



2007-07-13

# Stereotyped Seniors: The Portrayal of Older Characters in Teen Movies from 1980-2006

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STEREOTYPED SENIORS: THE PORTRAYAL OF OLDER CHARACTERS  
IN TEEN MOVIES FROM 1980-2006

By

Dawn Magoffin

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Communications

Brigham Young University

August 2007

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Dawn Magoffin

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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Date Dr. Thomas Robinson, Chair

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Dawn Magoffin in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### STEREOTYPED SENIORS: THE PORTRAYAL OF OLDER CHARACTERS IN TEEN MOVIES FROM 1980-2006

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This content analysis examined the 60 most popular teen movies from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s to determine how older people (those over 55) are portrayed. This study found that some portrayals of older people in teen movies were favorable. For example, the most positive finding of the current study was the physical portrayal of older characters. The overwhelming majority of older characters were portrayed as active and healthy and rarely portrayed as sick or ugly. The negative physical stereotypes associated with children's media, such as "toothless/missing teeth" and older characters' reliance on physical aids were mostly absent from teen movies.

The marginalization of older characters, their lack of significance to the plot, and the use of negative personality traits and stereotypes, however, were notable in the teen movie sample. Older characters were extremely under represented in teen movies; only 7% of characters in teen movies were old despite those over 55 comprising at least 21% of the total U.S. population. Similarly, older characters were marginalized in terms of

plot and were likely to be featured only as background characters.

Older characters were often portrayed with negative personality traits and in an overall negative manner. Fewer than 50% of older characters were portrayed positively. About a third of older characters were portrayed negatively overall, while 35% of older characters were portrayed as angry. Older characters were often portrayed in a stereotypical manner and a full 20% of older characters only exhibited negative stereotypes.

The stereotypes that adolescents today hold toward older people were reflected in older character portrayals in these popular teen films. Given the negative representations of older people that adolescents are exposed to in their teen years, it is no wonder that they express negative attitudes toward older people. After years of exposure to media that negatively depict older adults, adolescents may have been cultivated to stereotype older people. This has the potential to influence the quality of their interactions with older people, and also influence the way they come to view the prospect of getting old.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Although children as young as age three have already begun to manifest negative stereotypes toward older adults (Falchikov, 1990; Isaacs & Bearison, 1986; Middlecamp & Gross, 2002; Newman, Faux, & Larimer, 1997; Seefeldt, 1984; Williams & Blunk, 1999), attitudes toward older adults likely crystallize during late childhood and adolescence (Doka, 1986; Isaacs & Bearison, 1986; Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964; Luszcz & Fitzgerald, 1986; Tuckman & Lorge, 1956) and become entrenched by the time an individual reaches young adulthood (Chasteen, Schwartz, & Park, 2002; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Peccioni & Croghan, 2002). Although studies have shown that children, adolescents, and young adults hold some positive stereotypes toward older people, especially older relatives (Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005; Chasteen, Schwartz, & Park, 2002; McCann, Dailey, Giles, & Ota, 2005; Peccioni & Croghan, 2002; Waskel, Dubes, & Reviere, 1997), many studies have shown that young people view older people in general as ineffective, dependent, lonely, poor, angry, overly wrinkled, ugly, dirty, disabled, and less physically active and healthy than younger adults (Doka, 1986; Falchikov, 1990; Luszcz & Fitzgerald, 1986; Middlecamp & Gross, 2002; Seefeldt, 1984). Because today's children and adolescents have less contact with older people than in past decades, it is likely that some young people get most of their information about older people and aging from the media (Holladay, 2002; Vasil & Wass, 1993).

Portrayals of older people in the media have been consistent with the stereotypes held by adults of all ages (Miller, Leyell, & Mazachek, 2004; Miller, Miller, McKibben, & Pettys, 1999; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore,

2007). The majority of older characters in the media are depicted with positive personality traits, such as friendly and caring (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998; Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Robinson, 1998; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007), but negative attributes still persist for some characters (Robinson et al.; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2003), especially older women, who are often portrayed as mean, stupid, grumpy, and eccentric (Gerbner, 1997; Vasil & Wass, 1993). The physical appearance and attributes of older characters in the media have been generally positive or neutral, with few portrayed as sick or ugly (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998; Robinson, 1998), but some negative stereotypes have persisted in the media, including the portrayal of over one quarter of older characters as toothless or missing teeth (Robinson et al., 2007).

Despite the presence of more positive than negative stereotypes of older people in the media, older people are under represented relative to their actual numbers in the U.S. population, and they are relegated to minor roles. Older people have traditionally been under represented in many forms of media (Bramlett-Solomon & Subramanian, 1999; Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Gerbner, 1997; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b; Miller, Miller, McKibbin, & Pettys, 1999; Robinson, 1998; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore, 2007; Roy & Harwood, 1997, Vasil & Wass, 1993; Yan Bing Zhang et al., 2006). Older women and minorities are significantly more likely than white men to effectively be rendered invisible by the media (Briller, 2000; Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Gerbner, 1997; Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007; Roy & Harwood, 1997). When older adults are represented in the media, they are usually relegated to minor roles, have little

significance to the plot, and are not well developed (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Gerbner, 1997; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b; McConatha, Schnell, & McKenna, 1999; Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Robinson, 1998; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al. 2007; Roy & Harwood, 1997; Signorielli, 2001; Vasil & Wass, 1993). It is little wonder that individuals who view television heavily are more likely to feel that older people are vanishing from the population, and that there are fewer of them (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Those young people, including adolescents, who have little or no contact with older adults are especially likely to view older people in a negative light (Seefeldt, 1984), while those young people who have some contact with older adults are more likely to view them positively (Blunk & Williams, 1997).

Adolescents, who are in the process of formulating their identity during the teen years, may be especially vulnerable to the portrayal of older people in the media. Adolescents purposively seek out specific forms of media to actively acquire the norms and beliefs of the culture in which they live (Arnett, 1995). Teens are heavy media consumers (Smith, 2005; Stern, 2005b) who rely on the media as a socializing agent. While other more narrow socializing agents such as the family and schools have diminished power during the teenage years (Arnett, 1995), the media that adolescents choose to attend to become important in shaping their attitudes and beliefs about the world and their view of other groups within society. Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 2002) posited that the more someone attends to the media, the more likely he or she will come to accept the attitudes and beliefs portrayed within the media. Media can shape the descriptive norms of adolescents, including their attitudes toward older individuals. The cultivation effect is particularly strong for those who have little or no contact with the

groups portrayed in the media. Because today's young people may have little or no intergenerational contact with older people (Seefeldt, 1998; Vasil & Wass, 1993; Ward, 1997) and the media may be adolescents' most important source of information about older individuals and the aging process, it is important to examine popular teen media for the representation and portrayal of older people. Young people may learn negative stereotypes of older people from the media, and a young person's negative stereotypes toward older people may affect the quality of his or her personal interactions with them and contribute to intergenerational conflict (Isaacs & Bearison, 1986; Peccioni & Croghan, 2002; Vasil & Wass, 1993). Young people, especially adolescents, may feel negatively about their own aging process due to negative stereotypes held towards older adults (Doka, 1986; Holladay, 2002; Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964; Seefeldt, 1984).

The problem is that some young people today, who have little contact with older people in the real world, may only get their ideas about older people from watching the media. Those people who heavily consume media, such as adolescents, are more likely to believe that the way people are portrayed in the media represents reality. Media viewers who have no real-world contact with the groups portrayed within the media are likely to believe that the way the group is represented in the media is a reflection of how that groups really is in society. Because adolescents are heavy media consumers and may have little contact with older adults, they may be influenced by the media, which may be their only source of information about older people. Thus, it is important to examine how older people are portrayed in media aimed at teenagers. Only one study (Peterson & Karnes, 1976) has examined the portrayal of older people in media aimed at teens (adolescent literature from the 1920s to the 1970s), and more current research needs to be

conducted to determine how recent, popular teen media portray older adults. Because teens are the most frequent consumers of films, the purpose of this thesis is to examine the portrayal of older people in popular teen films. Although many studies have examined how older people are portrayed in children's media, almost nothing is known about how older people are portrayed in media aimed at teenagers. The purpose of this thesis is to bridge this research gap and to determine if older children, that is, adolescents, are being exposed to negative portrayals of older people in the media. The primary research question this thesis aims to address is how older people are portrayed in teen movies. Using cultivation theory as a framework, this content analysis will examine the portrayal of older people in the most popular teen movies made since the year 1980.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will focus on how older people have previously been portrayed in the media, including their representation and significance as well as their demographic, physical, and personality characteristics. Next, stereotypes held by children, adolescents, and adults will be reviewed to show how older people are viewed by others within society.

### *Representation of older people in the media*

Older people are rarely represented in the media according to their actual numbers in the real world population. The statistics on the percentage of older people in America and the percentage of media characters considered old vary due to the definition of old age used by the researchers. Some researchers measure old age at 65, while other researchers use age 60 or 55. For example, Briller (2000), using population statistics of those over 65 from the 1990s, said that 13% of the U.S. population is considered old. The U.S. Census Bureau defined old age as 65 in its 2000 census (Gist & Hetzel, 2004), although a population report based on the 2000 census and put out by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2003 identified older Americans as those 55 years and over (Smith, 2003). The present study will use age 55 as the beginning of old age. According to census figures from 1980, 1990, and 2000, those people age 55 and over make up approximately 21% of the total U.S. population, indicating that the percentage of older people in the U.S. has remained relatively constant over the last three decades (Baldrige, Brown, & Kincannon, 1983, Evans & Price, 2001; Goldstein & Damon, 1993). The most current

estimate (as of July 2006) of the percentage of people over age 55 in the United States is 23% (United States Census Bureau, 2006).

Although media scholars designate either age 55, 60, or 65 as the beginning of old age and often compare the percentages of older characters they find to the most recent real world population statistics available, studies have overwhelmingly found that older people are under represented in the media. Older people have traditionally been under represented in several kinds of media, including advertising (Bramlett-Solomon & Subramanian, 1999; Miller et al., 1999; Robinson, 1998; Roy & Harwood, 1997, Yan Bing Zhang et al, 2006), television (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Gerbner, 1997; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Vasil & Wass, 1993) and films (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a; Robinson et al., 2007). Again, the percentages on media portrayals of older people that follow may vary widely due to each researcher's operational definitions of old age.

In a content analysis of magazines over four decades, Miller et al. (1999) found that the percentage of older people portrayed in advertisements has decreased since 1964 despite the fact that the percentage of older people in the general population has increased. Bramlett-Solomon and Subramanian (1999), in their content analysis of *Life* and *Ebony* magazine ads appearing between 1990 and 1997, determined that fewer older people were featured in the 1990s compared to the previous decade. They found that only 1.5% of all people in the ads analyzed were considered old. Roy & Harwood (1997) found that older people appeared more frequently in television advertising: just under 7% of all television commercial characters were considered old. Robinson (1998) found an even higher percentage (16%) of older characters in his content analysis of television



commercials between 1994 and 1995. This percentage approached the percentage of older people in the general population, but still fell short. Advertising in other media, however, underrepresented the older people to a greater degree; he found that only 9% of magazine ads and 8% of newspaper ads from 1994-1995 contained older people. Yan Bing Zhang et al. (2006) argued that the representation of older people in advertising across various media has been relatively consistent: older characters have been underrepresented compared to U.S. census statistics.

