THE FUTURE IS FEMALE?
EXAMINING THE PREVALENCE AND PORTRAYAL
OF GIRLS AND TEENS IN POPULAR MOVIES

DR. STACY L. SMITH, DR. KATHERINE PIEPER, MARC CHOUEITI,
ARTUR TOFAN, ANNE-MARIE DEPAUW, AND ARIANA CASE

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THE FUTURE IS FEMALE?

CHILDREN AND TEENS ARE UNDERREPRESENTED IN POPULAR FILM

Children age 5 to 19 are
20.4%
of the U.S. population
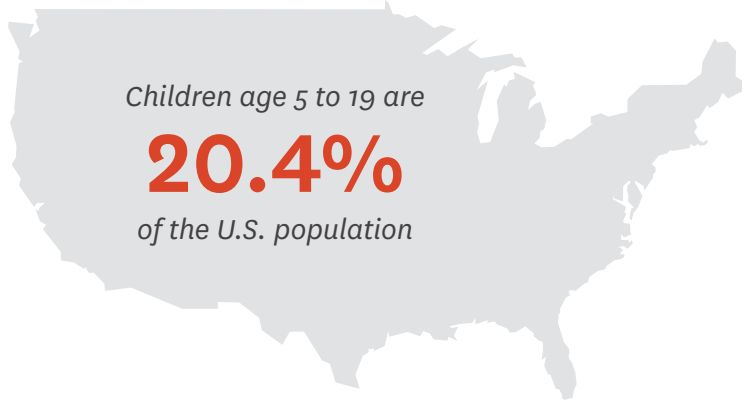
Yet out of
37,912
speaking characters...

12.5%
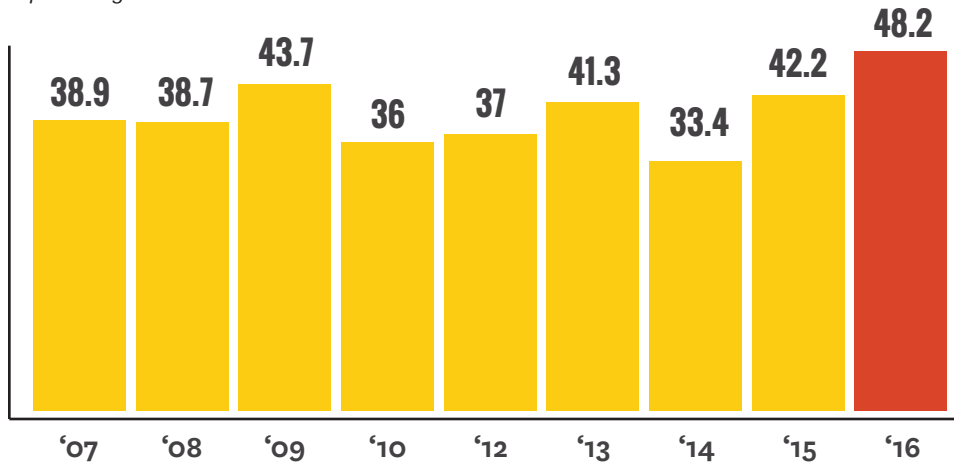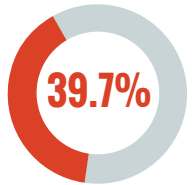were age 6 to 20
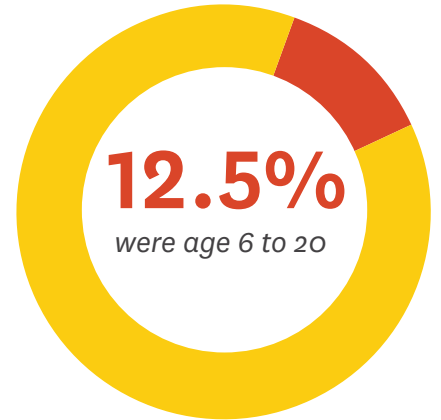
CHILD AND FEMALE TEEN SPEAKING CHARACTERS ACHIEVE PARITY IN 2016

*Prevalence of child and teen female speaking characters across 900 films,
in percentages*

'07	'08	'09	'10	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16
38.9	38.7	43.7	36	37	41.3	33.4	42.2	48.2

Overall percentage of females across 900 films **39.7%**

Ratio of males to females **1.52 : 1**

Total number of speaking characters **4,370**

YOUNG FEMALES RARELY DRIVE THE ACTION IN FILM

Of the 100 top films in 2016...
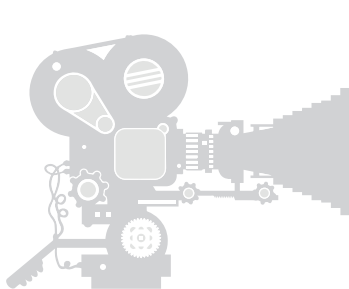
8
Depicted a
Young Female Lead or **Co Lead**

7 films depicted a young female lead or co lead in 2015.
6 films depicted a young female lead or co lead in 2007.

And of those Leads and Co Leads*...

2
Female actors were from **underrepresented racial / ethnic groups**
(None in 2015)

8
Films with female leads in 15-16 were horror/thrillers.

*Excludes films w/ensemble casts

CHILD AND TEEN FEMALES IN FILM ARE RARELY FROM UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS
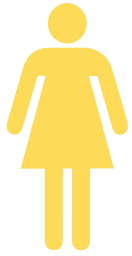
Race/ethnicity of female child and teen characters across 900 films, in percentages

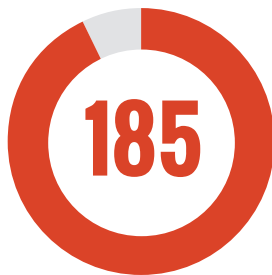| **77%** WHITE	**10.8%** BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN	**3.8%** HISPANIC/ LATINA	**6.1%** ASIAN	**2.4%** OTHER

YOUNG FEMALES FACE AN INVISIBILITY CRISIS IN FILM

Of the 200 top films of 2015 and 2016, the number of films with…

NO BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES AGE 6-20	**NO** ASIAN OR ASIAN AMERICAN FEMALES AGE 6-20	**NO** HISPANIC/LATINA FEMALES AGE 6-20	**NO** FEMALES AGE 6-20 WITH A DISABILITY
178	**185**	**189**	**193**
2015=92 2016=86	2015=94 2016=91	2015=92 2016=97	2015=99 2016=94
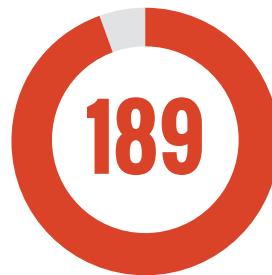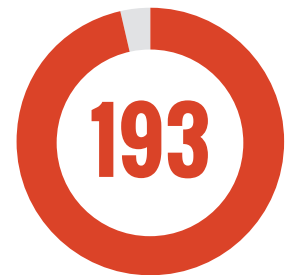
YOUNG LGBT FEMALES ARE LEFT OUT OF FILM

Of **947** child or teen speaking characters only…   **3** GAY   **1** BISEXUAL   **0** LESBIAN   **0** TRANSGENDER

NOT ONE LGBT FEMALE CHARACTER AGE 6 TO 20 APPEARED ACROSS 200 POPULAR MOVIES FROM 2015 AND 2016.

