SWEARING IN THE CINEMA
An analysis of profanity in US
teen-oriented movies, 1980–2006

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The exposure of children to profanity continues to be a concern for parents, media researchers, and policy makers alike. This study examines the types, frequency, and usage of profanity in movies directed at and featuring teenagers. A review of relevant literature explores the nature, use, and psychology of profanity, its potential social effects, and its prevalence in the media. A content analysis was conducted of the ninety top-grossing domestic teen films in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s (thirty from each decade) in the US based on domestic gross box-office amounts. Results indicate no change in preferences in types of profanity used over the decades. Teen and adult characters use similar profanity types; however, teens are more likely to use the seven dirty words than adults, whereas adult characters use mild words. Male characters use more profanity than female characters, and although both sexes frequently use mild profanity, females show a higher percentage for this type and males have a higher percentage for using the seven dirty words. Finally, results indicate that within and across rating categories (PG and PG-13), the amount of profanity in teen movies has actually decreased since the 1980s.

KEYWORDS   content analysis; cultivation; demographic characteristics; family; film; profanity; race; social learning; social reality; swearing; viewing

Introduction

A recent poll suggests that Americans are using and hearing profanity more often than ever before. According to the Associated Press (2006), nearly three fourths of poll respondents reported that they hear profanity more often than in years past and some two thirds perceive that swearing has become more prevalent in society. Scholar Timothy Jay claims that adolescents' use of swearing has increased over the past ten years, with the average youth using approximately ninety swear words per day (Glover, 2008). As Hilliard and Keith (2007, p. 117) suggest, 'We live in what is generally regarded as a crass culture,' and thus, must 'expect that the media in that culture' be equally coarse. Jay's (1992) content analysis of films made between 1939 and 1989 offers some support for this claim, reporting a significant increase in the use of profanity. More recently, Dufrene and Lehman (2002) reported a perception of increased use of profanity in the everyday lives of Americans and in Hollywood films and network television.

Although profanity has existed throughout human history, it has recently lost much of its status as a taboo linguistic practice, 'becoming more commonplace in everyday discourse as well as on network television' (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004a, p. 911). Language once confined to private discourse is reported being used in such public arenas as sports fields, awards shows, schools, even the United States Congress—and used in public by

such prominent figures as US Vice President Dick Cheney and singer Bono. The *New York Times* characterizes those who are troubled by the trend 'cultural Chicken Littles' for whom 'these are heady times' (Brick, 2005). In 2001, Jack Valenti, then the head of the Motion Picture Association of America, admitted that coarse material had become so prevalent it was 'invading the culture' ('Fritts', 2001).

As Sapolsky and Kaye (2005) note, much of the increase in profanity has been attributed to the mass media, with 'Music, films, and television … [pushing] the boundaries of expletive use' (p. 293). Hollywood films, the concern of this study, have a deep and 'dominant' (Hughes, 1991, p. 198) influence on American culture, as they are not only shown in theaters but are seen by millions more on television and through video rentals (Waterman, 2005). Teenagers are among those most often exposed—they are a popular audience segment for movie makers (Stern, 2005a) because they comprise a significant and loyal portion of the movie-going public (Smith, 2005). Moreover, teens have access to movies like never before through television, DVDs, the Internet, and pay per view, and about two thirds of youth and teens place importance on seeing the most current movies (Stern, 2005a). With teenagers representing almost 20 percent of the movie-going public—and half of them attending movies two times a month (Smith, 2005)—an examination of the portrayal and prevalence of profanity in teen-targeted movies will broaden our understanding of the messages teenagers receive from the media and the potential impact of those messages on viewers' perceptions. As Stern (2005a) notes, films 'may play a role in defining or authenticating normative teen activities and roles for teen viewers' (p. 331). For this young, impressionable audience, the media serve an important socializing function (Arnett, 1995), and researchers report parental concern that children will adopt coarse language as a result of media exposure (Bushman & Cantor, 2003).

Such concern is supported in part by Cultivation theory, which suggests that heavy exposure to media messages will shape one's view of reality. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1986) see media sources as the dominant symbolic environment for many people. According to this theory, media messages have a significant impact in shaping or 'cultivating' people's views of social reality. Cultivation theory is not concerned with the potential influence of a specific TV program or film, but of the patterns or aggregate messages to which groups or communities of viewers are exposed (Signorielli & Morgan, 2001). Applied to adolescents' long-term exposure to media messages, Cultivation theory would posit a cumulative and significant effect on perceptions.

The potential for teens to model coarse expressions from the media is explained in Bandura's (1977) Social Learning theory. Bandura (1994) notes that human learning is not acquired merely through direct experience, but through observational learning, which allows changes in behavior and thoughts as a result of models observed, be they family, friends, or people viewed in the mass media. The symbolic environment of the media can potentially exercise a strong influence on adolescents' behaviors. Sociologists have also expressed concern that, with heavy exposure, coarse, violent, and sexualized media messages—including profanity, which is considered a form of verbal aggression—can desensitize media viewers (Griffiths & Shuckford, 1989; Martin, Anderson, & Cos, 1997). For young, impressionable viewers, this is especially true. The prevalence of profanity in the media and the ease with which such utterances can be imitated can influence the likelihood of adolescents adopting such behavior.

