed in was *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010), in which the violence and harassment gangs participate in within juvenile facilities are seen, the gang in this film engages in deviant activities to gain a sense of power throughout the facility.

Next, the film *Boyz N the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) portrayed the issues that the African American members face in their daily lives, including but not limited to racism, poverty, substance abuse as well as violence. The important underlying concept from this film is the importance of Black fathers shouldering their parental responsibilities (*Boyz N the Hood*, 1991). Often communities who reported higher rates of absent fathers also reported having higher rates of poverty, crime, and young men in prison (As cited by Campbell et al., 2015, Brown et al., 2018). Researchers also found that adolescent boys were more likely to engage in delinquent behavior if there was no father figure present in their lives (Cobb-Clark, 2011). The absence of fathers in their child life created a social crisis which affected the moral development of a child, it was also seen as being a contributing factor to crime and delinquency, as the child(ren) had no role model. Children without fathers have been associated with increased tendencies towards

violence, truancy, substance abuse, unwed pregnancies and psychological disorders (Wilson et al., 2016).

Lastly, the purpose of the gang in *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013) was to gain a sense of belonging by fitting in, living the 'LA Dream/American Dream' or in other words living the rich lifestyle. *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015) was the one film in which the gang is represents a metaphor for standing up for a political belief. Consistently, the gang speaks out about the institutionalized racism they face in their everyday lives by the police in the United States through their rap songs (*Straight Outta Compton*, 2015).

I believe in regard to this variable, all the films did accurately represent what was happening in society during that time, since each gang served their own unique purpose of existence in each film. While the purpose of the gangs in some films sent a clear message about important issues that were prevalent in society, some films rationalized the presence of the gangs by explaining what gangs were used for (i.e. sense of belonging, sense of protection, etc.). In some cases, the films were also making political statements. I believe that overall all the films analyzed served as warning to society about the dangers that came along with gang involvement and played a role in fear mongering in regard to gangs and gang members in general. Maintaining distance from people of colour because they are violent, the justice system is racist towards people of colour, staying away from certain neighborhoods to avoid conflict with the law, were all assumed warnings that could be seen as being made by the film-makers. These warnings are not only directed to society, but also certain minority groups as well.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

As mentioned previously, the main objective of this study was to address the following: how popular film constructed gangs as a social problem; whether media portrayals of youth gangs changed over time and if so, how; and whether the media portrayals of gangs, gang members, and gang activity supported or challenged research findings. According to the analysis of nine popular films pertaining to youth gangs, I found that the media played a significant factor in portraying gangs as being a social problem through their depictions of gangs within society. I also found that the portrayals were often seen changing over time, adjusting to what was occurring in society during the time-period the film was made in. Additionally, most of the research findings did align with the youth gang portrayals. Although there is research on gang involvement regarding youth, there is very little research done on how the media portrays youth gangs and their effects on society. This research contributed insight into whether the portrayals of gangs, gang members and gang activity were accurately depicted based on research findings in these areas exploring the possibility of fear mongering by the media.

### **Gangs as a Social Problem**

Gangs are often classified as a social problem due to the violence they cause in communities. The harmful effects that gang membership has not only on the individual's joining the gangs, but also those around them also explains why gangs are considered social problems (Gebo, 2018). The act of labeling gangs as a social problem is a process that involves claims-makers creating cases that blame individuals. In the case of my research, claims-makers saw gangs as encouraging those around them to feel negative emotions such as hatred towards them. In this case, the film industry plays the role of the claim-makers in society. Loseke (2003), stated

that individuals in the mass media are known to be one of the most vital parts of social problems, explaining that the larger mass media gets the more individuals trust on media to inform them about the world. Youth gangs are often classified as a social problem because they participate in unwanted behaviors which are deemed as being deviant by society. Although being a part of a gang is not necessarily equally as violent for all members, it may lead to the possibility of violence and/or hostility when they come into contact with other members of society, or other gangs themselves. Violence among gangs often results in the lack of sense of community as well.