Similar trends of under representation have been discovered in television. Briller (2000) found that only 2% of television characters are over age 65. Gerbner (1997), in a study of prime-time programming covering 20 years, found that as characters age, their representation declines. In a study of prime-time programming during the 1990s, older characters made up only 3% of the total number of major and minor television characters (Signorielli, 2001). In a meta-analysis of 28 studies conducted between the 1970s and 1990s, Vasil & Wass (1993) determined that older characters constituted between 1 and 5% of television characters. Bishop & Krause (1984) found that 7% of children's animated television characters could be considered older. A more recent study (Robinson & Anderson, 2006) found that older characters made up 8% of characters in children's television. The television genre that seems to represent older people most favorably is soap operas; Cassata & Irwin (1997) estimated that 16% of all characters on daytime serials were considered old (ages 51-64) or elderly (over 65).

Studies analyzing the portrayal of older people in films are not as numerous as those investigating other media. In a content analysis of the top grossing movies from 2002, Lauzen and Dozier (2005a) found that older men and women were under

represented, while men and women in younger age groups were over represented. They concluded that modern films provide a distorted picture of age. Robinson et al. (2007) found that in classic animated Disney films, older women relative to older men and older minority characters relative to older Caucasian characters were under represented when compared to U.S. census figures. Older women only made up 33% of older characters, despite the fact that they made up about 57% of the older population in the United States in the year 1990 and 55% of the older population in the year 2000 (Goldstein & Damon, 1993; Smith, 2003). Minorities made up only 17% of older characters in Disney films, while certain racial groups, such as Hispanics, were not represented at all among older characters.

Older women and minorities have been underrepresented in other media as well. For example, Cassata & Irwin (1997) found that 64% of older characters in soap operas were men. Brillier (2000) said that older women's representation on television was even lower, at about 33% for women of all ages. These figures are largely consistent for representations of women in general, who over several decades of primetime programming have been outnumbered by men by a factor of 2 to 1 (Berg & Streckfuss, 1992; Gerbner, 1997; Glascock, 2003; Glascock, 2001; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999). Older minorities have been under represented as well: 94% of older characters in soap operas were identified as white (Cassata & Irwin, 1997). In a study of adolescent literature from 1922-1975 (Peterson & Karnes, 1976), minority characters were represented more frequently, comprising 13% of older characters. A more recent study of prime-time television programming (Gerbner, 1997) discovered that white characters made up about 91% of middle-aged and older characters, and certain minority groups, such as Hispanics

and Asians, were not represented at all among characters over age 65. In television commercials, most characters were Caucasian and young; less than 1% of all characters were old and black (Roy & Harwood, 1997). The television genre that appears to be most favorable to older minority groups is children's television: Robinson & Anderson (2006) determined that 25% of older characters were minorities, meaning as a whole, minorities were approaching an accurate representation according to population statistics (about 39%, Smith, 2003). Specific minority groups, especially older blacks, were extremely under represented, however. Caucasians were over represented.

#### *Older characters' significance*

Older people usually appear as minor characters in the media and are not well-developed (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Gerbner, 1997; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b; McConatha, Schnell, & McKenna, 1999; Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Robinson, 1998; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al. 2007; Roy & Harwood, 1997; Signorielli, 2001; Vasil & Wass, 1993). Older characters were "greatly underdeveloped" in adolescent literature, meriting only four or five pieces of description or information, while readers received a wealth of information on younger characters. Robinson (1998) concluded that when media target younger audiences, older characters are more likely to be featured in minor roles. Research on children's television and films (Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007) found that between 32 and 39% of older characters were featured in major roles. Older characters are usually more likely to be featured as minor or background characters in media not specifically aimed at children, but at the general population (Roy & Harwood, 1997). Sometimes, even media intended for older audiences

do not often feature older characters in central roles; McConatha et al. (1999) found that only 8% of magazine ads featured an older adult as the central person in ads, even though 25% of subscribers to the magazines (*Time* and *Newsweek*) were over 50.

Older women especially have been relegated to minor roles: after decades of analyzing prime-time television programming, Gerbner (1997) determined that older women “virtually vanish from the screen in major, positive, and powerful roles” (p. 93; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a). Signorielli (2004) found that the 1990s were no different from the 70s in terms of older women’s significance to plot in television programming. She concluded that as women get older, they are less significant to the stories told on television. Kjaersgaard (2005) concluded that older women are not portraying strong lead characters or featured in prominent roles. Lauzen & Dozier (2005a) determined that women over 40 are “consigned to limited exposure and character roles” in films (p. 443). Older men, on the other hand, are much more likely to be featured as major characters and have more significance to the plot (Gerbner, 1997; Kjaersgaard, 2005; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a; Signorielli, 2004). In addition to the limited importance of older characters’ roles, storylines rarely focus on age. For example, less than 1% of the Saturday morning cartoons analyzed by Bishop & Krause (1984) featured a plot centered on age. Although one study of children’s literature (Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998) found that older characters were most often featured as central characters, almost all studies investigating the plot significance of older characters have indicated that older people are “of little real importance or concern” (Bishop & Krause, 1984, p. 93). Older people are either portrayed in trivial terms or not represented at all, perhaps symbolizing the true status of older people as a social group in U.S. society (Bishop & Krause, 1984).

Peterson & Karnes (1976) concluded that older people were “portrayed as only shadows who moved into and out of the major flow of the story at expeditious times... the older persons seldom really existed in the eyes of others but quietly wandered through the pages, without trouble, gratification, or suffering” (p. 230). Scholars worry that older women are negatively stereotyped across many forms of media (Kjaersgaard, 2005; Sherman, 1997) and that television viewers do not see “effective, attractive older characters” that provide positive images of aging (Briller, 2000).

#### *Physical characteristics of older characters*

In general, older characters in the media have been portrayed as healthy (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998; Robinson, 1998). They were seldom or never depicted as sick in illustrations of children’s literature (Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998) and in ads targeting the older age market, they were most often shown as “active/healthy” (Robinson, 1998). Also, physical characteristics of older characters have mostly been neutral (i.e., the most common physical characteristic was gray hair) and only a small percentage of characters are shown with an ambulatory aid (Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007), though older women are more likely to be shown as disabled than older men (Gerbner, 1997). The physical appearance of older characters was judged to be positive, with few of them portrayed as ugly or dirty (Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998; Peterson & Karnes, 1976), although one negative physical characteristic that was common in Disney movies was “toothless” or “missing teeth” (Robinson et al., 2007). Overall, older people are portrayed as healthy and clean in the media.

### *Personality traits of older characters*

The majority of older characters in the media are depicted with positive personality traits (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998; Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Robinson, 1998; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007), but negative attributes still persist for some characters (Robinson et al.; Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2003), especially older women (Gerbner, 1997; Vasil & Wass, 1993). Typical positive personality traits exhibited by older characters include friendly, caring, altruistic, and happy (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998; Robinson, 1998; Robinson et al., 2007). In children's literature, older characters were seldom or never portrayed as passive, irritable, lazy, boring, or ignorant (Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998). Books written in more recent decades "are more sensitive to showing their young readers an array of positive and respected attributes that older people possess" (p. 98). Conclusions were similar for adolescent literature; the dispositions of older characters were described with more positive words than negative words (Peterson & Karnes, 1976). This was also true for older characters in children's television programming: about 60% of older characters were described as having positive personality traits (Robinson & Anderson, 2006). Despite this encouraging percentage, it is nevertheless true that a high percentage (40%) of characters exhibited negative personality characteristics. In their study of Disney movies, Robinson et al. found the two most dominant personality traits for older characters were "friendly" (25%) and "angry/grumpy" (25%). Gerbner (1997) determined that a greater proportion of older characters (than younger characters) were depicted in prime-time television as foolish or eccentric. In a textual analysis of classic Disney animated films, Towbin et al. (2003)

found that older characters were portrayed as stupid, forgetful, and crotchety. When older people were asked to explain how older characters are portrayed on television, they cited some of the negative traits discussed here, including dependent, vulnerable, asexual, stupid, and grumpy (Healey & Ross, 2002).

### *Differences between the portrayal of older men and older women*

Older men and women often appear in ads for products that are associated with old age, such as pharmaceuticals (Bailey, Harrell, & Anderson, 1993; Bramlett-Solomon & Subramanian, 1999; Robinson, 1998). Older women especially are more likely to appear in ads for products associated with old age in print media (Bramlett-Solomon & Subramanian, 1999). Older women were especially portrayed in Disney movies as ugly and mean (Towbin et al., 2003). Older women are more likely than men to be portrayed as being eccentric, silly, and asexual, as well as lacking common sense (Gerbner, 1997; Vasil & Wass, 1993). Robinson et al. found that the role dominated by the older female in Disney films was villain (67% of older characters), though Gerbner (1997) found that old rich men are most likely to play evil roles on television. Older women were also shown in television commercials as dependent on men (McConatha et al., 1999).

Older women are less likely than older men to be portrayed as working outside the home, despite the fact that 63% of U.S. women between 55-59 and 44% of women ages 60-64 continue to work outside the home according to 2000 census statistics (Smith, 2003). Over three-quarters of men between 55-59 and 57% of men ages 60-64 work outside the home. Older women are less likely to have leadership roles in the workplace as well. Older men portrayed leaders in the workplace significantly more often than

women of the same age in films and television, and the only older characters on television with prestigious jobs are portrayed by white men (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b, Signorielli, 2004). As women aged in films, they were less likely to have goals, while men, on the other hand, had goals no matter what their age. Signorielli (2004) and Lauzen and Dozier (2005a) concluded that male characters are allowed to remain active, vital, and important contributors to the world throughout their lives on screen, while women have diminished capacities and live less purposeful lives as they get older. In addition to having less prestigious jobs and often no careers, older women are treated disrespectfully more often than older men on television. Although Gerbner (1997) found that older characters overall were treated with less respect than younger characters, more than 80% of older women were not treated courteously or highly esteemed, compared to less than 70% of older men. These high percentages indicate that overall older characters and especially older women in the media are not well respected.

### *Stereotypes of older people*

Stereotypes have been defined in cognitive psychology as “knowledge structures (schemas) in long-term memory that contain an individual’s beliefs about a particular concept” (Miller, Leyell, & Mazachek, 2004, p. 317). Stereotypes “tend to be deeply rooted in cultures” and are “resistant to change,” with the ability to influence interpersonal interactions (McConatha et al., 1999, p. 1051). Positive stereotypes “represent sanitized and idealized images,” while negative stereotypes “produce demeaning and ridiculing portraits” (Miller et al., 2004, p. 317). Hummert, Garstka,



Shaner, and Strahm (1994) discovered that young, middle-aged, and even older adults hold certain positive and negative stereotypes towards older people. Although earlier studies used only university students (Hummert, 1990; Schmidt & Boland, 1986), Hummert et al. (1994) asked adult respondents of all ages to complete a trait generation task and trait sorting task designed to uncover stereotypes held toward older people. After identifying traits associated with older people, adults were asked to place the traits into groups representing all the traits found in a single older person. Hummert and her colleagues discovered that adults of all age groups shared seven stereotypes. The three positive stereotypes included Golden Ager (active, adventurous, healthy, lively, health-conscious, well-traveled, productive, liberal, future oriented, sociable), Perfect Grandparent (intelligent, kind, loving, family-oriented, generous, happy, grateful, supportive, understanding, interesting), and John Wayne Conservative (patriotic, retired, conservative, nostalgic, old-fashioned, religious, tough, proud, wealthy). All adults shared four negative stereotypes of older adults as well, including Shrew/Curmudgeon (greedy, stubborn, prejudiced, complaining, nosy, inflexible, demanding, hypochondriac), Despondent (lonely, neglected, sad, tired, fragile), Severely Impaired (senile, slow-moving, slow-thinking, poor, sexless, sick, feeble, incoherent, inarticulate), and Recluse (quiet, timid, dependent, forgetful).