This study examines the nature and strength of profanity in movies directed at a teenage audience. A review of relevant literature will explore the nature, use, and psychology of profanity, its potential social effects among teens, and its prevalence in the media. A content analysis of movie productions extending from the 1980s to the present will be conducted.

Research on profanity is not confined to the field of communication. Sociologists, psychologists, and pediatricians are among those contributing to the academic literature on the nature, social uses, and effects of profanity—both in the media and in everyday life. The following sections examine relevant research in these areas.

Psychology and Social Uses of Profanity

Much of the academic literature examines swearing as a socially constructed linguistic practice associated with identity building and discursive power. Social construction discourse holds that words and phrases in and of themselves are not inherently good or bad; they gain either legitimacy or taboo status through society's reaction to them. Objections are not made to the denotive meaning of words, but rather to the socially constructed meaning of them. Furthermore, the objectionable meaning of such words change over time (Andersson & Trudgill, 1990; Paivio, 1981; Risch, 1987).

What Foote and Woodward (1973, p. 264) delicately characterize as 'linguistic taboos' or prohibited 'phonemic strings,' Jay (2000) refers to simply as 'cursing.' Although Jay allows that the precise meaning of cursing is 'wishing harm on a person' (p. 9), he uses the word to describe all types of objectionable words. McEnery (2006) also draws a distinction between obscenity and the swearing of oaths, and similarly settles on a catch-all characterization of modern swearing, 'Bad Language Words' (BLW). McEnery categorizes such words on a 'scale of offence' (p. 36), whereas Jay (2000) organizes profanity by word type, using the categories of swearing, obscenity, profanity, blasphemy, name calling, insulting, verbal aggression, taboo speech, ethnic-racial slurs, vulgarity, slang, and scatology. Jay also sets forth a theory for why people swear. The neuro-psycho-social (NPS) theory strives to consider neurological, psychological, and sociocultural aspects of human behavior in order to explain and predict how and why people swear. According to NPS, as cited in Jay, swearing is 'never chaotic, meaningless, or random behavior,' but rather 'purposeful and rule-governed' (p. 22).

Similarly, McEnery (2006) finds social uses for Bad Language Words, drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction to demonstrate how swearing is used to construct social identity. According to McEnery, Bad Language Words are 'markers of distinction' (p. 11) in that the 'discourse of power excludes bad language,' whereas 'the discourse of the disempowered includes it' (p. 12). Modern attitudes toward bad language, according to McEnery, predate the Victorian age. During the last decade of the seventeenth century, England experienced declining religiosity and increased consumption of alcohol—the latter of which was thought to have contributed directly to the use of bad language. Meanwhile, an increasing numbers of words and phrases attained taboo status, which religious organizations deemed not only as socially unacceptable, but also immoral. Together, these conditions led to a moral panic. Subsequent efforts to reform society coincided with the rise of the middle class. In an effort to differentiate itself from lower classes, the English middle class 'began to seek a role of moral leadership' and, since bad language was deemed immoral, it was 'not a signifier of middle-class status' (p. 84).

Attitudes toward bad language hardened during the Victorian age, when it was simply 'not for public consumption' (p. 117).

Usage of swearing increased between 1950 and 1970 in a 'swift and dramatic' manner (Hughes, 1991, p. 197). Fine and Johnson (1984) suggest that the antiwar movement in the 1960s and the women's movement of the 1970s served as catalysts for changing attitudes toward the use of profanity. College students comprised a large segment of the antiwar movement in the United States and used profane language to challenge existing mores and to cohere as a cultural and political body. Similarly, women used obscenity as a way of challenging mores that had, among other things, constrained women from using what Hughes (1991, p. 209) characterizes as the 'language of power and assertion.' Whereas McEnery associated the use of profanity with the disempowered, others see its emancipatory value. McCorkle (2008) characterizes restrictions on the use of profanity as a 'linguistic loss' (p. 61) that amounts to 'power and control—someone else's over you' (p. 62).

Much of the psychological literature concerning profanity focuses on how males and females differ in their use and perception of profanity. Foote and Woodward (1973) found that men use profanity more than women and that all those who use such language claim to do so as a method of emotional release. Jay (Angier, 2005) typifies swearing as 'a coping mechanism, a way of reducing stress' and a 'form of anger management,' whereas Fine and Johnson (1984) cite anger as the top motivator for using profanity for both sexes. Although males may use profanity with greater frequency, Bate and Bowker (1997) note that women are using coarse language more than ever before. In addition, use of profanity is influenced by the sex of the receiver in an interaction. For instance, profanity is more prevalent in same-sex interactions than in mixed-sex interactions (Jay, 1992). Additional research shows that profanity is less tolerated when spoken by children to parents or other authority figures and deemed less offensive when used among peers or friends who also use profanity (Mercury, 1996). Others have suggested that the offensiveness of profane words be judged more by the reactions they arouse than by the words themselves (Risch, 1987).