The goal of acknowledging social problems is for them to be recognized so that they can be resolved. Since the 1990s gangs have been labeled as social problems; over time the focus on gangs in the mass media has increased attention to them in society (Enzeonu, 2014). The media brings gangs to the attention of society in hopes to find a permanent solution to this problem. By the use of the media, in this case film, more light is being shone on the issue of gangs, exemplifying how harmful their presence can be within society. While the main purpose of the film industry is entertainment, the issues that film may shine a light on may play a significant role in changing the perceptions of the audience. The attitudes of society prior to watching these films are the most important since they can determine how much influence the media has on the public's perceptions. Through the analysis it was seen that the people the gang members interacted with saw them as being dangerous and violent. This essentially serves as a warning to the audience of the implications of having gangs present within society. The problem that was seen within the films was the lack of police presence throughout the films. This suggested that the police did not care about the presence of the gangs. A social problem is meant to be resolved, however in the majority of the films reviewed there was no active resolution that was seen.

Ultimately, the problem with gangs is that their presence is not considered violent, however, their actions and behaviours can be, ultimately classifying them as a social problem.

### **Media Portrayals of Youth Gangs Over Time**

Over the years, the media images have changed to reflect shifts in societal attitudes and concerns have progressed with our ever-changing society. When looking at youth gangs over the various time periods I found that there was no consistency in how they were portrayed within the media. Throughout majority of the themes found through the analysis significant changes were found within each. I believe this is primarily due to the analysis occurring between the three different time periods of: the pre-1980s, 1980s to 2010 and 2010 to 2019. Since all nine films came from different time periods, the film's most often portrayed what was occurring within society within the film. For example, throughout the years gender construct of gangs were seen changing. During the first-time period, males were primarily seen engaging in gang behaviour while females were either seen as playing secondary roles or being non-existent within the gangs. However, in the films of the next two time periods females were seen as playing a more active role within the gangs rather than being secondary roles.

Another change that was seen during the analysis was in regard to the socio-economic status of gang members and the neighborhoods which they reside in. In the first-time period, members of the gang all primarily originated from low-income impoverished neighborhoods. This led the audience to believe that those who resided in these communities were bound to be violent and delinquent. From the beginning of time it is often perceived by society that having a higher socio-economic status results in a lesser likelihood that an individual is inclined to engage in deviant behaviors (Anderson, 1994). Although this was also seen in other films over the years,

the media then began showing that poor socio-economic status was not the only explanation for delinquency. In fact, individuals who came from middle-class as well as upper class families also engaged in delinquency. This was particularly seen in the films from the time-period of 2010-2019. According to Pyrooz et al., (2010), not all individuals who originated from low income neighborhoods were delinquent, rather it was found that socio-economic status does not entirely explain delinquency, since delinquent is also seen in high income neighborhoods in society today. This is just another way that the media portrayals of the gangs have changed over time.

As time passes, many things change within society, including regulations and laws in regard to crime being committed. What may have been considered a serious crime a hundred years ago may not be considered to be at the same severity level in society today. This was gauged throughout the films using the Canadian Crime Severity Index (CSI) (2019), which was established in 2004 by the police as well as community justice partners to help determine the level of severity of all crimes (Wallace et al., 2009). Through the analysis of the nine films it was seen that although the types of crime generally stayed the same, their severity levels had changed. This may be due to the fact that prior to 1998 (to when all the CSI data backdates), there was no means of determining the severity of the crimes being committed, all activities were classified as crimes and no one crime was more serious than the other crimes being committed. This shows the change in portrayals overtime regarding the crimes committed in these films.

Overall, the portrayals of youth gangs have changed over time. While some changes in the portrayals are more openly noticeable, others are not. However, this does not change the fact that there have been various changes in regard to gang related gender, socio-economic status' and the severity of crime.