YOUNG FEMALES WITH DISABILITIES ARE DISMISSED IN FILM

3% of young speaking characters in 200 top films were depicted with a disability

12 PHYSICAL
16 MENTAL
4 COMMUNICATIVE

*Based on U.S. Census domains

80%

67.9% MALES

32.1% FEMALES

0

TEEN FEMALE CHARACTERS ARE SEXUALIZED ON SCREEN

- 🟡 MALES
- 🔴 FEMALES

	% IN SEXY ATTIRE	% W/SOME NUDITY	% WHO ARE THIN
Males	10.2%	14.1%	38.4%
Females	39.5%	35%	60.7%

POPULAR FILMS PROVIDE A DISTORTED IMAGE OF FEMALE TEENS

THE AGE OF THE ACTOR **MATCHES** THE AGE OF THE CHARACTER FOR...

81.3% OF ELEMENTARY AGE FEMALES

46.3% OF TEENAGE FEMALES

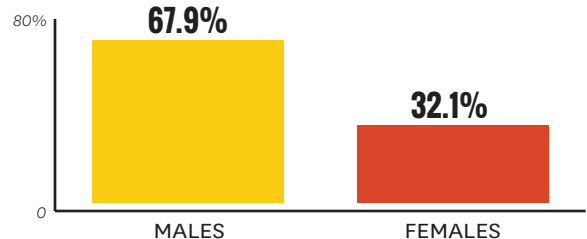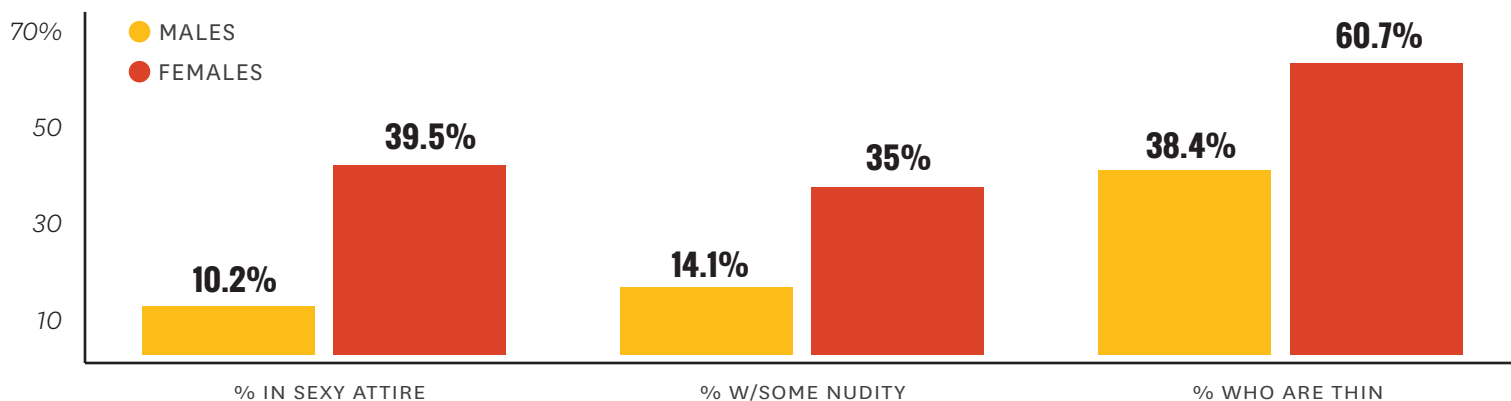THE AGE OF THE ACTOR **DOES NOT MATCH** THE AGE OF THE CHARACTER FOR...

18.7% OF ELEMENTARY AGE FEMALES

53.7% OF TEENAGE FEMALES

ALL BUT ONE OF THESE MISMATCHES OCCURRED WHEN AN ADULT ACTOR PLAYED A TEEN ROLE.
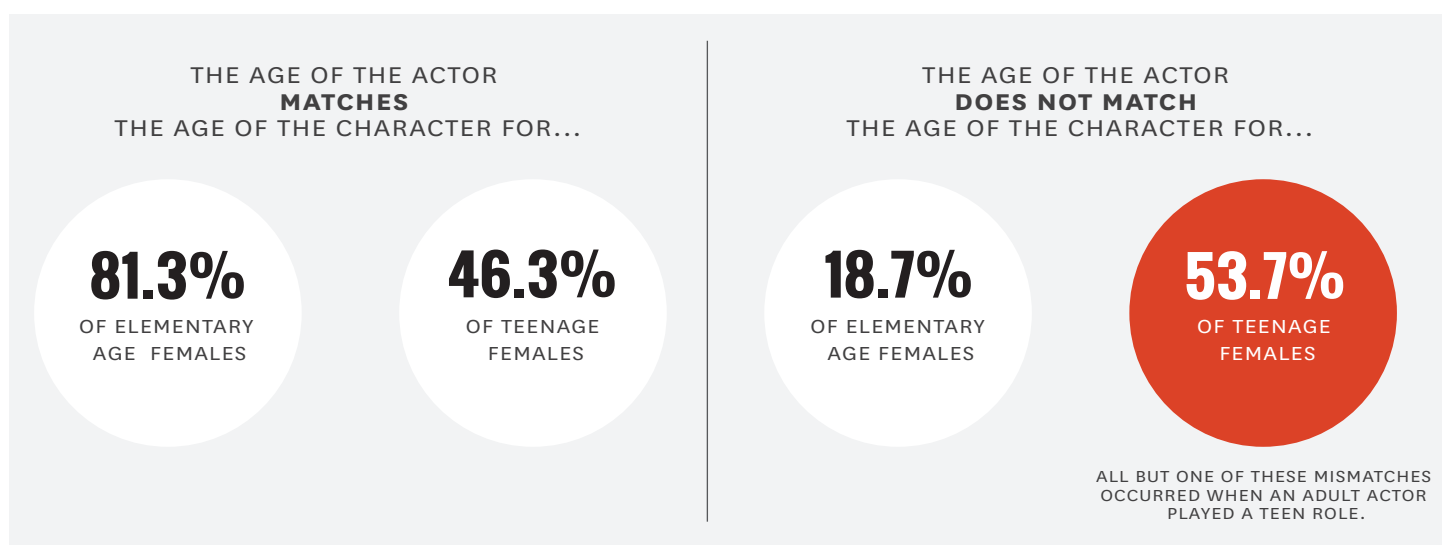
YOUNGER FEMALES STILL FACE STEREOTYPING IN POPULAR FILMS

YOUNG FEMALE CHARACTERS ARE **LESS** LIKELY TO BE SHOWN...