One age group, the young adults ages 18-24, yielded an additional negative stereotype: Vulnerable (afraid, victimized, bored, sedentary). Middle-aged adults yielded an additional negative stereotype: Self centered (inflexible, stubborn, humorless, jealous, miserly, greedy, nosy, selfish) while older adults yielded another negative stereotype: Elitist (demanding, prejudiced, wary, snobbish, naïve). Young adult respondents did not

furnish the Mildly impaired stereotype (forgetful, poor, lonely, slow moving, rambling), though middle aged and older adults did so. Middle age adults also furnished the Liberal Matriarch/patriarch stereotype (liberal, mellow, wealthy) while older adults furnished two other positive stereotypes: Activist (political, sexual, health-conscious) and Small town neighbor (emotional, old fashioned, conservative). The authors found that young adults sorted traits into fewer stereotypes than middle aged or older adults, meaning that young adults' stereotypes toward older adults are not very complex. Results also indicated that as people age, the stereotypes they hold towards older people tend to become more positive. Overall, the researchers were quite positive about their findings because only one stereotype (Severely Impaired) reflected the traditional stereotype of old age (a "physically and cognitively impaired person"). However, it is significant that adults hold more negative stereotypes toward older people than positive stereotypes, and that young adults in particular held the highest number of negative stereotypes toward older people.

Studies investigating the attitudes of young adults toward older people generally contradict Hummert et al.'s (1994) results. Several studies conclude that young adults hold mostly positive stereotypes of older adults, especially relatives (Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005; Chasteen, Schwartz, & Park, 2002; McCann, Dailey, Giles, & Ota, 2005; Peccioni & Croghan, 2002; Waskel, Dubes, & Reviere, 1997). Chasteen et al. (2002) determined that young adults hold stronger stereotypes toward older people than younger people, and that stereotypes are relatively fixed once an individual reaches young adulthood. Overall, young adults perceived older adults in a "relatively favorable" way, and were able to access positive aging attitudes faster than negative ones in a laboratory experiment. Other studies posited that college students may hold more positive

stereotypes toward older relatives than older people in general (Anderson et al., 2005; Waskel et al., 1997). Anderson et al. (2005) determined that young adults' stereotypes of their grandparents were significantly less positive than their stereotypes of older adult acquaintances. College students asked to identify words associated with older female relatives gave positive responses, suggesting that "a difference in attitudes towards the elderly may exist when older female relatives are considered in contrast to older women in general" (Waskel et al., 1997, p. 174). The authors posited that the old stereotype of older people as "infirm" and a group "to be pitied" has been slightly eroded by the presence of active older adult women relatives in college students' lives. Another study, however, found that college students do not always hold positive stereotypes towards all of their grandparents, even those they know well, and still describe them in negative terms (Peccioni & Croghan, 2002). The researchers concluded that "even when an older person is known to a young adult, he or she may not be able to overcome negative stereotypes of older adults, leading to potentially negative interactions" (p. 725). On the other hand, positive stereotypes held by young adults can have a positive impact on their relationship with older adults. McCann et al. (2005) found that positive stereotyping of older adults was negatively associated with communication avoidance; if young adults positively stereotyped older adults as vital and benevolent, the less likely they were to avoid interpersonal communication with older adults.

Other studies investigating the attitudes of college-aged students toward older adults were not as positive, however: in one study, first-year social work students believed that older adults were not as productive and were more pessimistic than younger adults (Gellis, Sherman, & Lawrance, 2003). The study found that young adults' negative

attitudes were present before they began their graduate work. Another study (Kimuna, Knox, & Zusman, 2005) yielded similar results: college-aged students exhibited negative attitudes toward older people, believing that they have no interest in sex, drive dangerously, and have limited physical capabilities.

Research over the last several decades has shown that negative stereotypes toward older people form in young childhood, sometimes as young as age three (Falchikov, 1990; Isaacs & Bearison, 1986; Middlecamp & Gross, 2002; Newman, Faux, & Larimer, 1997; Seefeldt, 1984; Williams & Blunk, 1999). By the time children start school, they already have assimilated these negative stereotypes (Isaacs & Bearison, 1986; Williams & Blunk, 1999). Children with little or no contact with older people are especially likely to hold negative stereotypes towards older people (Seefeldt, 1984), and those who have contact with older people are more likely to believe that older adults can engage in the same activities as children (Middlecamp & Gross, 2002). Three to five-year-old American children rated older adults less positively than younger adults, and preschool children in the United States and Sweden scored relatively high on a scale measuring ageist prejudice (Williams & Blunk, 1999). Isaacs and Bearison (1986) observed the behavior of four-, six-, and eight-year-old American children when interacting with older adults and determined that they showed significant levels of ageist prejudice, especially towards older women. For example, children sat significantly farther away from older people, and farther from older women than younger women. They initiated eye contact less often with older people, spoke fewer words, and initiated fewer conversations with older people than young people.

In another study (Falchikov, 1990), when children ages 10 and 11 were asked to draw a picture of an older person, they drew them with negative physical characteristics. For example, old women were extremely wrinkled and wore slippers, while both men and women were usually drawn with an ambulatory aid such as a walker or cane. Old people were generally smaller in size than younger people as well. Falchikov concluded that these negative stereotypes are very similar to those found in children's literature, implying that children may learn stereotypes of older people from the media. These stereotypes may also have implications for children's views of their own aging: although Middlecamp and Gross (2002) found that children ages three to five had positive attitudes about their own aging, children between fourth and sixth grades usually feel negatively about their own aging process (Newman et al., 1997; Seefeldt, 1984). Isaacs and Bearison (1986) posited that although children manifest ageist attitudes as young as age four, there appears to be a process of "attitude crystallization" that begins at age six or eight and continues through adolescence.

Studies on the attitudes of adolescents towards older adults have been relatively scarce compared to research on the attitudes of young adults and children. One early study (Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964) showed that adolescents in junior and senior high school regarded older people as strongly tied to the past, with little optimism for the present or the future. Adolescents tend to believe that older people are ineffective and dependent, while rating middle-aged adults as more acceptable and autonomous (Luszcz & Fitzgerald, 1986). Doka (1986) found that adolescents 12-16 held several negative stereotypes towards older people. Adolescents were exposed to older people as part of an oral history project, and pre- and post-tests were given to measure their attitude toward

older people. The majority of adolescents believed that older people are lonely, isolated, poor, and institutionalized, as well as angry or irritated most of the time. Adolescents also believed that younger people work more efficiently, learn much faster, and have fewer car accidents than older people. Adolescents on the upper end of the age bracket were more likely than their younger counterparts to describe older people as wrinkled and ugly. Some adolescents agreed that most old people are senile. Adolescents were more likely to see an older person in a negative light if the older person was particularly old. The researchers concluded that adolescents' exposure to older people did not significantly impact their already-held stereotypes, implying that stereotypes toward older people are resilient.

Youth's attitudes toward their own aging process appear to be just as strong; adolescents are especially more likely than adults to feel negatively about the aging process. When asked to identify the happiest times of life, adolescents never cited the years over age 70, which seem "to promise little satisfaction" (Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964, p. 244). Youth reportedly have "considerable misinformation about aging and anxiety about the later stages of the life cycle" (Doka, 1986, p. 173) and see the later years in life as ones of diminished happiness and augmented worries (Tuckman & Lorge, 1956). Adolescents were excited about the events that would happen in early adulthood, but were afraid that during old age, they would suffer from mental and/or physical disabilities, become dependent on others or lonely, or become a victim (Doka, 1986). The research suggested that negative attitudes toward older people start forming in childhood, crystallize during adolescence, and remain largely unchanged until individuals become old themselves.

### *Positive and negative stereotypes in the media*

Media scholars have searched specifically for the appearance of certain stereotypes of older people in the media to determine whether older characters are portrayed in a positive or negative way. Media scholars studying the portrayal of older people in the media have been inspired by the discovery of certain real-world stereotypes, striving to determine whether the portrayal of older people in the media matches society's positive and negative stereotypes toward older people (Miller et al., 1999; Miller et al., 2004; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007). As mentioned previously, studies investigating the perceptions of young, middle aged, and older adults toward older people have revealed that they hold multiple stereotypes toward older adults, including six positive stereotypes (Golden Ager, Perfect Grandparent, Liberal matriarch/Patriarch, John Wayne Conservative, Activist, and Small-town Neighbor) and eight negative stereotypes (Shrew/Curmudgeon, Despondent, Vulnerable, Severely Impaired, Recluse, Mildly Impaired, Self-centered, and Elitist) (Hummert et al., 1994).

In several media content analyses (Miller et al., 1999; Miller et al., 2004; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007), the appearance of these stereotypes is used to evaluate the overall portrayal of an older character as either positive or negative. In magazine ads and television commercials, for example, there has been little negative stereotyping of older characters, with the majority of older characters stereotyped positively (Miller et al., 2004; Miller et al., 1999). Magazine ads from the 1950s to 1990s had a particularly low percentage of negatively stereotyped portrayals of older characters (4% portrayed the mildly impaired stereotype), while about 78% of older characters in television commercials were found to be “somewhat” consistent with

a positive stereotype, such as golden ager or perfect grandparent. About 21% of magazine ads were not consistent with any stereotype, and the researchers determined that there was “not much extreme stereotyping” in the ads (Miller et al., 1999). The researchers studying older characters in television commercials were even more optimistic; they concluded that the appearance of several positive stereotypes confirmed the decades-long trend of portraying older people in a positive manner in advertising (Miller et al., 2004). They determined that overall “it seems that advertisers have probably not been socially irresponsible in their portrayal of the elderly... perhaps the critics have overstated their case.” Nevertheless, they did admit that certain advertisers “used demeaning and ridiculous stereotypes at times” (p. 331). Similarly, Miller et al. (1999) found that over time, there was an increasing percentage of negative stereotypes and a decreasing percentage of positive stereotypes, along with a smaller percentage of older characters.

Studies investigating the portrayal of older characters in content other than advertising have found less encouraging results: in children’s television programming, using the positive and negative stereotypes reiterated by Hummert et al., (1994). Robinson & Anderson (2006) determined that 62% of the older characters had an overall positive portrayal and 38% were negatively stereotyped. Robinson et al.’s results were similar for Disney animated films, with 58% of older characters portrayed in a positive way and 42% depicted in a negative manner. According to other studies that have not specifically used the stereotypes discussed by Hummert et al. (1994) to evaluate overall portrayal, the overall portrayal of older characters has been mixed. The overall portrayal of older adults in advertising was found to be mostly positive (Robinson, 1998; Roy &



Harwood, 1997) but older adults were portrayed in a negative manner in about 90% of Disney films studied (Towbin et al., 2003).

