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Who smokes in Hollywood? Characteristics of smokers in popular films from 1940 to 1989

William D. McIntosh, Doris G. Bazzini, Stephen M. Smith, and Shanan M. Wayne

ABSTRACT

We examined how smokers were depicted in 100 popular films spanning 5 decades. Smokers were depicted as more romantically and sexually active than nonsmokers and as marginally more intelligent than nonsmokers. Smokers and nonsmokers did not differ in terms of attractiveness, goodness, socioeconomic status, aggression, friendliness, or outcome at film's end. Thus, if anything, smokers are depicted a bit more positively than nonsmokers. We compared Hollywood's depiction of smokers to real-world demographics on smoking and found that Hollywood's depiction of smoking tends to ignore the negative consequences and correlates (e.g., ill health, low socioeconomic status, aggressive behavior) of smoking.

Media images serve in both a reflective and a projective capacity. Media reflects the popular beliefs of particular cultures as well as serving in the role of prophet, prescribing behaviors and attitudes. As such, media can be a powerful tool in the elimination and propagation of harmful behaviors.

Hazan, Lipton, and Glantz 1994 investigated the incidence of tobacco use in film and found that there has been little change in the overall rate of depictions of tobacco use from 1960 to 1990. Thus, a significant decline in smoking among the U.S. population (Fiore et al. 1989; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989a) has not been accompanied by a corresponding decrease in depictions of smoking in films.

The concern, of course, is that depictions of smoking in films influence moviegoers to begin or continue smoking. It can be argued that the raw number of occurrences of smoking in films is not the best predictor of whether depictions of smoking will influence film viewers to imitate the smoking behavior they see. An important question to ask is who is smoking in films. If the characters that are depicted as smokers are evil, aggressive, ugly, stupid characters, it is unlikely that people will be motivated to emulate their behaviors.

This study was carried out to examine (a) whether depictions of smokers and nonsmokers in popular films differ with regard to the portrayal of particular traits (e.g., goodness, intelligence, etc.), (b) whether depictions of smokers have changed across time as more information regarding the health risks associated with smoking has become available, and (c) how these depictions of smokers in films compare to real-world demographics of smoking. We investigated the smoking behaviors portrayed in 100 popular films spanning 5 decades.

METHOD

Selection of target films

We sampled films from among the 20 top-grossing films for each year from 1940–1989. Twenty films from each of the 5 decades were randomly selected.

Rating procedure

At least three trained raters rated each film. They were instructed to rate all characters that appeared in what the rater considered to be a significant number of scenes. Characters were rated on the following dimensions:

1. *Smoking*: If at any point in the film a character smoked a cigarette or cigar, raters indicated that the character was a smoker. Raters were also instructed to classify a character as a smoker if some comment or action in the movie made it clear that a character was a smoker. In the few cases where there was not total agreement among raters on whether a character had smoked or not, a character was rated as having smoked if at least 50% of raters judged the character to have smoked.

2. *Outcome*: At film's end, each character's outcome was rated on a scale ranging from 0 (*extremely negative*; e.g., death) to 10 (*extremely positive*; e.g., lived "happily ever after").

1. 3–9. Characters were also rated along the following dimensions on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (*very low on this characteristic*) to 10 (*very high on this characteristic*): physical attractiveness, aggressiveness, friendliness, goodness, intelligence, romantic activity, socioeconomic status.

RESULTS

Reliability of ratings

Reliability was assessed by randomly selecting 15 films from our sample. We then entered the ratings of the first three raters for these films as variables and calculated coefficient alphas. Reliabilities across raters were well above acceptable levels across all dimensions rated, ranging from a low of .74 (for intelligence) to a high of .94 (for tobacco use).

Frequency of smoking

Overall, 21% of the characters rated smoked at least once during the film. There is a general decline in the number of characters who smoked across decades, from 20% in the 1940s to a high of 31% in the 1950s, then declining to 18% in the 1960s, 17% in the 1970s, and finally 12% in the 1980s. For subsequent analyses, we divided characters into either smokers (those characters who smoked at least once during the film) or nonsmokers (those who never smoked).