## **Media Portrayals vs. Research Findings**

The media plays a vital role in how youth gangs are portrayed in film as filmmakers are the initial decision makers when determining what will be depicted within the films, the portrayals of the characters, gangs, and behaviors. Schutz (1967) explains, that due to the heavy presence of the media, the difference between face-to-face experiences and other social experiences in the social world are less absolute and decreasing, resulting in a continuous gradation (as cited by Couldry & Hepp, 2018). Although the public relies on the media to inform them about certain topics, it is important to remember that they may not always be accurate. Throughout this research, the ultimate goal was to determine whether the media accurately depicted youth gangs in popular films, since the media is known for shaping the public's perceptions. For the most part, it was seen that the portrayals lacked consistency in the research done in these areas. Much of the research focused on the factors that resulted in gang involvement, such as ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status.

There was no consistency between research findings regarding the ethnicity of gang members to the media portrayals. While the films did also show African-American members being a part of the gangs, majority of the films depicted gang members as primarily being of Caucasian descent. However, according to previous research, youth who were of African-American and Latino descent were more likely to join gangs compared to Caucasian and Asian individuals (Yiu & Gottfredson, 2014). According to the National Gang Centre (2011) the make-up of gang members was known to be solely based on specific ethnicity, this resulted in gangs being at war against another ethnic gang, however, this was not seen in most of the films.

The findings on the gender of the gang members were also not entirely consistent. This was especially an interesting finding due to the three distinct time periods that were analyzed

through this study. Historically speaking, gangs were known to be male dominated operations (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001), if females were involved it was by association to a gang member or they played secondary roles (Totten, 2010). However, the films primarily focused on showing male gang members as opposed to females regardless of the time-period the film was made in. However, as time has passed, females are seen playing an equally active role to males within the gangs (Miller & Brunson, 2000). In fact, there has also been a rise in all female gangs since the 1990s (Eghigian & Kirby, 2006). Since the films show that gangs are primarily made up of males rather than females too, this generates a perception that gangs are still primarily male enterprises. Ultimately highlighting the fact that the media portrayal challenges the research findings in regard to the gender constructs of gangs.

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the portrayals of youth gangs in the media, specifically within popular film. The following three research questions were sought to be answered: a) How does popular film construct gangs as a social problem?; b) How has the media portrayal changed over time?; and c) Do the media portrayals of gangs, gang members, and gang activity support or challenge research findings in these areas?

Nine films from three different time periods were analyzed; pre-1980 era, 1980 to 2010 and 2010 to 2019. The films were; *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955), *West Side Story* (Robbins & Wise, 1961), *Over the Edge* (Kaplan, 1979), *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton, 1991), *Green Street Hooligans* (Alexander, 2005), *Kidulthood* (Huda, 2006), *Dog Pound* (Chapiron, 2010), *The Bling Ring* (Coppola, 2013), and *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, 2015). Through the examination of these films, various themes were observed; including, race of gang members, gender of gang members, socioeconomic status of gang members, and the officer response to the gangs. These themes played significant parts in reiterating how the media portrays gangs as being a social problem and to see the true accuracy that the media portrays in regard to them. As suggested by the results, the media lacks accuracy in regard to them portraying youth gangs overall, as well as social problems. Although previous research has provided insight on the media portrayals of gangs, not much research has been conducted to find the true accuracy of the gangs seen in films compared to the real world.

Throughout my analysis, many of the films depicted male dominated gangs, often focusing on specific races that made up a gang ultimately shaping perceptions of the audience. According to Surette (Gray, 2015), film, the first medium, was used in order to avoid the traditional socializing channels of schools, churches, community and family, and reaching

individuals with information and images. According to Altheide and Schneider (Coppola, 2013), the mass media is a mechanism from which issues are constructed into problems, gearing towards entertainment. Undeniably the mass media plays a vital role in constructing public perceptions regarding certain individuals and issues, since the media promotes conversations about topics that is perceived to be accurate by the public.