Cohen and Saine (1977) reported that males and females learn and use profanity in different ways. For instance, de Klerk (1991) found a relationship between expletives and social power associated with men. Similarly, Selnow (1985) reported that males were more likely to consider the use of profanity as a demonstration of social power. Males learn at an earlier age to swear, while females perpetuate the stereotype that males swear more frequently. Females, meanwhile, judge negatively other females who swear. Hughes (1991, p. 211) notes a 'more "liberated" attitude towards swearing' among American women since the advent of the feminist movement. Risch (1987, p. 358) challenged the notion that women were 'socially and linguistically conservative' and Stapleton (2003) and Sutton (1995) found that swearing is an act of feminist solidarity.

Social Effects of Profanity

Beyond the nature and use of profanity is the concern that exposure to profanity may carry negative effects. In responding to the United States' Federal Communications Commission (FCC) decision to ban the broadcast of indecent speech because of its potential effects on young children, Donnerstein, Wilson, and Linz (1992) question whether there is sufficient evidence for such a regulation. They note that no studies at the

time of their writing focused on the effects of children's exposure to indecent language. The restraints on researchers to propose experimental designs that expose minors to offensive language obviously hamper researchers' ability to test for harmful effects.

Nonetheless, Social Learning theory and Cultivation theory provide some support for possible media effects on children. In Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, the author explains that beyond real-life models, people use media models to shape behavior. The learning they acquire from the media can endure for many years after the viewing experience (Huesmann, 1986). The possibility of media affecting children is further argued in cultivation theory, which explains that the media has a significant impact in shaping or 'cultivating' people's views of social reality and, when applied to children, would predict that heavy viewers of media content are more likely to be influenced by how the content depict social reality than light viewers (Gerbner et al., 1980).

Parents fear that repeated exposure to profanity, whether in school or in the media, can desensitize children. The concern with desensitization is not peculiar to profanity. According to Jay (1992, p. 14), any word that is repeated will induce desensitization. Building on Social Learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and Cultivation theory (Condry, 1989), others have suggested that the desensitizing effects of profanity eventually lead to antisocial behavior. For example, Infante, Riddle, Horvath, and Tumlin (1992) tied verbal aggressiveness to aggressive—even destructive—behavior. Further, Griffiths and Shuckford (1989) found that exposure to profanity, either through media or in everyday life, leads to a dulling of emotional responses. In some cases, viewers did not even notice the use of profanity in certain television entertainment programs.

Profanity in Media

As the American Academy of Pediatrics (2001) puts it, 'Children and teenagers continue to be bombarded with sexual imagery and innuendoes in programming and advertising' (p. 423). Hetsroni's (2007) meta-analysis of 30 years of television content found that the frequency per hour of sexual content has, with a few exceptions, actually decreased in recent years, whereas others have found a rise in offensive behaviors, such as profanity. Kaye and Sapolsky (2004a), for example, found increased use of profanity on television, typically occurring during the 9–10 p.m. hour and in situation comedies. In addition, they found that profanity was most often spoken by lead characters and directed at other characters, and was met with either neutral or positive reactions. The researchers also reported that profanity was seldom uttered by or directed at characters under the age of 21. Haygood (2007) examined movies that have been remade and reported an increase in profanity over its use in the original film.

In response to increases in objectionable media content and in an effort to ameliorate the effects of profanity, violence, and sexual content, such practices of 'bleeping' out offensive words and creating rating systems for television and motion pictures have been implemented. A history of ratings systems for films can be found in Jowett (1990) and in Hilliard and Keith (2007). Many of the studies examine violence and sexual content in movies, including Thompson and Yokota (2004) and Leone and Houle (2006), who found evidence of 'ratings creep,' or an escalation of sexual or violent material for PG-13 movies.

Although previous media research has examined profanity, much of the focus has been on prime-time TV (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2001, 2004a, 2004b; Sapolsky & Kaye, 2005). Few

studies have examined the prevalence of profanity in film. To date, no studies have examined profanity in teen targeted movies and possible trends over the decades. Examination of profanity in such films would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the media messages to which teens are exposed and how those messages may have changed over time. In addition, American films are watched globally, thus the implications of this research will have relevance beyond the US.

The following research questions and hypotheses will guide this study:

RQ1: How have the types of profanity in teen movies changed over the last three decades?
RQ2: Do adult and teenage movie characters differ in the types of profanity used?
RQ3: Do male and female characters differ in the types of profanity used?

H1: Profanity has increased over the last three decades in teen movies.
H2: Since the inception of the PG-13 rating, profanity has increased in both PG and PG-13 teen movies.
H3: Teen movies will contain more male profanity than female profanity across decade and movie rating.

