INTRODUCTION

John Hughes is was the writer of major cult classic films of the 1980's is known for his teenager themed films. John Hughes got his start in the film industry as a co-writer on the National Lampoon series, where he is credited for coming up with the idea for National Lampoons Vacation. However, it's his teen films that he wrote between 1984-1986, that got his films classified as cult movies. John Hughes cult movies are Buildingsroman stories or coming of age tales. Many teenagers can relate to these films, because they often are experiencing similar situations with home life, dating life, or school life. The age range of teenagers extends between preteen age of 13 to late adolescent age of 19. The 1980's were technologically less advanced, with teens not having access to social media, cell phone, apps or instant information via the internet. Somehow, these cult classic movies by John Hughes, still resonates with teens in 2017. This reason for my research is to analyze how John Hughes depicts parental relationships in his films where teens are experiencing angst. Since these movies still influence teenagers in current day society, this topic requires further sociological analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The image of youth is a widely approached topic from various film's perspectives. It is important to identify that the image of what being a teenager means, did not enter into pop culture until the 1950's. In that time frame, commercialism had begun to portray teens as for how they should see themselves. Subsequently, youth in films have continued the tradition of trying to relate to adolescent's emotions while displaying their coming of age stories. The films often feature teens in school settings and follow them through various challenging situations. Research correlates with these films depictions, that adolescence tends to be a confusing age, that can lead to the general feeling of being misunderstood. However, there is little research specifically on

how these films depict parental relationships and how it relates to adolescent angst. In John Hughes coming of age films, it is sociologically necessary to examine these relationships more closely, as they influence the youth of today.

In a course outline for "Film Genres and the Image of Youth," Timothy Shary (2003) writes that the "school film, for instance, tends to concern one of five types of teenager's characters (occasionally more than one): nerds, jocks, delinquent's, rebels and popular types. By looking at these characters, we can witness changing attitudes toward youth issues about education, sexuality, gender, popularity, class, race, criminality, families and success" (Shary 2003:40). Even though families are one of the categories that gets depicted in films about teens, it does not support the argument that accurate representations of families exist. Familial relationships are often very diverse, or extended and can be complicated to understand the dynamics. Researchers have focused many years on the connection between elementary children and parental involvement. The results have always shown a positive correlation. To understand the relationship between an adolescent and parent, more consideration would need to is given research that focused on this age group specifically. In a study done by Kevin Marjoribanks (1991), presented the social-psychological models of educational success. The age of the children used in the study was 16, which the average age in John Hughes films about teens. He focused on the "adolescent's perceptions of their parents educational and occupational aspirations for them, the encouragement they had received from their parents about schooling, and their parent's general interest in their education" (Marjoribanks 1991:284). He found that the widely varied results only further implicated that familial relationships were complex, especially in low ability groups. He concluded that he "What it does imply is that schools, of whatever

quality, are more effective for children from strong family backgrounds than for children of weak ones" (Marjoribanks 1991:288).

Another study conducted by Dornbusch and Ritter (2002) focused on adolescent's parental involvement about grades performance. They found that there was a significant increase in overall grades when a parent attended school functions. The study cautioned to say that they did not believe that the results were a direct reflection of socioeconomic status, as it did not matter what the parents level of education was. What is interesting about this study is that they used mixed methods to follow up with the parents in the study to see why they thought the positive correlation existed. These were the reasons given: "some parents said their attendance at school events actively demonstrated the values they express verbally to their children" (Dornbusch and Ritter 1988:76). They also said that "they were able to better communicate with their children after having observed some aspects of their work in which their children spend so much of the day" (Dornbusch and Ritter 1988:76).

Parental involvement is not limited to school functions. Further research shows that being involved in all levels of a teen's world can lead to a positive outcome. In a study conducted by Alyssa Gonzalez (2002), she looked at how relationships are affected by parental involvement with homework, extracurricular activities, corresponding with teachers, and assisting choose future courses. Her study showed that students with more parent involvement "children performed better academically and were more engaged in school. Students reported more effort, concentration, and attention in math, English, social studies and science" (Gonzalez 2002:132). The research even concluded that the most beneficial style of parenting for a high school-aged student is an authoritative parenting style.