IN AN ACADEMIC CONTEXT

31.7% of younger females were shown in a school setting or depicted doing homework.

ENGAGING IN STEM ACTIVITIES

12.2% of younger females were shown in science, technology, engineering, or math activities.

YOUNG FEMALE CHARACTERS ARE **MORE** LIKELY TO BE SHOWN...

WITH A ROMANTIC INTEREST

52.4% of female teens had a romantic interest. 23.8% were shown with a boyfriend. (No LGBT female teens appeared.)

ENGAGING IN STEREOTYPICAL CHORES

35.8% of younger females were shown doing chores. 93.2% of the chores were stereotypically feminine.

KEY FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to examine the prevalence and portrayal of girls and young women on screen. To this end, a secondary analysis of the 100 most popular movies released per year from 2007 and 2016 (excluding 2011) were analyzed. In total, 900 films were assessed. Quantitatively, characters between the ages of 6 and twenty were evaluated for demographics, disability, and hypersexualization. Qualitatively, primary and secondary female child and teen characters were assessed for academic pursuits (i.e., school attendance, STEM, aspirations), interpersonal relationships, and other leisure time activities (i.e., sports, clubs). Below, we report on the key findings of the investigation.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Of 37,912 speaking characters in 900 films, 12.5% were age 6 to 20, which is 7.9% below the 20.4% of U.S. children age 5 to 19 in the population in 2010.

A total of 4,730 elementary school and teen aged children appeared across 900 movies. Only 39.7% of these characters were female and 60.3% were male. The gender ratio is 1.52 male characters to every 1 female character on screen. Gender parity was achieved in 2016, with younger females clocking in at 48.2% of all speaking or named roles. The percentage of females in 2016 was greater than 2007 (+9.3%) and 2015 (+6%).

Among those female characters that could be evaluated for race/ethnicity, 77% were White, 3.8% Hispanic/Latino, 10.8% Black, 6.1% Asian, 1.9% mixed race/ethnicity, and <1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or Middle Eastern.

The percentage of White female characters has decreased from 2007 to 2016. The last year evaluated is also lower than 2015. The percentage of females from Other racial/ethnic groups has increased 5.6% from 2007 to 2016, but is slightly lower than the percentage found in 2015. We do not see an uptick in the percentage of Black, Asian, or Latino characters across the 9-yr sample.

Focusing on female speaking or named characters age 6 to 20 across the top 200 films of 2015 and 2016, 178 movies or 89% did not depict one Black/African American, 185 or 92.5% did not portray one Asian/Asian American, and 189 or 94.5% of films did not include one Hispanic/Latina.

Lead and co lead roles across the 200 most popular films of 2015 and 2016 were examined. Eight young female leads or co leads appeared in 2016, which is not different than 2015 (7) or 2007 (6). In 2015 and 2016, 14 of the leading characters were White (though one actor portraying a White character was Mixed Race), while 1 was a Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. All of the leading characters in 2007 were White. Of the 15 films with a young female lead in 2015-16, 8 or 53.3% were in the horror/thriller genre.

Only 4 out of 947 speaking or named child or teenaged characters were LGBT. Of these, 3 were gay males and 1 was a bisexual male. Three of these characters were Black and 1 was White. There were no female child or teen LGBT characters across 200 films from 2015-2016.

Of the 944 characters assessed in the 200 most popular films of 2015 and 2016, 28 or 3% were depicted with a disability which is below the 5.2% of children age 5 to 17 with disabilities estimated by the U.S. Census. Across these 200 popular films, 193 (2015=99, 2016=94) were missing any speaking or named young female characters with a disability.

Female teens were almost four times as likely as male teens to be depicted wearing tight or alluring attire (39.5% vs. 10.2%). Teenaged females also were over twice as likely to be shown with some nudity (35% vs. 14.1%). Finally, teenaged females (60.7%) were more likely to be thin than teenaged males (38.4%).

The percentage of females in sexually revealing attire has not changed from 2007 to 2016. However, the percentage of female teens shown with some nudity has increased from 23.3% to 35.4% of characters (+12.1%). Yet, 2016 is lower than 2015 as well as 2012, which is the sample wide high. Female teens were more likely to be depicted as thin in 2016 than they were in 2007. The 9-yr high was observed in 2009 and 2010, where more than 80% of female teens were portrayed thin or extremely thin on screen.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Primary and secondary female child and teen characters in the top 200 movies of 2015 and 2016 were assessed for a series of qualitative measures. Given the pronounced sexualization findings above, we were interested in the actual age of female actors playing teen characters. Over half of the primary and secondary teen female characters analyzed (53.7%, n=43) were played by actors who did not match the age bracket of the character. All but one of these mismatches occurred when adult actors (age 21 and over) were cast to play teen roles.

In terms of academic pursuits, slightly less than one-third (31.7%, n=39) of young primary and secondary female characters were shown in a classroom setting or doing homework. Even fewer girls and teens demonstrated academic interests. Only 8.1% (n=10) of females had discernible academic interests or goals (i.e., to go to college, study astronomy, learn Chinese). 15.4% (n=19) of younger females were referenced as intelligent within the course of the films studied.

A mere 12.2% (n=15) of female characters mentioned or were shown taking part in science, technology, engineering, or math activities. This ranged from being part of a chemistry class to building a time machine or jetpacks, or even hacking. Four of the characters in STEM were elementary-age girls, while 11 were teens. Eleven of the female characters with STEM activity were White, one of the teens was Hispanic/Latino, and three females (two teen, one elementary) were from Other Racial/Ethnic backgrounds.

Just 7.3% (n=9) of the elementary or teenage female characters assessed remarked on professional aspirations. Only 5 characters gave explicit or implicit indication that they had a role model—4 were White and 1 was Black. Role models consisted of females who were historical icons and those with notoriety in the real world or in fictional settings.

One-third (35.8%, n=44) of girls and teens were shown doing chores during the course of the film. Virtually all (93.2%) of the characters engaged in stereotypically feminine chores, though two female characters were shown engaging in counterstereotypical actions (i.e., repairing a roof, farming) and three were shown engaging in neutral chores.