Method

For this content analysis, the ninety top-grossing domestic teen films in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s were selected (thirty from each decade) based on domestic gross box-office amounts obtained from www.boxofficemojo.com (see Appendix A). Box-office performance was used because it suggests the movie's popularity and indicates the strength of the film's distribution in non-theater venues, such as home rentals and downloads (Smith, 2003; Stern, 2005a, 2005b). A film was determined to be a 'teen' film if it met the following criteria: (a) the storyline was centered on teens; (b) the film featured a teen (ages 12–17) as the central character; and (c) the film featured teens in major and minor roles. Storylines for the teen movies were gathered from the Internet Movie Database (n.d.), which provides plot outlines, synopses, genre, and the actors of each movie. The sample consists of the most popular films starring teen actors and created for a teen audience. Moreover, young viewers are more inclined to model younger characters and personalities than older ones (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004a).

In addition, only G, PG, and PG-13 films were included in the sample because R-rated movies cannot be seen by teens without a parent or guardian and they are primarily targeted toward older audiences. The American movie rating system uses five categories that allow viewers to self-monitor what they choose to view: G, PG, PG-13, R, and NC-17. 'G' is for 'general audiences,' indicating that all ages are admitted. The ratings are given to movies containing nothing in theme, sex, language, nudity, or other subjects that would potentially offend parents whose children see the film. 'PG' indicates that 'parental guidance' is suggested. The rating is a recommendation that parents first view the film for potentially inappropriate content for their children. Although these movies contain no drug use, they may contain some violence, profanity, or nudity, but in general these elements are not intense enough to warrant extreme caution from parents. 'PG-13' indicates that parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13. These movies go can go beyond PG movies in terms of sex, nudity,

violence, profanity usage and the presence of drug use. Stronger language, as deemed by the rating board, may warrant a PG-13 rating as well. 'R' stands for 'restricted' and warns that children under the age of 17 are not admitted without a parent. This rating is given when a movie has adult themes, harsh language, intense violence, adult activities, sexually oriented nudity, or drug abuse. This rating functions as a very serious warning meaning that any minors under 17 must be accompanied by an adult to view these films. And finally, 'NC-17' indicates that no children 17 and under admitted. A film carrying this rating is one that most parents would deem too adult for children under 17 and could include extreme violence, aberrational behavior, drug abuse, sex, or any other acts deemed inappropriate for children, even with adult supervision.

Sequels were also excluded from the sample. If a sequel contained teen characters, however, and the original movie did not, the sequel most representing teen storylines was included (for example, the first *Harry Potter* film was not used because the characters were not yet 12). Three different decades were chosen in order to obtain a more comprehensive view of the portrayal and representation of profanity longitudinally.

Coding Scheme

Major and minor characters were both coded for profanity use. *Major* characters were defined as those central to the film through dialogue or action and whose presence affected the direction of the film's plot or subplots (Stern, 2005b). *Minor* characters were defined as being central to a given scene through dialogue or action but whose presence had little or no bearing on the direction of the plot or subplots in the film. Within each movie, teens were coded for their use of profanity. Adult characters' use of profanity was coded as well, since current studies have shown that youth are commonly influenced not just by peers but also by adults. Adults may serve as heroic role models, no matter the age (Bandura, 1994). Character gender was also coded.

As noted earlier, objectionable words can be precisely defined and categorized. However, similar to Jay (1992), this study will use the word 'profanity' to cover all categories of objectionable words. Profanity was categorized into five groups based on Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations as well as previous research conducted by Kaye and Sapolsky (2004b). The categories are the following: the *Seven dirty words* that the FCC deemed unspeakable for broadcast (see Appendix B for examples within all categories of offensive words). *Sexual words* were the second group and comprised words that describe sexual body parts or sexual behavior in coarse ways. *Excretory words* were defined as direct or literal references to human waste products and processes. Words that weren't categorized as seven dirty, sexual, or excretory words were then categorized as either *mild* or *strong*, based on their level of offensiveness or 'tabooness' as determined in the book *Cursings in America* (Jay, 1992), in accordance with Kaye and Sapolsky (2004a, 2004b). *Mild other words* were compiled from various sources (Jay, 1992, as cited in Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004a, 2004b) and include such words as 'hell' and 'damn,' and the use of the name of deity in vain (if used in a reverent context, names of deity were not included). Finally, *strong other words*, including 'bastard' and other words that trigger strong emotions and reactions, were considered more offensive than mild words and were given their own category. Offensive gestures, such as the middle finger, were also included in this category.

Two independent coders were trained on variable definitions and identification and five non-sample movies were viewed jointly and discussed openly as coders applied the coding protocol. Offensive words were preclassified into one of the five existing categories and coders were trained in identifying and categorizing the words. Following training, coders examined thirteen randomly selected films (15 percent of the sample) in order to assess intercoder reliability. Upon completion, a Scott's Pi reliability formula was used to calculate levels of reliability for the five categories of profanity. This methods accounts for agreements that occur through chance alone and provides a more rigorous measure of reliability. The reliabilities were as follows: seven dirty (89 percent), sexual (80 percent), excretory (100 percent), mild other (92 percent), and strong other (82 percent). Any discrepancies in coder evaluations were discussed and resolved. Once reliability was established the remaining seventy-seven movies were then divided equally between two coders. Moreover, the coders were blind to the research questions and hypotheses.