Many of the John Hughes films about coming of age depicts teens from affluent upbringings. Relationships between parents of affluence and teens brought up in this lifestyle have been researched to show the unique pressures that they face. The role of achievement pressures is examined in "Privileged but Pressured? A Study of Affluent Youth" (2002). In this study, Luthar, and Becker (2002) focused on the potential causes of distress in academic achievement. The study showed that "in upwardly mobile suburban communities, there is often a ubiquitous emphasis on ensuring that children secure admission to stellar colleges. As a result, many youngsters feel highly driven to excel, not only in academics but also at multiple extracurricular activities, with these pressures beginning as early as middle school years" (Luther and Becker 2002:1594).

Teens from affluent families often experience the strain of the absentee parent. Professional lives can evade into family time, and the emotional closeness is lost. However, Luther and Becker (2002) say that a "possible closeness to parents, particular mothers can buffer many suburban children from negative forces" (Luther and Becker 2002:1595). From this standpoint, it is imperative that we look at how these relationships are depicted in John Hughes coming of age films. The research shows that parental influence is significant to the success of an adolescent. John Hughes films have become cult classics, which define our idea of reality when it comes to how teenagers relate to the world.

A critical view of these films is given by Armond White (1985) in his article titled "Kidpix." In his writings, he examines the topic of "Boy Movies" (White 1985) which define a period of movies in the 1980's. He refutes the idea of these films as being realistic with the themes people indulge in as "half-truths and falsehoods on which they were raised (beautiful girls are shallow; bookish girls are sweet)" (White 1985:9). He calls the films clichés where

rebellion is celebrated, and the image of a teen adds very little depth to the characters. He asserts that "James Dean's embodiment of the yearning, dissatisfied youth" (White 1985:9) paints a portrait for subsequent films to follow the pattern. He furthers his case by saying that the characters are written to make the audience feel the protagonist's experiences. However, they tend to fall short in retrospect of real life.

The discussion of coming of age films depiction of parental relationships with teens who display angst is a topic should be explored further. Reality is often based on what we see on film, and the research shows that parental relationships heavily influence adolescent success. The research that I intend to do on John Hughes coming of age films will allow us to look deeper into the portrayal of these familial ties and how society is accurately reflected or if it is disproportionate. Since these films are still heavily in the rotation, past the 1980's generation who grew up on them, it will provide further understanding on why these films may or may not reflect attitudes that our studies have shown.

DATA AND METHODS

This study utilizes unobtrusive methods to analyze how John Hughes depicts the roles of parents in relation to teen angst in his first four films that he wrote, directed and produced. I performed a content analysis on the following four movies: *Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986), Weird Science (1985), The Breakfast Club (1985),* and *Sixteen Candles (1984).* Non-interactive data collecting was used to perform my analysis, while all four films were streamed using Amazon Prime. Even though John Hughes was largely popular during the 1980's and has many films to his name, this unobtrusive study was only conducted on the first four films of his career, where he was the author of the script.

John Hughes films are recognized as "films (that) are as much a part as many people's childhood and adolescence as the friends we grew up with" (Cornmell 2007). These John Hughes films have transcended time and stayed relevant through several decades. They are films that influence youth because their parents have passed the movies down, or they have come across them on their own and found them to be representations of their own lives. While it is not known how many copies of these movies have been sold or viewed, it is easy to see that they hold cult status with a 92% audience liked rating on rottentomatoes.com, specifically for *The Breakfast Club* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off.* While not as strong as the previous movies, *Sixteen Candles* follows in at 85% audience liked, and *Weird Science* comes in last with 69% audience liked.

I chose these films because, like many others, I also enjoyed watching these coming of age movies as a teen. Now, I am now a parent and wanted to analyze the depictions of parental relationships regarding teen angst in his films. All four films focus on the adolescent age range of high school years, which is typically known as 14 -18 years of age. As I watched the films, I was looking for certain clues and contexts where parental relationships were mentioned, shown or depicted through imagery. After watching the movies and collecting the contextual data, I then reanalyzed for coding, recoding, and then finally taking the descriptive codes to find literal codes. From this data, I was able to focus on three analytical themes for this research.