Turning to hobbies and activities of younger characters, nearly half of the female characters analyzed participated in at least one leisure time or school-sponsored activity (46.3%, *n*=57). Of the female characters who participated in leisure or school-sponsored activities, 29.8% (*n*=17) were involved in athletics such as soccer, cheerleading, gymnastics, ice hockey, and volleyball. Around a quarter of younger females (24.6%, *n*=14) were part of organized clubs or groups such as sororities, bands, troops similar to the Girl Scouts, and even a protest group. Finally, 63.2% (*n*=36) of girls and young women had other individual interests or activities such as music, art, sailing, reading, journaling, and filmmaking, or attended other school functions such as school dances or college fairs, to name a few.

The romantic interests of teens were also explored. Over half (52.4%, *n*=44) of the female teens evaluated had a romantic interest. The remaining 47.6% (*n*=40) did not have a romantic attachment. These interests did not necessarily have to become romantic relationships—23.8% (*n*=20) teenage females clearly had a boyfriend in the movies examined. There were no LGBT female characters in the films examined; as a result, all relationships were with male characters.

Finally, 10.6% (*n*=13) girls and young women were the victims of bullying activities. Another 9.8% (*n*=12) were instigators or bullies, and 4.1% (*n*=5) were bystanders or intervened when bullying occurred.

The picture young female viewers see of themselves in media is one of erasure and marginalization, and reinforces the idea that a girl's value is not only on her appearance but also her romantic interests, rather than what she can do or be.

I n a year that has included a global Women's march and the release of *Wonder Woman*, it seems the influence of females is undeniable. Purveyors of popular culture may finally be realizing that women are a powerful audience at the box office. Yet, as females worldwide fight for the future, what does the next generation of women see reflected in media? While a number of studies have explored the lack of women in movies, little is known about how girls and female teens are shown on screen. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to fill this void.

The project examines the 100 most popular movies released per year between 2007 and 2016 (excluding 2011).[1] Thus, a total of 900 films were assessed. Here, we seek to understand the prevalence and portrayal of girls and young women on screen. Quantitatively, a total of 4,730 characters were between the ages of 6 and twenty. Those characters are evaluated for gender, race/ethnicity and among a smaller subset of the movies, LGBT status and disability.[2] Focusing on teens, we also assess male and female sexualization.

This research also takes a deeper dive qualitatively into the ways in which girls and female teens are shown on screen.[3] The focus is on female characters in leading and supporting roles, assessing a few key elements. Namely, we examine academic pursuits (i.e., school attendance, STEM, aspirations), interpersonal relationships, and other leisure time activities (i.e., sports, clubs).

Below, the report is divided into two sections. The results for the quantitative analysis are presented first, focusing on the breakdown of demographic characteristics by gender for elementary school aged and teen characters. For some measures, the sample size is contingent on the number of years the key variables were assessed. Across analyses, we present the results by focusing on the overall trends across the 9-yr sample. Then, 2016 is compared with 2007 and 2015 to evaluate whether the depiction of girls and teenage females has changed over time. The second section focuses on the qualitative trends for primary and secondary elementary school and teen aged females. These analyses only focused on the last two years, including the 200 top-grossing films of 2015 and 2016. As with all our research in this area, only differences of 5% or greater are noted.

PREVALENCE OF CHILDREN AND TEENS: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Out of
37,912
speaking characters...

12.5%
were age 6 to 20
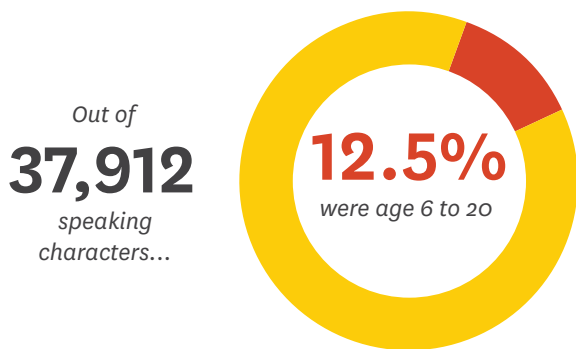
Demographics. A total of 4,730 elementary school and teen aged children appeared across 900 movies. Thus, of 37,912 speaking characters in 900 films, 12.5% were age 6 to 20, which is 7.9% below the 20.4% of U.S. children age 5 to 19 in the population in 2010.[4]

Only 39.7% of these characters were female (*n*=1,876) and 60.3% were male (*n*=2,854). The gender ratio is 1.52 male characters to every 1 female character on screen. Rating and year differed by younger characters' gender. Using the MPAA categorization, G rated films (43.8%) were more likely than PG rated films (38.3%) to depict younger female characters. Movies receiving a PG-13 (40.2% female) and R (39.1% female) rating did not differ meaningfully from the other two ratings.

TABLE 1

GENDER OF CHILD & TEEN CHARACTERS BY YEAR

YEAR	MALES	FEMALES	GENDER RATIO
2007	61.1%	38.9%	1.57 to 1
2008	61.3%	38.7%	1.58 to 1
2009	56.3%	43.7%	1.29 to 1
2010	64%	36%	1.78 to 1
2012	63%	37%	1.70 to 1
2013	58.7%	41.3%	1.42 to 1
2014	66.6%	33.4%	1.99 to 1
2015	57.8%	42.2%	1.37 to 1
2016	51.8%	48.2%	1.07 to 1
TOTAL	60.3%	39.7%	1.52 to 1

FIGURE 1

YOUNGER FEMALE CHARACTERS' RACE/ETHNICITY

TOTAL

in percentages

77
10.8
3.8
6.1
2.4

● WHITE ● BLACK / AFRICAN AMERICAN ● ASIAN

● HISPANIC / LATINO ● OTHER
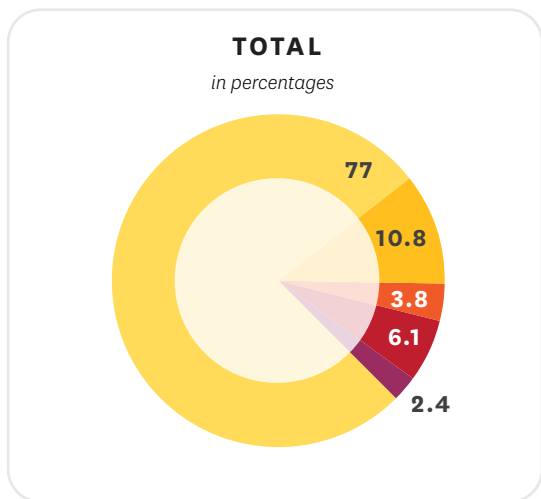
The gender of child and teenaged characters varied by year. As shown in Table 1, the percentage of females in 2016 was greater than 2007 (+9.3%) and 2015 (+6%). **It should be noted that parity was achieved the last year evaluated, with younger females clocking in at 48.2% of all speaking or named roles.**

Next, we examined the race/ethnicity of younger characters across the 900 films. Only child and teenaged *female* characters were assessed in this analysis. Among those characters that could be evaluated for race/ethnicity, 77% were White (n=1,329), 3.8% Hispanic/Latino (n=65), 10.8% Black (n=187), 6.1% Asian (n=105), 1.9% mixed race/ethnicity (n=32), and <1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or Middle Eastern (n=9).