### *Theory: Cultivation*

Cultivation theory posits that the more television (or media) an individual consumes, the more likely he or she will come to believe that the norms, beliefs, and attitudes portrayed on television (or in the media) are an accurate representation of the real world (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Gerbner argued that television is the nation's storyteller, acting as a broad socializing agent. The same can be said for movies. Cultivation theory implies that children and adolescents learn the most about society from watching television, movies, and other forms of media, and the media can cultivate and shape normative beliefs, or individuals' perceptions of how the world works. The media can be important in the development of descriptive norms, which are formed when observing others, even in a mediated form.

Cultivation theory posits that the heavy media viewers are more vulnerable to the cultivation effect, and teens are heavy media consumers. Teens reportedly spend up to half of their waking hours with the media, and although teens may have varied individual experiences with the media, most "of their lives are mediated, to a large extent, by the mass media" (Mastronardi, 2003, p. 84). In addition to attending the movie theater twice as often as adults, teens watch one to three videos per week (Stern, 2005b). The majority of children and adolescents (65%) have television sets in their bedrooms and watch more than 21 hours of television a week (Smith, 2005). Teens have access to movies like never before through television, DVDs, the Internet, and pay per view, and about 65% of youth

and teens place importance on seeing the most current movies (Stern, 2005b). Teenagers represent almost 20% of the movie-going public and half of them attend movies two times a month (Smith, 2005, Self-Absorbed). Over the past several decades, filmmakers have tapped into the financial power of the youth market (who spend \$170 billion of their own money a year) by making films directed specifically at teenagers (Smith, 2005; Stern, 2005b). Teen movies have become especially popular in the last few decades, garnering high domestic box office grosses.

The media are an important socializing agent for teenagers, who are in the process of forming their identity and developing a set of beliefs (Arnett, 1995). Children make decisions on who they want to be during their teenage years, and adolescents use the media for their own self-socialization processes. Due to the diminishing role of the family in their teen years, adolescents purposively use media to “acquire—or resist acquiring—the behaviors and beliefs of the social world, the culture in which they live” (p. 525). Mastronardi (2003) argued that media give adolescents “interpretive frameworks and logics for understanding and responding to their world.” Of course, teens do not exclusively rely on the media for socialization purposes and may still be influenced by other socializing agents such as their families, schools, and peers during these formative years. Tan (1997), in a study of U.S. high school students, found support for a cognitive-functional model of television’s socialization effects: adolescents accepted values presented on television if they recognized those values and perceived them to be important to being successful. Given the importance of movies to teens, the popularity of teen movies, and the amount of time teens spend with the media, however, it stands to reason that teen movies play a role in contributing to the attitudes and beliefs of teens,

who are actively forming their identity from the culture they experience. Research has found that “steady, cumulative exposure to television makes an ‘independent contribution’ to how attitudes or beliefs are developed and maintained” (Mastronardi, 2003). Implicitly, this is true for other media as well, including movies.

Through television and movies, adolescents observe others and their perceptions, beliefs, and actions in a mediated form, and this may in turn affect their knowledge and perspective of the world. According to schema theory, when individuals are presented with new information or stimuli, they activate a template for processing the stimuli. Most of the time, television and movies, in their aim to appeal to the broadest audience, present information that is vivid and repeated, and thus it is easiest to recall and access templates that we have learned from the media in other situations in our lives. This is evidenced by the normative beliefs people may have about groups of people that they have only come in contact with in the media. Cultivation theory has often been used as a theoretical foundation to examine how media portray minorities (Tamborini, Mastro, Chory-Assad, & Huang, 2000; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005), teenagers (Stern, 2005b), and of course, older people (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a; 2005b; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2006). The cultivation effect is stronger for individuals who may have no real world contact with certain groups who are portrayed in the media. In recent years, children and adolescents’ contact with older people, including their grandparents, has diminished due to recent sociocultural shifts in American society (Vasil & Wass, 1993), and it is possible that some young people only have contact with the older people they see in the media. This means that “it is likely that the media play an important role in shaping attitudes toward the elderly, particularly among children who have limited, superficial, or

no contact with elderly people” (p. 72). This not only has repercussions for how older people are viewed and treated by teenagers, but the negative portrayals of older people found in the media may affect adolescents’ views of old age in general. Holladay (2002) argued that “certainly the media is responsible for cultivating some of our views on aging... Through exposure to elderly television and movie characters, we may develop conceptions of what later life might hold for aging individuals and ourselves” (p. 681).

Given the theoretical foundation that the media may ultimately shape the attitudes and beliefs of adolescents, it is important to study the media that teens consume. Teen movies are an appropriate sample to analyze given the importance of movies to teens and the amount of time they spend watching movies and videos. Researchers have recently studied teen films to discover how teens and “nerds” are portrayed (Bach, 2006; Stern, 2005b) and to determine the prevalence of teen substance use (Stern, 2005a). Teen movies made around the turn of the millennium have been analyzed from a literary standpoint, given that many teen movies, such as *Clueless* and *She’s All That*, have been adapted from popular literary works (Davis, 2006). No studies have investigated the portrayal of older people in teen movies, however. Although negative stereotypes towards older people may begin in childhood, the research suggests that they crystallize during the teen years and are completely formed by the time they reach young adulthood. If the media can indeed cultivate negative attitudes of adolescents and young adults towards older people, then it is important to study how older characters are portrayed in media aimed at teenagers. The following research questions will guide this inquiry:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: Does the percentage of older characters in teen movies reflect real world U.S. population statistics?

- RQ<sub>2</sub>: How accurately represented are older characters in terms of gender and race when compared to population figures?
- RQ<sub>3</sub>: What are the primary roles of older characters in teen movies, and what percentage are major, minor, or incidental roles?
- RQ<sub>4</sub>: What personality traits do the older characters possess?
- RQ<sub>5</sub>: What physical characteristics do older characters possess, including activity level, health status, body image, hair and facial hair type and color, use of an ambulatory aid, presence of wrinkles, and level of attractiveness?
- RQ<sub>6</sub>: Are there significant differences between the portrayal of older men and older women?
- RQ<sub>7</sub>: What stereotypes (based on the cognitive psychology literature) do older characters embody?
- RQ<sub>8</sub>: Is the overall portrayal of older characters in teen films positive, negative, or neutral, based upon the presence of certain stereotypes found in the literature?
- RQ<sub>9</sub>: Do the representation, physical characteristics, personality traits, roles, and overall portrayal of older characters vary by decade?

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### *Sample Selection*

A content analysis was conducted on 60 of the most popular teen movies from the 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s (20 from each decade, see Appendix A) to obtain a comprehensive view of the portrayal of older people through three decades. The top grossing teen films were determined by consulting box office websites that track domestic box office grosses, including [www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com). A film was determined to be a “teen” film if the storyline centers around teenagers, features a teenager (ages 12-17) as the central character, features teenagers in major and supporting roles, and is rated G, PG, or PG-13. R-rated films were excluded from the sample because teens cannot legally see R-rated films (without a parent or guardian), which are geared more towards an adult audience. Sequels were also excluded because characters are often repeated. If sequels contained teen characters, however, and the original movie did not, the sequel most representing teen storylines was included in the sample (e.g., *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*).

### *Measurement and Coding Instrument*

Two independent coders examined the teen movies. Before identifying older characters specifically, all major and minor characters regardless of age were identified and accounted for to accurately determine the representation of older characters in teen films. A coding sheet was devised to keep track of the information about each of the older characters. Older characters were defined as those who appeared to be 55 years of age and older, and were identified based the presence of one or more of the following characteristics: (1) an appearance of retirement, (2) extensive gray hair, (3) wrinkles of

the skin, (4) extensive loss of hair or balding, (5) cracking voice, (6) use of an aid such as a cane or wheelchair, (7) the parent of a son or daughter who is middle-aged or older, and (8) evidence of grandchildren or great-grandchildren (Bishop & Krause, 1984; Gantz, Gartenberg, & Rainbow, 1980; Peterson, 1992; Robinson, 1998; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Swayne & Greco, 1987).

Once identified, the gender and race (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Other) of each older character were coded, as well as his or her role in the teen film. Major, minor, and incidental older characters were included; background characters who have no role in the plot and were only seen briefly were excluded. A major character was defined as one who is important or central to the plot, is on screen for an extended amount of time, and has a significant amount of dialogue. A minor character was defined as one who is in more than one scene, has more than one line, and whose role is at least somewhat relevant to the plot. An incidental character was defined as one who is drawn into the plot of the movie and becomes part of the action (i.e., he or she may interact with a major or minor character, or he or she may be shown repeatedly in several camera shots), but who may only have one line or be in only one scene. Extras who were present in the background but were not drawn into the plot were excluded. Non-humans were also excluded (including those who only had a partial body, legendary animals, monsters, etc.).

The chronological age of older characters was coded according to Miller et al.'s coding categories: young old (55-64), middle old (65-74), and old old (75+). The primary role (worker, boss, parent, grandparent, friend, villain, spouse, other) of each older character was coded as well.

The physical characteristics and personality traits of older characters were also coded. Variables coded included health status (good, minor limitations, poor), level of physical activity (very active, active, inactive), and physical portrayal (hair and facial hair type and color, teeth, glasses, wrinkles, level of attractiveness, body type, and use of a physical aid such as a cane, wheelchair, or hearing aid). Personality descriptions were noted, including forgetful, angry/grumpy/stern, humorous, helpless, lonely/recluse, intelligent/wise, sad, senile/crazy, friendly, nosey, happy/content, loving/caring, eccentric, overly affectionate, object of ridicule, or evil/sinister. These variables were taken from Robinson et al. (2007), who conducted an extensive literature review on the portrayal of older people in the media before devising specific coding categories.

Coders determined whether the portrayal of each character was consistent with stereotypes found by Hummert et al. (1994). These include six positive stereotypes (Golden ager, perfect grandparent, John Wayne conservative, Liberal Matriarch/patriarch, Activist, and Small town neighbor) and eight negative ones (Shrew/curmudgeon, Despondent, Vulnerable, Severely impaired, Recluse, Mildly impaired, Self-centered, and Elitist), each described previously in the literature review (see Appendix B for operational definitions). These stereotypes were used rather than those from earlier studies (Hummert, 1990; Schmidt & Boland, 1986) in an effort to include all possible stereotypes. Hummert et al. (1994) uncovered the range of stereotypes held by all adults, rather than just those held by college-age students. It is possible that the stereotypes found in teen movies will be reflective of stereotypes held by middle aged and older adults, as well as stereotypes held by young adults.



Transforming Miller et al.'s (1999) coding categories, older character portrayals were coded as either "consistent" or "not consistent" with each of the 14 stereotypes. Thus, it is possible for character portrayals to reflect more than one stereotype. Using Miller et al.'s (1999; 2004) coding scheme, coders rated each character portrayal according to the consistency of the audio content of the movie and the character's visual representation with the traits associated with each stereotype. Elements of each character portrayal were examined to determine their consistency with various stereotypes, including physical appearance, emotional state, activity depicted, and social role. The dialogue of the film (including what was said by, to, and/or about each of the older characters) was also used to determine a character's overall consistency with stereotypes (Miller et al., 2004).