As with any research, it is imperative to speak about the limitations of my study. Since this is only an examination of the first four films that John Hughes created independently, it does not consider the rest of the film credits to his name. Other contextual clues or themes from these films may have altered my themes listed in this study, and therefore is a limitation of the overall study. Also, since this study uses the form of unobtrusive research methodology, no person or

people were interviewed in focus groups or in-depth interviews. In all, I was able to use the data provided to answer my research question.

DATA ANALYSIS

The objective of this study was to examine how parental relationships are depicted in relation to teen angst in John Hughes early independent films. After the analysis was complete, three themes were evident. (1.) No family situation is ideal; (2.) Parents are often absent, but the major source of stress for teens (3.) Adults are typically portrayed as imbeciles, while the teens are portrayed as cunning. I will investigate each theme and provide the reader with descriptive codes on how these themes are portrayed through John Hughes films.

Theme 1: No Family Situation is Ideal

In every single one of the films I watched, there was an overarching theme that each family has a dynamic and despite what others perceive, not a single one was without its flaws. In *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, Ferris is depicted as having a great relationship with his parents. Both parents are very active in his life and give the impression that Ferris is one of their priorities in their life. The opening scene is where Ferris is faking that he is sick, and both his mother and his father come into his room to see how he is doing. Ferris's home is shown as a typical suburban house, with things that portray that his family is probably above middle class. Ferris has a computer, which at the time was not a typical electronic for a teen to have in his room. He also has a stereo unit which is capable of making recordings advanced enough to trick people into believing that real people are coming through the speakers. His parents are dressed conservatively, but also in business casual, which tells us that they have respectable office jobs in the community.

Despite having the seemingly perfect life, Ferris skips school and lies to his family and the principal about being sick for the day. This causes his sister to become infuriated because Ferris is always getting away with things, and she is not. This dynamic shows that Ferris, the baby of the family is favored over her, and gets specialized treatment. Cameron, Ferris' best friend in the movie, is introduced to us lying in bed, actually sick, although it is self-induced from stress. His family life is depicted as being financially taken care of, but disconnected with his father, who causes him so much doubt that he cannot function on a day to day basis.

In *Weird Science,* we do not know much about the family lives inner workings, as the films chooses to focus on the relationship between two teens and one brother of the teen. However, with the contextual clues from the conversations held in the movie, we gather that their parents are not always around. Chett, the brother in the movie, is left as the guardian in this film. From his dynamics of his relationship with his younger brother, we see that Chett is a bully and fills the role of antagonizing everyone in this film. He torments his brother, and brothers friend for a sense of power over them, since the boys are self-proclaimed "geeks." (1985) The relationship leaves little to be desired, even though they live in an upper-class house, with little parental influence. Wyatt, Chett's brother, focuses on his friendships more than his relationship with his own family. Weird Science has the least family interactions of the four films, and it may be because the film is mostly a teen boys fantasy about creating the perfect woman from a computer, and how she ended up changing their lives.

Sixteen Candles follows the 16th birthday of Sam, which is supposed to be a girl's entry into womanhood. The significance of this day is completely lost on her family, as they focus on her older sisters upcoming wedding instead. Sam feels overshadowed and uses the day to complain about her parents not acknowledging her milestone. While she as depicted as having a

relatively close relationship with her family, it is really hard to believe that any parent could truly forget the birthday of their own child. Her mom ends up apologizing to her at the end of the school day, and her dad makes amends with her in the middle of the night. Sam forgives both and can move forward with her birthday and the wedding day, despite the flawed moments of the morning amnesia.