Change over time in female characters' race/ethnicity appears in Table 2. The percentage of White female characters has decreased from 2007 to 2016. The last year evaluated is also lower than 2015. The percentage of females from Other racial/ethnic groups has increased 5.6% from 2007 to 2016, but is slightly lower than the percentage found in 2015. Sadly, we do not see an uptick in the percentage of Black, Asian, or Latino characters across the 9-yr sample. From 2015 to 2016, the percentage of younger Black female characters increased 10.1% which is primarily due to a 9-yr low observed in 2015. The percentage of Latinas decreased from 2015 to 2016 (-5.6%).

TABLE 2
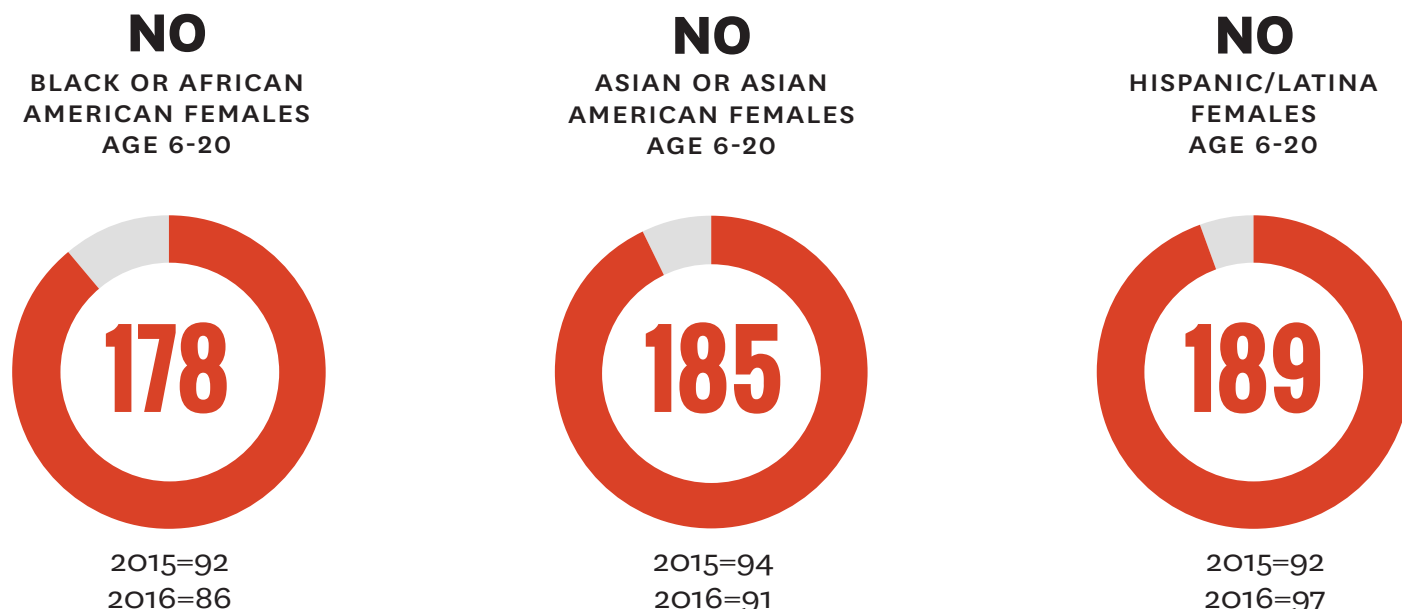YOUNGER FEMALE CHARACTERS' RACE/ETHNICITY BY YEAR

YEAR	WHITE	BLACK	ASIAN	HISPANIC	OTHER
2007	79.5%	14%	3.7%	2.8%	0
2008	71.3%	14%	7.9%	4.3%	2.4%
2009	78.8%	14.3%	4.1%	2.3%	<1%
2010	77.7%	9.7%	11.4%	1.1%	0
2012	84.5%	5.3%	6.3%	3.4%	<1%
2013	72.3%	14.5%	5.8%	6.4%	1.2%
2014	78%	7.9%	6.3%	4.7%	3.1%
2015	77.2%	4.4%	2.9%	7.3%	8.3%
2016	70.4%	14.5%	7.8%	1.7%	5.6%
TOTAL	77%	10.8%	6.1%	3.8%	2.4%

Note: Other is comprised of American Indians/Alaskan Natives, Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders, Middle Eastern, and characters of mixed race/ethnicity. Rows sum to 100%.

Although overall percentages of underrepresented groups offer one way to think about the data, they may mask larger gaps in representation. Another way to understand how often younger females from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups are depicted is to perform an *invisibility analysis*. This analysis, reveals how many films are missing even one young female speaking or named character on screen from an underrepresented racial group. See Table 3. Focusing on female speaking or named characters age 6 to 20 across the top 200 films of 2015 and 2016, 178 movies or 89% did not depict one Black/African American, 185 or 92.5% did not portray one Asian/Asian American, and 189 or 94.5% of films did not include one Hispanic/Latina. Young female viewers from these racial/ethnic groups would have to watch hundreds of films before seeing themselves represented on screen.

TABLE 3
INVISIBILITY OF FEMALE SPEAKING CHARACTERS BY RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP AND YEAR

Of the 200 top films of 2015 and 2016, the number of films with...

NO	**NO**	**NO**
BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES AGE 6-20	ASIAN OR ASIAN AMERICAN FEMALES AGE 6-20	HISPANIC/LATINA FEMALES AGE 6-20
178	**185**	**189**
2015=92 2016=86	2015=94 2016=91	2015=92 2016=97

Turning to leading and co leading roles, just 15 of the 200 films evaluated featured a leading or co-leading female age 6-20. Eight films from 2016 and 7 films from 2015 had a younger female character at the center of the story. One of these leads was an elementary-aged female, while the remainder were teens. In terms of the characters, 14 of the leads or co leads were White (though one actor portraying a White character was Mixed Race), while 1 was a Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. In terms of the genre of these films, over half (53%, *n*=8) were horror/thriller, while 13% (*n*=2) were action. The remaining five films were animated, comedy, drama, or other genres (i.e., science fiction, adventure).