After determining the consistency of stereotypes, coders evaluated each character portrayal as either positive, negative, or neutral in an effort to assess overall trends in character portrayals. Some character portrayals were reflective of (consistent with) more than one stereotype (Miller et al., 1999). Those portrayals reflecting one or more positive stereotypes but no negative stereotypes were coded as positive. Those portrayals consistent with one or more negative stereotypes but no positive stereotypes were coded as negative. Portrayals that are consistent with a positive and negative stereotype were coded as neutral. Portrayals that are consistent with a greater number of positive stereotypes than negative stereotypes were coded as positive. Portrayals that are consistent with a greater number of negative stereotypes than positive stereotypes were coded as negative. Character portrayals that are not consistent with a positive or negative stereotype were coded as neutral.

Two independent coders, who were previously trained, collected the data. The two coders each coded nine randomly selected movies, or 15% of the sample. The coders discussed any disagreements and resolved them. Holsti's (1969) intercoder reliability formula was used to calculate agreement on the identification of older characters (93% agreement), chronological age (96% agreement), race (100% agreement), both types of roles (100% agreement), activity level (100% agreement), health status (100% agreement), one randomly selected physical characteristic—wrinkles (96% agreement), selection of stereotypes (100% agreement), and the overall portrayal of older characters (100% agreement). Once intercoder reliability was established one of the coders collected data for the remaining 51 films.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

RQ<sub>1</sub> asked how many older characters appear in the sample and how this compared to real-world population statistics. A total of 560 major and minor characters were coded. Of these, 93% (n=519) were coded as under 55, while 7% (n=41) were considered old. This represents a substantial under representation of older people in teen films. According to census figures, the percentage of older people in the United States has remained relatively constant over the last three decades. Those people age 55 and over made up approximately 21% of the total U.S. population in 1980, 1990, and 2000 (Baldrige, Brown, & Kincannon, 1983, Evans & Price, 2001; Goldstein & Damon, 1993), meaning that those 55 and older were greatly under represented in teen movies compared to real world statistics. In addition to major and minor characters, 50 older characters incidental to the plot were identified, bringing the total number of older characters identified in the sample to 91.

Almost a third of the movies (n=19, 32%) did not contain any older characters as specified by the operational definitions. Those films containing zero older characters included 6 films from the 1980s (*Honey I Shrunk the Kids*, *Footloose*, *Wargames*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Pretty in Pink*, and *Red Dawn*), 8 from the 1990s (*She's All That*, *Clueless*, *Encino Man*, *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Flipper*, *Drive Me Crazy*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), and 5 from the 2000s (*Bring It On*, *Friday Night Lights*, *Snow Day*, *The Lizzie McGuire Movie*, and *A Walk to Remember*).

The films with the highest number of older characters were recent: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* contained 7 older characters (two major characters, three minor

characters, and two incidental characters), and *The Princess Diaries* contained 6 (two major characters and four incidental characters). Fifty percent of the films contained either one or two older characters (n=30), while 15% contained either three or four older characters (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Older Characters Per Film**

Number of Older Characters Per Film	Number of films	Percentage of Films
Zero	19	31%
One	15	25%
Two	15	25%
Three	3	5%
Four	6	10%
Six	1	2%
Seven	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100%</b>

RQ<sub>2</sub> asked about the gender and race of older characters and how these portrayals compare to real world population statistics. Older females were under represented and older males were over represented. About 61% (n=56) of older characters were male, while 39% (n=35) were female. This almost represents an inversion from U.S. census figures; women made up about 57% of the older population in the United States in the year 1990 and 55% of the older population in the year 2000 (Goldstein & Damon, 1993; Smith, 2003).

Minorities were also under represented, while Caucasians were over represented. About 84% of the older characters (n=76) were Caucasian, 9% of older characters were

African American (n=8), 4% were Asian (n=4), and only 1% (n=1) were Hispanic (see Table 2). About 2% (n=2) were identified as “other,” including a landlady from *Mad Love* identified as Native American and Madam Zeroni from *Holes*, who as a gypsy was considered of mixed racial descent. The representation of all minority groups combined was only 16%, despite the fact that minorities make up about 40% of the current population of those over 55 (Smith, 2003). The representation of individual racial groups among older characters (55+) was distorted and fell substantially below actual population figures, which include about 15% African American, 15% Asian, and 10% Hispanic.

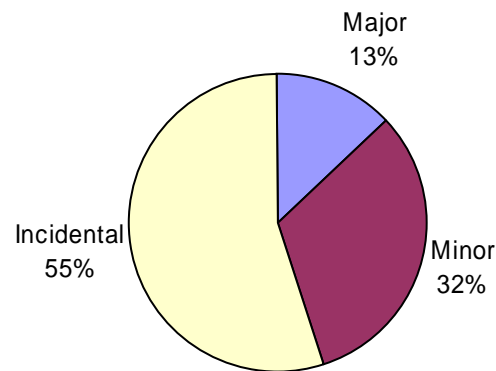
**Table 2**  
**Race of Older Characters**

Caucasian	African American	Asian	Hispanic	Other
84%	9%	4%	1%	2%

RQ<sub>3</sub> asked about older characters’ significance to the plot. Older characters were featured in major roles only 4% of the time, while 96% of those featured in major roles were under 55. About 11% of those featured in minor roles were old, while 89% of those featured in minor roles were coded as young. Of the total number of older characters identified in the sample (n=91), 13% of them (n=12) were featured in major roles, 32% (n=29) were featured in minor roles, and 55% (n=50) of older characters were featured in incidental roles (see Figure 1). Because only 7% of major and minor characters were coded as old and more than half of all older characters were coded as incidental to the plot, the role of most older characters is of limited significance to the plot of the teen movies studied.

**Figure 1**

**Role of Older Characters**



The primary character role fulfilled by the older character was that of worker (n=27, 30%), followed by grandparent (n=18, 20%) and boss (n=18, 20%). The roles least likely to be filled by older characters were that of parent (n=2, 2%) and villain (n=2, 2%). The two older characters considered parents were Aunt May and Uncle Ben from *SpiderMan*, who raise Peter Parker as their son. The two villains in the sample were women: Mrs. Sturak from *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead* and Mama from *The Goonies*. Only 13% of older characters were coded as friends, but a quarter of those coded as friends were featured in major, memorable roles, such as Doc from *Back to the Future* and Mr. Miyagi from *Karate Kid*. Grandparents were overwhelmingly featured in minor or incidental roles; only 2 of the 18 grandparents were featured in major roles (Clarisse from *The Princess Diaries* and Mrs. Peache from *My Bodyguard*). About 13% of the older characters were coded as “other,” meaning that they did not fit the criteria for classification as a friend, grandparent, etc. Most of the time, these were incidental characters (ones who appeared briefly at a social event during the film, for example).

Although the present study was not investigating the differences between major, minor, and incidental characters, statistical tests yielded some significant differences

between the portrayals of these characters. Those who had either major or minor roles were significantly more likely to have teeth ( $X^2 = 13.06$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .05$ ), to be portrayed as intelligent ( $X^2 = 22.81$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ), loving ( $X^2 = 8.36$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ), or eccentric ( $X^2 = 7.3$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and to exhibit the Golden Ager ( $X^2 = 7.3$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ), John Wayne Conservative ( $X^2 = 8.9$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ), or Perfect Grandparent ( $X^2 = 14.52$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ ) stereotype. Major and minor characters were significantly more likely than incidental characters to be portrayed in an overall positive manner, while incidental characters were slightly more likely to be portrayed as neutral or negative ( $X^2 = 11.17$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Previous studies on the portrayal of older people in the media did not include incidental characters, however, so it is unknown how incidental older characters in other media have been portrayed compared to older characters who are more important to the plot. Further research in this area is warranted.

The personality traits of older characters (as addressed by RQ<sub>4</sub>) were both positive and negative, but the dominant personality trait of older characters was “angry/grumpy/stern,” exhibited by 35% of the older characters ( $n=32$ , see Table 3). The second most dominant trait was “friendly” (25%). Other prominent personality traits included “intelligent/wise” (22%), “loving/caring” (19%), “eccentric” (14%), and “happy/content” (10%). Personality traits coded as “other” included “strict/tough,” “elegant,” “hickish.” Two older characters were coded as “childish.” For example, Mr. Carson, in *Rookie of the Year*, was extremely excited to get a prize in a cracker jack box and was ridiculed for it later by a middle-aged character. Mrs. Peache, in *My Bodyguard*, tried to hide repeatedly from her son and grandson but was told to stop playing games.

Other personality traits found by the coders were more positive: Clarisse, a queen in *The Princess Diaries*, was described by coders as “polite” and “graceful.”

**Table 3**  
**Personality Types of Older Characters**

Personality Type	Total Characters	Percentage
Angry/Grumpy/Stern	32	35%
Friendly	23	25%
Intelligent/Wise	20	22%
Loving/Caring	17	19%
Eccentric	13	14%
Happy/Content	9	10%
Evil/Sinister	5	6%
Object of Ridicule	5	6%
Nosey	4	4%
Forgetful	4	4%
Senile/Crazy	4	4%
Sad	3	3%
Overly Affectionate	2	2%
Sexy/Macho	1	1%
Lonely/Recluse	1	1%
Humorous	1	1%
Dirty Old Man/Woman	1	1%

The physical attributes of older characters, as addressed by RQ<sub>5</sub>, were mostly positive, especially their health status and level of activity. Almost all older characters (n=88, or 97%) were coded as active or very active, meaning that older characters were rarely shown just sitting or lying down, but were physically capable of activities such as walking, running, and exercising. Similarly, the health status of older characters was good for the majority of characters (n=77, or 85%). About 10% of the characters (n=9) were shown relying on a physical aid such as a hearing aid, cane, or prosthetic limb, though none were shown with walkers or wheelchairs. Some (n=14, 15%) were portrayed with minor health limitations, a result mainly due to their reliance on physical aids, but



some took medication or complained about problems such as backaches, hernias, and arthritis. No characters were portrayed in poor health, although some characters did die of natural causes at some point in two of the films (Aunt March in *Little Women* and Mrs. Sturak from *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*). There was no indication, however, that they were in poor health before they died.

Older characters' other physical characteristics were largely positive; 90% (n=82) were coded as attractive or very attractive, and few (n=2, 2%) were shown as toothless or missing teeth. Only 9 characters (10%) were coded as ugly (four females and five males). About 80% of the older characters (n=73) were shown with limited wrinkles, while 19% (n=17) had extensive wrinkles. This could be due to the chronological age breakdown of older characters: 48% were between 55 and 64, 44% were between 65 and 74, and only 7% were over 75. The body image of older characters was also positive: 56% (n=50) were shown as average, a third (n=30) were shown as thin, and 11% (n=10) were shown as overweight. No older characters were shown as very thin or obese. A greater proportion of women (37%) than men (31%) were shown as thin, however. Women also seemed more likely to be portrayed as overweight. Of the 10 overweight characters, seven of them were women. Men were shown as having an average weight (64%), while women were shown as average 42% of the time.

Most of the older characters' other physical characteristics were neutral and a natural result of the aging process. Three-quarters of the older characters (n=66) had gray or white hair, while males were bald about 52% of the time (n=26). Thirty-four percent (n=19) of males had facial hair of some kind, and it was gray or white 90% of the time and neatly trimmed 68% of the time. Twenty-three percent (n=21) of the older characters

wore glasses. Fourteen percent of older women characters were shown with sagging breasts, 9% of all older characters were shown as hunched over, and 19% (n=17) had a cracking voice.