The most dynamic family relationships are depicted in *The Breakfast Club*, a movie about five kids getting Saturday detention and how they form stereotypes about each other based on their subculture cliques at school. As the movie plays out, they challenge each other to be who they want to be, despite the expectations and form friendships that may have never played out without the 8 hours in detention. Each of the five has a different family structure, with all of them being stereotypes of who could possibly raise a kid to be in each subculture clique. The geek has a helicopter mom, with scolding tendencies. The rebel has an absentee parent who can't even be bothered to take his kid to school. The princess is a daddy's girl with a BMW, who almost apologizes for not being able to get her out of detention. The odd girl who steals is essentially ignored by her family. And the jock? Well, he has a blue-collar dad who drives a truck, and thinks sports are everything in life. Throughout the movie, they each tell a story of how they hate their own family dynamic and perceives the others as better. It ends up being a coming to terms of realizing that not one of them has it better than the other. The odd girl comments "my home life is unsatisfying" (1985) and tells everyone that she steals, so her bags are always packed. It is apparent from this theme that John Hughes wants to portray every teen relationship with their parent as complicated, and not ideal.

Theme 2: Parents are often absent, but the major source of stress for teens

John Hughes often writes at least one of his teen characters parents as being an off-screen element or seen very rarely, in each of these four films. While they are not shown to the viewers in entirety, the teens talk about them enough in the movie to form a basis of what they are like. Cameron's dad in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is one of the biggest sources of stress for him. Cameron lives in fear of the wrath of his father and walks on eggshells to prevent his dad from going off on him. At one point in the movie, Ferris convinces Cameron that they should take his father's priceless car for the day, and Cameron vehemently tries to talk him out of it because he knows his father will kill him for it. Cameron says "he loves that car more than he loves me!" (1986) Eventually, Cameron gives into the peer pressure of Ferris, and they take the car. When Cameron realizes his father will find out about the mileage, he tries to commit suicide by drowning in a pool. This shows how much stress his father puts on him, along with the earlier depiction of causing Cameron to get physically sick.

In *The Breakfast Club,* John who is the rebel of the group in detention talks about his relationship with his father. We never see John's father in the film, but his relationship with his son is one of the main plot details. John decides to make fun of Brian's family (the geek) by stereotyping them as being a scene out of The Andy Griffith Show. When he is questioned about his own family, he describes he dad as foul-mouthed and abusive. He reenacts a scene of interaction with his father, and it ends in a fist fight. From this, it is clear to see that John's father is the source of all the attention seeking patterns that John shows towards others. John is spiteful, mean, assuming, but also detached from being given a real chance in life. John acts out, instead of being a good citizen, chooses to spend his time in detention because it is probably better than being at home.

The jock, Andy, allows the group to know that his father places too many expectations on him and he "can no longer think" (1985) for himself. He tells the group that he is so worried about failing his father that he goes out of his way to impress him. When they go around the group to confide what landed them in detention, he confesses that he pulled a stunt that hurt another kid because his father was always talking about the stunts he pulled as a teen. Andy feels bad about hurting the kid and admits that this is not his true nature, and he was only trying to make his father feel like he was more like him. When we see Andy's father, he is adding pressure on him in the car about his potential scholarship chances as a wrestler. This is the only scene we see Andy's father, even though the pressure he adds to Andy is also one of the main plot details of the movie.

Theme 3: Adults are typically portrayed as imbeciles, while the teens are portrayed as cunning.

Almost all of the adults in John Hughes films are depicted as being rather simple, but also easy to deceive. The teens are given depth and allowed to be intelligent or witty in his films. While the portrayal is not limited to just parental relationships in the film, it is also depicted with figures of authority, such as teachers or principals. The teens are given emotions that allow them to manipulate or navigate through situations that their parents are usually shown as being oblivious to. Ferris Bueller is a con artist. While he is only a teen, we are supposed to believe that he is naïve and innocent based on his cuteness that everyone talks about. Ferris is able to con an entire city into believing that he has a fatal disease. He is also able to con his principal, the principal's secretary, and his parents that he is sick. He uses advanced language to sound intelligent, and the entire film allows him to have advance thought processes on his own feelings. He often narrates the film and analyzes his friends or situations. However, his parents can't tell that he has a dummy in the bed when they go home to check on him, or that he has zero signs of

being sick. He also gets away with passing his father four times, side by side, and his father never notices.