There has been no change in the depiction of younger female leads since 2007, when 6 child and teen females were in lead or co lead roles across the 100 most popular films. All of these females were White. Despite achieving parity in all speaking roles, young girls and women are still not the driving force in popular storytelling.

In addition to gender and race/ethnicity, we examined LGBT status and disability of 6 to 20 year olds. Only 200 films or the 100 top movies of 2015 and 2016 were included in the analysis. ***Only 4 out of 947 speaking or named child or teenaged characters were LGBT.*** Of these, 3 were gay males and 1 was a bisexual male. Three of these characters were Black and 1 was White. These portrayals appeared in two films, *Moonlight* and *The Duff*. Put differently, not one female age 6 to 20 was depicted from the LGBT community across 200 different storylines.

Disability was also evaluated for child and teen characters. Of the 944 characters assessed, 28 or 3% were depicted with a disability which is below the 5.2% of children age 5 to 17 with disabilities estimated by the U.S. Census.[5] Just over two-thirds of these characters were male and only 32.1% were female. Notably, of the 8 female characters with a disability in 2016, 6 were younger incarnations of an adult character with a disability in the same film. ***Across the 200 most popular films in 2015 and 2016, 193 (2015=99, 2016=94) were missing any speaking or named young female characters with a disability.***
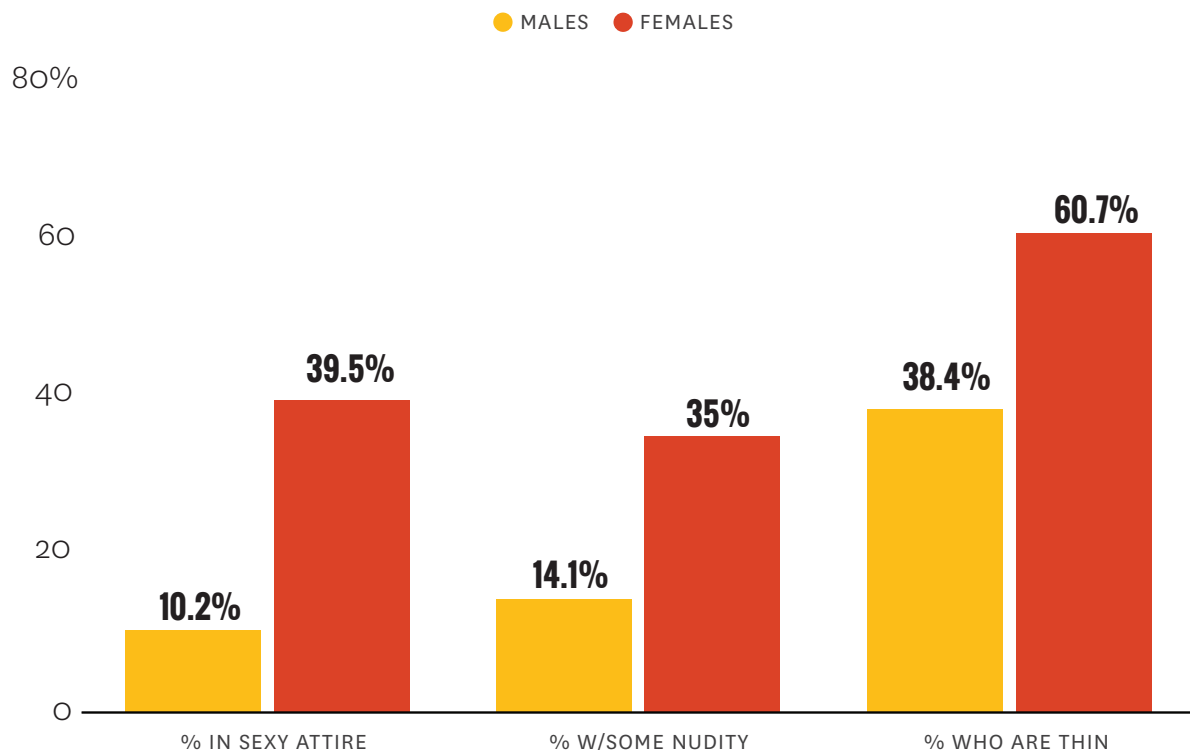
TABLE 4

CHARACTER DISABILITY DOMAIN BY GENDER

DOMAIN	MALES	FEMALES
PHYSICAL	8	4
COMMUNICATIVE	3	1
MENTAL	10	6

Note: Table presents information on 200 films from 2015 and 2016. As disabilities could be classified into more than one domain, columns do not sum to the total number of characters with disabilities.

The types of disabilities depicted for child and teen characters by gender are shown in Table 3. The U.S. Census classifies disabilities into three domains.[6] Physical disabilities included ambulatory or other health issues. For example, children or teen characters in popular movies required the use of a wheelchair or experienced an illness that affected digestion. Communicative disabilities involve characters who are blind, deaf, or as was depicted in popular film, those who have difficulty with speech. Mental disabilities are those affecting learning, intellect, or conditions that influence emotions. Examples that appeared in the movies analyzed included autism, suicide, and memory issues.

Sexualization. Besides demographics, it was important to also assess the nature or way in which male and female teen characters were presented on screen. Given the increased concern over the sexualization of girls and women in the media,[7]

FIGURE 2

CHARACTER SEXUALIZATION BY GENDER

● MALES   ● FEMALES

	% IN SEXY ATTIRE	% W/SOME NUDITY	% WHO ARE THIN
Males	10.2%	14.1%	38.4%
Females	39.5%	35%	60.7%

we examined how gender was related to the presence of sexually revealing clothing, nudity and thinness. As shown in Figure 1, female teens were almost four times as likely as male teens to be depicted wearing tight or alluring attire (39.5% vs. 10.2%). Teenaged females also were over twice as likely to be shown with some nudity (35% vs. 14.1%). Finally, teenaged females (60.7%) were more likely to be thin than teenaged males (38.4%).

Has female teen sexualization increased over time? The percentage of females in sexually revealing attire has not changed from 2007 to 2016. However, the percentage of female teens shown with some nudity has increased from 23.3% to 35.4% of characters (+12.1%). Yet, 2016 is lower than 2015 as well as 2012, which is the sample wide high. Female teens were more likely to be depicted as thin in 2016 than they were in 2007. The 9-yr high was observed in 2009 and 2010, where more than 80% of female teens were portrayed thin or extremely thin on screen.