Characteristics of smokers versus nonsmokers

Overall ratings. Of the eight character variables examined, only one of these, romantic activity, was significantly related to smoking when data from all decades are combined. Smokers were depicted as engaging in more romantic and sexual activity ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 2.48$) than were nonsmokers ($M = 1.22$, $SD = 1.94$; $t = -4.24$, $p < .001$). Of the other variables, intelligence approached significance ($t = -1.83$, $p < .07$), with smokers being depicted as marginally more intelligent ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.35$) than nonsmokers ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 1.27$). Smokers and nonsmokers were not differentially depicted in terms of attractiveness ($M = 5.96$ vs. 5.80 , respectively), goodness ($M = 5.73$ vs. 5.82), socioeconomic status ($M = 5.84$ vs. 5.79), aggression ($M = 2.29$ vs. 2.02), friendliness ($M = 5.49$ vs. 5.49), or outcome at film's end (5.29 vs. 5.12).

Ratings by decade. An examination of differences by decade indicated no systematic trends over time.

DISCUSSION

Depiction of smokers versus nonsmokers

Based on the ratings of 832 characters appearing in 100 popular films, we found that smokers are depicted as more romantically and sexually active than nonsmokers and as marginally more intelligent than nonsmokers. Otherwise, there is little to distinguish smokers from nonsmokers in films. This pattern of results might be summarized by suggesting that, if anything, smokers are depicted a bit more positively than nonsmokers. There is no evidence of smoking being linked with any negative behaviors or characteristics in the films reviewed. The smoker portrayed in the movies has remained largely heterogeneous, not easily subject to stereotyping.

One surprising finding was the decline in depictions of tobacco use over time. This appears to contradict the findings of Hazan, Lipton, and Glantz 1994. However, the two studies differ in terms of the time period that was covered. We found the steepest decline in tobacco use between the 1950s (where 31% of characters smoked) and the 1960s (where 18% of characters smoked). In the period from 1960–1990 that Hazan, Lipton, and Glantz 1994 examined, we found little change in the frequency of tobacco depictions. When considering earlier decades, there does appear to be a trend toward fewer depictions of tobacco use. It is interesting to note that the first large-scale study linking smoking to health risks was the report of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health, in 1965 (U.S. Public Health Service 1964). Thus, the observed decline in depictions of smokers in movies coincides with the first warnings concerning the health risks of smoking.

Movies versus real life

One way to gauge the messages about smoking that are conveyed by the depiction of smokers in films is to compare those depictions to what is known about smokers in real life.

The depiction of smokers as marginally more intelligent than nonsmokers is apparently inconsistent with real life. In reality, smokers have significantly fewer years of education than nonsmokers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989b).

Another disparity between film and real life exists in the lack of relationship between smoking and socioeconomic status. Tobacco use declines as income increases (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989a).

Although there is no relationship depicted in films between smoking and violence, there is substantial evidence suggesting that smokers are more likely to be aggressive than are nonsmokers (e.g., Kellam, Ensminger, & Simon 1980; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1994).

No relationship was found between smoking and characters' outcome at film's end. Because films are intended to be dramatic and eventful, many highly negative outcomes are depicted, such as death, loss of loved ones, and life imprisonment. Many extremely positive outcomes are

also depicted, such as becoming wealthy unexpectedly or finding true love. It can be argued that the depiction of equal fortune in the lives of smokers and nonsmokers is not accurate. Some support for this assertion has already been presented. In real life, smokers are likely to be less well educated than nonsmokers and are lower in socioeconomic status than nonsmokers. Smoking is also related to aggressive behavior, which may increase the likelihood of becoming the victim of violence or of becoming incarcerated. Perhaps more significant, one need only look at the myriad of real-world data concerning the link between smoking and health to see that, in the case of outcome, films do not present an accurate portrayal of real life. Smokers are clearly at substantially greater risk than nonsmokers of suffering ill health and premature death (e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989a).

Although films are often said to be reflective of real life, there are limits to this. Inexplicably, Hollywood has chosen to depict smoking as a behavior that has no negative consequences. Indeed, smoking is, if anything, glamorized in Hollywood. Smokers are depicted as people who are somewhat more intelligent than nonsmokers, and, consistent with the tobacco industry's attempt to depict smokers as vibrant and sexy, smokers are depicted as more sexually active and romantic than nonsmokers.

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