There was some statistically significant differences between the characteristics of older men and older women, as asked by RQ<sub>6</sub>. Males were significantly more likely to be shown with gray hair than females ( $X^2 = 13.01$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and women were significantly more likely than men to be shown as hunched over ( $X^2 = 4.95$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There was also a significant relationship between gender and primary character role ( $X^2 = 21.17$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Men were significantly more likely to be portrayed in a position of authority (as a boss), while women were more likely to be portrayed as a worker. There were no other statistically significant relationships for gender, although the relationship between intelligence and gender approached significance (men are almost more likely than women to be portrayed as intelligent,  $p < .06$ ). A greater proportion of men (63%) than women (51%) were portrayed as middle aged.

The portrayal of the majority of older characters (59%) was consistent with stereotypes as specified in the literature review (RQ<sub>7</sub>). Thirty-one percent of characters (n=28) embodied only positive stereotypes (such as Perfect Grandparent or Golden Ager), 19% (n=17) embodied only negative stereotypes (such as Shrew), and only 10% (n=9) embodied a mix of both positive and negative stereotypes. A substantial number (n=37, 41%) of older characters' portrayals were not consistent with any stereotype. The most dominant stereotype found among older characters was Perfect Grandparent, exhibited by 28% of older characters (n=25, see Table 4), followed by Shrew, which was embodied by 15% of older characters. Other prominent stereotypes exhibited by older

characters included Golden Ager, John Wayne Conservative, and Mildly Impaired. The stereotypes of Liberal Matriarch/Patriarch, Small-town Neighbor, and Recluse were not embodied by any older characters in the sample. The traditional stereotype of older people, that of Severely Impaired (Hummert et al., 1994) was embodied by three characters, a small proportion of the older characters.

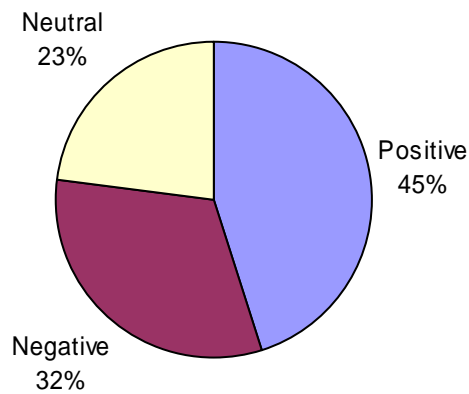
**Table 4**  
**Stereotypes of Older Characters**

Stereotype	Total Characters	Percentage
Perfect Grandparent	25	28%
Shrew	14	15%
Golden Ager	13	14%
John Wayne Conservative	11	12%
Mildly Impaired	8	9%
Vulnerable	5	6%
Elitist	4	4%
Despondent	3	3%
Severely Impaired	3	3%
Activist	3	3%
Self-centered	3	3%
Liberal Matriarch/Patriarch	0	0%
Small town Neighbor	0	0%
Recluse	0	0%
Not consistent with any stereotype	37	41%

The overall portrayal was positive for 45% (n=41) of the older characters, while a significant number of older characters were portrayed as either neutral (n=29, 32%) or negative n=21 (23%, see Figure 2), as addressed by RQ<sub>8</sub>.

**Figure 2**

**Overall Portrayal of Older Characters**



A significant statistical relationship was found between overall portrayal and role ( $X^2 = 11.17$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Incidental characters were significantly more likely than major and minor characters to be portrayed in a neutral manner, while major and minor characters were significantly more likely than incidental characters to be portrayed in either a positive or negative way. Incidental characters were significantly less likely to be portrayed in a positive way, and major characters were more likely than other characters to be portrayed in an overall positive manner. None of the major older characters were portrayed in a neutral manner, and three quarters of them were portrayed positively (see Table 5). Minor characters were portrayed in a positive manner just over half of the time ( $n=16$ , 55%). The proportion of major and incidental characters that were portrayed negatively was similar ( $n=3$ , 35%;  $n=13$ , 26%, respectively). The overall portrayal did not vary significantly with relation to gender, race, chronological age, social age, or primary character role.

**Table 5**  
**Overall Portrayal of Characters in Teen Movies by Role**

	Major		Minor		Incidental		TOTAL	
Positive	9	75%	16	55%	16	32%	41	45%
Negative	3	25%	5	17%	13	26%	21	23%
Neutral	0	0%	8	28%	21	42%	29	32%
TOTAL	12	100%	29	100%	50	100%	91	100%

There were no statistically significant differences found between the three decades, indicating that the representation of older characters, as well as their demographic, physical, and personality characteristics, have remained relatively consistent in teen films over time (RQ<sub>9</sub>). Some frequencies, however, provide some interesting information. Teen movies made since the year 2000 contained the highest number of older characters (n=38, 42%), followed by the 1980s, which contained 29 older characters (32%). The 1990s contained the fewest number of older characters, 23 (25%). The 2000s contained the highest number of characters over age 75, while the 1980s did not feature any characters over age 75.

Gender representation was largely the same across decades, although the portrayal of older women increased about 2% from the 1990s to the 2000s (the 1980s and 1990s contained about 38% females, whereas the 2000s contained almost 40% females). The representation of older women in each decade falls far short of the actual population of older females, who in the 2000s made up about 55% of the older population, and in each of the earlier decades comprised about 57% of the older population (Baldrige, Brown, & Kincannon, 1983; Gist & Hetzel, 2004; Goldstein & Damon, 1993).

Similar patterns were found for race. The 1980s contained the highest percentage of Caucasian characters (94%), followed by the 2000s (82%), and then the 1990s (71%). The 1990s were the most racially diverse decade, with the most older African American and Hispanic characters. The 1990s was the only decade where older minorities actually approached their representation in actual population figures; they were greatly under represented in the 1980s and somewhat in the 2000s.

Physical characteristics were largely consistent over the three decades. Each decade contained three older characters who used a physical aid, for example. The 2000s, however, by far contained the highest proportion of thin older characters (55%), while the 1990s contained thin characters 28% of the time and the 1980s contained thin older characters only 17% of the time. The 1980s contained the highest percentage of overweight older characters (19%), followed by the 1990s (14%), and then the 2000s (only 5%).

The decades that most frequently featured older characters as grandparents were the 1980s and the 2000s, while the 2000s most often featured older characters in the role of worker. The personality traits of older characters were mostly consistent across the three decades, but the 1980s contained a higher proportion of “angry/grumpy/stern” older characters (44%) than the 2000s (34%) and the 1990s (22%). The 1990s contained the highest proportion of “friendly” older characters (39%).

The overall portrayal of older characters did not vary much, although the highest percentage of positive portrayals was found in the 1990s (57% of characters in the 1990s were portrayed positively, see Table 6). The 2000s contained the lowest percentage of negative portrayals (48% of older characters in the 2000s were portrayed negatively).

**Table 6**  
**Overall Portrayal of Characters in Teen Movies by Decade**

	191980s		191990s		202000s		TOTAL	
Positive	11	34%	12	57%	18	47%	41	45%
Negative	9	28%	2	10%	10	26%	21	23%
Neutral	12	38%	7	33%	10	26%	29	32%
TOTAL	32	100%	21	100%	38	100%	91	100%

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

While children may get their ideas about older people from many different sources, including parents, peers, relatives, acquaintances, and teachers, these socializing agents have less of an effect during the teen years (Arnett, 1995). Instead, teens begin to heavily consume media during adolescence and may consciously acquire and shape their identity based on the media they consume. In modern society, when children and adolescents have little contact with older people, the ideas about groups they have little experience with may be taken from the media (the cultivation effect, see Gerbner et al., 2002). The current study did a content analysis of the most popular teen movies for the portrayal of older characters to determine way older people that are presented in teen films. Although some results were favorable, the marginalization of older characters, their lack of significance to the plot, and the use of negative stereotypes were notable.

The under representation of older characters found in teen movies confirms a decade-long trend of older characters' under representation in the media. Only 7% of major and minor characters in teen movies were over the age of 55, despite real world population statistics that estimate the over-55 population of the United States at 21% over the last three decades. The population of older Americans is expected to continue to grow as Baby Boomers reach retirement age; it is estimated that there will be 86 million people over age 65 in the United States by the year 2050 (Gist & Hetzel, 2004). Seven percent, however, is an improvement over the percentage of older characters that were featured in major and minor roles in primetime television in the 1990s (3%, Signorielli, 2001). Older characters' representation in teen movies is similar to their representation in media aimed at younger audiences, including children's television (Bishop & Krause, 1984; Robinson



& Anderson, 2006), as well as in media aimed at adult audiences, including magazine and newspaper advertising (Robinson, 1998). The discovery of 50 incidental older characters (in addition to the 41 major and minor older characters) in teen movies indicates that on average, for every major or minor older character in teen movies, there is likely to be an older character that is incidental to the storyline.

The number of older characters in teen movies was less than the number of older characters found in Disney movies in a previous study. Using the same operational definitions and coding scheme as Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, and Moore (2007), who identified 93 older characters (2.74 older characters per film), the total number of older characters found in the current study was 91 (1.52 older characters per film). In Robinson et al.'s (2007) study, older characters were identified in all but one of the Disney films (3% of the sample), while the current study found that about 32% (n=19) of the teen movie sample did not contain any older characters. Older characters were clearly represented more often in films targeting the family, while films targeting teenagers specifically featured fewer older characters. Examining the types of teen movies that did not contain older characters (for example, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Pretty in Pink*, *She's All That*, *Clueless*, *Encino Man*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Drive Me Crazy*, *Bring It On*, *Snow Day*, *The Lizzie McGuire Movie*) is somewhat illuminating; these films could be labeled as "high school" or "junior high school" films that focus on the lives of teenagers to the exclusion of adult characters of all ages, though sometimes one or two parents are featured in minor roles. On the other hand, the two teen films in the sample with the most older characters were *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and *The Princess Diaries*, two recent films that feature a cast of teenagers but are primarily aimed

at a family audience. The high number of older characters in *Harry Potter* can also be explained by the fact that the movie was adapted from a book that contained an unusually high number of major and minor older characters. Most of the films included in the present sample, however, do not contain several older characters. Older people were under represented in teen films.

The under representation of older women and minorities in teen films could give teens the idea that older people are primarily male and Caucasian, which is a distorted picture of reality. Although older women's representation in teen films (39%) relative to men was higher than in Disney films, soap operas, and primetime television (all at 33%; see Briller, 2000; Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Robinson et al. 2007), older women's representation in teen films does not come close to their actual make-up of the older population, at 59%. This holds true for racial minorities as well; the representation of older minorities in teen films was about 16%, higher than their representation in soap operas, adolescent literature, primetime television, and television commercials (Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Gerbner, 1997; Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Roy & Harwood, 1997). This percentage is still far short of their proportion in the actual U.S. population in the year 2000, at 40% (Smith, 2003). Hispanics, who made up only 1% of older characters in teen movies, were greatly under represented, though this percentage marks an improvement over older Hispanic representation in prime time television, when they were not represented at all (Gerbner, 1997). This divergence from actual population figures contributes to the decades-long trend of rendering women and minorities as invisible in the media (Briller, 2000; Cassata & Irwin, 1997; Gerbner, 1997; Peterson & Karnes, 1976; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007; Roy & Harwood, 1997).