Overall, these findings reveal that teenage and elementary-aged girls are still not shown equally on screen—especially younger females from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, from the LGBT community, and those with disabilities. The vast majority of popular movies are completely missing speaking or named younger female characters who are Black/African American, Asian or Asian American, or Hispanic/Latino. Teenage females are also more likely than their male counterparts to be sexualized. One positive finding is that in 2016, younger female characters reached parity with younger males. Yet, while this increase is encouraging, these characters lack the racial/ethnic diversity of the generations they are depicting. In the next section, we turn to how these young female characters are portrayed on screen.

TABLE 5
FEMALE CHARACTERS' SEXUALIZATION BY YEAR

YEAR	% OF FEMALES IN SEXY ATTIRE	% OF FEMALES W/SOME NUDITY	% OF FEMALES WHO ARE THIN
2007	34.6%	23.3%	43.3%
2008	39.8%	30.1%	62.6%
2009	33.8%	28.2%	82.8%
2010	41.4%	33%	80.2%
2012	56.6%	55.8%	69%
2013	39.4%	37.4%	48.1%
2014	35.3%	33.6%	51%
2015	43.3%	41.7%	50.5%
2016	32.3%	35.4%	54.1%
TOTAL	39.5%	35%	60.7%

To more fully understand the depiction of girls and young women in film, a qualitative examination of 200 popular films from 2015 and 2016 was undertaken in four key areas. In this section, we focus on primary and secondary female characters age 6 to 20. First, we overview demographic attributes. Then, we examine the age of actors playing younger female characters. Third, we examine academic pursuits and interests. Finally, we evaluate relationships and activities.

A total of 123 primary and secondary female characters age 6 to 20 were assessed. To contextualize the qualitative results, a few demographic indicators are presented. Over two-thirds of these characters were teenagers (68.3%, n=84), while just under one-third were elementary-aged girls (31.7%, *n*=39). These females were predominantly White (83.6%, *n*=97), with 5.2% (*n*=6) Black or African American, 2.6% (*n*=3) Hispanic/Latino, and 8.6% (*n*=10) from Other or Mixed Racial/Ethnic backgrounds. Seven female characters were animated animals and thus excluded from this analysis on race/ethnicity.

We were curious as to whether elementary and teenage female characters were played by actors in the same age brackets. To this end, the birthdate of each actor was obtained and compared to the release date of the film.[8] When the age of the actor and character was within the same bandwidth of years (i.e., 6 to 12 for elementary age girls or 13-20 for teen girls), this was considered a "match." When the age of the actor fell outside the appropriate age bracket, this was considered a "mismatch." Mismatched ages could be older or younger.

Of the 123 primary and secondary female characters evaluated, the birthdates of 112 female actors could be obtained. Over half of the female characters analyzed (56.3%, *n*=63) were played by actors who matched the age bracket of the character. The remaining 43.7% (*n*=49) of characters were played by actors who did not match the age of the character. Of the mismatched actors and characters, the majority (87.7%, n=43) were in the teenage bracket—which equates to 53.7% of all teen characters whose age could be ascertained (*n*=80). All but one of these mismatches occurred when adult actors were cast to play teen roles. While 13.9% of these teen mismatches occurred in animated content, 86.1% were in live action films. Paired with the knowledge that over a third of teenage females are sexualized, these findings suggest that the portrayal of adult women as teens could offer a distorted image of teenage females to younger viewers.

TABLE 6
FEMALE CHARACTER AGE BY ACTOR AGE

	ELEMENTARY	TEEN	TOTAL
ACTOR AGE MATCH	81.3%	46.3%	56.3%
ACTOR AGE MISMATCH	18.7%	53.7%	43.7%

The nature of how female characters were portrayed was also assessed. One area of interest in the portrayal of girls and young women was academics. Several variables captured the participation of young female characters in school activities. Slightly less than one-third (31.7%, *n*=39) of young primary and secondary female characters were shown in a classroom setting or doing homework, while 68.3% (*n*=84) were not. Those shown in school were in classes (e.g., math,

science, history) or in other parts of campus (e.g., lunchroom, playground, library). Even fewer girls and teens demonstrated academic interests. Only 8.1% (*n*=10) of females had discernible academic interests or goals. This included examples such as going to college, studying astronomy, or learning Chinese. All of the characters with academic interests were teens; eight of these females were White and one was Hispanic/Latina.

Another area of interest was whether films included depictions of girls engaging in or referencing STEM either at school or during leisure time. A mere 12.2% (*n*=15) of female characters mentioned or were shown taking part in science, technology, engineering, or math activities. This ranged from being part of a chemistry class, building a time machine or jetpacks, and even hacking. Four of the characters in STEM were elementary-age girls, while 11 were teens. Eleven of the female characters with STEM activity were White, one of the teens was Hispanic/Latino, and three females (two teen, one elementary) were from Other Racial/Ethnic backgrounds. Clearly, scientific exploration and related fields are rarely a priority for female characters on screen.

Similarly, few girls and teens explicitly state any professional aspirations or reference role models. Just 7.3% (*n*=9) of the elementary or teenage female characters assessed remarked on professional aspirations. Those that did mentioned building a recording studio, being a surfer, delivering packages, starting a small business, being a fashion designer, leading an island tribe, becoming a theater actor, and aspiring to become a reality TV star. Six of these female characters were White, while one was a Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and the final character was an animated animal with no apparent race/ethnicity. All but one of the characters with an aspiration were teens. Young female characters were less likely to mention role models. Only 5 characters gave explicit or implicit indication that they had a role model—4 were White and one was Black/African American. Role models consisted of females who were historical icons and those with notoriety in the real world or in fictional settings.

References to female characters' intelligence were also assessed. Intelligence is one attribute that may promote identification with characters by young viewers.[9] Thus, the actions of female characters who embody this attribute may be attended to more closely by viewers. A full 15.4% (*n*=19) of younger females were referenced as intelligent within the course of the films studied. These included comments such as calling the character "very clever" or a "smart girl." Unfortunately, the remaining 84.6% (*n*=104) of elementary or teenaged females were not referenced as intelligent.

These results suggest that the academic lives and aspirations of girls are viewed as being of little importance to audiences or storytelling. Few girls are shown engaging in academic activities, with academic interests, or with longer term aspirations or role models. For younger viewers, who spend a great deal of time in school and engaged scholastically, these depictions run counter to the reality of their young lives.