Results

From the selection of ninety teen films there were 2,311 instances of profanity. Since the genre was teen movies, not surprisingly teens were involved in the vast majority of instances of profanity ($n=1,596$, 69.1 percent), and adults ($n=715$, 31.4 percent) accounted for slightly less than one third of the total profanity used. When profanity totals were broken down by gender, profanity totals for males ($n=1,662$, 72.2 percent) exceeded by more than double the totals for their female counterparts ($n=649$, 28.1 percent). When broken down by age groups, teen males ($n=1091$, 47.1 percent) accounted for the majority of profanity used, followed by adult males ($n=571$, 24.7 percent), then teen females ($n=505$, 22.1 percent), and lastly adult females ($n=144$, 6.2 percent).

The most common uses of profanity fell under the *mild* category ($n=1,317$, 57.1 percent); the next most common category coded was the *seven dirty* ($n=508$, 22.1 percent); the third highest category of profanity was *strong other* ($n=332$, 14.4 percent); the fourth category was *sexual* profanity ($n=113$, 5.1 percent); and the fifth category, which was least prevalent in the films, was *excretory* ($n=41$, 2.7 percent).

The first research question asks how the types of profanity in teen movies have changed over the last three decades. A two-sample chi square analysis indicated no significant difference in profanity type across the decades. The greatest differences occurred with a slight increase in the use of *excretory* words from the 1980s to the 2000s and a slight decrease in the *seven dirty* words during that time period (see Table 1).

Research question 2 asks if adult and teenage movie characters differ in the types of profanity they use. Results indicate a significant difference in the types of profanity used

TABLE 1
Percentages of profanity types over three decades.

Decade	Excretory (%)	Mild (%)	Sexual (%)	Seven dirty (%)	Strong (%)	Total (%)
1980s	0.006	55	4	25	15	100
1990s	3	59	5	19	14	100
2000s	3	58	6	19	14	100

Total instances of profanity=2,311.

TABLE 2
Percent of profanity types for age groups.

Profanity type	Adult		Teen	
	%	n	%	n
Excretory	0.8	6	2	35
Mild other	69	494	51	823
Sexual	3	21	6	92
Seven dirty	16	112	25	396
Strong other	11	82	16	250
Total	100	715	100	1,596

$\chi^2 = 64.63$, $p \leqslant .001$.

by adult and teen characters, $\chi^2(4, 2,311) = 64.6$, $p < .001$. The percentages within each profanity category in Table 2 indicate how adults and teens differ in their profanity use. *Mild* profanity is the most prevalent among adults and teens, with the percent of adults using *mild* profanity considerably higher than the percent of teens. Teens are more likely to use one of the *seven dirty* words or *strong other* compared to adults.

Research question 3 looks at whether there is any difference in the types of profanity used between male and female characters within the studied teen movies. A chi-square test shows a significant difference between males and females in profanity use (see Table 3), $\chi^2(4, 2,311) = 24.3$, $p < .001$. Both sexes frequently use mild profanity, but females show a higher percentage for this type and males have a higher percentage for the seven dirty words.

Hypothesis 1 posits that profanity has increased over the last three decades. A one-way ANOVA was run to test for differences in the amount of swearing across each decade. To find support for Hypothesis 1, this study looked at the means per decade for total profanity use and compared the three decades in question. Overall profanity use actually decreased steadily from the 1980s ($M = 35.6$) to the 1990s ($M = 25.3$) to the 2000s ($M = 16.2$), $F(2, 87) = 6.5$, $p = .002$. Thus, the hypothesis as stated was not supported. A closer examination of decade means shows no significant difference in the use of *excretory* language. However, in comparing decade means for use of *mild*, *sexual*, *seven dirty*, and *strong other* language, all differences were statistically significant. The total number of profanities in each decade (thirty films per decade) was 1,068 in the 1980s, 758 in the

TABLE 3
Percent of profanity types for gender.

Profanity type	Male		Female	
	%	n	%	n
Excretory	2	26	2	15
Mild other	55	921	62	396
Sexual	4	73	6	40
Seven dirty	25	408	15	100
Strong other	14	234	15	98
Total	100	1,662	100	649

$\chi^2 = 24.33$, $p \leqslant .001$.

1990s, and 485 in the 2000s. Although the numbers have decreased, profanity is still very prevalent in teen movies. In the current decade, the mean across all thirty movies was 16.2 (SD=18.3), for PG-13 movies the mean was 32.2 (SD=16.8), and for PG movies the mean was 4.4 (SD=5.0).

Another one-way ANOVA showed that differences in profanity over the decades for only teen characters were significant, but also in the opposite direction. Teen profanity decreased significantly from the 1980s (M=25) to the 1990s (M=16) to the 2000s (M=12), $F(2, 87)=4.7$, $p=.011$. Post hoc analysis of this outcome also identified the decades of the 1980s and 2000s as containing the greatest difference, again showing an overall decrease in usage.