Throughout my analysis it was seen that media played a vital role in portraying the youth gangs as social problems within the societies they were found in within the films. According to Loseke (2003), individuals within the mass media are known as being one of the most fundamental parts of social problems. He explains that the more mass media begins to expand, the more individuals form a reliance to be informed about the world. The media, in this case film, is seen shining a light on the issue of gangs, illustrating how detrimental their presence in society can be. Throughout the analysis, it was seen that the society's attitudes during their interactions with gangs painted a picture of them being dangerous and violent, ultimately serving as warnings to the audience about the implications of having gangs present. Social problems are brought to the attention of individuals to find a solution to the problem. However, in the majority of the films I analyzed no active resolution was seen in combatting the gang problems that the communities faced. This was seen by the lack of active police presence as well as responses in regard to the presence of the gangs.

As time passes, it is expected that the media will advance with the progressive nature of society. Throughout my analysis there was no consistency in the films in regard to their portrayals of youth gangs over time. I believe that the analysis of three different time periods played a significant factor in this finding. Since all nine films came from different time periods, the film's most often illustrated the occurrences of society during that time. A primary example

of this was the changing gender constructions of the gangs throughout the time periods, during the first-time period males were predominately seen as gang members while females played secondary roles or being non-existent. However, during the next two time periods females seen being more active within the gangs. Other examples of changes over the time periods included; the socio-economic status of gang members and the severity of crime.

The media plays a significant role in how youth gangs are depicted in film, primarily due to the fact that filmmakers are the initial decision makers in deciding what will be illustrated in the films, as well as the portrayals of the characters, behaviors and gangs. According to Schutz (1967), since there is a significant presence of media in the lives of individuals, the face-to-face experiences as well as other social experiences are decreasing (as cited by Couldry & Hepp, 2018). Throughout the analysis, it was found that the media portrayals of youth gangs seen within the films ultimately contradict the research findings in the areas of gangs, gang members, and gang activity.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

The nine films analyzed for this study are merely a small representation of gauging the accuracy of the media portrayals of the gangs depicted in the films. While this study has contributed to knowledgebase on media representation of youth gangs in films, various limitations also arose within the research. The first limitation was finding a concrete definition of a 'gang'. This was deemed as difficult as there was a wide range of different definitions that were established by researchers. Due to the diverse various definitions of gangs, I used the Canadian Criminal Code Definition of a gangs since it was the vaguest definition and could be easily utilized and applied to the films.

Another limitation I came across was finding a concrete definition for the term 'youth'. I found that the age range of youth widely differed from one another. In some cases, youth were defined as being aged 12 to 18 or 19 years old; however, in other cases young adults up to age 30 could also be classified as youth. Various scholars also defined youth by using various criteria based on age, biology and even psychology. This made it more difficult to accurately classify members that were apart of youth gangs.

The next limitation was that the sampling procedure I used was not a random sample, instead I used a purposive sampling method. Out of hundreds of films about gangs, nine were picked and analyzed for the purpose of this study. The problem I faced here was that the gangs did not outright classify themselves as gangs. According to the definition of gangs I had chosen to use, they were ultimately classified so. The films were chosen based on the narratives of groups of youth engaging in deviant behaviours within society.

Discussing the psycho/social aspects of the films that were analyzed was another limitation I came across. Psychological aspects of the film were not explored since they are much more difficult to measure in a content analysis of film. They were also exceptionally difficult to find throughout the literature since much of the previous research done focuses identity factors of gang involvement such as age, gender, race, socio-economic status.

Lastly, finding films about youth gangs was extremely difficult since many did not fit the criteria of, either youth, gangs, or both. Not only were the films selected based on their characters, but they were also chosen based on the crimes that the gangs committed. After viewing 15 films, only nine had fit the criteria and were analyzed. Unfortunately, due to the time restraints with a master's thesis, I chose to analyze nine films, however, I would have been more beneficial to analyze more films to be able to get a larger sample of the media that individuals

had access to during the time frames. If more films were used per time-period, my sample size would have increased and given me more detail to determine the true accuracy of the media's role in these portrayals.