Turning to leisure time and relationships, the home-based activities of girls and teens were also assessed. One-third (35.8%, *n*=44) of girls and teens were shown doing chores during the course of the film, while 64.2% (*n*=79) were not. Chores included stereotypically feminine domestic tasks such as cleaning, gardening, doing grocery shopping, or caring for siblings or other children. Virtually all (93.2%) of the characters engaged in stereotypically feminine chores, though two female characters were shown engaging in counterstereotypical actions (i.e., repairing a roof, farming) and three were shown engaging in neutral chores (i.e., carrying groceries, getting mail). For young viewers, depictions of these domestic tasks may reinforce or strengthen stereotypical beliefs, aspirations, or attitudes.[10]

In terms of additional activities pursued by female characters, the leisure time and school-sponsored activities of girls and young women were examined. Nearly half of the female characters analyzed participated in at least one activity (46.3%, *n*=57) while 53.7% (*n*=66) did not. Of the female characters who participated in leisure or school-sponsored activities, 29.8% (*n*=17) were involved in athletics such as soccer, cheerleading, gymnastics, ice hockey, and volleyball. Around a quarter of younger females (24.6%, *n*=14) were part of organized clubs or groups such as sororities, bands, troops similar to the Girl Scouts, and even a protest group. Finally, 63.2% (*n*=36) of girls and young women had other individual interests or activities, such as music, art, sailing, reading, journaling, and filmmaking, or attended other school functions such as school dances or college fairs, to name a few.

The interpersonal relationships of young females were assessed, including romantic attachments. Only teenage females were evaluated for this variable, to determine if storylines featuring these characters included romantic elements. Over half (52.4%, *n*=44) of the female teens evaluated had a romantic interest. The remaining 47.6% (*n*=40) did not have a romantic attachment. These interests did not necessarily have to become romantic relationships—23.8% (*n*=20) teenage females clearly had a boyfriend in the movies examined. There were no LGBT female characters in the films examined; as a result, all relationships were with male characters.

A second aspect of relationships that was explored was interpersonal aggression, namely bullying, that might be part of film narratives. Three-quarters (75.6%, *n*=93) of female characters were not depicted in bullying situations. However, 10.6% (*n*=13) girls and young women were the victims of bullying activities. Another 9.8% (*n*=12) were instigators or bullies, and 4.1% (*n*=5) were bystanders or intervened when bullying occurred. Mediated aggression, especially that perpetrated by role models, can have consequences for young viewers.[11] The "mean girl" phenomenon may be more problematic for young viewers than content creators realize.

These results suggest that the feminine stereotype is alive and well in film. Girls are still engaged in housework or domestic chores, still interested in dating, and a few were involved in interpersonal aggression. On the positive side, females were involved with sports and other activities that were more counter-stereotypical in nature. However, continuing to feature the tired tropes that focus on female domesticity and sexuality in film narratives limits the kinds of stories that can be told about girls.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the prevalence and portrayal of girls age 6 to 20 in popular films. A total of 4,370 characters were analyzed across 900 movies from 2007 to 2016 (excluding 2011) to examine how often younger and teenage girls are seen on screen. A qualitative analysis of 200 movies from 2015 and 2016 was conducted to examine how young female characters are depicted. A few trends are noted below.

First, the picture of youth is male. Younger female characters are outnumbered by their male peers, though the most recent year had more parity. It is clear from this research, however, that younger characters—like their adult counterparts—tend to be males. The storytelling bias starts early, and for young female viewers may be a sign that the stories of girls and women carry little value compared to those of boys and men.

Second, female characters are predominantly White, straight, and able-bodied. The elementary and teenaged girls in film were rarely from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. This is particularly problematic, given that 47.8% of children under 18 in the U.S. were not White in 2015.[12] Young female viewers who are Black, Latino, or Asian may be a large portion of the population and therefore the audience, but they do not see themselves reflected on screen. Females from the LGBT community were absent in film, and there were few female characters depicted with a disability.

Third, female teens are sexualized in popular films. Over one-third of teen females were shown in sexually revealing attire or with partial nudity, and 60.7% were thin in 900 popular films over the last decade. This emphasis on female bodies is particularly problematic considering that over half of female teen characters are played by adult actors. This sets an unachievable standard for younger female viewers, who developmentally are not adults and may feel pressure or dissatisfaction to mimic these on-screen peers.

Fourth and finally, stereotypically feminine attributes are more often a part of female depictions than academic achievement. Over half of the teens shown in film had a romantic interest in another character. In contrast, only 12.2% of elementary and teen girls were shown engaging in STEM activities, and few females were referenced as intelligent. The emphasis on dating and relationships, especially given the sexualization of teen characters, perpetuates the idea that female characters serve a particular role in storytelling—the ingénue.

Girls growing up today live in a world of contradiction. On one hand, they are taught that they can do and be anything as female role models shatter expectations and make advancements into new fields. Yet, our media narratives tell young female viewers a different story. This is a story where they are absent, marginalized, or valued for their appearance. It is a story that does not match what girls today learn from parents, teachers, and even their peers. As film seeks to find its next audiences, it must strive to do better—to represent the girls of today, not the outdated ideas about girls who might have been.

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MDSC INITIATIVE STUDENT RESEARCH TEAM

Elizabeth Abramov	Lance Good	Sabrina Leaali
James Cardichon	Jack Haley	Andrew Lefebvre
Celine Carrasco	Drew Howard	Lorraine Lin
Kylie Charney-Harrington	Danning Huang	Rekha Olsen
Sarah Dillon	Kristy Hutchings	Brionna Randolph
Emma Donahue	Avra Juliani	Charlotte Spector
Rachelle Escobar	Rena Kotoi	Hannah Tan
Lian Elizabeth Eytinge	Josephine Kremer	Fan Zhang

FOOTNOTES

1. This report is a secondary analysis of data collected by the Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative. All information on data collection procedures from previous annual reports can be found at the MDSC Initiative webpage (http://annenberg.usc.edu/research/mdsci).

2. The MDSC Initiative began measuring LGBT status of characters in films from 2014, and characters with disabilities in films from 2015. As such, this information is not reported on films from prior years.

3. The qualitative analysis was conducted in Fall 2017. Each primary or secondary female character was identified across the 100 top-grossing films of 2015 and 2016. Following this, two research assistants from the MDSC Initiative lab were assigned to evaluate these characters. Questions focused on academics, social interactions, family interactions and residence, media use and hobbies/leisure time activities, chores, risky behaviors, intelligence, and overall character descriptions. Once each character had been evaluated by two research assistants, discrepancies were resolved through discussion with an MDSC Initiative team leader. Responses to each question were aggregated and analyzed.

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8. Information on actors' ages was obtained by using databases (i.e., Studio System/inBaseline, VarietyInsight, IMDbPro) as well as other online sources. Age at time of release was calculated by comparing the actors birthdate to the U.S. release date of the film. Initial character coding involved assessing each characters' age and assigning them to an age bracket (i.e., elementary=6 to 12 years old; teen=13 to 20 years old). Mismatches were considered to occur when the actual age of the actor fell outside the coded age bracket of the character. Therefore, actors could be older or younger than the characters they portrayed.

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