Hypothesis 2 states that since the inception of PG-13 ratings, profanity has increased in both PG and in PG-13 teen movies. The results showed a significant difference but not in the direction hypothesized. For PG movies, only movies produced after 1984 were used, since the PG-13 rating was first introduced in 1985. Means show that profanity in PG movies has steadily declined since 1985, and a one-way ANOVA indicated a significant decline in total profanity in teen-oriented PG movies, $F(2, 35)=7.1$, $p<.03$. A series of one-way ANOVAs were run to test for differences within the various profanity types. With the exception of excretory, all other profanity types demonstrated significant differences. The results are reported in Table 4.

A one-way ANOVA was also run on PG-13 films (1985–2006), which—with the exception of the excretory profanity, $F(2, 41)=3.3$, $p<.046$—showed no significant change over the decades in profanity use among the various types (see Table 5). Examination of the means does show a trend toward less profanity, similar to the trend found in PG movies.

Our third hypothesis states that across the three decades and including all ratings, teen movies will include more males who use profanity than females. This hypothesis was supported. By running a paired samples t-test, $t(89)=5.6$, $p<.001$, $d=0.59$, a significant difference was found in profanity usage between males (M=18.5) and females (M=7.2) in teen movies (means reported are per movie).

Discussion

Although the use of profanity on television continues to rise (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004a), this study provides evidence that in the realm of teen-oriented movies, the trend

TABLE 4
Profanity in PG films after 1984.

Profanity type	N	M			F	Sig.
		1980s	1990s	1900s		
Excretory	38	0.4	0.3	0.5	F(2, 35)=0.107	.889
Mild other	38	15.0	6.5	3.6	F(2, 35)=5.717	.007**
Sexual	38	0.6	0.2	0.0	F(2, 35)=4.342	.021*
Seven dirty	38	4.0	1.0	0.2	F(2, 35)=7.860	.002**
Strong other	38	3.0	1.0	0.1	F(2, 35)=3.956	.028*
Profanity total	38	22.0	9.0	4.0	F(2, 35)=7.075	.003**

*$p \leqslant .05$, **$p \leqslant .01$.

TABLE 5
Profanity in PG-13 films after 1984.

Profanity type	N	M			F	Sig.
		1980s	1990s	1900s		
Excretory	44	0.0	1.0	0.5	$F(2, 41)=3.33$	.046*
Mild other	44	20.0	21.0	17.5	$F(2, 41)=0.47$	.628
Sexual	44	2.0	2.0	2.0	$F(2, 41)=0.04$	.958
Seven dirty	44	12.0	8.0	7.0	$F(2, 41)=2.07$	.139
Strong other	44	7.0	5.0	5.0	$F(2, 41)=0.43$	.427
Profanity total	44	41.0	37.5	32.0	$F(2, 41)=0.61$	.549

*$p \leqslant .05$.

has been surprisingly downward. Although profanity is certainly still prevalent in teen movies (in the current decade, the mean for instances of profanity per film was 16.7, with a median of 10), especially in PG-13 films, the trend over the last three decades shows a decrease in usage across nearly all profanity types. Further, while teen movies still contain teen profanity, the decrease in usage more closely reflects levels of teen profanity usage on television, where, as previously mentioned, Kaye and Sapolsky (2004b) reported that profanity was seldom uttered by or directed at characters under the age of 21 on television.

Although the distribution of profanity across profanity types is similar for teens and adults (mild profanity is most common for both groups), the prevalence with which characters are likely to use profanity within each type differ. Teen characters are more likely to use the seven dirty words than adults, while mild words make up a larger portion of adult profanity than teens. In addition, both male and female characters use mild profanity most often, a finding consistent with Sapolsky and Kaye's (2005) content analysis of profanity among prime-time characters. The percentage of female characters using mild profanity is higher than for males, although the percentage of male characters using one of the seven dirty words is higher than for females. These frequencies reflect societal attitudes toward profanity. As mentioned, profanity types used often depend on the gender of the person using the profanity. Males consider the use of profanity a demonstration of social power (Hughes, 1991; Selnow, 1985), whereas females are generally less accepting of profanity, especially among their own sex (Cohen & Saine, 1977). In examining gender differences, males, regardless of age, used profanity more often than females, a finding consistent with actual language use (De Klerk, 1991; Jay, 1992), and with prime-time television (Sapolsky & Kaye, 2005).

Any attempt at explaining a decrease in profanity would, at this point, be merely conjecture. For some media analysis, however, this decrease may represent a higher awareness of and heightened concern for the use of profanity in the public sphere—a moral panic if you will—resulting in consumers pressuring film makers to limit its use. The notion of moral panic was popularized in 1987 by Cohen (2002, p. 1), who wrote that '[s]ocieties appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic' wherein certain conditions 'become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.' In such cases, 'the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people' who emphasize the threat. Typically, the panic either recedes for a time or results in legal or social changes. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) further refined the theory,

located it within a social construction framework, and identified five characteristics of moral panics: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. For a moral panic to be present, according to Goode and Ben-Yehuda, concern is heightened, as measured public opinion polls or media commentaries; there is an increased level of hostility for groups regarded as engaging in the objectionable behavior; there is a level of consensus in society regarding the objectionable behavior; public concern is disproportional to the harm caused by the behavior in question; and moral panics are volatile in that they quickly develop or reappear, then quickly disappear.