In *Sixteen Candles*, Sam spends the majority of the movie being emotional about her parents forgetting her birthday. When her father comes down to apologize to her, he is still oblivious that she is having boy problems, because she has a crush on a popular boy at school, even after she spells it out for him. His main role in the film provides some encouraging advice, so when she gets the guy at the end of the film, he can smile approvingly. This shows us that John Hughes is not trying to create adult characters with depth. This character could have played a much bigger role in Sam's life in the movie, and it is minimized to five minutes of film time. Sam shows angst for the entire film because her family forgets her, and at the end, all is forgotten when she gets the guy.

In *Weird Science,* Gary's parents are shown having a conversation with the women they created from the computer before they throw a party at Wyatt's house. They are seeking the parent's approval, despite the fact that the woman is much older, British sounding, and dressed provocatively. When the parents do not agree with the idea of the party, the woman looks at the parents and says "You are out of shape. I'll kick your ass if you try to stop us." (1985) With that, the parents back down and allow their son to do whatever he wants with a woman that is well over 25. While this movie is mostly a fantasy of a teen boy, it is not a depiction of what a parent would most likely do in this situation.

Finally, with *The Breakfast Club,* the kids can outsmart the teacher who is supposed to be monitoring them the entire movie. The written quote in the start of the film shows the defiance theme that will take over. "And these children that you spit on as they try to change their worlds are immune to your consultations. They are quite aware of what they are going though – David

Bowie" (1985) The teens in the film are shown doing whatever they want to, without being caught. They smoke weed, they dance on the balconies, and they run the hallways. The monitor is only aware of what they are doing at the start of detention when he is in the room.

CONCLUSIONS

This research was conducted to see how parental relationships are depicted in regards to teen angst in John Hughes films. My analysis focuses on the first four independent films that John Hughes wrote, directed and produced in his career. In these films, I concluded that there were three evident themes. These themes have been analyzed and support using contextual imagery and coding from the movies directly.

The first theme is that John Hughes depicts all families as not being ideal. A lot of assumptions are made by supporting characters about how they think someone lives, but find out their assumptions are usually wrong, and the family they think has a wonderful family life, is usually not what it seems. John Hughes creates a complicated family dynamic for most of his characters, which seems to add to most of the teen's angst that they display in the films.

The second theme I found was that John Hughes often depicts his parents as being off-screen characters, but they tend to add the most stress to the characters. The most conflicted teens were often portrayed as ones who did not have a large presence on screen. While the teen characters open up about these parents, John Hughes does not allow the viewer to see the parent who causes the most strife for the teens who were likely to show signs of physical illness, have suicidal tendencies or ones who spoke about abuse or neglect.

My final theme was one that not only fit the parental relationships but also the adult characters in the film with any kind of authority. John Hughes depicts adults as imbeciles, while

he depicts teens as being able to outsmart the adults. This was probably the most surprising theme, as I watched these movies growing up, and never realized how much this was prevalent in his movies. Surely if teens think all authority figures are idiots, then they do not have the support and guidance that is needed from the leadership perspective that adults provide.

While John Hughes films are largely meant for entertainment, it is apparent that some of his themes are stereotypes or exaggerations of what he thinks certain family relationships are like. To have coming of age movies sell, he creates a storyline that makes parents seem like they are able to forget birthdays, ignore their children, or simply be out of touch with the antics they pull. Since these movies are still watched in our culture, this adds to the sociological perspective of how some teens may associate this to issues they are having at home.

I am sure that there is some truth in some people's homes, but on a larger scale, since we have seen the literature of parents making a difference by being active in their kids lives. I do not feel that this is an accurate portrayal of every family dynamic, or comes even close to being a good representation of them. One of the reasons why teens may still identify with this film is that it can make them feel better about their own troubles when they see that someone else may have it worse than them.

It is important to remember that parents were once teens themselves, and while some of the situations may be new to a parent, most likely the parent went through some of the phases of angst themselves. John Hughes portrayal of parents does not show that any of the adults understand the issues the teens are going through and creates adult characters with less depth and less relevancy than I would assume parents would have. John Hughes does give families different dynamics, but they are mostly arranged around the stereotypes of an affluent white family, a poor white family, or middle class one.

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