The marginalization of older characters in terms of the plot further contributes to their invisibility in teen movies, confirming previous research that older characters are more likely to be featured in minor roles (Robinson, 1998; Roy & Harwood, 1997). There were several statistically significant differences between those older characters featured in major and minor roles and those featured in incidental roles. The reason for this difference between major, minor, and incidental characters could be a result of the lack of information on incidental characters, whose personality traits were difficult or impossible to assess because they were on screen for a limited time, had little dialogue, or were barely involved in the storyline. These incidental characters were greatly under developed, with few pieces of information about the character furnished to the audience, as were those older characters found in adolescent literature decades ago (Peterson & Karnes, 1976).

The financial interests of Hollywood filmmakers may explain the insignificance of older characters in teen films. In Disney films, older characters were featured in major roles 39% of the time, while older characters in teen movies were featured in major roles only 13% of the time. This could be a result of an effort to attract the teen market. It is logical for teen movie producers to use teen characters; teens want to see films with characters they can identify with. Adolescents are in the process of forming their identity and part of that identity involves independence and a separation from older generations, including parents, grandparents, and other older adults. Because of this, teens are likely to seek out media that primarily focus on teenagers and teenage storylines, while possibly ignoring family films or those films that contain a large number of middle aged or older characters. The inclusion of a large number of older characters, even in minor roles,

could be a financial risk for Hollywood producers who want to attract the teen market at the box office. Filmmakers may believe that if their movies contained more older characters, teenagers would not be interested in seeing their films. Rather than take a risk by including some older characters, they may instead decide to rely on the tried and true teenage movie format, with teenagers playing nearly all of the major and supporting roles. Older characters' lack of significance to the plot of teen movies contributes to the assertion that in media aimed at children and teenagers, older people are "of little real importance or concern" as they are portrayed only as "shadows" (Bishop & Krause, 1984, p. 93; Peterson & Karnes, 1976, p. 230). The marginalization of older characters gives the message to teens that older people are an unimportant social group unworthy of attention, having little or no impact on teenagers' lives.

Despite the fact that older characters were few in number, they embodied positive physical characteristics. Older characters in teen movies were portrayed in a more positive manner in previous studies, especially compared to the physical characteristics exhibited by older characters in Disney films (Robinson et al., 2007). Because of the positive characteristics exhibited by older characters in teen movies, those teenagers with little or no contact with their grandparents or other older adults may come to believe from watching teen movies that older adults are mostly healthy, active, and at least moderate looking. Although a few older characters were portrayed with minor health limitations, including the use of ambulatory and hearing aids, almost all of the older characters were in good health and active, confirming more recent studies that have found that older characters are rarely portrayed as sick or feeble (Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1998; Robinson, 1998; Robinson & Anderson, 2006). In addition, most of the older characters

in teen movies were portrayed with neutral characteristics, such as gray or white hair or baldness, and only two characters were shown as toothless or missing teeth (though there was a handful of older characters who had yellowed, rotten teeth). This result represents a great improvement over the repeated stereotype of “toothless” found in more than one-quarter of the older characters in Disney movies (Robinson et al., 2007). The extremely negative physical characteristics that children added to their drawings of older people (including lots of wrinkles, ambulatory aids, and frumpy clothes, see Falchikov, 1990) seem to be mostly absent from teen movies. The presence of positive physical characteristics for older characters in teen movies is encouraging and may draw the viewer’s attention away from some of the other negative characteristics of older characters in teen movies.

One such negative characteristic was the dominant personality trait— “angry/grumpy/stern” — exhibited by more than a third (35%) of older characters in teen movies. This negative personality trait was also persistent amongst older characters in Disney films (25%) and amongst older characters in cartoons (28%) (Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007). As children get older, they are seeing more and more angry older adults in media targeted to their age group. When children are very young, they are exposed to angry older characters in Disney films and as they age and begin to watch cartoons, perhaps between the ages of 6 and 10, they are exposed to an even greater number of angry older characters. Then, when children reach the preteen and teenage years and watch teen movies, they are exposed to the highest percentage of angry older characters. Given the fact that children and adolescents have been exposed to media that perpetuate this negative stereotype, it is no wonder that teens believe that older adults

are angry or irritated most of the time (Doka, 1986). Similarly, some teenagers believe that older people are senile (Doka, 1986), and 4% of older characters in teen movies were portrayed in this manner. This is a marked improvement over cartoons, where 18% of older characters were portrayed as senile or crazy (Robinson & Anderson, 2006). It is possible that this extremely negative stereotype is a result of media exposure during childhood and is internalized before the teen years, but it is likely that the presence of these negatively stereotyped characters at least reinforces teens' beliefs that old people are senile.

There were significant differences between the portrayals of older men and older women, although women were not portrayed nearly as negatively as evidenced by previous studies, which found they were less likely than men to be featured as major characters and more likely to be portrayed as eccentric, ugly, mean, and disabled (Gerbner, 1997; Kjaersgaard, 2005; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a; Signorielli, 2004; Vasil & Wass, 1993). Over the past several decades, some progress has been made in portraying women who work outside the home (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999), and the fact that half of the older women in teen films were shown actively engaged in some type of employment is a promising trend. A large percentage, however, did not have jobs, implying that older women are more suited to the home and family environment. The most significant difference between older men and older women in the current study was that older women were significantly less likely than men to be shown in positions of authority in the workplace. Previous research (Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005b; Signorielli, 2004) also found that women were significantly less likely than men to be shown in positions of power. The message teens receive from the media is that there are

few older women who work and that they are of little importance, have limited power in the business world, contribute little to society, are not as productive as older men, and that they do not have the skills necessary to become leaders.

Male teens may develop chauvinistic attitudes about older women's place in the occupational hierarchy, while female teens may believe that they will have such diminished abilities as they age that they cannot hold positions of authority and therefore dread the thought of growing old. Men are likely portrayed in leadership roles more often than women in the media because there are more males than females working in the media. Lauzen (2001) found that only 21% of those working in television behind-the-scenes were women. Women served as directors of television shows only 7% of the time. Males hold positions of power within the film industry, serving as writers, directors, and producers, while women probably hold less powerful positions. The male filmmakers are likely reflecting the occupational conditions of their professional world. Further research on the prevalence of older females in the film industry is warranted and may explain the significant differences between the portrayal of older men and older women.

Another significant difference between males and females was the greater presence of gray/white hair for men and that a greater proportion of women were portrayed as thin (37%). This may seem encouraging, but perhaps it is more an indication of the cultural norms of femininity that equate beauty with youth. Older women in teen movies may not be shown with gray or white hair and be shown as thin because cultural norms of femininity teach older women, and especially female actors, to stave off the effects of the aging process through dyeing their hair, cosmetic surgery, dieting, using makeup, etc. It is acceptable for men to have gray or white hair, but women must deny

that they are experiencing the aging process. Although not specifically addressed by the literature in the current study, the role that cultural norms of femininity play in the portrayal of older women in teen movies is a research area that should be explored.

Although the current study did not test for effects, there is evidence that teen films have the power to cultivate in adolescent viewers both positive and negative stereotypes towards older people, as proposed by cultivation theory (Bandura, 1994). The finding that 60% of older character portrayals were consistent with stereotypes from cognitive psychology research (Hummert et al., 1994) indicates that teen films are contributing to and perpetuating the stereotypes held by teenagers. All but one of the stereotypes held currently by young adults were reflected in the teen films (see Hummert et al., 1994). This means that the producers of Hollywood films aimed at teenagers have some power in shaping the attitudes of adolescents toward older people. They can choose to portray older people in a positive manner, thus encouraging beneficial stereotypes such as Golden Ager, or they can decide to take the easy way out and rely on negative stereotypes, such as Shrew.

These teen movie filmmakers rely on both positive and negative stereotypes more heavily than producers of other media, such as print advertising, where only 23% of the older characters were stereotyped (Miller et al., 1999). The finding that 31% of older characters in teen films were only stereotyped positively is somewhat encouraging; seeing these particular films that contain only positive stereotypes of older people may eventually lead teens to actively seek out communication with older relatives or acquaintances (research has shown that young people who positively stereotype older adults are less likely to avoid communication with older people, see McCann et al. 2005).



However, in a study of magazine ads from the 1950s to the 1990s, older characters were positively stereotyped 78% of the time (Miller et al., 1999). Unlike magazine ads, which found only 4% of older characters were stereotyped negatively, almost 20% of older characters in teen movies only embodied negative stereotypes. These findings indicate that teenagers are exposed to more negative stereotypes of older people than adults, who are less vulnerable to the cultivation effect because they have already formed their own opinions about older people and likely know older people on a personal basis. The cultivation effect of these negative stereotypes is likely to be much stronger for teens, who can be considered a vulnerable audience. Teens purposively seek out and use certain media, including teen movies, in acquiring their identities (Arnett, 1995) and often have little contact with older people (Holladay, 2002; Vasil & Wass, 1993). Assuming that there is a cultivation effect for teens and that the negative stereotypes portrayed in teen movies contributes to their negative beliefs about older people, those who make films aimed at teenagers have a responsibility to reevaluate the stereotypes they use in teen movies.

Teen filmmakers may rely heavily on stereotypes of older people in their efforts to tell a story in a limited amount of time and/or for comedic effect. For example, in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Ferris's dad is driving home and is slowed down by a large car in front of him that keeps swerving, out of control, on a residential street. The shot cuts to the driver of the swerving car, and all that can be seen above the car's dashboard is a head of gray hair and eyes. It is obviously an old lady, but her face and body are never shown, and she does not say anything, completely oblivious to Ferris's dad who is driving impatiently behind her. Although the audience cannot see her face or the rest of

her body, the extremely negative stereotype of older women as “bad drivers” is difficult to miss. The stereotype that younger people are better drivers than the old was held by teenagers (Doka, 1986) at the time *Ferris Bueller* was made. This stereotype is perhaps enhanced by the fact that there are no older characters with significant roles in the rest of the film. The old woman’s presence in the film is so minimal that the audience never sees her body. She is literally disembodied and rendered invisible, yet she is used for comedic effect. The implication is that every member of the audience can relate to getting stuck behind a terrible old lady driver and that it is acceptable to make fun of older people and to laugh at their expense. Repeated use of this type of stereotype in teen films can only reinforce adolescents’ belief that older people are vastly different from younger people and a group to be mocked by younger generations.

The majority of older characters in teen films were not portrayed in an overall positive manner. Previous studies found that media aimed at children contained a much higher percentage of positive portrayals: 58% for Disney films and 62% for cartoons (Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007). Less than half of the older characters in teen films (45%), however, were portrayed in a positive manner. This is all the more compounded given the fact that almost a third (32%) of older characters in teen films were not portrayed with any positive or negative attributes. Those who were portrayed in a neutral manner were basically invisible, having no traits at all, barely distinguishable from the scenery behind them. Twenty-three percent of older characters in teen films were portrayed negatively, which is a high percentage, though not as high as the percentages found in Disney films and animated programs. From the early days of their childhood, young people are exposed to a number of negative older characters, and

these media portrayals do not seem to change even when they reach their adolescent years. It is no wonder that by the time they reach college age that they express negative attitudes toward older people (Gellis, Sherman, & Lawrance, 2005; Kimuna, Knox, & Zusman, 2003). Although the current study did not test for effects, the results indicate that media aimed at children and teenagers certainly can cultivate young people's attitudes towards older people. After years and years of exposure to negative stereotypes of older people, young people have internalized these stereotypes, which become a fixed part of their identity once they reach young adulthood. It appears that this cultivation effect may be so strong as to trump personal experience, as evidenced by the fact that some college students even hold negative attitudes towards their grandparents (Peccioni & Croghan, 2002). It is possible that the quality of young people's interactions with older people may be affected due to these negative portrayals. In addition, young people's attitudes towards the aging process could be affected; they could believe that growing old is not something to look forward to but something to be avoided or at best tolerated.