Perhaps for other media researchers a 'moral panic' is a loaded term for describing a public's heightened awareness and resulting social anxieties. Cohen (2002, p. xxvii) himself acknowledges that for some it has a 'connotation with irrationality and being out of control' and that the term also 'evokes the image of a frenzied crowd or mob.' However, what was first used to describe media-driven narratives of social deviants has come to be used more broadly—as a catch phrase for journalists and as a heuristic device for sociologists.

Interestingly, just as language changes over time, so too do societies' reactions to it. Considered somewhat profane during Elizabethan times, Shakespeare's work is today read by school children. Because language, as a social construction, changes over time, it is instructive to review how the film industry's relationship with taboo language has evolved. Language used in Hollywood movies appears to have been the subject of concern since the Progressive Era, when clergymen and others scrutinized films for potential harm to children (Jowett, 1990). In 1915, the Supreme Court of the United States upheld cities' and states' efforts to censor movies because of offensive language or sexually suggestive content. In response, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, also known as the Hays Office—named after the organization's president, Will H. Hays— established a mechanism for self regulation, first with a series of guidelines, then an enforceable Production Code. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church asserted itself by advising its members which movies were suitable for viewing. Through the Catholic Legion of Decency, some twenty million Catholics signed pledges condemning 'vile and unwholesome' movies that presented a 'grave menace to youth, to home life, to country and to religion' (Jowett, 1990, p. 16). Later, the Legion created a rating system that delineated movies that were 'morally unobjectionable for general patronage,' from those that were 'positively bad' (p. 17). Although the ratings system was not enforceable, the church told its members which movies it could and should not see in order to avoid sin.

Language conventions had sufficiently evolved by the mid-twentieth century that one film director suggested the Production Code's restriction on language be re-examined 'because we now accept certain words in the language which we did not when the code was drawn' (Hodgins, 1949, p. 104). In the early and mid 1960s, a series of legal rulings in the United States rejected wholesale censorship of Hollywood movies. By 1967, the Production Code was dropped and the Motion Picture Association of America (the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America changed its name in 1945) was able to adopt a classification system on November 1, 1968. Unlike the precedent-setting system instituted by the Catholic Legion of Decency, the MPPA's classification system was binding on movie producers. Nevertheless, the ratings system was instituted at a time of social unrest in the United States, including the aforementioned Vietnam War protests and feminist movements, which had helped change the existing mores concerning the use of taboo language. Meanwhile, the ubiquity of television had severely eroded box office

receipts. Because of government regulations, television's use of taboo language was restricted; in order to compete with television, Hollywood movies began using more of the language used in American society, ultimately setting off a ratings creep, as documented by Thompson and Yokota (2004) and Leone and Houle (2006).

Thus, the MPAA ratings system has failed to satisfy critics, who find substantial amounts of objectionable material, including the use of profanity. Medved (1992) points to polling data that claims that foul language offends moviegoers most—more, in fact, than depictions of sex and violence. Groups such as Focus on the Family and the American Family Association have taken up the cause, widely publicizing their complaints through popular media and on the World Wide Web. Whereas broadcasters are subject to Federal Communications Commission sanctions, Hollywood's foes must rely on the application of economic pressure. Focus on the Family publishes a monthly magazine and a web site that urges readers to boycott movies that use profanity or contain depictions of sex and violence (Dobson, 2005). Similarly, the American Family Association publishes 'OneMillionMoms.com' in which the organization aims to galvanize support for protests against various social ills, including use of taboo language in Hollywood films. In one article, 'Have you patronized blasphemy lately?' (OneMillionMoms.com, n.d.), readers are urged to avoid or walk out of movies with objectionable language: 'With more than 170 million professing Christians in America, we have a powerful sling that can hit Hollywood between the eyes and leave a deep impression on its money-making mind.'

Not only are such groups better organized for influencing consumers, but many of them, particularly conservative Christians, have also been more influential in the American political sphere. Their efforts may have had an influence on movie producers, who seem to have responded with fewer instances of swearing in movies produced for younger audiences. Movies intended for younger audiences may be exceptionally sensitive to such pressure. As Critcher (2003) notes, society is particularly susceptible to moral panics when children are threatened with harm. Although this study suggests swearing is on the decline in teen oriented movies, it is still prevalent enough to concern many parents.

A potential limitation of this study is the lack of contextual information. A study examining contextual elements in which teen characters typically use profanity and the potential function it serves would give additional insight into motives for using profanity. For instance, was the profanity used in a humorous or non-humorous context and with what effect? Was profanity used as a means of provoking, escalating conflict, asserting power, jesting, gaining attention, lowering tension? Was the profanity expressed in a same-sex or mixed-sex interaction and does that impact the types of profanity employed? In addition, what impact did the profanity have on the target(s)? Was the result greater social power, increased conflict, laughter, relief?