### **Future Research**

Future research for my study includes measuring the moral panic that is caused by the media in on youth gangs and the fear mongering that is caused by the film industry. Since it has already been discovered that the media plays a fundamental role in shaping one's reality (Bourke, 2013), it would be noteworthy to see the degree that the media alters one's perception about a certain topic, in this case, youth gangs in society. Moreover, using a greater sample size of popular film throughout the time periods should be analyzed, as it would offer further data and results in relation to the accuracy of the gang portrayals. The sample can also be extended to films that were not theatrically released within North America, as well as any foreign language films. Further research can also analyze other forms of media such as, television shows revolving around youth gangs. Although films were the primary sources of entertainment, in society today there is much attachment to television programming as well, this could be seen as being a vital source for collecting data as it is becoming more dependable due to the various streaming services available to individuals in society today. Furthermore, it would also be interesting to touch on whether the beliefs and values of the filmmakers are reflected within the films themselves. Studying the role that media plays in societies changing perceptions of youth and deviance is very important for future researchers to highlight because in contributes to the inclusions and exclusions of youths within society.

In conclusion, this research provided insight into the role the media plays in portraying youth gangs in popular film, ultimately classifying them as a social problem. Historically, gangs were seen as being male enterprises (Moore & Hagedorn, 2001), however, over time females are now seen as playing an equal part in their involvement with the gangs. The media plays a significant role, in informing the audience about the outside world, however it is not always accurate in their portrayals. This was particularly seen through the comparison of the films back to previous research on gangs that was conducted. While some occurrences in the films aligned with the research, much did not. This could be seen as providing fake news to the audience, ultimately resulting in fear mongering. The correlation between Race and socio-economic status to delinquency were seen being vital factors in these portrayals. Causing fear and panic towards certain people due to the colour of their skin or based on where they live merely based on a film is deemed problematic.



## Appendix A

<i>Title of Film</i>	<i>Year of Release</i>	<i>Synopsis</i>
<b>Pre-1980:</b> Blackboard Jungle	1955	World War II veteran Richard Dadier who takes up a teaching job at a rough New York City school for boys, he is warned by the other staff that the students are almost impossible to control. He soon recognizes that his students are not just rowdy, they are utterly dangerous.
<b>Pre-1980:</b> West Side Story	1961	An adaptation of the 1957 Broadway musical. The film takes place in the summer of 1957 in a neighbourhood in Manhattan, where there is tension between the Jets, an American white gang, and the Sharks, a Puerto Rican gang.
<b>Pre-1980:</b> Over the Edge	1979	A group of teenagers living in an isolated community, New Granada, located east of Denver, Colorado. They eventually turn to sex, drugs, and petty crimes to end their boredom; however, their outcry has no bearing. After one of the kids is shot by a police officer, the youth begin to violently rebel against the authorities and their parents.
<b>1980- 2010:</b> Boyz n the Hood	1991	Based on the life of Tre Styles who is sent by his mother to live with his father Furious Styles in South Central LA, bordered by the neighborhood's roaring gang culture.

<b>1980- 2010:</b> Green Street Hooligans	2005	Also known as <i>Green Street</i> is about an American college student who intermingles with a violent West Ham football firm, known as the ‘Green Street Elite’, which is run by his brother-in-law’s younger brother, morally altered by their commitment to one another.
<b>1980- 2010:</b> Kidulthood	2006	Follows a day in the lives of four youth that live in an impoverished neighbourhood, the youth must decide to choose between a life of hopelessness, crime and violence, or the worrisome prospect of striving towards a better life.
<b>2010-2019:</b> Dog Pound	2010	A group of three juvenile delinquents are condemned to a correctional facility where they come across death, gang violence, and harassment from other inmates and staff.
<b>2010-2019:</b> The Bling Ring	2013	A group of teenagers use the internet to track the whereabouts of celebrities in order to rob their homes
<b>2010-2019:</b> Straight Outta Compton	2015	The formation of the music group NWA arises from the streets of Compton, Los Angeles, California during the mid-1980s. They reform the Hip Hop culture within their music and tell tales about life in the ‘hood’.

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