The current study revealed that the same stereotypes uncovered in teen movies, such as Shrew, Golden Ager, etc., are held by teenagers and adults of all ages in current U.S. society. Few previous studies (Miller et al., 2004; Miller et al., 1999) have determined the extent to which older characters are portrayed with current stereotypes (such as Golden Ager, Shrew, Mildly Impaired, etc.), although some studies have used these stereotypes to ascertain whether the overall character portrayal is either positive or negative (Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson et al., 2007). Future content analyses of the portrayal of older people, whether they replicate previous studies or venture into different types of media, such as movies aimed at adult audiences, should code for the

presence of stereotypes commonly held by the media audience. If the stereotypes found in the media match the stereotypes held by the media's target audience, as was found in the current study, then this is further evidence that teens get some of their negative attitudes towards older people from the media and further support for cultivation theory.

Because there are so few older characters in teen films, future research could include a much larger sample of teen movies, perhaps double the size, in order to increase external validity. In fact, an ideal way to investigate the portrayal of older people in teen movies is to conduct a thorough census, as Robinson et al. (2007) did with Disney movies. In the current study, the most popular teen films were selected because they are likely the films that most teenagers are exposed to. It is possible, however, that the lower-grossing teen films may contain more older characters and portray those characters differently from the films analyzed in the current study.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

This content analysis found that some portrayals of older people in teen movies were favorable. For example, the most positive finding of the current study was the physical portrayal of older characters. The overwhelming majority of older characters were portrayed as active and healthy and rarely portrayed as sick or ugly. The negative physical stereotypes associated with children's media, such as "toothless/missing teeth" and older characters' reliance on physical aids were mostly absent from teen movies.

The marginalization of older characters, their lack of significance to the plot, and the use of negative personality traits and stereotypes, however, were notable in the teen movie sample. Older characters (those over 55) were extremely under represented in teen movies; only 7% of characters in teen movies are old despite those over 55 comprising at least 21% of the total U.S. population. Similarly, older characters were marginalized in terms of plot (only 4% of major characters and 11% of minor characters in teen movies were considered old) and were likely to be featured only as background characters.

Older characters were often portrayed with negative personality traits and in an overall negative manner. About a third of older characters were portrayed negatively overall, while 35% of older characters were portrayed as angry. Older characters were often portrayed in a stereotypical manner (see Hummert et al., 1994) and a full 20% of older characters only exhibited negative stereotypes such as Shrew, Severely Impaired, etc. Fewer than 50% of older characters were portrayed positively.

The evidence suggests that ideas and stereotypes about older people begin to manifest themselves in childhood (Falchikov, 1990; Isaacs & Bearison, 1986; Middlecamp & Gross, 2002; Newman, Faux, & Larimer, 1997; Seefeldt, 1984; Williams

& Blunk, 1999) and then crystallize during late childhood and adolescence (Chasteen, Schwartz, & Park, 2002; Doka, 1986; Hummert et al., 1994; Isaacs & Bearison, 1986; Kastenbaum & Durkee, 1964; Luszcz & Fitzgerald, 1986; Peccioni & Croghan, 2002; Tuckman & Lorge, 1956). The present study has demonstrated that the negative stereotypes held by teens in society (including the belief that older people are angry most of the time, that they are bad drivers, that they are senile, lonely, etc.) are also presented in teen films. Media aimed at teens likely has a cultivation effect on them, reinforcing and/or contributing to their conceptions of older people. Teenagers have little contact with older adults, and are thus likely to believe that the way older people are portrayed in the media is a representation of reality. Simply from watching teen movies alone, adolescents may come to believe that all old people are grumpy and senile. Although older people were most often portrayed with positive physical characteristics, the presence of several negative stereotypes and the dearth of older minority and female characters contribute to the negative stereotypes that adolescents hold towards older people.

The cultivation effect is also enhanced for teens because of their cumulative exposure to negative stereotypes of older people. From an early age, children are exposed to negative stereotypes about older people in certain media such as Disney films and cartoons, and as children get older and seek out different media during adolescence, such as teen movies, they are continually fed a large dose of negative portrayals of older people. It is no wonder that children, adolescents, and young adults express negative attitudes toward older people. Long, cumulative exposure to such negative stereotypes has cultivated their negative attitudes toward older people. Viewing popular teen movies

can only enhance or reinforce the negative attitudes that individuals have learned earlier in their childhood from viewing other media that stereotypes older adults. Because teens rely on the media for the formation of their identities, it is likely that the attitudes towards older adults and the aging process that are learned from teen films and other media will remain largely unchanged throughout an individual's life.

The problem is all the more compounded given the fact that certain media content aimed at children and at adolescents will likely be consumed by future generations as teenagers grow older and share the movies they love with their own children. Generation after generation have been exposed to classic Disney films, and this pattern is likely to continue for those teen films that have reached "classic" or cult teen movie status, such as *Sixteen Candles*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *Clueless*, and *Napoleon Dynamite*, and for other films that are wildly popular and family friendly, such as *Back to the Future* and *Harry Potter*. The potential to influence children and adolescents in years to come makes it all the more imperative that the makers of teen movies begin to portray older people in a more positive manner and with fewer stereotypes.

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## Appendix A

1980s Teen films, with Domestic box office grosses (in millions, rounded)

1.	Back to the Future	\$211
2.	Honey I Shrunk the Kids	\$104
3.	Dead Poets Society	\$96
4.	Karate Kid	\$91
5.	Footloose	\$80
6.	Wargames	\$80
7.	Ferris Bueller's Day Off	\$70
8.	The Goonies	\$61
9.	Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure	\$40
10.	Pretty in Pink	\$40
11.	Red Dawn	\$38
12.	Taps	\$36
13.	Adventures in Babysitting	\$34
14.	Teen Wolf	\$33
15.	Can't Buy Me Love	\$32
16.	The Outsiders	\$26
17.	Weird Science	\$24
18.	Sixteen Candles	\$24
19.	My Bodyguard	\$22
20.	License to Drive	\$22

1990s Teen films, with Domestic box office grosses (in millions, rounded)

1.	Casper	\$100
2.	She's All That	\$63
3.	Clueless	\$57
4.	Rookie of the Year	\$53
5.	Little Women	\$50
6.	The Brady Bunch Movie	\$47
7.	Romeo + Juliet	\$46
8.	Encino Man	\$41
9.	Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers	\$38
10.	10 Things I Hate About You	\$38
11.	October Sky	\$33
12.	First Kid	\$26
13.	Can't Hardly Wait	\$26
14.	Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead	\$25
15.	Good Burger	\$24
16.	Flipper	\$20
17.	Drive Me Crazy	\$18
18.	Buffy the Vampire Slayer	\$17
19.	Mad Love	\$15

20. School Ties \$14

2000s Teen films, with Domestic box office grosses (in millions, rounded)

1.	Spider Man	\$404
2.	The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe	\$292
3.	Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	\$290
4.	Remember the Titans	\$116
5.	Freaky Friday	\$110
6.	The Princess Diaries	\$108
7.	Save the Last Dance	\$91
8.	Mean Girls	\$86
9.	Bring it On	\$68
10.	Holes	\$67
11.	Sky High	\$64
12.	Friday Night Lights	\$61
13.	Snow Day	\$60
14.	Cinderella Story	\$51
15.	Big Fat Liar	\$48
16.	Fat Albert	\$48
17.	Agent Cody Banks	\$48
18.	Napoleon Dynamite	\$45
19.	The Lizzie McGuire Movie	\$45
20.	A Walk to Remember	\$41

## Appendix B

### Older Characters in Teen Movies Coding Sheet

Movie \_\_\_\_\_ Decade \_\_\_\_\_

**Character Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Identification of older character (check all that apply)**

- Appearance of retirement                       Extensive gray hair  
 Wrinkles     Extensive loss of hair or balding  
 Cracking voice                                       Use of an aid (a cane or wheelchair)  
 Parent of a son or daughter who is middle aged or older  
 Evidence of grandchildren or great grandchildren

**Chronological Age**

- Young old (55-64)                       Middle old (65-74)                       Old old (75+)

**Gender of older person:**     M                       F

**Race of older person:**

- W     B     H     A     Other \_\_\_\_\_                       Indeterminate

**Role of Character:**                       Major                       Minor                       Incidental

**Level of activity shown:**

- Very active                       Active                       Inactive

**Health Status:**

- Good                       Minor Limitations                       Poor

**Physical Description:**

- Wrinkled                       Limited Wrinkles                       Indeterminate



- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ugly                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Moderate Looking | <input type="checkbox"/> Attractive                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gray/White hair             | <input type="checkbox"/> Dark hair        | <input type="checkbox"/> Indeterminate                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bald/balding                | <input type="checkbox"/> Full hair        | <input type="checkbox"/> Indeterminate                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Facial hair beard mustache  | <input type="checkbox"/> Gray/White       | <input type="checkbox"/> Neat <input type="checkbox"/> Unkempt |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Toothless/Missing teeth     | <input type="checkbox"/> Has teeth        | <input type="checkbox"/> Indeterminate                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Glasses                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Hearing aide     | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use of a physical aid _____ |   | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____                           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sagging breasts             | <input type="checkbox"/> Hunched over     |  |

**Role of the older character (choose one for primary role):**

- |  |                                      |                                      |
|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Husband/Wife  | <input type="checkbox"/> Parent      | <input type="checkbox"/> Grandparent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worker        | <input type="checkbox"/> Boss        | <input type="checkbox"/> Friend      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Indeterminate | <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Villain     |

**Personality Description:**

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forgetful          | <input type="checkbox"/> Intelligent/Wise    | <input type="checkbox"/> Happy/Content       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Angry/Grumpy/Stern | <input type="checkbox"/> Sad                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Loving/Caring       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Humorous           | <input type="checkbox"/> Senile/Crazy        | <input type="checkbox"/> Eccentric           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexy/Macho         | <input type="checkbox"/> Friendly            | <input type="checkbox"/> Overly Affectionate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Helpless           | <input type="checkbox"/> Nosey               | <input type="checkbox"/> Object of ridicule  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lonely/Recluse     | <input type="checkbox"/> Dirty old man/woman | <input type="checkbox"/> Other               |
| _____                                       |  |  |

**Body Image of the older character:**  Indeterminate

- Very thin     Thin     Average     Overweight     Obese

**Stereotypes Present**

*Activist* (political, sexual, health-conscious)

- Consistent                       Not consistent

*Liberal matriarch/patriarch* (liberal, mellow, wealthy)

- Consistent                       Not consistent

*Golden ager* (active, adventurous, healthy, lively, health-conscious, well-traveled, productive, liberal, future oriented, sociable)



\_\_\_ Consistent

\_\_\_ Not consistent

**Overall evaluation of older character:** (based on stereotypes above)

\_\_\_ Positive

\_\_\_ Negative

\_\_\_ Neutral