Researchers may also examine whether the emergence of Internet technologies such as YouTube and MySpace are providing an alternative venue for access to taboo language and whether the increased use of DVD and video rentals has brought movie viewing into homes, causing film makers to limit the use of profanity in movies aimed at teens. Finally, future studies may ascertain whether there is an increase in the prevalence of sexual and violent content in popular teen movies. Perhaps directors, in an effort to keep teen movies from obtaining an R rating, trade profanity for increased violent and sexual content.

APPENDIX A

(Domestic box office gross is in millions.)

2000s Movies

1.	*Spider Man*	$403,706
2.	*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*	$290,013
3.	*Remember the Titans*	$115,645
4.	*Freaky Friday*	$110,230
5.	*The Princess Diaries*	$108,248
6.	*Save the Last Dance*	$91,057
7.	*Mean Girls*	$86,058
8.	*Bring It On*	$68,379
9.	*Holes*	$67,406
10.	*Sky High*	$63,946
11.	*Friday Night Lights*	$61,255
12.	*Snow Day*	$60,020
13.	*Cinderella Story*	$51,438
14.	*Big Fat Liar*	$48,360
15.	*Fat Albert*	$48,116
16.	*Agent Cody Banks*	$47,938
17.	*Napoleon Dynamite*	$44,540
18.	*The Lizzie McGuire Movie*	$42,734
19.	*A Walk to Remember*	$41,281
20.	*Orange County*	$41,076
21.	*John Tucker Must Die*	$41,011
22.	*You Got Served*	$40,636
23.	*Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*	$39,053
24.	*Clockstoppers*	$36,989
25.	*What a Girl Wants*	$36,105
26.	*She's the Man*	$33,741
27.	*Bend It Like Beckham*	$32,543
28.	*The New Guy*	$29,760
29.	*Stick It*	$26,910
30.	*Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen*	$26,331

1990s Movies

1.	*Casper*	$100,328
2.	*She's All That*	$63,366
3.	*Clueless*	$56,634
4.	*Rookie of the Year*	$53,165
5.	*The Mighty Ducks*	$50,752
6.	*Little Women*	$50,083
7.	*The Brady Bunch Movie*	$46,576
8.	*Romeo + Juliet*	$46,351
9.	*Encino Man*	$40,693
10.	*Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*	$38,187
11.	*10 Things I Hate About You*	$38,178
12.	*Richie Rich*	$38,087
13.	*October Sky*	$32,547
14.	*First Kid*	$26,491
15.	*Can't Hardly Wait*	$25,605
16.	*Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*	$25,196
17.	*Good Burger*	$23,712
18.	*Flipper*	$20,080
19.	*Drive Me Crazy*	$17,845
20.	*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*	$16,624

21. *Mad Love*	$15,453
22. *School Ties*	$14,453
23. *Excess Baggage*	$14,515
24. *Class Act*	$13,272
25. *Little Big League*	$12,267
26. *Drop Dead Gorgeous*	$10,571
27. *Cry-Baby*	$8,266
28. *Hackers*	$7,536
29. *Dick*	$6,262
30. *Mystery Date*	$6,166

1980s Movies

1. *Back to the Future*	$210,609
2. *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*	$103,724
3. *Dead Poets Society*	$95,860
4. *Karate Kid*	$90,815
5. *Footloose*	$80,035
6. *WarGames*	$79,567
7. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*	$70,136
8. *The Goonies*	$61,389
9. *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*	$40,485
10. *Pretty in Pink*	$40,471
11. *Red Dawn*	$38,376
12. *Taps*	$35,856
13. *Adventures in Baby Sitting*	$34,368
14. *Teen Wolf*	$33,086
15. *Can't Buy Me Love*	$31,623
16. *The Outsiders*	$25,697
17. *Weird Science*	$23,834
18. *Sixteen Candles*	$23,686
19. *My Bodyguard*	$22,482
20. *License to Drive*	$22,433
21. *Say Anything*	$20,781
22. *Young Sherlock Holmes*	$19,739
23. *Some Kind of Wonderful*	$18,553
24. *One Crazy Summer*	$13,431
25. *She's Out of Control*	$12,065
26. *Just One of the Guys*	$11,528
27. *Better Off Dead*	$10,297
28. *Lucas*	$8,200
29. *Girls Just Want to Have Fun*	$6,326
30. *Hot Pursuit*	$4,215

APPENDIX B

Coding category	Offensive terms
Seven dirty words	*shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, tits*
Sexual words	sexual body parts: e.g. *testicles, boobs*; sexual behavior: e.g. *jackoff*
Excretory words	e.g. *poop, pee, crap, asshole*
Mild other words	e.g. *hell, damn, slut*, and using the name of deity in vain
Strong other words	e.g. *bastard, bitch, bullshit*

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